There's a hidden gem on our doorstep, but at 45 square miles in area you'd have thought that it couldn't hide. It's the island of Jersey. Far from trying to keep it a secret, Jersey islanders are beckoning loud and clear, in particular to families with children of all ages. But they feel that they are being overlooked by their bigger neighbour, the UK. They say that they've got lots to offer as a family destination, especially if you love any sort of seaside holiday: active, extreme or just playing on a sunny beach.

Jersey's tourism team invited us to put their offerings to the test, so we visited at Whitsun. My children, aged 12 and 14, love all forms of watersports, and were keen to try out as many as possible. I had spoken to friends about our forthcoming trip; they all told me we'd love it. No-one could quite put a finger on it, but we'd love it.

I reflected on that love I'd have as I walked off Jersey's longest beach at St Ouen's after a session of blokarting, perhaps better known as sand yachting. I had sand in every possible nook and cranny of my face. I was chewing it, shaking it out of my ears and blowing it out of my nose. The kids' hoots of laughter rang around the beachfront car park when I took off my glasses, because I had two clean circles of pink flesh around my eyes. The blokart had kicked up wet sand off the front wheel and sprayed it all over me, particularly when cornering at speed.

The prospect of trying blokarting was both thrilling and scary. But hitting middle age in parenthood didn't mean that I was going to sit back and watch my children have all the fun; this was an opportunity too good to miss.

It was thrilling, but it's fair to say you only need push yourself as hard as you dare; it's easy to work out how to slow down and stop, which your instructor teaches you before you start, and in no time we were trying to beat each other and go faster and further along the sand, with Dad showing off and doing wheelies. ‘Falling about laughing’ took on a new meaning when we pushed the limits too far and slowly but surely tipped over sideways. Harnessed in, we looked like beached whales while waiting to be uprighted by our instructor; our laughter had drained all ability to get out and right ourselves.

That was enough adrenalin for one day, or so I thought, until we got back to base, the Merton Hotel. It's got an indoor and outdoor pool complex, including waterslide, lazy river and flowrider, which is a surfing and bodyboarding machine; the children were itching to get into the pools. Adults can catch a quiet moment in the jacuzzi, fitness suite or steam room, as lifeguards are on duty poolside. Needless to say we slept well during the week and woke to full English buffet breakfasts, giving us a chance to fuel up before the next active day.
Not all watersports have to be quite so energetic… the two kayaking trips that we did with Derek Hairon take you offshore into beautiful waters, through craggy rock formations, into caves and quietly watching wildlife.

A second half day of paddling with Derek, up to and round Icho tower, was around gullies on the rising tide. Starting in very shallow water as the tide is coming in, you can learn paddling techniques in a couple of feet of water. Our trip out to moor on a resulting islet was a bit of an adventure, being able to rest en route in open water where Derek knew there was shelter.

Derek also offers a moonwalk trip on the island, around the south east coast. He explained the walk’s title: the tidal range is one of the greatest in the world, and at very low tide the size of the island almost doubles. The resultant sea bed takes you offshore into beautiful waters, through craggy rock formations, into caves and quietly watching wildlife. I think it’s one of the best ways of getting to know a place. With boats to suit all sizes, you can paddle with a passenger, or children from about age 12 can paddle a smaller kayak on their own. Derek first teaches you technique with a passenger, or children from about age 12 can paddle a smaller kayak on their own. Derek first teaches you technique with a passenger, or children from about age 12 can paddle a smaller kayak on their own. Derek first teaches you technique with a passenger, or children from about age 12 can paddle a smaller kayak on their own. Derek first teaches you technique with a passenger, or children from about age 12 can paddle a smaller kayak on their own.

We found time to explore on land too. St Helier is a bustling, cosmopolitan town. You’ll hear almost as much French being spoken as English, and at commuting time, mopeds and scooters buzz everywhere as though you’re in an Italian town. Al fresco lunches with work colleagues spill out onto pedestrianised streets to enjoy the sunny weather. This is a proper working town, not dressed up for tourists, but we felt like we were overseas.

We wanted to spend some time visiting historic sights, starting with the Jersey War Tunnels, as the Channel Islands were the only parts of the British Isles to be invaded and occupied by German forces during the Second World War. The war tunnels were excavated by forced labour from throughout Europe during the German Occupation. A plaque on a side wall is a chilling reminder that over 1,000 English residents of Jersey were deported from that terminus to Germany in 1942. Elsewhere, eight German bunkers have been restored and are open to the public. The excellent M19 Fortress Mortar Bunker, permanently lived in by 9 people for over 12 months, gave us all an opportunity to witness the conditions and to handle some of the grenades and extremely heavy rifles used.

Reminders of Occupation are evident throughout the island. In the middle of St Helier, the offices of Jersey Tourism are in the former railway station terminus. A plaque on a side wall is a chilling reminder that over 1,000 English residents of Jersey were deported from that terminus to Germany in 1942. Elsewhere, eight German bunkers have been restored and are open to the public. The excellent M19 Fortress Mortar Bunker, permanently lived in by 9 people for over 12 months, gave us all an opportunity to witness the conditions and to handle some of the grenades and extremely heavy rifles used.

Not all kayaking trips are as energetic. Derek Hairon. He takes you offshore into beautiful waters, through craggy rock formations, into caves and quietly watching wildlife. I think it’s one of the best ways of getting to know a place. With boats to suit all sizes, you can paddle with a passenger, or children from about age 12 can paddle a smaller kayak on their own. Derek first teaches you technique with a passenger, or children from about age 12 can paddle a smaller kayak on their own. Derek first teaches you technique with a passenger, or children from about age 12 can paddle a smaller kayak on their own. Derek first teaches you technique with a passenger, or children from about age 12 can paddle a smaller kayak on their own. Derek first teaches you technique with a passenger, or children from about age 12 can paddle a smaller kayak on their own. Derek first teaches you technique with a passenger, or children from about age 12 can paddle a smaller kayak on their own. Derek first teaches you technique with a passenger, or children from about age 12 can paddle a smaller kayak on their own. Derek first teaches you technique with a passenger, or children from about age 12 can paddle a smaller kayak on their own.
Durrell Wildlife is a must-see on the island and is celebrating its 50th birthday this year. They regard their focus as completely different from traditional zoos; the animals at Durrell Wildlife are ambassadors for their species in the wild, here to help us all learn about them as well as ourselves. You’ll still see some animals in cages, and we’ve no idea if those cages are bigger and better than anywhere else, but the majority seem to have outdoor space into which they can voluntarily wander. A relaxed day at Durrell rewards you with an opportunity to see species that also look relaxed in their surroundings, and to take time to find out about their ethos.

We couldn’t finish our stay without returning to the water, this time with a bit of guilty indulgence as we were on powered craft. At least, I was feeling guilty about pointlessly burning up fuel as we jetskied, while the kids were very keen to say the least, feeling like they’d become new James Bond characters. While the operator we used has now gone, another has been established on the island for 26 years. Our half hour of jetskiing is now remembered as one of the highlights of any watersport the children have ever undertaken. Each jetski is big enough to take three, and children aged 12 and over can take the controls because there’s a speed limiter and a cut-out function if you fall off. Despite the guilt, I couldn’t help but enjoy the thrill and speed it offers - just this once.

Waterskiing was last on the agenda, just as bad on the gas guzzling front, I know. The large, safe St Aubin’s Bay was a perfect place to learn waterskiing, but one of the tricks was to keep your mouth closed, as one of my two discovered to his cost. He chose to end his waterskiing early, the rest of us again making surprisingly good progress in a few minutes, being able to stand up and ski until our arms ached and we chose to stop.

Is there any other water-based fun to be had on the island? We’ve overlooked the simple pleasures which we could enjoy in the evenings: BBQ’s on one of the island’s 27 beaches, together with paddling in the sea and beach games. With the fish market in St Helier giving us the option to try out unusual BBQ meals, the beaches provided a fine end to the day.

So were our friends right that we’d love it? Of course they were - it’s a cracking family destination. The only surprise is that Jersey folk are happy to tell the rest of the world about this gem and invite their neighbours over to share the fun.

**St Helier is a bustling, cosmopolitan town… at commuting time, mopeds and scooters buzz everywhere as though you’re in an Italian town**
Jersey’s favourite family hotel

For many visitors to Jersey, the Merton Hotel continues to provide the perfect place for an unforgettable stay on the Island. The Hotel’s success is built on its appeal to all ages, whether travelling as a family, a couple or alone. The range of accommodation and facilities ensures that, whether you are aged nine or ninety, we can satisfy your needs.

Early Booking Offers available
Please call us on 01534 724231 or visit www.mertonhotel.com

THE MERTON HOTEL
Part of the Seymour Group of hotels on the island – a private, family-owned trio of hotels, this one firmly suited to the family market. We weren’t that keen on the concept of a family hotel to start with, expecting it to be running wild with unruly children. How wrong we were. It’s a pleasantly quiet hotel, large enough both in the pool complex and hotel to cope, without being so large that it lacks character. And there wasn’t an unruly child to be seen. Conveniently located in St Helier, rates are £31.50 per adult for February, Easter and October holidays, £58.50 at Whitson and £74 for summer holidays for bed and a comprehensive buffet-style English breakfast. Under 2’s free, 2-11 years at 50% and 12-15’s at 75% of the adult rate. Weekly rates available. Special offers shown online or via email alert.

Facilities include family rooms and suites, clubs from crèche to teen, tennis court and DIY laundry facilities, free access to the fitness centre (for 16+ years) and leisure complex including the Flowrider, the only one of its kind in the British Isles and the only one within a hotel complex in Europe. It enables you to surf or bodyboard, whether a complete beginner or experienced. The Star Room provides nightly entertainment free of charge Whitson to September, ranging from an Abba tribute band to a magician and music hall nights (might suit grandparents or bodyboard, whether a complete beginner or experienced. The Star Room provides nightly entertainment free of charge Whitson to September, ranging from an Abba tribute band to a magician and music hall nights (might suit grandparents

CAMPING AND CARAVANNING is possible but touring is not allowed – you and your caravan or motorhome get met off the ferry, guided to the campsite and allowed to pitch but not roam. How that works when your motorhome is your only vehicle I'm not quite sure, but it’s clearly a bit more difficult.

WATERSPORTS AND OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES
BLOCKARTING and COASTERING Pure Adventure in Jersey offers a range of activities including blockarting, rock climbing, coastarting and abseiling. Average prices £35 per adult for a 2 hour session, children 16 and under £20, students £25. For Summer 2009 they are planning RIB trips to the Ecrehos islands and possibly waterskiing. For those trying blockarting there’s a sidecar for those too small or unable to take in the detail. Helmets provided. Coastearting is not for the fainthearted. Helmets and wetsuits provided. Wear suitable stout and sticky-soled footwear.

www.purejersey.com

JETSKIING AND WATERSKIING Jersey Sea Sport Centre offers jet ski hire at £35 for 30 minutes on the water for ages 12+, with extra passengers at £10 or £5 for under 12’s, waterskiing at £22 per lesson or £110 for a course of six lessons for ages 5+ and banana boat rides at £6 per person. Wetsuits provided. www.jerseyseasport.com

KAYAKING AND MOONWALKING Derek’s got the British Canoe Union’s highest coaching qualification in sea kayaking and has lots of expedition experience. With detailed knowledge of how the tide works against the coast on the island, we were comfortable in the knowledge that we were in the hands of an expert. It has stood us in good stead on an ‘instructor’ led kayaking trip on another holiday since, where the coaching was non-existent. And as a Jersey islander since childhood, Derek’s a great tour guide too. He takes his own camera on kayaking trips, which means you don’t risk getting your own wet, and he’ll post on a disk of images at no additional cost. A 2.5 hour kayak tour costs £37.50 per adult and £25 per child under 17. Wetsuits provided. A 2.5 to 3 hour walking tour to Seymour or Icho Towers costs £12.50 per person. Bring suitable footwear that can get wet.

www.jerseykayakadventures.co.uk and www.jerseywalkadventures.co.uk

PLACES TO VISIT
There’s lots more, but we chose:

DURRELL WILDLIFE Jersey’s zoo, with a mission to save endangered wild animals from extinction. The entry fee helps their conservation programmes both in Jersey and overseas. £39.95 for 3 adults and 2 children. Under 4’s free. Durrell’s books are of course available in the large shop. www.durrell.org

ELIZABETH CASTLE Open daily from 6 April, Family ticket £25 for castle only, or £30 for castle and ferry. www.jerseyheritagetrust.org

JERSEY WAR TUNNELS Adults £10.50, Children 7-16 £6.50 www.jerseywartunnels.com

SECOND WORLD WAR BUNKERS The Channel Islands Occupation Society has both restored and mans the eight bunkers using volunteers alone. Opening times and prices vary, from free to £2. www.ciosjersey.org.uk

THE WEATHER The sun shone day after day when we were there, and usually sets in for the summer when the high pressure settles over the Azores. Whilst Jersey was basking, Cornwall, Devon and Dor set struck unlucky for Whitsun half term with a lot of rain.

WEATHER WEBSITES
www.thisisjersey.com/weather
www.magicseaweed.com
www.metcheck.com
www.jerseymet.gov.je

Plumas and the Channel Islands

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