

Camp Laurent

Introduces the Charente

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The best beaches in the Poitou-Charentes?

Head straight for the Charente-Maritime...

Warm sunshine, cool water, soft sand.... If you're dreaming of a beach holiday or simply just a great day out by the sea, then you're spoilt for choice. The Poitou-Charentes boasts as many as 100 beaches – yes 100! – spread along the coastline and the easily accessible islands that lie just off the Atlantic coast.

All boast long stretches of clean, soft sand and as many are protected under the Conservatoire du Littoral (the society to protect the coastline), the scenery is unspoilt and quite beautiful.

A good starting place when choosing the best beach for you is the archipelago of islands, including Ile de Ré and found off the coast of La Rochelle. Known as the French Hamptons, it's here that those French glitterati after a less blinging experience than that found on the Côte d'Azur come each summer for weeks of fun in the sun. Then there are the family friendly beaches round Royan while surfers will love the wild beauty of the Côte Sauvage. Here are few suggestions to get you started. Just don't forget your hat!

Le-Bois-Plage-en-Ré, Ile de Ré: Wherever you are on Ile de Ré, you are not far from a picture postcard beach. However, the southern side of this small island is where the best beaches are considered to be, and this one is one of the prettiest – and popular. A very gorgeous seven kilometres of gently shelving fine white sand with clear blue water, and a lovely village that's surrounded by vineyards and forest. The beach is patrolled by lifeguards in the summer. For something quieter, head for **La Plage de la Conche** between Les Portes and St Clements. At the edge of the Trousse-Chemise Pine Forest, it's a spot popular with artists.

Grande Plage, Ile d'Oléron: Pick a spot anywhere along the 12 km stretch of this beach that's on the southern tip of the island. Backed by sand dunes and the typical pine forests of the area, it has a very attractive natural setting that is in keeping with the unspoilt nature of the island. The waves are good so expect to see surfers. The southern part of the beach is designated as nudist so if going au naturel is not your thing, stick to the northern section! Other beaches worth noting are **Vert Bois** and **L'Acheneau** for surfers, the former is particularly highly rated. For calmer beaches that are more suitable for families with young children, head east to resorts such as **St Trojan les Bains**, where the beaches are patrolled. Water sports are also popular here. Other family-friendly beaches are **Boyardville** in the north and **Saumonnards** in the south.

Châtelailon plage: Located on the Atlantic coast, not far from La Rochelle and facing Ile de Ré, Aix and Oleron islands – from the beach you can see Fort Bayard – this three kilometre long stretch of sandy beach is made even more attractive by the century-old resort town that's noted for its Belle Epoque architecture. In July and August there are plenty of activities for children of all ages, as well as for adults (including beach volleyball). It has a 'Handiplage' award of excellence for catering for people with disabilities, including amphibious wheelchairs.

La Palmyre: North of Royan and part of the Côte Sauvage, this beautiful five kilometre stretch of beach is backed by sand dunes and forest. As the name **Côte Sauvage** – wild coast – suggests, the waves can be big here so it's popular with surfers and wind-surfers. It is not patrolled by lifeguards so you need to be careful, but if you're looking for an uncrowded beach this stretch is where to go.

Saint Palais-sur-Mer: North-west of Royan, located in the estuary and surrounded by the small but attractive seaside town is this curving, sandy beach with very calm waters. Near the beach plenty of cafés and restaurants, and in the evening the town comes alive with music. It is very child friendly with clubs for different age groups, and plenty of entertainment as well as loads of places to buy an ice-cream!

St Georges-de-Didonne: Just south of Royan, this two kilometre long beach with tranquil waters, is set between cliffs at one end and a 36m high lighthouse at the other. In between, the beach is fringed by pine forests. As well as the long promenade, there are walks along the cliff tops, giving you breath-taking views. There is also the Parc de l'Estuaire, with its interactive museum, forest walks and educational tours. The beach also has a 'Handiplage' designation which means it has some facilities suited for handicapped people including loos and shower.

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Grande Conche: In Royan itself, the two kilometre beach features pretty striped tents and is perfect for bathing. Many families also head for **Conche Foncillon** and **Pigeonnier**. Also worth a visit is **Conche de Pontaillac** to the west which is more sheltered and can be less crowded of the beach is designated as nudist so if going au naturel is not your thing, stick to the northern section! Other beaches worth noting are **Vert Bois** and **L'Acheneau** for surfers, the former is particularly highly rated. For calmer beaches that are more suitable for families with young children, head east to resorts such as **St Trojan les Bains**, where the beaches are patrolled. Water sports are also popular here. Other family-friendly beaches are **Boyardville** in the north and **Saumonards** in the south.

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Le Lacs de Haute Charente and other Inland Beaches

You don't need to be by the coast to spend a day at the beach – it is a French tradition to create artificial beaches by rivers and lakes, both natural and man-made. Usually called outdoor recreation areas or étangs, they are life-guard patrolled during the summer months and are usually accompanied by a café plus a playground for young children. Some will also have a watersports centre. Your local tourist information centre will have details of one nearest you, but these are some of the more well-known ones.

One of the largest is found in an area known as the [Lake District of the Charente](#), [Les Lacs de Haute Charente](#) (see photo above and map below). Here two neighbouring lakes create a water sports paradise but also plenty of space for relaxing by the water.



Plan d'eau de Peyras - Roumazieres - 10 mins

Soak up some sunshine on a sandy beach just over 10 mins from Camp Laurent.

The swimming area is filtered so it is clean and fish free. Supervised in July and August. Pedaloos are available for hire on the adjoining lake. There is also a snack bar, toilets and changing facilities.

Etang de la Féculerie - Etagnac - 30 mins

A man made beach with swimming and fishing area. Sunbathe in beautiful surroundings with plenty of shady areas for picnics. There is a snack bar, tennis area, petanque and some beautiful lake side walks. Open May to September. Please note the swimming area is not supervised at all times.

Lac de Lauvaud and Mas Chaban - Verneuil - 25 mins

In the heart of the Lacs de Haute Charente lies two stunning lakes offering swimming, fishing, cycle routes and woodland trails. The Plage de Guerlie is a beautiful sandy beach on the shores of Lac de Lauvaud. There is a snack bar, mini golf, shaded picnic areas and the restaurant Cote de Boeuf alongside the beach. On the opposite side of the lake there is a non motorised water sports centre offering windsurfing, sailing, rowing and canoeing as well as an equestrian centre. There is also the Soleil Couchant, a bar/restaurant offering great food and the chance to admire views over the lake from the outside terrace. Just a little further along you will find the slightly smaller Plage de Chassagne. Mas chaban is a quieter lake and boasts spectacular scenery, excellent fishing spots and beautiful woodland walks.

Lac Saint-Pardoux - Limousin - 1 hour

Travel a little further to the Limousin and you will find the beautiful Lac de Saint Pardoux nestling in the heart of a 330 hectare forest. The lake is divided into three areas - Santrop which offers swimming and leisure activities, Chabannes with its nautical centre aimed at sailing and windsurfing and Freaudor which specialises in water skiing. All three areas have beaches and snack bars.

Other étangs are found at: Aubeterre-sur-Dronne, Bonneuil-Matours, Brossac, La Bussière, Château-Garnier, Condac, near Ruffec, Etagnac, Martin L'Ars, La Puye, Roumazieres, Saint-Cyr, Saint-Macoux Saint-Yriex, Saint-Sauveur, Valdivienne, Vars and Villefagnan.

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Tourist attractions and things to see and do in the historic town of La Rochelle

La Rochelle is one of France's loveliest coastal towns. Its historic port is beautifully preserved with a quayside that bustles with boats small and large, a seafront that is packed full of lively cafes, bars and restaurants where you can stop and watch the world go by. In the old town wander through its arcades streets, flanked by seventeenth and eighteenth century buildings that are now home to boutique shops selling everything from fashion and homeware to delicious pastries and fresh bread, books and antiques.

The town was first founded as a fishing village in the 10th century but grew rapidly, especially after it was given a charter by Eleanor of Aquitaine, allowing it to be a free port and runs its own affairs. Under Plantagenet rule, it traded with England Netherlands and Spain. Despite the One Hundred Years War and the French Wars of Religion, the city continued to thrive and from the 14th to the 16th century it was one of France's great maritime cities, its wealth based on trade with the New World.

However, at the beginning of the 17th century, the city was a stronghold for the protestant Huguenots and there antipathy to the French king resulted in the famous Siege of La Rochelle – Cardinal Richelieu authorising a 14-month blockade to bring the city into submission; this siege in 1627 is the backdrop to much of Alexandre Dumas' famous novel, 'The Three Musketeers'.

At the end of the siege it lost its city status and privileges, however in the following centuries it again built up its trade, this time with the New World, and the city once again became prosperous.

It has long been a French favourite with luminaries including Voltaire and Rabelais and Jean-Paul Sartre, who went to school here, associated with the town. Today, the French come to La Rochelle for its tourist attractions, great atmosphere and its proximity to the golden sands of the Atlantic beaches and beautiful off-shore islands.

WHAT TO SEE & DO NEAR LA ROCHELLE:

Le Vieux Port: The old port area of La Rochelle is dominated by three 14th and 15th century towers that stand tall at the entrance and is one of the town's major tourist attractions. The oldest is la Tour de la Chaîne, so called because a huge chain was slung from it across to Tour St-Nicolas on the other side. Just over 400 years ago the first settlers to Quebec left from La Rochelle and Tour de la Chaîne now houses a permanent exhibition celebrating this. It's open daily. Perhaps most interesting is Tour de la Lanterne that was originally built as a beacon for ships but subsequently became a prison for pirates, enemy seamen including the British, then Huguenots and finally clergy during the revolution. The only surviving medieval lighthouse on the Atlantic coast, you can still see graffiti inscribed on the walls by captured English seamen. The view from the top is worth the climb. It's open daily except Tuesdays.

Tel: 05 46 34 11 81.



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Take in the views: In La Rochelle you're spoiled for choice when it comes to beautiful views. As mentioned above, the vista from the top of the Tour de la Lanterne is wonderful. Then there's the walk from the old port to the modern new harbour of Port des Minimes which gives a great view of the town. If you don't feel like walking, take the 'bus de mer', a small boat that runs between the Vieux Port at Tour de la Chaîne and quay number 10 at the Port des Minimes. It costs about €2 each. Tel: 05 46 34 02 22.

Watch the sun go down from La Plage des Minimes. Another great spot is on the clifftops by the Port de Plomb – here the sun sets over the Ile de Ré bridge.

For a sense of the town, sit yourself down at one of the port cafés and watch the hustle and bustle around you.

Take a tour: Because of its two periods of prosperity, La Rochelle is an interesting mix of Gothic and Renaissance architecture. Sadly, the Hôtel de Ville, which dates back to around 1600 during the reign of Henri IV, and considered one of the most beautiful town halls in France, suffered a catastrophic fire in 2013 and is currently hidden behind scaffolding awaiting funds for its restoration. But there's still plenty to see – read more on how to see the town...

Plage des Minimes: La Rochelle is not known for its beaches – there are excellent ones just a short distance away along the coast on the nearby islands. However, this beach is where the *beau monde* like to come to see and be seen. If you're looking for somewhere to watch the sunset, then it's the perfect choice. La Plage de la Concurrence in town has a great view of the town.

Foodie fancies: The town's daily market takes over the streets around Place du Marché. For an eye-boggling array of fresh seafood, head to the seafood market at Rue Marche. For the best ice-cream, head straight for Ernest le Glacier, a family business renowned for their fantastic ice-creams in fabulous flavours. There are two shops: 15-16 rue du Port and opposite at 18 rue Port.

The Aquarium: One of the best aquariums in Europe, with 12,000 marine animals including sharks contained in 75 different aquaria. Many of the large tanks start at floor level so small children can get face to face with many of the creatures. [Read more...](#)

Museums: There are many museums to discover with themes including La Rochelle's seafaring history (of course) to perfume bottles (yes, truly!). [Find out more about La Rochelle's museums...](#)

Boat rides: There are a number of boat rides that you can take from La Rochelle, taking you up to Fort Boyard and the islands near the town – Ile de Re, Ile d'Oleron and Ile d'Aix. Sail out for two hours, half-a-day or a full day. Departure points are the Vieux Port, Cours des Dames or the Esplanade Saint-Jean-d'Acre. The main companies to look out for are:

Croisières Inter-Iles: www.inter-iles.com

Croisières SMR: www.promenade-en-mer-larochelle.fr; it also offers sunset cruises, departing La Rochelle for Fort Boyard at 8pm during July and August.

La Rochelle Croisières: www.larochelle-croisiers.com

Navipromer: navipromer.com

For a trip by catamaran: www.kapalouest.com

Guided kayaking: www.antioche-kayak.com

Learn to sail: There are a number of sailing schools to choose from including:

ASPTT Voile La Rochelle: www.asptt.com

Ecole de voile Rochelaise: www.voile-rochelais.com

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Line-fishing guide:

Line-fishing with a guide: <http://www.ydfishing.fr>

The islands: Just off the coast of La Rochelle are the three islands of Ile de Ré, Ile d'Oléron and Ile d'Aix.

Ile de Ré: Nicknamed the French Hamptons, the island is famous for its pretty villages of white-washed houses and gardens of hollyhocks, beaches of fine sand and expanses of wild rosemary. Read more about [Ile de Ré](#)

Ile d'Oléron: The celebrated French century writer Pierre Loti dubbed the island of Oléron 'La Lumineuse' for its light. [Read more about Ile d'Oléron.](#)

Ile d'Aix: The little island of Aix can only be reached by boat. It has heavy Napoleonic fortifications, some of the best beaches in the area and it only takes an hour or so to walk around the island. In the village is a pretty church with an interesting crypt, a hotel and a couple of cafés.

LA ROCHELLE DETAILS:

Tourist office: 2 Quai Georges Simenon, Le Gabut; tel 05 46 41 14 68. It's English-language guide, La Rochelle Tourism, is worth picking up, and includes a detailed, three-hour walk through the town.

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Holidays, tourist attractions and beaches in sunny Royan

Royan on the Charente-Maritime coast can claim to be one of the best Atlantic beach and holiday resorts in France. It has a warm and sunny climate, tourist attractions, a lovely natural location and best of all some wonderful sandy beaches.

Once a chic seaside resort of beautiful Belle Époque architecture, it was flattened in January 1945 by Allied bombing. This attack appears to have been needless – according to one historian the Germans had already left the town – and caused huge damage. The town was rebuilt in modernist style in the 1950s today it is an attractive mix of the old and new, the colourful old villas nestling behind the main part of town.

It also has a fine port to wander around, lots of natural areas rich with wildlife to explore and for those who like to shop there's plenty to do, too, from Royan's renowned market to some upmarket stores aimed at Parisian holidaymakers. For despite its growing popularity with some foreign holidaymakers, Royan is still a place where the French like to holiday and enjoy the seaside as only the French can. Indeed, its beaches and ambiance have attracted the Sarkozy family for many years.

TOURIST ATTRACTIONS

The best beaches: The largest beach is La Grande Conche which runs for 2,650metres, is full of beautiful, fine sand – and faces due south. What more could a beach lover ask for? Add to that some great nearby hotels and fine restaurants in Royan and you can see why La Grande Conche is so popular. But there are other fine beaches too, including the Conche du Chay at nearby Pontaillac, just to the north, which is considered to be the most relaxed and intimate beaches in the area. Another quieter beach is the Conche de Pigeonnier (conche means cove) while there are plenty of fine Atlantic beaches further south around Saint-Georges. Meanwhile to the north of Royan is the Bonne Anse, which not only has a beach but is also a great location see wildlife.



Church of Notre-Dame: You'll probably either love or hate Royan's main church. Unlike the Romanesque style of the region, this church is most definitely modernist, and rather like the Tardis seems much bigger (and some would say nicer) inside. Built of concrete between 1952 and 1956 and replacing the original church that was destroyed during the Allied bombing, the nave is as high as Notre-Dame in Paris.

Inside, the stained glass windows tell the story of Royan.

The market: Another striking piece of modernist architecture is Royan's covered market, a shell-shaped building that was also created during the 1950s reconstruction. Architecture aside, the market is considered one of the best in the Charente-Maritime. It is open seven days a week from 7am-1pm but it's best to get there early – before 10am – to see it at its bustling best as locals come to buy not just fresh fruit and vegetables but also the freshest catch of the day.

The views: Walk about town to appreciate not just the changing architectural styles but also the lovely views out to the Atlantic. One recommended route is the *chemin douanier* (customs walk) for a vista of sandy beaches and secluded bays as well as Belle Époque mansions. Follow the path along the shore from the port before heading up to Grande-Cote, via the towns of Vaux-sur-Mer – it has a lovely Romanesque church – and Saint-Palais-sur-Mer. You can also cycle along the coastal park that takes you through the nearby pine forest.

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Out on the water: Take a boat ride out to Le Phare de Cordouan, one of France's oldest lighthouses – and one that still has a live-in lighthouse-keeper. Ten kilometres off the coast and 67-metre high, inside it boasts a black and white marble floor. For a breath-taking view, you can climb the 300 or so steps to the top. Another notable lighthouse is the one at La Courbe.

For cruise details, see the tourist office.

Les Jardins du Monde: Over seven hectares see plants and garden styles from all over the world, including a Japanese garden and an Indonesian forest plus a bamboo labyrinth and collections of orchids. Children will love the butterfly house, bamboo maze and the electric boats that can be taken out onto the water.

TOURIST ATTRACTIONS NEARBY

The côte Sauvage: Literally the 'wild coast', it's a stunning stretch of sand and sand dunes facing directly onto the Atlantic. Extra care, though, has to be taken when bathing here as the winds, undercurrents and tides can make this area a particularly treacherous place to swim. The beaches are backed by cycle paths and it is also possible to go horse-riding. For details on bike rentals and stables, see the tourist office at Royan. For those who like their taste of water to be a little more controlled, the Conche de Foncillon has a series of seaside swimming pools, where the water is kept at a balmy 28° C! See also the atmospheric villages such as La Temblade with their oyster nets and huts.

Meschers-sur-Gironde and the Grottes de Régulus: Clinging to the cliffs and surrounded by forests of oak and pine, Meschers, 12km south of Royan, is a typical fishing village that has become famous for its ancient caves (*Grottes troglodytiques*) created by the sea weathering away the white calcium cliffs. The caves have an interesting modern history, having been a place of hiding since the Middle Ages, first for pirates and ship wreckers, then protestants during the Wars of Religion. The most visited caves are those known as the Grottes de Régulus. These are named after the French warship Le Régulus, that was deliberately set alight and scuttled off these rocks on 7 April 1814 to avoid capture by British ships.

There are 15 different caverns stretching for more than a hundred metres, and visitors can go on guided tours. You can find out about the ruthless ship wreckers who used to work here, plus 'Guicharde', the last inhabitant of this place, who lived here until the beginning of the 20th century. There are also night-time visits and activities for children – reservations are required for all of them.

For more information about the Grottes de Régulus call 05 46 02 55 36 / 05 46 39 71 00 or visit the [Meschers-sur-Gironde website](#).

There's also the **Trogloscope** with its special effects show devoted to a local pirate attack at Meschers in 1617 (with a captain Picard!), exhibition and cinema screen. It's only open in July and August, with shows at 3pm, 4pm, 5pm and 6pm (plus 9pm and 10pm on Saturdays). Adults €4, children under 12, €3.

For more info about the Trogloscope call: 05 46 02 75 98

Another series of caves are Les Grottes de Matata where there is a museum, hotel, banquet hall, bar and crêperie. More information: 05 46 02 70 02 or visit www.grottesdematata.com.

Tourist office:

Avenue des Congrès; 05 46 23 00 00

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Tourist attractions – what to do and see in Cognac and its historic centre

As you approach the town of Cognac in the Charente, the scenery changes from fields of grazing cattle to neat rows of vines, stretching as far as the eye can see. The town is famous all over the world thanks to cognac, the grape-based spirit that has been made here for the past 300 years – French writer Victor Hugo called it the ‘liquor of the gods’.

Cognac is a town full of history. King François 1 was born here in 1494. A contemporary of King Henry VIII of England he is considered France’s first Renaissance king. He gave the town the right to trade salt using the river, so creating the foundations of its commercial success that was further enhanced when it went into cognac production.

The spirit was first made as an alternative to wine as a preventive drink against scurvy – wine was difficult to transport and took up a lot of space. Double-distilled and turned into brandy (cognac) it was more compact and more stable so travelled well but also tasted better after being aged in oak casks.

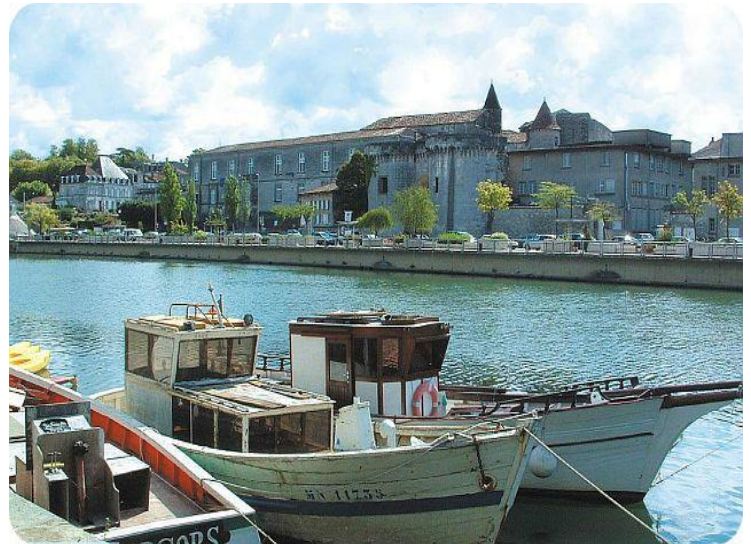
Today the town of Cognac continues to revolve around the spirit, its fortunes rising and falling according to the popularity of the drink.

THINGS TO SEE & DO IN COGNAC

Walk around the old town: Here the narrow streets are a mix of narrow medieval timber framed houses that once housed the workers and the grander mansions of the wealthy merchants. Points of interest include the window called ‘King’s balcony’ which is half way along Rampe du Chateau. Amongst the decoration are two salamanders, the insignia of King François 1 found throughout this part of town.

Also along this street is the Creux de Charlotte, once the chateau’s water tank, but turned into a public wash house after the Revolution.

The two crenellated towers along Quai Maurice Hennessy date from 1499 – 1500 and which some of the few remains almost of the original fortified town.



Walk along Rue Grande, Cognac’s main street from the Middle Ages to the 19th century, which is evident in the half-timbered houses. The most well-known is Maison de la Lieutenance at number seven whose wooden storey dates back to the 15th century. The house owes its name to the lieutenant general of Cognac who lived there during the 16th century.

Down by the river are the blackened chais (warehouses) that still store barrels of cognac, their discoloured state caused by the alcohol evaporating into the surrounding air. The locals call this ‘the angels taking their share’ – sadly, the truth is less romantic as the culprit is a tiny fungus that thrives in the alcohol-laden atmosphere.

Another option is to follow one or both of the routes created by the tourist office to help you discover the town. With ‘totem’ poles or panels that give information on the town’s history, the routes lead visitors through different parts of Cognac. These include the banks of the River Charente, place François 1er, place d’Armes, the Récollets convent and the gardens of the town hall.

The Parours du Roy route takes visitors back in time to the era of the salt trade and then the brandy industry, thanks to its pathway through the beautiful streets of the old town.

Take the Parours Belle-Epoque, route and discover the urban growth that took place in the 19th century thanks to the extraordinary economic development of that dazzling era.

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Also take a look at the booklet, available from the tourist office, called 'Laissez-vous conter Cognac' or 'Discover the world of Cognac' which contains a programme of six visits that are a little different. The 'Les instantanées' (or 'Snapshot tour') tours is all about getting to know a particular place or a district of the town during a brief visit of no more than 30 minutes.

The 'Rendez-vous en terres cognacaïses inconnues', meanwhile, take visitors on a mystery trip to a less well-known but still exceptional feature, monument or site in the region. All you know in advance is a place and time to meet – nothing else.

The 'Savoir-faire et des Hommes' tour focuses on local personalities. Artists, artisans and designers living in the region open up their workshops to share their knowledge and passion for their art or craft.

Take a cognac tour: One of most popular tourist attractions is a tour of one – or more! – of the many cognac producers to learn the history of cognac, how it is made plus enjoy a tasting or two. Most of the big names offer a tour – [more information](#). It's also worth asking the tourist office about tours of the surrounding vineyards and smaller producers where you can also buy direct.

Château de Cognac: The birthplace of François 1 is now called Château de Cognac. During its illustrious history it hosted the marriage of Richard the Lion Heart's son to Aurélie de Cognac in 1190. During the French Revolution it was sold as national property and bought in 1795 by cognac producer Baron Otard. Today it is the headquarters of Otard cognac. A tour includes some of the rooms of the château.

Take a cruise on a gabarre: The traditional flat-bottomed oak boat that once used to transport cognac, salt and other produce, today transports visitors along the Charente – a great way to see the town from the river. At 22m long, La Dame Jeanne is an exact replica of a gabarre and from May to September (inclusive) the boat sails for 14 kilometres along the river Charente for a relaxing and enjoyable journey of just under two hours. Tickets can be bought La Salle Verte, near the river port, from 15 minutes before departure or from the Cognac tourist office. Sailing times vary throughout the summer; for times see here. For more information telephone: 05 45 82 10 71.

Cognathèque: A permanent exhibition devoted to cognac – see and buy 450 different cognacs as well as 50 types of pineau, the delicious aperitif of the Charente. 8 place Jean-Monnet; tel 05 45 82 43 31; www.cognatheque.com. Also at **Le Musée des arts du cognac** learn more about the history and economic impact of the Cognac industry. Les Remparts – Place de la Salle Verte, Cognac. Work of local artists and collections of art nouveaux glass can be seen at **Le Musée d'art et d'histoire**: 48 bd Denfert Rochereau, Cognac.

WHAT TO SEE & DO NEAR COGNAC

Musée François Mitterrand: In the nearby town of Jarnac, it's dedicated to former French president François Mitterrand who was born in the town. One of France's most loved and respected presidents, the museum chronicles his life, but also contains the gifts he received from visiting heads of state from around the world when he was president. 10 quai de l'Orangerie, Jarnac; tel 05 45 81 38 88

The Village Gabarrier: the village of Saint Simon was once the site of the Charente's most important shipyard. Today it's peaceful but 200 years ago the air was filled with a cacophony of noise as workmen and traders plied their trade. To soak up the history, take a look at the museum, La maison des Gabarriers, which is housed in an elegant old stone building. Your ticket also includes a 90-minute trip on a replica gabarre. Also stroll around town, keeping an eye out for evidence of the past – signs explaining all are posted along the way. Also worth a look is the 12th century church of Saint Sigismond.

Bourg-Charente: Take the tow-path from Cognac and follow the river to this medieval chateau that's overlooked by a grand château owned by the family behind Grand Marnier (unfortunately, it is not open to the public). You can, however, have lunch at the Charente's only Michelin-starred restaurant, La Ribaudière.

Tourist offices:

Cognac: 16 rue du XIV Juillet; tel 05 45 82 10 71; www.tourism-cognac.com

Jarnac: Place du Château; tel 05 45 81 09 30; www.jarnac-tourisme.com

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Tourist attractions and what to do and see in Angoulême and its historic centre

Fall for the attractions of Angoulême's winding streets, historic buildings and shopping. If you're a tourist and visiting for the first time, don't be put off by the sprawling industrial zone that surrounds the Charente capital. Ignore the huge pre-fabricated buildings and garish signs on the plain and continue climbing until you reach the *centre ville*. As you will discover, the mood is very different up here with winding cobbled streets of the old quarter and, from the ancient city walls, magnificent views across the valley, the river Charente glistening in the sunshine. It has plenty of tourist attractions and things to see and do.

Walk around the town and you can trace its history. It dates back to the first century but became politically and historically important during the late Middle Ages. It was during this time that the city walls, called Les Ramparts were first built, as well as St Pierre Cathedral whose spire can be seen from miles around.



It has seen its fair share of battles, being at the heart of the struggle for power between the French and English during the 14th century and then during the French Wars of Religion two hundred years later. During the 18th and 19th centuries the many papermaking mills (now all but disappeared) brought the town great wealth. Today, reminders of these past days can be found in the older medieval style buildings and grander mansion with beautiful facades and thick wooden doors.

Also look out for something more modern – the 20 or so walls decorated with cartoon-style murals by a variety of artists and the 1000 or so street name plaques in the form of a speech bubbles. Angoulême is world-renowned amongst creators and fans of this creative medium, and hosts the Comic Strip festival every January.

A good place to start your exploration of the old part of the town is Les Halles, the covered market that's an excellent example of 19th century metal work, with ornate scroll work curling around the roof and walls. Inside are stalls selling fresh produce from cheeses to meat, seafood and fresh fruit and vegetables. If you want to see the market at its bustling best, make sure you go in the morning. (Near the market is the tourist office where you can pick up a leaflet, in English, with a map of the old town including explanations of local tourist attractions, what to see and where to find it.)

More shops and cafés can be found in and around Rue des Postes that leads to Place F Louvel, just past the town hall. Make sure you buy some brightly coloured macaroons or canellés (small pastries with a custard centre), both local specialities.

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WHAT TO SEE NEAR ANGOULÊME

The view: Walk along les Remparts for a view of the Charente valley. The best vistas are found from Rempart du Midi up to Place Beaulieu. St Pierre Cathedral: an impressive example of Romanesque architecture, whose spire can be seen from miles around. Originally built in the 12th century, seven hundred years later, Paul Abadie who designed the basilica of Paris' Sacré-Coeur cathedral, added the two towers. It is most famous, though, for its detailed 12 century facade – make sure you see the depiction of the Last Judgement..

Cordelier's Chapel: Dating back to the 14th century, in the nave is the 350 year-old tomb of Jean-Louis-Guez de Balzac, one of France's most celebrated writers, who was born in Angoulême.

Musée de la bande dessinée: Devoted to the art of the comic strip – the annual festival on the subject is held every January in Angoulême – and its impact on the world, both culturally and politically, this is arguably Angoulême's most famous museum. The museum collection contains 8,000 original drawings and over 110,000 magazines, and as well as information on France's comic heroes, including Tin Tin and Asterix, there are exhibitions of comics from around the world including the Marvel Comics and Japanese manga. Quai de la Charente; tel 05 17 17 31 00; www.citebd.org

Musée D'Angoulême: After years of planning, the museum recently underwent a €6.8 million facelift with the addition of a new wing, at the same time changing its name from Musée des Beaux-Arts to the grander Museum of Angoulême. Over three floors plus the crypt, it covers archaeology, artefacts from the Maghreb, Africa and Oceania, French paintings and sculpture from the 16th to 20th centuries plus the complete reconstruction of a 19th century salon, down to the carved panelling and parquet floor. 1 rue Friedland, Square Girard II, côté jardin; tel 05 45 95 79 88; [La Musée d'Angoulême](http://LaMuséeDAngoulême)

Le Nil Paper Museum: Joseph-Bardou manufactured the famous 'Le Nil' cigarette papers (hence its name), and this museum which shows the history of the paper history both locally (Rizla had a factory here) and around the world is housed in his former paper mill. 134, rue de Bordeaux; tel 05 45 92 73 43

Musée de la Résistance et de la Déportation: The story of the French resistance during WWII both locally and nationally, using real life stories, documents and maps. 34, rue de Genève; tel 05 45 38 76 87; <http://musee.delaresistance.free.fr/> It is now part of the local archives department and is not always open to the public; it's best to give them a call first before visiting.

Vintage cars: During the third weekend of September, the old town is given over to vintage cars from all over the world who compete in Circuit des Remparts, fondly known as 'Monaco without the sea'. A series of races is held over three days within the town and is great fun with loads of atmosphere. This year marks the 70th anniversary of the event – expect plenty of revving! www.circuit-des-remparts.com

WHAT TO SEE & DO NEAR ANGOULÊME:

Cognac: The medieval town of Cognac with its narrow cobbled streets that are a mix of medieval stone as well as more elegant Renaissance facades. By the river are the many chais, old warehouses that have for many hundreds years stored barrels of maturing cognac, and through which you can take a guided tour.

Saintes: On the river Charente, is known for its Roman remains including a vast amphitheatre built for gladiatorial combats, and busy Monday market.

La Rochefoucauld château: In the town of the same name is this striking chateau. The oldest part of the castle dates back to the year 980 but much of it was rebuilt in the 11th and 18th centuries, the solid Romanesque square in sharp contrast to the fairytale-style turrets and elegant cloisters. As well as the dungeon, original kitchen and some living rooms – the latter containing family photos of the La Rochefoucauld family who still own the château. On the top floor is a dressing up room where children and adults can don garments from medieval times. Open all year round, every day except Tuesdays. Tel 05 45 62 07 42;

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Villebois-Lavalette: A town set on a hill and dominated by a feudal castle first built in the 10th century – it is still possible to see the chapel, outer walls and round towers from this period. As with many castles in this area, it was added to over the following 300 years and from the top of this part of the castle you get fantastic views of the Dordogne valley. Open daily (closed for lunch) from May to September. Tel: 05 45 64 71 58 Also worth a look are the 300-year old market halls of this town that are some of the loveliest – and oldest – in this part of the world. Built in 1665, the oak roof rests on stone columns and the flagstones of the sloping floor have been trodden on for many centuries. Market day is on Saturday, with stalls selling local produce including honey, bread and oysters.

Tusson: The medieval village of Tusson is famous of being the place where Marguerite d'Angoulême, the sister of King of François 1st and known for her political influence and literary work, lived after she withdrew from court. The village's houses, a mix of medieval and Renaissance, have been restored, and it's also known for its pretty medieval garden growing vegetables, flowers, herbs and fruit.

Restored mills: The river Charente has long been an important part of life here, both as a means of transport as an energy source. Not far from Angoulême is the Horte-et-Tardoire valley where are a number of mills that have been restored to working use.

Paper: The Charente was once the epicentre of paper-making in France with the mills of Angoulême and its surrounds working continually to transform linen, cotton and hemp into paper and vellum that was used for official government documents and to make banknotes.

Today the industry has all but disappeared although there are a couple of mills still making paper the traditional way with the paper used in the restoration of old books and documents. One is the Moulin Papier du Verger, Puymoyen, which has been a mill since 1589. The other, Moulin de Fleurac, is at Nersac on the banks of the Charente river which dates back to the 17th century. Both are listed historic monuments. Moulin À Papier du Verger is open Monday-Friday, between 4pm-6pm; tel 05 45 61 10 38 ; www.moulinduverger.com Moulin de Fleurac is open all the year although times vary; tel 05 45 91 50 69; www.moulin-de-fleurac.com

Moulins de Menet and de Chabrot, Montbron: Both date back to the 19th century, making different kinds of flour. Today you can buy flour from both, and the Moulin de Chabrot bakes its own bread.

Moulin de la Chaume, St-Germain-de-Montbron: On the Bandiat river, this 17th century mill produces walnut and hazelnut oil as well as stoneground flour.

Moulin de la Pierre, Vilhonneur: The only mill in France to cut limestone using hydraulic energy.

Arboretum Jean Aubouin du Clédou: Created by the botanist in 1932, it stretches over 10 hectares. Take the trail created by the Office National des Forêts to see trees from almost 40 countries including the giant sequoia. La Mothe-Clédou, tel: 05 45 64 71 58

Tourist office:

7 bis rue du Chat, Place des Halles

Tel 05 45 95 16 84

www.Angoulême-tourisme.com

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Tourist attractions and what to see and do in Poitiers

When it comes to historic French towns, Poitiers is dripping with memories of hard fought battles and the pomp and ceremony of French royalty. French queen, Eleanor of Aquitaine, annulled her marriage to Louis VII to marry King Henry II of England, and they established their court here. Joan of Arc tried to claim the city as did Richard the Lion Heart, and

in the Hundred Years War, the Battle of Poitiers is ranked with Agincourt as one of England's great victories against France.

Today Poitiers is rather less turbulent but with a charm and tourist attractions that makes it one of the loveliest towns in the Poitou-Charentes. Its population is just 85,000 but with around one quarter of them university students – Poitiers University dates back to 1431 and counts French philosopher René Descartes and English painter Francis Bacon amongst its former students – it is always lively.

Poitiers is a town to stroll around at leisure. From tree-lined Place Mar Leclerc that is filled with cafés in the summer (at Christmas it becomes an ice-skating ring) meander through cobbled, pedestrianised streets flanked by a mix of centuries-old architecture and half-timbered houses, many of which have been transformed into lovely little boutique shops.



At Place Charles-de-Gaulle, there are more cafes and restaurants as well as the daily covered market which is on every day, plus a bric-a-brac one on Friday and Saturday mornings. The place is also the home of the Notre-Dame-la-Grande church, one of the town's star attractions.

WHAT TO SEE AND DO IN POITIERS

Notre-Dame-la-Grande: This 11th century church (see picture above) was started during the reign of Eleanor of Aquitaine and is renowned throughout France. Of particular interest is its intricately detailed Romanesque facade on the west front which was added in the mid-12th century. Flanked by pinecone shaped turrets – trademark Romanesque architecture of the region – it is in three tiers. The bottom one, known as The Drama of the Prophets, is based on a fifth-century sermon and follows the story of Christianity from the time of Adam and Eve to the birth of Christ – see baby Jesus have a bath while Joseph and sheep look on! The middle tier shows the 'Word of God' being spread by the Twelve Apostles while the top tier celebrates Christ in his glory (sadly, Jesus is headless now). The church gleams white thanks to a thorough restoration in 1996. Interestingly the majority of damage was caused by salt from the nearby market seeping into the ground and up the facade. Every night during the summer (June -September), the facade of the church will be lit in a myriad of bright colours.

Palais de Justice: It may have a 19th century facade but go inside, past the modern law courts, to see the Romanesque great hall where the Dukes of Aquitaine, including Richard the Lionheart, strutted their stuff. Joan of Arc was here too – questioned by the local bishops before they gave her their blessing. Take the stairs for a superb view of the town.

Place Alphonse Lepetit Cathédrale St-Pierre: Walk down the hill to the 12th century cathedral whose main claim to fame is that it has one of the oldest stained glass windows in France. Built over the ruins of a Roman basilica, construction began in 1162 under the direction of Henry II of England and his wife Eleanor of Aquitaine although it was finally completed much later in a Gothic style. Make sure you see the east window which is said to have been donated by Henry and Eleanor themselves.

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Place de la Cathedrale Baptistère St-Jean: Dating back to the 4th century it is thought to be the oldest Christian building in France, built so that baptisms no longer had to be done in the river Clain. It was added to over the centuries and then abandoned in 1791 during the revolution. Confiscated from the church it was sold to a private citizen who used it as a warehouse. Saved from demolition by the public, it was repurchased by the church in the 19th century and excavated and restored in the middle of the 20th. Of particular interest are the octagonal tank and sixth century frescoes.

Musée Saint-Croix: If you've had enough of sacred buildings (let's face it, they can get a bit overwhelming after a while) next door to the Baptistère is this fine museum. As well as archeological exhibits, it has paintings by Alfred Sisley, Eugène Boudin and Piet Mondrian as well as works by Rodin and Camille Claudel. 3 bis rue Jean Jaures.

Parc de Blossac: Take a walk along tree-lined paths in this lovely park that was originally created in the 18th century by the Count of Blossac on what was a Roman settlement. Beautifully landscaped in classic French style it also includes an English style rose garden as well as a grotto, ornamental lake and pavilion, and a small zoo with monkeys, deer and birds.

From the park are lovely views of the Clain valley. Rue L. Thézard. Open from April 15 - October 15: 7am - 10.30pm (English garden closes at 8pm); from October 15 - April 15:

6.45am - 9.30pm (English garden closes at dusk).

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Maraîs Poitevin – take in the beauty of the ‘Green Venice’ of Poitou-Charentes

Just outside Coulon in the Maraîs Poitevin there’s a roadside sign that reads:

‘Ralentissez et Admirez’ or *‘Slow down and Admire’*. It’s **sound advice**. This area of the Poitou-Charentes occupies not just its own space but seems to operate on its own timescale too. Perhaps it’s something to do with the water but as soon as you enter the Maraîs Poitevin you can feel life slowing down.

It certainly is a remarkable place. The ‘Maraîs’ or marsh as it means in English (Poitevin simply means that it’s in the Poitou area) stretches for miles and is made up of natural water channels and man-made canals as well as meadows, dykes and fens that are full of wildlife, including herons, kingfishers and deer. In spring and summer, the banks are filled with wildfloweres. Little wonder that it’s often referred to as the ‘Venise Verte’ or ‘Green Venice’.



At 970 square kilometres or nearly 375 square miles it is the largest area of marshland on France’s Atlantic coastline and the second largest anywhere in the country, stretching as it does from just west of Niort in the Deux-Sèvres through the south of the Vendée and the north of the Charente-Maritime just above La Rochelle towards the coast.

Once the villages of this area were only accessible by water. Today they are easily reached by car by memories of this time past remain. All have ports where row boats can be tied. Cattle which graze the land are still transported using flat-bottomed boats and in [July there is a floating market](#), a reminder of how people once used to buy their provisions.

One of the dominant features of this landscape – which can be a little eerie in winter – are the poplar trees, which bend and rustle in the wind. They are usually planted in rows along with ash, often gnarled and pollarded, their roots excellent at holding the earth of the banks together. But man-made structures have made their mark too, and you can see church spires from miles away, jutting up from the flat landscape into the sky.

Things to do in the Poitevin:

You can cycle and drive but without a doubt the best way to travel the Maraîs Poitevin’s network of canals, rivers and waterways is by boat – you can reach areas still inaccessible by road, you will see more of the wildlife and, perhaps, most importantly, it will give you a real sense of the beauty and timelessness of the area.

The traditional boats used here are flat-bottomed punt-like vessels and these can be hired from various spots throughout the Maraîs Poitevin – just look out for the word *embarcadère*, which means pier or wharf. You can hire a boat or canoe for just an hour or two, or for a half or a whole day. Take a picnic and spend hours floating through the dreamy green landscape, or stop for lunch at one of the villages – the restaurants here specialise in eels and frogs, and also pike which is caught locally. Or, you can choose to have a guided boat tour – with commentary in English – or go on an organised two or three day tour of the Maraîs Poitevin. The tourist office (see details below) can organise this for you.

For keen cyclists, there are plenty of places to hire a bicycle in this very flat landscape. You can also take trips in horse-drawn carriages.

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Villages to see in the Marais-Poitevin

Though the real star of the show is the water and the landscape, the villages that punctuate the Marais Poitevin are definitely worth a visit. These are two of our favourites...

Coulon is considered the capital of the Venise verte (Green Venice) and has been officially designated one of the region's most beautiful villages. Here you can see the typical marshlander houses with their white-washed walls and brightly coloured shutters as well as the more elegant Renaissance architecture in white stone. The Maison de Marais Mouillés by the river was once where river taxes were collected. Today it's a museum where you can learn about the history and life of this atmospheric area. From Coulon you can hire punts and spend a few hours exploring the area. Or take the miniature train. Tourist office: 31, rue Gabriel Auchier; tel 05 49 35 99 29.

Another gem is Arçais, near St Hilaire-la-Palud. Here you can hire a boat and stroll around the old 'port' and village. You can also see the old stone cottages lined up along the edge of the waterway and buy a liquor based on Angelica – this area is France's leading place for growing this traditional herb.

Tourist office: At the museum – Maison du Marais Poitevin – which can be found at place de la coutume, Coulon; tel 05 49 35 99 29; www.niortmaraispoitevin.com

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The most beautiful villages of the Poitou-Charentes

There are about 32,000 villages in France and just 151 of them are given the accolade of being one of Les Plus Beaux Villages de France. In the Poitou-Charentes there are seven such villages, all of them worth a visit.

AUBETERRE-SUR-DRONNE, Charente: With its red-tiled roofs, steep cobbled streets and typically French town square lined with linden trees, it's not surprising that this village in the south of the Charente is the best-known and most popular of the Les Plus Beaux Villages de France, in the region. If you see just one, this is the one to visit. But it's not just looks that make it special – the once fortified town saw battles against the English and then the Huguenots during the Wars of Religion. And as a stopping point for travellers on their way to Santiago de Compostela in Spain, the village also has a significant pilgrim history. Aubeterre is a lovely village to wander about in, especially as many of the streets are filled with artisans making and selling pottery and other crafts. At the heart of the town is Place Trarieux, an attractive, tree-lined square that's the perfect place to stop and watch the world bustle by. It's named after Ludovic Trarieux, the founder of the League of Human Rights who was born here. Another native is Roger Vivier who invented the stiletto! Tourist office: Place Ludovic-Trarieux; tel 05 45 98 57 18

[See also: touring the beautiful south Charente in a 2CV](#)

The underground church, *église souterraine* or *église monolithe* of Saint-Jean: The village's most amazing site is this church which was carved out of cliff face by monks back in the 12th century. Twenty-seven metres high, the *église monolithe* is said to have taken 100 years to complete and includes a nave, baptismal font, vestibule, octagonal columns and gallery. The necropolis contains 80 or so sarcophagi and the 6m high, carved monument standing in the apse is a replica of the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea in Jerusalem's Holy Sepulchre church. Archaeologists are still trying to understand the mysteries of this extraordinary building. More information from the [Aubeterre tourist office](#).

The church of Saint Jacques: For a touch of Moorish Spain, take a look at the 12th century facade of this church – make sure you see the signs of the zodiac! This is the only part of the original church left – the rest of it was destroyed during the Wars of Religion.

Musée des Marionnettes: Run by Englishman Keith Hubbard, he has over 200 shadow, rod and glove puppets as well as marionettes. His shows are in French and English. Open June-September. Place Ludovic-Trarieux; tel 05 45 98 02 71

Musée du Papillon et de l'Art Africain: A mix of collections of more than 12,000 butterflies and insects that owner Albert Petit and his family have collected from Africa. There is also a smaller collection of African artefacts and jewellery. Open Easter to October. Place Ludovic-Trarieux; tel 05 45 98 64 58.

Beach fun: At a point where the river Dronne widens to resemble a lake is an artificial beach with real sand that is constantly replenished. It is a great place to spend a few hours splashing around. Route de Ribérac

TALMONT-SUR-GIRONDE, Charente-Maritime: South of [Royan](#), Talmont sits atop a rocky cliff with fantastic views out to the Gironde estuary. Built in the 13th century as a fortified village at the orders of Edward I, it still has its original layout, the narrow streets flanked by small white houses and hollyhocks, the ubiquitous flower of the region. Saint Radegonde church, one of the most famous Romanesque church in Poitou-Charentes, towers over the village protected by the ancient ramparts.

Tourist office:

Rue de l'Eglise, tel 05 46 90 16 25



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ARS-EN-RE on [L'ILE DE RE](#), Charente-Maritime: On the northwest coast of the island, this pretty port village with its winding streets is quintessentially l'île de Ré. The houses are in the traditional style of white with green shutters and framed by hollyhocks, the prettiness a contrast to the surrounding saltpans that have been worked for the past 800 years. The town is famous for Saint-Étienne church, whose black and white painted bell tower is a beacon for passing ships. During the summer, you can climb to the top of the church for a view of the surrounding forest and oyster beds. If you can, try to be there for La fête de la Sardine et du Port which takes place of the July 5 and celebrates the village's history. Tourist office: Place Carnot; tel 05 46 29 46 09

LA FLOTTE-EN-RE on [L'ILE DE RE](#), Charente-Maritime: The hub of activity in this lovely village on the north coast of the island is around the port, which is filled with small sailing and fishing vessels – it's a great place to have a drink and watch the world go by. La Flotte not only boasts the pretty homes and gardens of l'île de Ré villages, it's also the site of two impressive fortifications. Fort de la Prée, built in 1626, is the oldest fortification on the island and played a major role in the battle against the English. L'Abbaye des Chateliers was built by Cistercian monks in the 12th century. Pillaged and set on fire in the past, today it's been restored and is an atmospheric sight. Great for children are the guided tours and treasure hunts that allow them to explore the village and the seashore. Sign up at La Maison du Platin. Tourist office: Quai de Sénac; tel 05 46 09 60

MORNAC-SUR-SEUDRE, Charente-Maritime: Once a commercial fishing port, today like much of this part of France oysters and salt are the economic mainstays, along with tourism. As pretty as Ars and Flotte with similar village style, it also has some fine Romanesque architecture, especially the church of Saint Pierre. The nearby salt marsh is a great place for a ramble, not just for the views of oyster farms and wilderness but also the wildlife. Tourist office: 46 Place du Port; tel 05 46 22 61 68

COULON, Deux-Sèvres: Situated in the [Marais Poitevin](#), the watery landscape of slow moving rivers, meadows, fens and fields, Coulon in the Deux-Sèvres, is considered the capital of the Venise Verte (Green Venice). Here you can see the typical marshlander houses with their white-washed walls and brightly coloured shutters as well as the more elegant Renaissance architecture in white stone. The [Maison du Marais Poitevin](#) by the river was once where river taxes were collected. Today it's a museum where you can learn about the history and life of this atmospheric area. From Coulon you can hire punts and spend a few hours exploring the area. Or take the miniature train. Tourist office: 31, rue Gabriel Auchier; tel 05 49 35 99 29

ANGLES-SUR-L'ANGLIN, Vienne: Dominated by the ruins of Chateau Guichard high up on a hill, wander the narrow winding streets and take in the architecture that dates back to medieval times. You can visit the chateau and see the remainders of two towers, the donjon and two chapels. The village is also known for its fine embroidery – see the tourist office for details of where you can see the craft in action. Recently opened in the Roc Aux Sociers or 'Witches Rock', replicas of prehistoric carvings that date from 14 000 years ago that were found here in the 1950s but are closed to the public to preserve them. Tourist office: La Place; tel 05 49 48 86 87

Camp Laurent

Beautiful gardens to visit in the Poitou-Charentes

There's something very relaxing and enjoyable about spending a few hours wandering around a lovely garden, not just admiring the flowers but being inspired by ideas on what you can do at home. The Poitou-Charentes has a number of beautiful gardens - these are our favourites, listed by department...

CHARENTE

Jardins du Chaîgne *

Absolutely beautiful gardens (pictured above), from the French garden that complements the 19th century manor house to the fruit garden, potager, water garden and much more. There are lovely flowers, magnificent chestnut trees and sweeping views of the surrounding vineyards. These gardens feature in our Little Black Book of Addresses, a list of places personally recommended by readers. [Read more...](#)

Where: 16120 Touzac; tel 05 45 62 33 92; www.jardinsduchaigne.com

Open: Every day except Wednesday and Thursday mornings - 10am-noon and 2pm-6pm.

Entry: €5; children under 12 are free

Les Jardins Ephémères

Situated in the middle of marshes on the banks of the River Aume, each winter the gardens are flooded, coming back to life again each spring. They then become works of art thanks to the imagination of designers, landscape architects and artists who create art and floral compositions that tell a story. The vegetative artworks grow during the season to reach their peak in summer. There are also games designed for children.

Where: Le Bourg, 16140 Saint-Fraigne; tel 05 45 21 57 65; www.islenature.fr

Open: June 1 - September 30, Wednesday - Sunday, 2pm - 7.30pm.



Jardin monastique médiéval *

Once attached to a monastery - just a wall and doorway remain, as well as some of the old tombs - this small but lovely garden is officially recognised as one of France's 'remarkable gardens'. A recreation of a medieval garden - old documents were used when planning the design - it has separate areas dedicated to different types of plants: the medicinal garden, scented garden, kitchen garden and orchard. It's in the centre of the historic town of Tusson.

Where: Maison du Patrimoine, Le Bourg, 16140 Tusson; tel 05 45 31 17 32.

Opening hours: spring and autumn - Wednesday-Sunday, 2pm-6pm; summer - Wednesday-Sunday, 2pm-6pm.

Entry: 0, -4; children under 12 are free. Guided visits possible.

Jardin de l'abbaye de Fontaine Vêve

A beautiful English-style garden, set in a classic monastic landscape, with springs, an underground water system, fishponds and a lake. Full of flowers there are herbaceous borders and a stone balustrades covered in roses, and a long terraced organic vegetable garden also surrounded by flowers, both decorative and for cutting. In the pretty cloister garden that's full of blue and white flowers English teas are served. In a tranquil wooded valley, now a nature reserve, the formal abbey gardens blend naturally into the surrounding park. This garden and the abbey feature in our Little Black Book of Addresses, a list of places personally recommended by readers. [Read more...](#)

Where: 16380, Charras; tel 05 45 23 02 00; www.fontaineveve.com

Open: May 8 - 12; 18 - 20; 25 & 26, 31, June 1 - 2, and every day from July 18 - August 30, except Mondays - noon-6pm.

Entry: €5; children under 13 are free.

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Jardins de Montbron

In 6000m² see a variety of different garden styles including a romantic garden that's features two weeping willows, an Oriental garden, rockery, Mediterranean garden, vegetable garden and small space gardens. See also different gardening techniques such as green walls plus shrubs and trees that are well adapted to the region including a collection of conifers that are at least 50 years old.

Where: Route de la Rochefoucauld, 16220 Montbron; tel 05 45 70 82 40.

Open: every day except Sundays, from 9am - 12.30pm and 2pm - 6.30pm.

Entry: free

Jardins du logis de Forge *

Created by a globe-trotting couple, this five hectare garden surrounds a 16th and 18th century 'logis' and paper mill. Inspired by the gardens of England, Japan and America, it has a number of striking water features from small lakes to waterfalls and fountains, with bridges taking you around the garden for different perspectives.

Where: Logis de Forge, 16440, Mouthiers-sur-Bois de Lognon; tel 05 45 67 84 22.

Open: April 15 - October 15, 10am-noon and 2pm-6pm; guided tours by appointment.

Entry: €5; children under 12 are free

Parc et jardin de l'Abrégement *

Devastated by the storm of 1999, in reviving the park, the owners asked international artists to create sculptures using the fallen trees. These large sculptures, by artists including Antony Gormley, Andy Goldsworthy, Antony Gormley, Christian Lapie and Joël Shapiro, can be found throughout. There is also a collection of 170 varieties of oak, replanted after the storm, as well as a walled vegetable garden in which all the flowers and vegetables are yellow or orange (visit the arbour dedicated to gourds and marrows during the autumn).

Where: 16700 Bioussac; tel 05 45 31 84 73.

Open: all year by appointment; also August 1 - September 20, from 11am-7pm.

Entry: €4 adults; €2 children.

Jardin de Saint-Florent

Near the famous château and on the banks of the River Tardoire, this garden may be small but it packs a punch with more than 700 varieties of plants including rare shrubs and roses.

Where: 1 rue Saint-Florent, 16110 La Rochefoucauld; ; tel 05 45 23 94 30; www.jardinsaintflorent.com

Open: May - September, Tuesday-Sunday from 2pm-6pm.

Entry: €4; children under 16 are free.

Jardin de Puy-Vidal*

Located on a rocky spur with lovely views of the Bandiat valley, these gardens were created in 2002. There is a garden designed in the Italianate style with terraces and a box maze, as well as a flower garden and small but charming vegetable garden.

Where: 16110 Saint-Projet Saint-Constant.

Open: May 1 - June 30; and August 16 - September 30, Wednesdays - Fridays; July 1 - August 15, Monday-Friday.

Entry: €4,50 adults; children under 14 are free. For information and tickets see the tourist office in nearby La Rochefoucauld.

Respectful garden

The Respectful Garden was created and developed by leading landscape architect Rémi Marcotte between 2003 and 2011 and takes its inspiration from the old romantic garden that dates from the 19th Château de l'Yeu. Enjoy a wide range of flowers, trees and other plants, as well as the typical wildlife of this area, such as kingfishers, salamanders and the type of nocturnal carnivorous mammal known as the genet. You can also learn about the cooking of wild plants in the vegetable garden.

Where: 65 rue de Bellevue, 16100 Châteaubernard; www.yeu.fr

Open: all year by appointment

Entry: €3

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CHARENTE-MARITIME

Les Fontaines Bleues du Château de Beaulon*

The talking point of this 13 hectare garden is the blue-green colour of the water in its network of pools caused by algae in the water. Complementing this is the 'Jardin Bleu' (Blue Garden) with swathes of blue-flowered plants such as lavender, rosemary and agapanthus with eucalyptus and conifers scenting the air. If you wish, end your visit with a drink of pineau or cognac.

Where: 25 rue Saint-Vincent, 17240 Saint-Dizant-du-Gua; www.chateau-de-beaulon.com

Open: every day from May 1 to September 30 from 9am - 12.30pm and 2.30pm - 6pm; from October 1 - April 30, open Monday-Friday, 9am - 12.30pm and 2.30pm.

Entry: €4.

Jardin de Pomone*

This 8000 m² garden celebrates fruit. In the main garden and set amongst fountains see a variety of fruit trees and shrubs set in beds and trailing over pergolas. The orangerie is devoted to tropical fruits.

Where: La Fayolle, 12 rue du Château d'eau, 17400, Saint Denis du Pin; tel 05 46 32 32 38.

Open: from Rendezvous aux Jardins weekend in June to October, every Sunday; until 3pm for the orangerie and 4pm for the main garden.

Entry: €5 adults, €3 children under 14; free for those under 5.

Jardins de la Boirie *

A small walled garden that boasts a wide variety of plants including 150 species of sage! The garden, whose inspiration is gardens in England and Asia, is designed to be a succession of differing spaces, full of colour and all enlivened by the sound of water.

Where: 10 rue Centrale, La Boirie, 17310, Saint-Pierre-d'Oléron on Ile d'Oléron; tel 05 46 76 45 63

Open: April 1 - September 30, Tuesday-Saturday, 10am - noon and 3pm-7pm; Sunday 3pm - 7pm. Open Mondays in July and August.

Entry: €5 adults; €2.50 children.

Jardin du phare de Chassiron *

Arranged around the 19th century lighthouse, and designed with compass points in mind, this garden is divided into themes with a contemporary garden filled with roses, irises, box as well as marginal waterplants. The more traditional garden has vines and a vegetable plot. For an unusual view, climb the steps to the top of the lighthouse and look down!

Where: Pointe de Chassiron, 17650 Saint-Denis-d'Oléron on Ile d'Oléron; tel 05 46 75 18 62

Open: April 1 - June 30 and September 1 - 30, 10am - 7pm; from July 1 - August 31, 10am - 8pm; from October 1 - March 31: 10am - 5pm. Closed Christmas Day and January 1.

Entry: free

Jardin de Diktyнна

This award-winning garden beautiful garden is dedicated to the Duchess de Retz, the last descendent of the Clermont-Dampierre family who also started the first literary salon amongst the nobility in Paris. Over 7000 m² it has a mystical mood and features a box maze, arbours and historic stone carvings interpreted by contemporary artists as well as mosaics and sculptures. Follow three different paths that take you through black, white and red themed gardens. In the middle of a carpet of flowers discover symbols of the Arthurian and Celtic traditions.

Where: Château de Dampierre, 17470, Dampierre-sur-Boutonne

Open: March 15 - May 31 and October 1 - November 11, Sundays and public holidays from 2pm-5pm; in June and September every day from 2pm-6pm; and in July and August every day from 10.30am - 7pm.

Entry: €6 adults and €4 for children; those under seven are free.

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Jardin de la Couture

A very pretty garden within a stone's throw of the imposing château of Saint-Jean-d'Angle (open to the public). In a space of 2500 m², the garden's green-fingered owner has created a tranquil oasis with informal planting of trees, shrubs, perennials, annuals and vegetables with emphasis on texture, smell, colour, shape and structure. The garden awakes in early spring with a lovely show of bulbs followed by hellebores, roses and irises. Perennials and a variety of grasses take over in high summer, followed by fruit and vegetables in autumn. The planting is interspersed with works of art for added interest.

Where: Fief de la Couture, 8 rue de la Couture, 17620 Saint-Jean-d'Angle; <http://jardindelacouture.free.fr>

Open: April 15 - October, Sunday - Thursday, 3pm - 7pm. Groups by appointment.

Entry: €3 adults, €1.50 children.

Jardins d'Harmonie

A series of gardens representing each season, with emphasis on scent and colour, and featuring rare plants, unusual materials and water features. The winter garden features shade plants, the autumn garden is full of yellow and orange while the summer garden goes for pink and purple. There is also a pond and a French-style garden.

Where: La Prée Aux Boeufs, 17137 Nieul-sur-Mer (near La Rochelle); tel 05 46 37 29 76

Open: 3pm - 7pm on weekends and public holidays from May 15 - October 15.

Entry: €5 (the garden is for adults only);

Jardins du château de la Roche Courbon *

Known as Sleeping Beauty's castle, this château was rescued and restored by the French writer Pierre Loti at the beginning of the 20th century. The magnificent gardens date from 1920 when the new owner began restoration of the grounds and over the decades the gardens have been added to. Today they include a beautiful lake around which are formal gardens laid out with an avenue of lime trees, terraces, geometric flowerbeds and lawn, topiary and statues. The orchard features 17 types of apple and pear trees. [More about the château...](#)

Where: Saint-Porchaire, 17250; tel 05 46 95 60 10

Open: every day from 10am - noon and 2pm - 7pm (5.30pm in winter) except December 25, January 1, Sunday mornings in winter and Monday-Friday throughout January.

Entry: €6 (if you take the guided tour of the chateau the cost is €9)

Jardin du château de Ransanne *

Enjoy the walled flower garden with its dovecote, hydrangea collections, avenue of roses as well as an orchard and even hens!

Where: 3 chemin du Château - 17250 Soullignonne

Open: Rendezvous aux Jardins weekend in June and July 1 - August 11 and September 2 - 12 (except September 7/8): 9.30am - noon and 2pm - 5.30pm.

Entry: €2 adults; €1 children.

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DEUX SEVRES

Parc de la Sayette

A garden created in the Renaissance, it consists of four enclosed garden spread over three hectares. It includes a courtyard of topiary with 150 apple trees and Lebanese cedars; a classical garden with lawns, walkways and two 300 year-old sundials; a walking and discovery garden; and a vegetable garden that is surrounded by 40 espaliered pear trees.

Where: 79340 Vasles

Open: July 29 – September 6, 1.30pm – 7.30pm (last visits start at 6pm)

Entry: €5 adults; children are free.

Arboretum du chemin de la Découverte

A series of walks (totalling seven kilometres) takes you round this arboretum created by the former mayor of Melle almost 15 years ago and now managed by his grandson. With more than 1400 different trees and shrubs it's known for its botanical collections of chestnut, ash, birches, hornbeams, currant bushes, willows, rowans and limes.

The many gardens include one that showcases the beauty of bark as well as water gardens and a wildflower maze. Touch the Californian maple whose velvety texture makes it the tree plant in the world. As well as the plants you can enjoy the views of Melle and the surrounding countryside.

Where: 79500 Melle

Open: all year, by appointment; tel 05 49 29 15 10

Entry: €4.50; entry free for those under 16 years.

Jardin du château de la Guyonnière *

This lovely garden is on an island reached across a drawbridge from the château courtyard. Designed by the well-known landscape gardener Alain Richert, it features nine different gardens with appropriate plants – small fruit, butterfly, bee (with wildflowers), three medieval gardens and two of shrubs. There are also vine and rose-covered arbours, an orchard of old varieties of pears and apples, and a 500-year-old oak.

Where: Château de la Guyonnière, 79420 Beaulieu-sous-Parthenay; tel 05 49 64 22 99.

Open: June 1 – July 14 and August 20 – September 30, from 9.30am – noon and 2.30pm – 6pm.

Entry: €3 adults; children under 16 are free.

VIENNE

Le Jardin des Rosiers

The three acre garden holds a collection of 350 old fashioned and botanic (wild) roses, as well as David Austin's English roses. They are planted throughout the garden amongst flowering perennials & shrubs, climbing through trees and over pergolas and spilling over the ground.

Where: 86260 La Puye; tel 05 49 46 99 96; www.lejardindesrosiers.com

Open: May 18 – June 30, every day except Mondays between 2.30pm–6pm.

Entry: €7; €4 for children.

Jardin du Prieuré de Laverré *

Set against the ruins of a medieval priory, this two hectare garden is a mix of the formal and the lush. Features include a 100-year-old vine, a rock garden, vegetable garden, traditional plants, from acanpanthus to old roses, as well as medicinal plants and those known for their scent. Unusually, it has a large and towering collection of thistles.

Where: Aslonnes-Laverré, 86340 Aslonnes; tel 05 49 42 59 40

Open: April – October, 10am–noon and 2pm–5pm.

Entry: €5; children are free

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Jardins du Château de Touffou *

With views across the Vienne River and the château behind you, this is a lovely garden to visit. Five hectares in total, it is divided into three parts – a garden of mixed borders with perennials and a rose garden. The chapel garden and terrace garden are both formal and geometric with boxwood hedges, lavender, and topiary.

Where: 86300 Bonnes; tel 05 49 56 40 08

Open: April 20 – September 29, Saturdays and Sundays from 10am-noon and 2pm-6pm.

Entry: €6 adults; €5 children

Jardins du Château de la Motte *

This riverside garden dates back to medieval times and complements the château. In formal French style. The garden design begins with a fountain in the centre. Ranged around it are topiary, box hedges, arbours, as well as a walled orchard. There are also herbs and medicinal plants, lavender, roses and a number of annuals plus many trees.

Where: Château de la Motte, 86190 Chalandray; tel 05 49 39 26 13

Open: Rendezvous aux Jardins Ouvert in June; and from August 1 – September 25, (not weekends and August 15): 10am-noon and 2pm – 6pm. Guided visits are possible.

Entry: €5; children are free

* gardens marked with an asterisk have been awarded 'Jardin Remarquable' (Remarkable Garden) status. This is given to gardens which combine botanical interest with good design. The status is awarded every five years and is revised every five years.

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The Top 50 attractions in the Poitou-Charentes!

The number one attraction in the Poitou-Charentes is, of course, the theme park Futuroscope but after that come a huge variety of things to see and do – from animal parks and zoos to cognac tours, Roman remains, nature reserves, unusual and fascinating museums and historic sites that really tell of this area's turbulent past. So, if you're looking for a great day out, take your pick from the the list of the top 50 attractions in the Poitou-Charentes below!"



1. [Futuroscope](#): The theme park near Poitiers that's a mix of thrills and education with rides and 3D and now 4D films
2. [Aquarium](#): At La Rochelle in the Charente-Maritime, 12,000 marine animals, with 70 different aquaria within the complex, including a shark tank over three levels.
3. [Zoo de la Palmyre](#): Near Royan in the Charente-Maritime, see 1,600 species, from flamingos, monkeys, cheetahs, hippos and elephants to snow leopards, pandas, penguins, polar bears, ostriches, pythons and sea lions. Among them are several endangered species, such as the White Rhinoceros, which the zoo is helping to save with breeding programme.
4. [Les Antilles Water Park](#): An indoor aquatic centre in Jonzac in the Charente-Maritime that's is one of the largest of its type in Europe, offering swimming plus slides, water toboggans, indoor beaches, beauty and fitness centres, tropical surroundings and great eating too.
5. [L'Hermione](#): The replica, being built in Rochefort in the Charente-Maritime, of the famous ship that took the Marquis de La Fayette to America in 1780 to fight in the War of Independence against the British. This year – 2011 – is the last you can see it in dry dock before it takes to the sea.
6. [Vallée des Singes](#): A 15 hectare monkey and ape park near Civray in the Vienne where many of the 350 primates, from gorillas to chimpanzees and squirrel monkeys, travel freely through the trees and along ropes strung between them, or are enclosed on large islands which allows them to move as they please.
7. [Phare des Baleines](#): A working lighthouse on Ile de Ré, its 257-step spiral staircase leading to stunning views.
8. [Phare de Chassiron](#): On Ile d'Oléron, its distinctive white and black-striped lighthouse offers impressive views of the Atlantic coast.
9. [Centre International de la Mer](#): At the Corderie Royale (the Royal ropeworks) in Rochefort in the Charente-Maritime, houses both permanent and temporary exhibitions on the sea and seafaring.
10. [Cité de l'écrit](#): The town of Montmorillon in the Vienne, whose medieval centre is known as the City of Writing and Bookmaking or the Village of the Written Word. Here the town comes alive to the sights, sounds and smells of the book and writing trade.
11. [Le Vigeant](#): In the Vienne, near L'Isle Jourdain, the racing circuit of 2.341 mile (3.768km) track that regularly hosts major race events.
12. [Halles aux Vivres](#): Museum in the Brouage citadel, not far from Rochefort in the Charente-Maritime, that covers the history of

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the Brouage citadel, as well as military history with temporary exhibitions about the area, its history and culture.

13. [Les Jardins du Monde](#): The 7.5 hectare (18.5 acre) park in the Marais de Pousseau area of marshland near Royan in the Charente-Maritime, with plants as well as electric boats you can navigate through the waterways and a butterfly house.
14. [The towers of La Rochelle](#): The three 14th and 15th century towers that dominate the port area of La Rochelle in the Charente-Maritime
15. [Maison du Cognac](#): visit one of the big names cognac houses in and around the town of Cognac in the Charente
16. [Planète des Crocodiles](#): At Civaux in the Vienne has a collection of around 200 reptiles from eight different species of crocodile and alligator.
17. [The P'tit Train de Saint-Trojan-les-Bains](#): On Ile d'Oléron in the Charente-Maritime, it combines railway history, tourism and environmental awareness all in one little railway track.
18. [Zoodyssée](#): A 25-hectare nature park zoo and animal park in the forest of Chizé in the Deux-Sèvres which has around 500 animals from 60 different European species.
19. [Le Parc de l'estuaire](#): Nature park in Europe's largest estuary near Saint-Georges-de-Didonne, south of Royan in the Charente-Maritime.
20. [Espace Mendès France](#): In Poitiers, a centre designed to popularise the worlds of science and technology with permanent and temporary exhibitions and a planetarium.
21. [Paléosite](#): A 10-hectare park at Saint-Césaire in the Charente-Maritime, situated at the site of the 1979 archaeological dig and which now takes look at Neanderthal (and Homo Sapiens) life.
22. [CIBDI](#): The comic strip museum in Angoulême in the Charente that's the Louvre for comics, with a collection of more than 8,000 original drawings and over 110,000 magazines and comic books.
23. [The Château des Énigmes](#): At Pons in the Charente-Maritime, a this Renaissance château where adults and children solve the final mystery of the château through a series of 21 games.
24. [Château de la Gataudière](#): Near the coast at Marennes in the Charente-Maritime, have fun on the dirt (scramble) and quad bike circuit, the paintball and laser tag area and a treetop adventure obstacle course.
25. [The Abbey of Saint-Savin sur-Gartempe](#): In the town of the same name in the Vienne, the abbey famed for its 11th century paintings that have made it a UNESCO World Heritage Site.
26. [Roman amphitheatre](#): At Saintes in the Charente-Maritime, it is one of the oldest and largest in existence in France and dates back to 40AD.
27. [Angoulême museum](#): Formerly the Musée des Beaux-Arts with collections of African and Oceanic art and the history of the Charente, from geological times, through prehistoric humans to the middle ages.
28. [Underground church at Aubeterre-sur-Dronne](#): In the Charente village officially designated one of the most beautiful in France, this church was carved out of cliff face back in the 12th century.
29. [Grottes de Regulus](#): In the town of Meschers-sur-Gironde in the Charente-maritime, walk through the seafront caves of the prehistoric troglodytes.

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30. [Le Marais aux Oiseaux](#): On Ile d'Oléron, a nature park with 60 species of wild, domesticated and caged birds.
31. [The Natural History Museum](#): In La Rochelle in the Charente-Maritime has an eclectic collection of more than 10,000 objects from Africa, America and Oceania.
32. [Archaeological museum](#): By the Roman Arc of Germanicus in Saintes in the Charente-Maritime the museum its collection includes grand statues, sculpture and mosaics to more common objects from Roman times.
33. [Pont Transbordeur](#): The suspended car or ferry bridge near Rochefort in the Charente-Maritime that's the last of its kind in France.
34. [Pôle-Nature de Vitrezay](#): A nature reserve on the largest wild estuary in Europe, in the Charente-Maritime.
35. [Abbaye aux Dames](#): In Saintes in the Charente-Maritime, a former Benedictine abbey.
36. [L'île aux Serpents](#): At La Trémouille in the Vienne see more than 50 species of reptile. **CURRENTLY CLOSED**
37. [Maritime Museum, la Rochelle](#): In the pretty Charente-Maritime town, its exhibits are housed on three ships, each of which is classed as an historic monument.
38. [Site de Moussais la Bataille](#): Where the 732 battle between Christian and Muslim armies is said to have taken place.
39. [Ecomusée du Marais Salant](#): Near Loix on Ile de Ré, covers the production of salt on the island.
40. [Château de la Roche Courbon](#): In the Charente-Maritime, it's known as Sleeping beauty's castle.
41. [Lilleau des Niges nature reserve](#): On Ile de Ré in the Charente-Maritime where 310 species of bird have been seen.
42. [Maison Pierre Loti](#): The flamboyant home of romance write Pierre Loti in Rochefort in the Charente-Maritime. **CURRENTLY CLOSED FOR RESTORATION**
43. [Maritime Museum, Rochefort](#): In this elegant Charente-Maritime town, see models boats as well as other naval memorabilia.
44. [Musée des Commerces d'autrefois](#): In Rochefort in the Charente-Maritime, see 20 superb replicas of shops from the turn of the last century.
45. [Abbaye de Bassac](#): A Benedictine Abbey in the Charente.
46. [Château de la Rochefoucauld](#): An original 11th century square keep flanked by Renaissance towers, in la Rochefoucauld in the Charente.
47. [Les Géants du Ciel](#): In the hillside old town of Chauvigny in the Deux-Sèvres, see displays of falconry.
48. [Asinerie Nationale](#): In Dampierre sur Boutonne in the Charente-Maritime, the place to see the du baudet du Poitou donkey. [For more information...](#)
49. [The Musée Napoléon](#): Home of Napoleon I on L'île d'Aix, restored, and a museum on Napoleonic history.
50. [Maison du Marais Poitevin](#): In Coulon in the Deux-Sèvres, exhibitions and displays about the flora and fauna, traditional architecture and way of life of the Marais people.

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Ideas for Great Days Out in the Charente

There's plenty to do in this picturesque part of the world. Here are a few suggestions...

The taste of Cognac and fun on a *gaberre*

The best – and most historic – cognac houses are in the area immediately around the town of Cognac, and taking a tour is a must if you holiday in this region. There are plenty of cognac houses to choose from – [see our full list](#) – and all offer tastings. Before or after your tour, explore the town of Cognac, especially the old town whose narrow streets are lined with medieval timber framed houses and handsome 16th century mansions that were once home to wealthy merchants. Also take a trip down the river on a *gabarre*, a traditional flat-bottomed oak boat once used to transport cognac, salt and other produce but now used for a leisurely cruise down the river Charente (see the Cognac tourist office for tickets).



Jarnac - cognac, a boat trip and an interesting museum

Jarnac, just down the road from Cognac, is a pretty town by the river Charente. Here, spend the morning taking a tasting tour at the cognac house [Courvoisier](#), famous for being Napoleon's brandy (both I and III). Stay in town for lunch (especially if you're doing a cognac tour that includes lunch in the Courvoisier chateau). Afterwards, take the 2pm boat ride down the river Charente on 'Le Chabot', a guided boat trip that lasts 90 minutes taking you through the many locks for a riverside view of the area ([www.randonneefluviale.fr](#)). Then take in the Francois Mitterand museum, dedicated to former French president who was born in the town. The museum chronicles his life, but also contains the gifts he received from visiting heads of state from around the world when he was president. 10 quai de l'Orangerie, Jarnac; tel 05 45 81 38 88. [More info...](#)

The beautiful village of Aubeterre-sur-Dronne

Officially designated one of the Poitou-Charentes' most beautiful villages. Take in the red-tiled roofs, steep cobbled streets lined with shops and studios in which artisans make and sell pottery and other crafts. The typically French

The town square is lined with linden trees is the perfect place to stop for a coffee or more. Unmissable is the underground church of Saint-Jean, carved out of the cliff face by monks back in the 12th century. Twenty-seven metres high, it is said to have taken 100 years to complete. [Read more](#)

The hilltop town of Angoulême

Head for the main town which fans out from the bustling Les Halles, the covered market that's a beautiful example of 19th century metal work. From there wander through the winding cobbled streets, walk the *remparts* (old walls) and take in the views, see the spectacular cathedral and other historic buildings. After lunch in one of the many excellent restaurants, choose from a number of museums including the Musée D'Angoulême that covers archaeology, French paintings and sculpture plus has a complete reconstruction of a 19th century salon. Down by the river is the internationally famous Cité Internationale de la Bande Dessinée et de l'Image – inside, it's rather like the set of 2001: a Space Odyssey! [Read more](#).

For a taste of past traditions, at the refurbished Moulin du Verger ([www.moulinduverger.com](#)), four kilometres south of Angoulême at Puymoyen, paper masters Jacques Brejoux and Christopher Clarkson, and book restorer and binder Nadine Dumain have revived the tradition of papermaking, both for every day papermaking and for artistic uses of paper.

At the beautiful old mill, you can see how paper is made and the uses to which it can be put. If you have the time you can take courses in papermaking and bookbinding. And naturally, there are plenty of paper products from books to artwork for sale. The tour lasts about 45 minutes and can be in English. It's open all year on weekdays and visits cost about €3.

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La Rochefoucauld château and restored mills

Dominating the town of La Rochefoucauld, [this castle](#) is an unusual mix of a solid Romanesque square keep, fairytale-style turrets, elegant cloisters and a sweeping spiral staircase. Kids will love the dressing up room where they – and their parents – can don garments from medieval times. After lunch head out of town along the river to see one or more of the mills that have been restored to working use. Moulins de Menet and de Chabrot in nearby Montbron both date back to the 19th century, and make different kinds of flour. The Moulin de Chabrot also bakes its own bread. Moulin de la Chaume in St-Germain-de-Montbron on the Bandiat river produces walnut and hazelnut oil as well as stoneground flour.

Roman remains and meteorites

The Roman archaeological site of Chassenon (called Cassinomagus and open every day) has been newly revamped and is a fascinating place to visit. See the ancient baths – considered the largest example in Europe – a theatre and other remains as well as recreated Roman gardens, Gallic vegetable plots and glass-making workshops. Nearby, actually in the neighbouring Limousin region, is the town of Rochechouart where 200 million years ago a meteorite 1.5km in diameter crashed here leaving a 20km wide crater – today the only remains are the unusual white stone that is used to build many of the houses but the Espace Météorite is an interesting museum that explains what happened. Further down the road in the town of Chalus is Château de Chalus Chabrol. Now a ruin but open to the public it is here that Richard the Lionheart died on April 5, 1199 during a siege of the town.

The Lakes of the Charente

If you're not by the coast then the Lacs de Haute Charente is a great place to relax by the water. Made up of the neighbouring lakes of Lavaud and Mas Chaban that together make up close to 400 hectares of fresh water. Indulge in all manner of water sports including water-skiing and sailing. Fishing can be done at both lakes but only from the shore and a permit is required. Landlubbers can go a-rambling or bird-watching (at Foucherie, make an appointment to use the hide to see some of the 70 species of bird). On either side of Lake Lavaud, at La Guerlie and Videix (the latter is actually in the Haute-Vienne), are artificial sandy beaches that are shaded by oak and willow trees with plenty of spots for picnicking as well as shops and restaurants. *Maison des Lacs*; tel 05 45 65 26 69

Take to the water

Canoeing down a river is a popular activity in the Charente, including for children. It's a great way to get another perspective on the countryside and see passing riverside châteaux and mills. You can take to the water on your own in a kayak or share a canoe. The Charente river is a popular route but also recommended is the Tardoire river, especially to the Chambon Gorges. Ask at the tourist office at Montbron. If you're down that way and want something more to do, go for a walk through the Arboretum Jean Aubouin du Clédou at La Mothe-Clédou (tel 05 45 64 71 58). Created in 1932, it stretches over 10 hectares and the created by the Office National des Forêts allows you to see trees from almost 40 countries including the giant sequoia.

You can't beat a personal recommendation when looking for somewhere to go for a day out, a good cup of coffee or even a day of pampering. So we've started to compile our Little Black Book of great addresses. These are all recommendations, based on first-hand experiences



PLACES

Cistercian Abbaye de Fontaine Vive, Grosbot, near Charras, Charente

Visit this beautiful Cistercian abbey, built during the 12th, 17th and 18th centuries, including the lovely garden which features century old trees and an organic potager. Afterwards have afternoon tea in the cloister courtyard. 2013 opening: May 8 – 12; 18 – 20; 25 & 26, 31. June 1 ^ 2. Every day from July 18 – August 30, noon-6pm, except Mondays.. www.fontainevive.com

[Jardins du Chaigne, Touzac, Charente](#)

Absolutely beautiful gardens, from the French garden that complements the 19th century manor house to the fruit garden, potager, water garden and much more. From the lovely flowers, magnificent chestnut trees and sweeping views of the surrounding vineyards, this award-winning garden is an extra special place. [Read more...](#)

Camp Laurent

The beach at Rivedoux Plage, Ile-de-Ré, Charente-Maritime

Ile-de-Ré beaches are all rather nice but this is a favourite. Not just very pretty, it's also a great place to see kite surfers. You can also walk out to see the oyster beds when the tide is out. It's on the right after you cross the bridge (on the left is the nudist section...)

The church at Ligugé, Vienne

We especially love it on a hot summer's day. Pop in for vespers and enjoy the Gregorian chanting by the monks; as you do so watch the lozenges of light from the stained glass windows moving up the walls as the sun goes down. The church (as opposed to the ancient abbey), is a modern building, very simple, with plain cream walls and abstract stained glass windows. Says our recommendee: 'I don't regard it as a religious experience, just a spiritual one that is very calming and peaceful.' [This video](#) might make you feel a bit giddy, but the sound is beautiful.

Domaine de Boisébuchet, Lessac, Charente

Deep in the Charente countryside is an unlikely place to find cutting-edge modern design but this 150-hectare estate with its lake, river and woodland holds regular summer workshops with some of the big names in modern architecture and design. Many of these names build signature pavilions which can be seen by taking a tour of the Architectural Park during the summer months – they range from a traditional Japanese guest house to the most recent creation, a large bamboo pavilion. As well as the park, visitors can see the annual exhibition held in the unrenovated and atmospheric chateau. Have a light lunch or afternoon tea in the renovated mill. For reservations and more information: www.boisebuchet.org; info@boisebuchet.org or 05 45 89 67 00.

The spa at Le Clos Saint Martin Hôtel, Saint Martin de Ré, Charente-Maritime

Once a barn, now a gorgeous Clarins spa. Relax on a heated treatment bed and enjoy a massage, scrub and/or wrap. Afterwards relax in the bar or take a dip in the heated swimming pools. 87 cours Pasteur, Saint Martin de Ré; tel 05 46 01 10 62; www.le-clos-saint-martin.com

Hotel Particulier La Chamoiserie, Niort, Deux-Sèvres

A luxury boutique hotel – think chandeliers, a sweeping staircase and large beds – that's big on charm and service. 10 Rue de l'Espingole, Niort; tel 05 49 78 07 07; www.hotelparticulierniort.com

A beautiful countryside drive in the Deux-Sèvres

An easy drive of 25 kilometres or so in which you can stop and admire at least three châteaux, two beautiful churches, and an old roman bridge. Find a restaurant to eat at at the end of the drive or pack a basket of goodies and stop at the picnic spot by the river Thouet that's about half-way through.

You can drive it in reverse too, and as the route more or less follows the new cycling path of La Vallée du Thouet so it is possible to do it on two wheels too.

Directions:

- * From the N147 in La Ferrière (it's on the Poitiers to Parthenay road), turn off, direction Thenezay, and fork left to Oroux.
- * In Oroux you can stop and admire, or even visit during the summer, the 15th century Château d'Oroux (tel 05 49 95 32 69) which has recently been renovated (and is also a Haras equine stud) before driving on to the 15th and 16th century Château de Maurivet (tel 05 49 63 01 28). Both are very different from each other but fine architectural examples (telephone to check summer opening hours)
- * Drive on to Lhoumois where you can admire La Roche Fâton which dominates the river Thouet. This 16th château has remained in the same family and was important during the Vendée revolution. Only the outside is open to the public but it's still worth the stop.
- * In the valley below this château is Le Qué du Flais where there are stepping stones that cross the river Thouet. Stop for a picnic, and try leaping from stone to stone – if you feel energetic!
- * Drive on to Gourgé and admire the roman bridge and the 10th/11th century church at the top of the town.
- * You could then continue on to St Loup and visit this beautiful old medieval town and its XVII château and gardens.
- * In Airvault further up the river, there is an abbaye and wonderful old museum full of local history, as well as an underground fountain, outside market and timber houses.