

## PLATEAU DES MINQUIERS

**L**es Minquiers is a 65 kilometres reef lying 17 kilometres south of Jersey. In clear weather it is visible from there, sitting just on the horizon. At high water it is a collection of isolated rocks. At low water it is an archipelago larger than Jersey. The name apparently comes from the French word for a fish wholesaler *minque*.

Originally our plan was to visit the Minkies – as they are known locally – for the day while on a working visit to Jersey; the Minkies on Friday, the Écréhous on Sunday. It all seemed so straight forward. The offer to organise the visits came from friends in the Jersey Harbour Office.

I was to be taken there in an Aqua Star *Barbarella B* by its owner, a retired ships' captain, former Jersey harbour pilot and lifeboat coxswain. His knowledge of the waters around the islands in all their various states is encyclopaedic. With his more than 50 years sailing experience and still teaching navigation, I would be in the safest hands possible.

No problem.

Cometh the day, cometh the wind. It was far too risky.

He must have sensed my disappointment over the phone when he informed me that the trip was off and suggested a meeting at the Yacht Club for a chat over coffee instead. Within a few minutes of meeting I was offered the chance of staying on the Minkies. I was in the presence of someone who actually owned a property there.



looking up from the shore



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Momentarily I was stunned. Stay on the Minkies? Overnight? Me? On my own?

For once my imagination failed to produce a picture of what that might entail. It did not equate with anything stored in my memory bank.

“I assume Joy will be going as well, you’ll be wanting your home comforts!”

With pride he flourished an album of photographs documenting the four year rebuilding of his property from a gable end or two poking out from a pile of rubble into a single storey cottage.

“How long would you want to stay?”

“A couple of nights?”

“You’ll need at least three to get a feel for the place.”

“Three it is then.”

“It’s a difficult place to get into. There are lots of submerged rocks and the level drops about eleven metres on a spring tide, so the water runs fast through the channels. It’s a dangerous place if you’re not familiar with it. To see the full effect of the changes in levels for your work we would need to get you there on a spring tide, arriving at about half tide down. It takes two hours to get there so we must leave St Helier at about an hour after high tide.”

This is when it began to dawn on me that visiting the Minkies might be a bit of an adventure even in favourable weather.

After consulting diaries and tide tables we opted to set off from St Helier at 8 am on Monday 12th July.

Two hours in a comfortable force 3 brought us to our destination, tying up at the States of Jersey mooring buoy.

Immediately to our west was the appropriately named main ‘island’, *Maitresse Île*, a granite protrusion of probably no more than 100 metres in length and 15 to 20 metres in width, supporting a slipway, a flag pole, a helicopter pad, seven small habitable buildings and four ruined ones and, doubling as a sea mark (you line it up with the chimney pot on the building behind it to bring yourself safely to the buoy), the most southerly building in the British Isles; the communal lavatory.

At the top of the slipway visitors are greeted by the States of Jersey Customs House. Naturally this, too, is the most southerly of its kind in the British Isles. It is kept unlocked as a haven for shipwrecked sailors – with a fair chance of being used I would think. Inside there are five beds, but only one pillow, a table and stool, a bright blue tarpaulin, a candle in a bottle and a substantial fireplace fitted with a very nice Victorian cast iron range which would finish off my dining room back home perfectly. Visitors are expected to leave some provisions for the poor shipwrecked sailors. On the table was a tin of baked beans, but no can opener, and a packet of Safeway Slim Choice Asparagus Soup with Croutons. Slim choice indeed.

The collection of buildings are former fishermen’s huts, probably from the nineteenth century although building work has revealed several different floor surfaces below the most recent, suggesting renewal over a long period of time. Dwellings of some sort must have been here in about 1800 as there are stories of the dispute between the semi-resident fishermen and the quarrymen who came here for



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granite for Fort Regent in St Helier. The fishermen were angry that too much granite was being removed and threw the quarrymen's tools into the sea.

There is something unnatural about being on the Minkies. The wildlife seems very at home, but somehow I get the impression that man was not designed for this.

Soil is almost non-existent so very little grows, certainly nothing you would consider eating except in the most desperate circumstances. Mallow grows well and, I understand, makes a good substitute for toilet paper, being as soft as a baby's bottom and it adds a splash of colour when in flower.

We brought food for four, gastronomically speaking, carefully planned days. If the weather turned foul and we could not be taken off for some time we may have been in trouble, but we did at least have a can opener. Sea birds are plentiful, so I guess that we could have turned fowl, too. I have eaten braised puffin and very nice it was, but our first mate, appropriately dressed in a Jane Fonda as Barbarella tee-shirt, informed us that "the birds round here don't have much meat on them," which I took to be a reference to the gulls and cormorants.

Water for most purposes must be brought over in barrels or bottles, although in some instances wine and beer can be used as an alternative. The communal toilet is flushed with sea water from a bucket. This is easy to fill from a rock pool at low tide, but at high tide involves a dash down the slipway to catch a wave. It certainly makes you appreciate the convenience of running water and drains. I see now why the Victorians celebrated the arrival of clean and healthy

water systems by building their waterworks to look like grand Italianate palaces.

Our home for four days was to be a little more modest. Boarded for protection against the weather and light fingered visitors, our four granite walls housed kitchen, dining room, lounge and bedroom in open-plan style. Reconstruction was based on the foundations of two separate dwellings and still had to conform to the planning requirements of the Jersey parish of Grouville; of which the Minkies form an outpost and to which the owners of the various properties pay rates. These understandably are at a reduced level as they do not receive all the regular services of the parish, street lighting and refuse collection for instance.

The buildings are surrounded by a low wall of granite blocks, which is interrupted only where nature has provided her own sea defence. At the highest tides all but the top of the slipway is covered and the sea almost reaches the wall, showering the huts with spray when the wind blows strong. A walk round the block, excluding the helicopter pad, takes little more than a minute. If you move fast enough it is possible to get all of the landed sea birds in the air at the same time; quite a sight and a sound.

Looking out to sea, the northern horizon is dominated by Jersey. To the east, if visibility is particularly good, is the pale silhouette of the Normandy coast in the vicinity of Coutainville and to the south east France's equivalent of the Isles of Scilly, Îles Chausey. Close by the sea is broken only by the occasional rock, with four small outcrops about 200 metres to the east, each supporting a pilotage beacon.



*View across Les Minquiers*



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Low tide brings a dramatic change of scenery.

The retreating sea reveals massive granite boulders, smooth and rounded by the action of the sea, which help to protect the island by dissipating some of the energy of the waves. The four offshore outcrops of rock are transformed into the peaks on a mountain range maquette. All around the sea is filled with a maze of pink/beige granite outcrops, which to the west stretch to the horizon, appearing to be

more rock than sea. Most spectacular of all, a huge curving golden beach of shell fragments is revealed. The scale is difficult to comprehend until the tiny specks that appear on it are revealed through binoculars to be gulls.

Particularly low tides are known locally as ormering tides. A great delicacy, the ormer is a large Mediterranean cousin of the limpet, found here at the northern extreme of its habitat and under rocks



the most southerly building in the British Isles



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exposed at low water. The Minkies is a good place to fish for them as their relative inaccessibility has prevented the over fishing that has occurred round the populous islands. The gathering of them is strictly controlled. It may only take place between September 1st and April 30th, and then only on the first day of each new moon or full moon and the three following days, and only if the shell is a minimum of eight centimetres long. Possession of them is allowed for a further two days beyond the four fishing days. After that you are in deep water, so to speak.

On the rock there isn't total silence, but it's close to it. The gentle crash of waves on rocks and the raucous laughter of hundreds of gulls soon fade into the background. The distant drone of a boat's engine is instantly picked out as something unnatural.

While one of the senses enjoys something of a holiday, another goes into overdrive. At times the smell of what is politely known as guano can be

overpowering, but you soon learn to stand or sit somewhere else.

We lounge in soporific splendour. The sea rises, the sea falls. From their roof-top perches the great black backed gulls taunt the herring gulls on the rocks below who squawk back, they know their place and don't like it. Cormorants and shags stand around in small groups as if waiting for a bus to come along. Common terns squabble over sand eels as a group of oystercatchers circle as if preparing to perform a Red Arrows display. A mating pair of clown face beetles shunt back and forth across a rock.

It's another hectic day at the Minkies.

If your appetite has been whetted, I understand that one property is on the market for a modest £15,000. There are two drawbacks, however. Firstly you must be a Jersey resident and meet their house purchasing regulations. Secondly, the property is a gable end and a pile of rubble, but it's a start, and you won't have many interruptions while you work.