

## **Rob interviews Mike Lucas about the islands of Brittany**

**Rob** I've come back to the delightful town of Port Louis, to speak to Mike Lucas once again. You've got a project on the go at the moment and you're writing a book about the islands of Brittany. Can you tell me a bit about how that's come about?

**Mike** Yes, it's quite a long, on-going project, this. It's 10 years like, but it's a big project because originally when we moved to Brittany, we started hearing about these islands that you could go and visit, you know, where people actually lived. And so I think, first of all, probably went to Belle Ile, which is the biggest.

**Rob** Belle-Ile-en-Mer.

**Mike** Belle-Ile-en-Mer, and absolutely loved it and discovered a little bit of it and realised how interesting it was.

**Rob** You go to Quiberon to get to that?

**Mike** Forty five minute boat trip from Quiberon, Yeah. And just next to Belle Ile are the ugly ducklings, Houat and Hoëdic. Houat's small, Hoëdic's even smaller, but they are lived on as well. And they are brilliant. But so I thought when you look at a book about Brittany or or a travel book, islands are mentioned, but I couldn't find any book that had been written in English - or in French for that matter - that tells you the story of all the islands. And originally, my idea was to cover the whole of the islands of the Atlantic. So going round from Ile de Chausey, that's in Normandy actually technically, isn't it?

**Rob** Just near the Mont Saint Michel.

**Mike** Yeah, yeah. And coming right down through Brittany and ending up right down near La Rochelle. With Ile d'Aix and Ile d'Oleron. So I was going to cover all those islands and then write the book about that. So I started doing that, and I've had actually been to those down in south, Aix, Olereon, haven't been to Chausey yet, but I've been to every inhabited frankly tiny ones where there is one person living or something like. So there's one where a young couple and their child look after this island, they've got a gîte and you can go and stay.

**Rob** Which one is this?

**Mike** Oh God, what's its name? It's near Molène. It's just off Molène actually. Anyway, so I decided that there's gotta be a book about this. So that's the research started. Started visiting the islands. And what was so fascinating and what makes hopefully the book interesting is that every island is different. Every Island has its

own characteristics, its own geography. A different type of people, a history of the people, the the culture. Every island from Belle Ile, which has obviously got quite a few inhabitants. I think it's got, I think about two and a half thousand live on Belle Ile. We're down to somewhere like er Ile de Sein, which has got 100 people living on it. And that is an amazing island - you go there from Audierne and as you go on the boat trips, nearly an hour's boat trip, you go along the coast, and then you turn left at the Point de Raz and that's the first time you catch sight of the island but all you can see, it looks like there's a little group of houses sitting on the sea, actually sitting on the sea, because it's so flat. It literally sits on the sea and in the winter - must been amazing - the hotel for instance we stayed with, the waves come over the first floor on a good night. So, I mean that's just one example of of all the differences of the islands.

Rob Do you have a favourite?

Mike Ah, goodness me. Oh, no that oh, gosh, obviously Belle Ile has so much, so much history as well. No, I love things like Ile de Sein and the story of Ile de Sein which is absolutely amazing that when General De Gaul went to Eng Britain, he made that amazing speech asking French people to come and join him for starting the resistance from England, all the men of Sein, almost the next day after the speech, got into their boats and came to England.

Rob Every single man?

Mike Every single man apart from the vicar, the baker and can't remember who else. About two or three were left behind - just the women and children were left.

Rob How many of them came back?

Mike They all stayed there during the war, their boats got impounded when they got there. So they couldn't get back. And I think most of them did get back eventually. General de Gaul made a speech not long after and he said that two thirds of his army were from the Ile de Sein because not many people answered the call, initially at all. Wasn't a great flood of people coming over from France. So I love that island. That's just one example of Houat, Ile Houat, which is just off Belle Ile and Hoëdic even more so. Actually, I'll choose Hoëdic over Houat, Hoëdic's even smaller. The little duckling and the big duckling they're called. Houat - it's just paradise. It's just a little paradise. It seems to always have good weather. I don't know why.

Rob Has its own microclimate.

Mike Yeah, and then wonderful beaches, you know, and and again, a lot of history. But again, about 100 people live there. But, there is there are the bars and restaurants and they do get summer visitors, but not anything like the numbers that go to Belle Ile or crowd onto Groix.

Rob We're in Port Louis here. If we were lucky, you'd have to look out in the right direction, we'd see the Ile de Groix.

Mike It's just over there, Yeah

Rob Which is also a wonderful place.

Mike Oh, yes. I love it. The thing about doing this research is it's no good just going over for the day. Every Island we've been to, we've gone over and found somewhere to stay and we stayed at least two days. So that you can get a feel of the island.

Rob It's a fantastic bit of research. I mean.

Mike Yes.

Rob It's a real pleasure, I imagine.

Mike Yes, I mean it's costing a fortune. I'll never make any money out of this. I mean, obviously we're paying all the expenses, haven't got a publisher yet.

Rob And what do you think the appeal is for an island? Do the English have a particular attraction?

Mike Well, no. The English, we asked about this. We asked for instance, on Ouessant, "who comes here?" They said, "all the French obviously, the Bretons particularly, Germans, Dutch". "Any English?" "Oh, very few." And we tried to work out why it was that the English, obviously they do go to the islands, but not in the numbers you'd expect. Because I think they live on an island. Going to another island doesn't really appeal to them in the same way that when you're on 'le continent', and that's what that's called, when you go to an island you look across to 'le continent'. So the appeal to English it doesn't seem to be great, but the appeal to most people who go there is the fact that you do feel the title of the book 'a world apart'. Soon as soon as you get off the boat. It's very similar, that maybe this is why it appeals to me, to living on the canals because living on the canals although you're passing through towns and villages you're a world apart, you're you live in a linear world. As the boat people did, that was their world, the linear

world where they travelled along these ribbons of waterways passing through places.

Rob I'll just remind listeners who maybe didn't hear the first interview with you that you actually in er your colourful past

Mike Yes

Rob Directed a theatre company which travelled the canals

Mike Yes

Rob Of England.

Mike Mikron Theatre.

Rob Mikron Theatre, Yeah. Ok, So that's you're making a parallel with that. That's really interesting. I'm also curious to know whether you discovered anything that these islanders have got in common, like an attitude to 'le continent' as you call it, the mainland, or a spirit of independence or

Mike Yes.

Rob Something like that. I don't know.

Mike I think of all those things you've mentioned, I think, the desire to live somewhere tranquil where you're away from the the bustle. The one thing you never get on an island is bustle, except you do, you get bustle - it's the moment the ferry arrives. And the ferry is a very interesting thing because we've sat and watched the ferry people pour off and if it's an island like Belle Ile where the cars are allowed the cars have to negotiate their way off this boat - quite tricky. It looks oh my god, all these people arriving. And then within five minutes, they're scattered and you don't even notice they're there. It's very, very interesting. So even though there are people there it's a feeling of remoteness, and of course if you go to certain parts of the islands, they are really remote. People live there and I couldn't live there. I wouldn't want to live on an island but I love visiting them.

Rob I also wonder about the problems that these islanders might have because recent visit to Groix I noticed a lot of houses with their shutters closed. Made me think that actually there were a lot of holiday homes and it's very good for the island in that there's people that use the island for their leisure, but it's also makes life very difficult for the young people.

Mike: There are problems in keeping the populations up. And certainly there is a lot of second home ownership and that the populations of these islands increases dramatically in the summer months, you know, but the people who live there, most of them are actually going up slightly and the the reason is, I think it's the young. The young are actually very interested in that way of life now. And most of them have still got a school, a primary school at least.

Rob But there are young people on the island

Mike There are young people who want to see small children as well and people are having babies which is good. So that is very important. it's not just an old dying population. In my view. I mean, it's I think it's gradual, but there is a feeling that these things are worth keeping and and the young notice realise this. I've got faith in the young.

Rob That's a great way to end the the conversation, for the time being anyway, Mike. Thanks very much indeed. Just remind us of the title of the book.

Mike A World Apart.

Rob Okay, well we'll look out for that when it's on the bookshelves.

Mike Right thank you.

Rob Mike Lucas, thanks very much indeed.

Mike You're welcome anytime.