

## Holiday destinations

### TRAVEL FACTS

THE Pre de la Baffardiere is one of hundreds of independently owned holiday homes available through Holiday France Direct, Brittany Ferries' direct letting service.

Holiday France Direct features a huge variety of accommodation – including cottages, apartments, villas, B&Bs and mobile homes – both online at [holidayfrancedirect.com](http://holidayfrancedirect.com) and through the brochure, which can be ordered through the website. There's even the chance to spend your holiday in a mill, thatched cottage, mansion or a chateau, and not only in France. Holiday France Direct also has properties in Spain and Portugal available for holiday rental.

Anyone booking a property with Holiday France Direct also benefits from special cross-Channel fares on services operated by Brittany Ferries. For more information call 0871 244 0744 or visit websites [www.holidayfrancedirect.co.uk](http://www.holidayfrancedirect.co.uk) or [www.brittanyferries.co.uk](http://www.brittanyferries.co.uk).



# Let us Pre: a divine retreat in France

JOHN POWELL discovers a rural holiday that offers relaxation, as well as plenty to visit on foot or by bicycle

**T**HE late afternoon sun was slanting low over the fields of corn as we picked our way through the Vendée countryside in search of our holiday home.

The owner Charles Harriss says on the Holiday France Direct website – run by Brittany Ferries – that the four-bedroom Pre de la Baffardiere is in an exclusive and secluded hamlet, near the end of a cul-de-sac.

After a few false starts we finally came across the house which, although very new, is so typical of this part of France, the white paint, almost unbearably bright in the sun, set off by blue shutters.

It's worth the effort. It is, after all, the secluded nature of the Pre that makes it so attractive – the heated swimming pool hidden behind high walls, the drive shut off from the world by two gates, a small oak wood between us and the little-used road and a vineyard, just a stone's throw away, stretching southwards into the valley of the River Yon.

At first sight the visitor to this very rural part of France might think it's a little too far off the beaten track. But that would be quite wrong.

Even if, like us, you spend almost the whole time either on foot or cycling, there's so much to see and do.

A Grand Randonnée, a long distance footpath, skirts the Pre on its way to the Yon and offers, with local paths, a lovely circular walk through the woods.

Cycle tracks abound – there are at least three waymarked tracks in the local area alone – although beware, they are both on- and off-road and can be through rather rough terrain.

The little town Champ St Pere is a 20-minute cycle ride (a couple of minutes by car) from the hamlet of Baffardiere and while there is a supermarket, the Thursday open air market, held in the car park in front of the ancient church, may be small but is a must.

You'll come across the L'Opera des Fromages stall, with its dazzling array of cheeses, more often to be found in Les Halles at Napoleon's city, La Roche sur Yon.

Charcuterie, a wide variety of bread 'artisanale', plants and even shoes are on offer for the locals who can't or don't want to leave the town.

Nearby Luçon, where Cardinal Richelieu was first made a bishop, boasts a permanent covered market as well as beautiful gardens.



**OFF THE BEATEN TRACK:** The house patio (above) and pool, and (far left) village shutters open in the sun. Top, Les Sables-d'Olonne

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Luçon is further than a cycle ride away but there is an easy pedal to St Vincent sur Graon with its picturesque reservoir.

The roads are quiet and full of interest. The strange calling of bright green toads will attract your attention as you cycle by local ponds as will the woodpeckers and egrets and the ubiquitous tiny lizards, their heads held high to catch the sun's rays.

We spotted a coypu eating a perch on the banks of the Yon and an unforgettable turquoise flash betrayed a kingfisher flying, surprisingly, right over the roof of the

house and way above the trees on its way to some new fishing ground. We did make one 'long distance' journey from the peace of Baffardiere to the bustling resort and port of Les Sables-d'Olonne, tempted by a walk along its beach of hard sand and a meal of oysters and Coquille St Jacques at the L'Escale restaurant alongside the busy quays.

Even here the cyclist is well catered for with special lanes marked along the roads in the town and a brilliant traffic-free tarmac path through the dunes, pine forests and salt pans to the wild and lonely Sauveterre beach

and the nearby town Olonne.

The thing about a holiday home like the Pre is that you don't always want to leave.

We had the run of the house (although it can sleep up to 10 people) and the exclusive use of the pool – so several days were spent lazily dozing in the sun.

One day, with thunderstorms crackling and rebounding overhead, the Pre came into its own with comfortable couches and chairs in a welcoming living room. A cosy shelter from the summer storm.