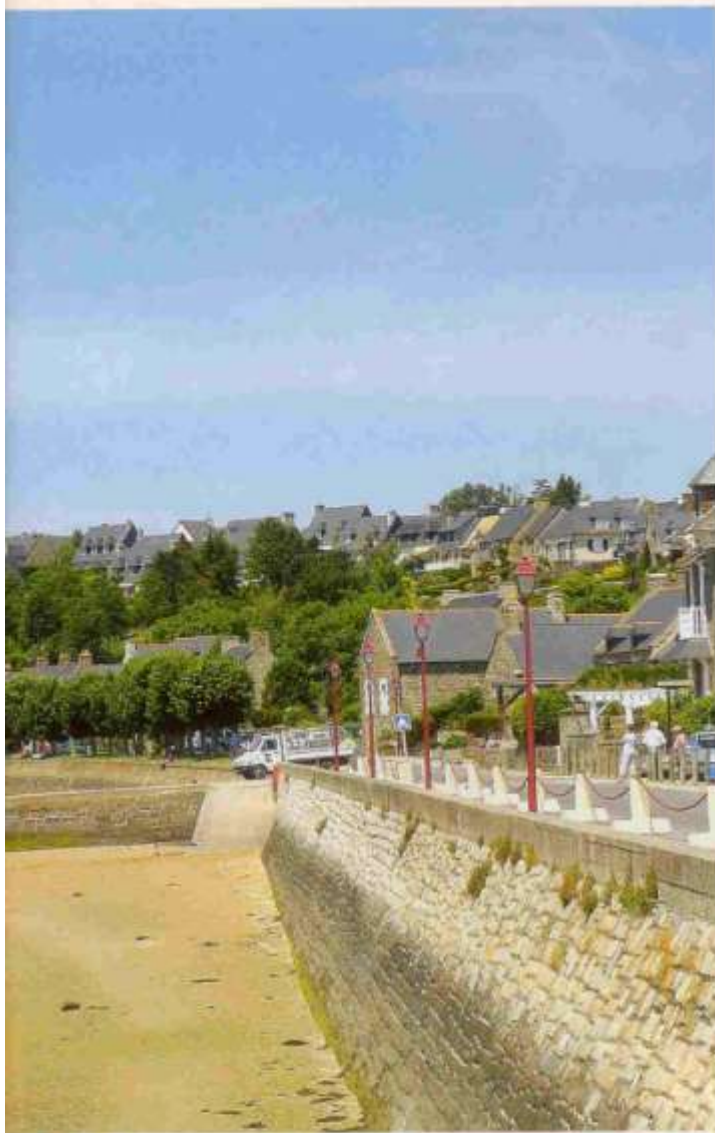


Village life

A mariner's tale

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JANE GIFFORD





The pretty village of Saint-Suliac has been home to generations of deep-sea fishermen who have risked their lives to earn a living. **Mark Stratton** visits a community bound to the sea

The fishing nets, buoys and ship's bells adorning Saint-Suliac's stone cottages are quaint reminders of a rich maritime history. But they scarcely tell the story of the bravery and sacrifice made by generations of fisherman from this charming village located on the Rance estuary's right bank, ten kilometres south of Saint-Malo.

It's a story that retired deep-sea fisherman Marcel Jouquan is delighted to recall. For centuries Saint-Suliac's men set sail for the distant and dangerous fishing grounds of Terre-Neuve – the Canadian coast of Newfoundland. "Terre-Neuve fishing has been a tradition of our village for three centuries," says Marcel, as we chat in the *chambres d'hôtes* he now runs with his wife, Marie-Annick.

"I fished for 36 years, sailing back and forth to northern Canada. The journey took eight days from Saint-Suliac and we would work for three months in Terre-Neuve before returning for 15 days' shore leave," recalls Marcel. His living room is crammed with nautical memorabilia from his career; cabinets of ship's knots and pictures of trawlers he worked on. "We would work 18-hour shifts; it was very tiring and the work was very dangerous. Not all Saint-Suliac's fishermen returned," says Marcel.

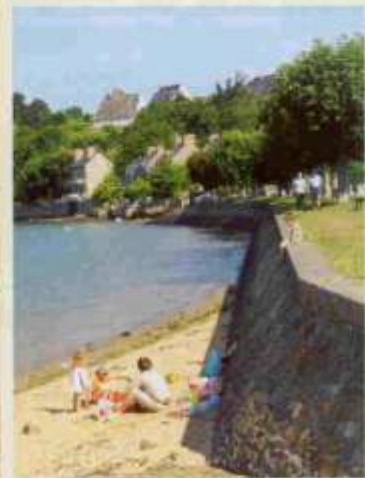
His wife Marie-Annick admits she used to pray for Marcel's safe return. She advises me to take a short

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Saint-Suliac's waterfront; Marcel Jouquan was a fisherman for 36 years; The pretty village in bloom; Place du Carrouge



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SAINT-SULIAC



walk along the coast to a prominent headland just north of the village to a monument built for the seafarers. From a cliff-top perch, an alabaster-white statue of Mary, *La Vierge de Grainfollet*, gazes seawards from under a stone gazebo, as if enjoying the blistering views back down the Rance and across Saint-Suliac.

"The statue was built by my great-grandfather in 1894 to pray for the safe return of our fishermen," says Marie-Annick.

"Terre-Neuve fishing ended here ten years ago when the company based in Saint-Malo ceased trading," says Marcel, who then retired. Saint-Suliac has a fraction over 800 inhabitants but Marcel reveals only ten fishermen who used to voyage to Terre-Neuve now remain in the village when once virtually all the men were engaged in fishing.

"Now we have a lot of people from Paris and Rennes coming here to buy houses," he says, somewhat wistfully.

The attraction of owning a home here is very obvious; village life is completely unhurried and Saint-Suliac's appearance has scarcely changed since the 17th-century. The maze of lanes of stone cottages are still laid

out in medieval fashion around the central focus of the village, the imposing Saint-Suliac parish church.

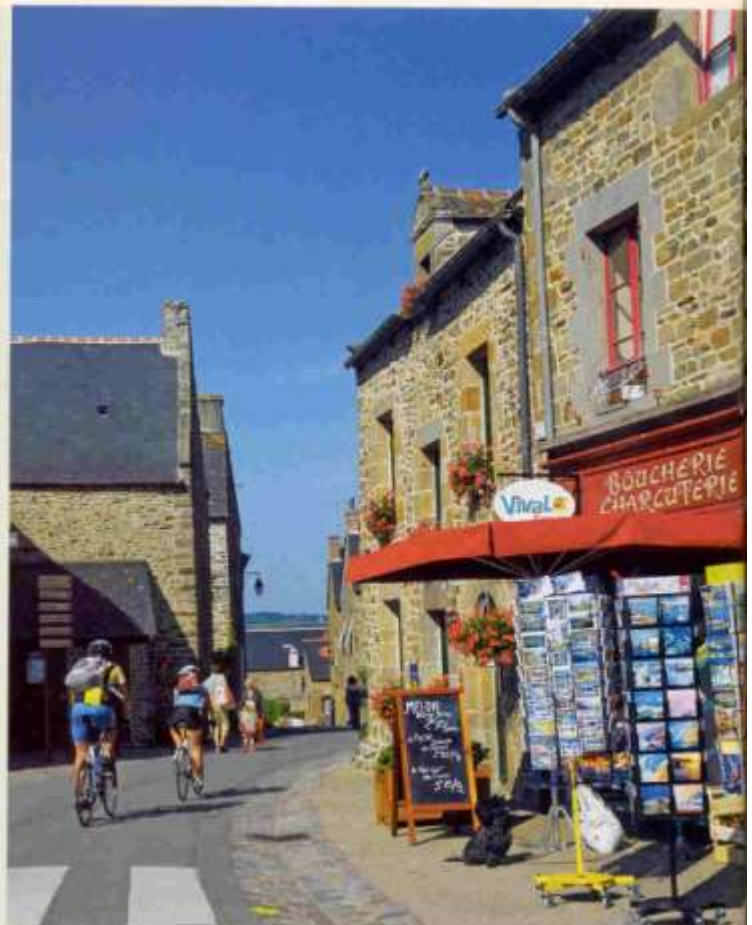
Typically the lanes, or *ruelles*, are narrow and high-walled to protect people's privacy. The Passage du Petit Puits is typical of these and it leads downhill to the village's attractive tree-lined quay.

The waterfront has a working boatyard and moored boats still pepper the estuary, although they are mainly recreational vessels these days. The exposed tidal flats are alive with the cries of foraging wader birds. The shimmering light is dreamy and it's little wonder the village has become popular with artists.

At Marie-Annick's insistence, I called by the village's ancient church – one of Brittany's oldest. Christianity arrived here in 606AD with the appearance of a Welsh monk named Suliau. He established a monastery just south of the village at Mont Garrot; the site of which can be passed on a well-signed nine-kilometre circular hike from Saint-Suliac.

The first church was eventually constructed in the 11th century and you can still see the original Romanesque foundations incorporated into a later 13th and 14th-century Gothic reconstruction. It was rebuilt ►

FAR LEFT: Everyday life in Saint-Suliac
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Marcel and Marie-Annick in their home; enjoying the waterfront; A memorial window in the church; *La Vierge de Grainfollet*



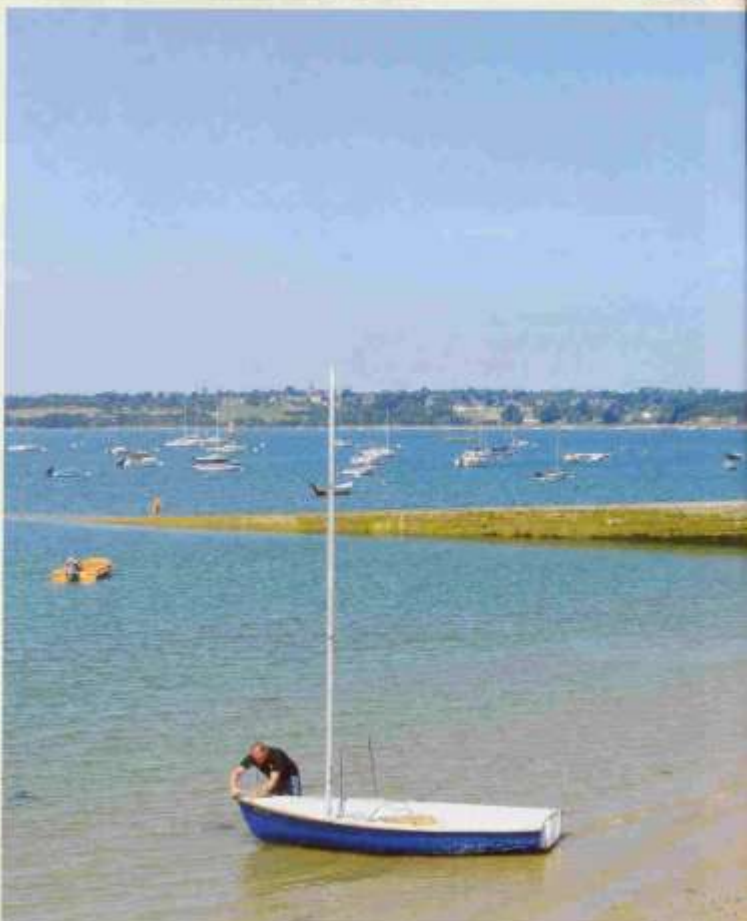
once again after being damaged in 1596 while under siege by Henry IV during the Wars of Religion. Inside the ancient interior are several scale models of wooden sailing ships (one hangs above the congregation) which function as ex-voto offerings for sailors' safe return.

Elsewhere there is ample evidence that Saint-Suliac's alluring headland location sheltered far older civilisations. Just outside town is a five-metre-high standing stone or menhir from the Neolithic era known as the "tooth of Gargantua" (*la dent de Gargantua*). Local mythology claims it to be the lost tooth of an evil child-eating giant. And not far outside the village, around the tidal zone, lie impressive fortifications of a Norman camp built in the early 10th-century.

Back at the Jouquans', Marie-Annick shows me an old black and white picture of the village. "Look, only donkeys in the village, no cars", she says. It was taken a century earlier and she tells me how on the first weekend in August, the village celebrates a festival that recalls how Saint-Suliac was 100 years ago.

"There can be 15,000 people visiting this festival," she says, "there are lots of boats, the houses are covered in fishing nets and there are even donkeys. It's *très jolie*". 🇫🇷

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A pretty doorway; Place du Carrouge in the centre is home to the *épicerie*; A village *ruette*; The bay with the alabaster-white statue of Mary, *La Vierge de Grainfollet* on the headland



SAINT-SULIAC



FRANCOFILE



GETTING THERE

Situated just 10km south of Saint-Malo, Saint-Suliac can be reached via Brittany Ferries. The village is four hours from Paris.

Brittany Ferries

Tel: 0871 244 0744

www.brittanyferries.com

WHERE TO STAY

Contre Vents et Marées B&B

3 Place du Carrouge

35430 Saint-Suliac

Tel: (Fr) 2 99 58 54 17

www.contreventsetmarees.com

Marcel and Marie-Annick Jouquan's homely *chambres d'hôtes* with rooms from €52 for two people sharing.

WHERE TO EAT

Le Galichon Crêperie

5 Rue de la Grande Cohue

35430 Saint-Suliac

Tel: (Fr) 2 99 58 49 49

Open all year but with restricted opening hours: in summer Tuesday to Sundays for evening meals.

Guinguette

Quai de Rance

35430 Saint-Suliac

Tel: (Fr) 2 23 15 09 22

Open daily April-October.

Côté Sens

16 Rue de la Herse

35400 Saint-Malo

Tel: (Fr) 22 99 20 08 12

www.cote-sens.com

PLACES TO VISIT

L'Église de Saint-Suliac

35430 Saint-Suliac

TOURIST OFFICE

Point d'Information Touristique

La Mairie Annexe

5 Place Corrouge

35430 Saint-Suliac

Tel: (Fr) 2 99 58 41 22

www.saint-suliac.fr

www.brittanytourism.com



DON'T MISS

FRANCE Magazine, together with l'Association des Plus Beaux Villages, has compiled a book of the most beautiful village drives in France. See page 10 for more details.