

Coastal Days Out



La Rochelle Port

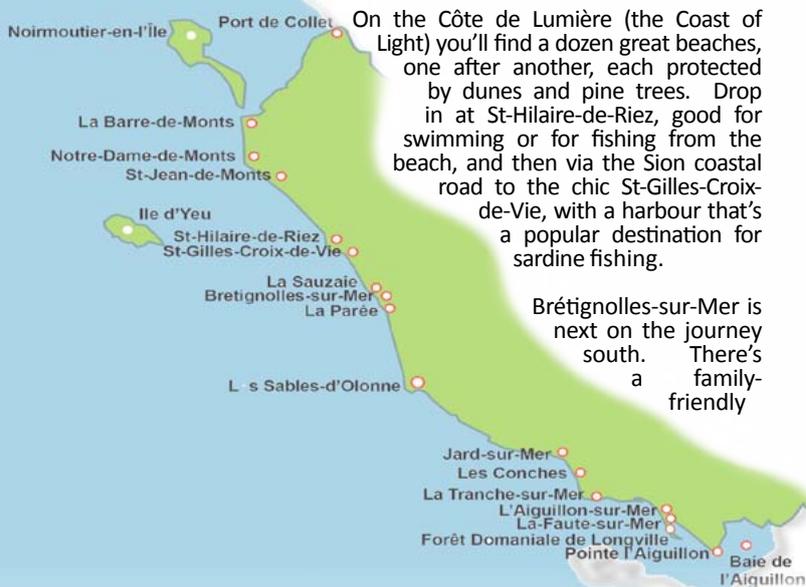
by Mick Austin

Whether you're after a family day out, a romantic break, a heritage trip or even a gastronomic weekend, France's Atlantic coast is packed with possibilities. And the Deux-Sèvres department is an ideal starting point for visits to either the Vendée or Charente-Maritime coastline. Here we give you a tiny taste of what's in store just a short drive away. Make the most of the sunshine, get out there and enjoy!

The Vendée Coast

The 250kms of coastline includes 140kms of stunning, fine-sand beaches, so no wonder it's the top tourist destination on France's Atlantic coast. It welcomes around five million visitors every year (87% of them French) and the majority head straight for the beach.

From Port de Collet in the north to Pointe l'Aiguillon in the south, the choice is vast. In the north, head for La Barre-de-Monts, Notre-Dame de Monts and especially St-Jean-de-Monts to recharge your batteries. The kids will love the latter, with its gently sloping beaches and numerous safety patrols. Grown-ups love it too, with its golf courses, fishing trips and thalassotherapy (soft water spa treatments). Equally tempting are the bike rides along coastal paths or trails running deep into the surrounding countryside.



On the Côte de Lumière (the Coast of Light) you'll find a dozen great beaches, one after another, each protected by dunes and pine trees. Drop in at St-Hilaire-de-Riez, good for swimming or for fishing from the beach, and then via the Sion coastal road to the chic St-Gilles-Croix-de-Vie, with a harbour that's a popular destination for sardine fishing.

Brétignolles-sur-Mer is next on the journey south. There's a family-friendly

beach at La Parée, where young and old alike can explore the rock pools at low tide, but this area is really home to those who love to ride the Atlantic waves and the wild, rocky coast at La Sauzaie is home to surfers.

The coast is just as splendid in the Vendée Plein Sud, particularly Jard-sur-Mer. Better known for its attractive harbour than for its beaches, it has a variety of watersports on its magnificent bay and 7kms of beach. One of the most popular beaches along this stretch is at Les Conches, with its golden sands, dunes and pine forests. You'll find surfers there almost all year round and the beach also draws sea anglers and cockle-hunters.

A word of warning if you have granny with you. Although not always an official site, some beach areas are popular with those holidaymakers looking for an all-over tan!

Sun, sea and sand are also the big appeal of La Tranche-sur-Mer, with the longest south-facing beach in the department. Families love the 12kms of sand and the watersports. The same goes for La Faute-sur-Mer and its sand dunes and pine and oak forests. In the heart of the Baie de l'Aiguillon, it's famous for oysters and bouchot mussels grown on ropes strung from wooden poles in the sea.

The Charente-Maritime Coast

If you're after a feeling of space and untamed natural beauty then one of the most spectacular parts of the Poitou-Charente is the Côte Sauvage (the wild coast). It stretches from the point at La Tremblade south to La Palmyre, north of Royan and, apart from its fine beaches, it is dominated by the huge pine and oak forest of La Forêt de la Coubre. It's excellent for walking, biking and horse riding and marked pathways lead you through the forest and down to beaches that are a magnet for surfers. Climb to the top of the Courbre lighthouse on the tip of the Arvert Peninsular for spectacular views over both coast and countryside.

Châtelailon-Plage, between La Rochelle and Rochefort, looks over the islands of Ré, Aix and Oléron and has around 4km of sandy beaches and is known for its Belle Epoque architecture. It has a Handiplage award for catering for the disabled, including amphibious wheelchairs. Another wheelchair-friendly beach resort is St Georges-de-Didonne, south of Royan. There's a long promenade and the walk along the cliff-tops gives you breathtaking views. Check out the Parc de l'Estuaire for its forest walks and interactive museum.

Gironde Estuary

Five sandy bays, fabulous leisure facilities and more than 2600 hours of sunshine a year combine to make Royan one of the most popular seaside resorts on the Atlantic coast. Discover some



Oysters on Ile d'Oléron



Cycling in the Forêt de la Coubre, Cote Sauvage



Plage des Soux, Ile d'Yeau

of its architectural gems with a self-guided audio tour from the tourist office, where one highlight is the concrete church of Notre Dame, built to resemble a ship. Both Royan and neighbouring St-Georges-de-Didonne carry the coveted Family-Plus label for their family-friendly facilities.

The nearby zoo of Palmyre is one of Europe's largest and today is the most popular private zoo in France. It covers 40 acres and is home to more than 1500 species of every shape and size – from hippos and elephants to cheetahs and pandas.

There are spectacular views from the Cordouan lighthouse at the mouth of the estuary. It's France's oldest lighthouse (started in 1584 and finished in 1611) and stands on a rocky island 11km off Royan and can be reached by boat at low tide.

Farther into the estuary from Royan is the fishing village of Meschers-sur-Gironde, where you can take a guided tour of cave houses hollowed out of the cliffs. Nearby Talmont-sur-Gironde is another must-see. It's one of France's Most Beautiful Villages with its cliff-top Romanesque church and narrow streets of whitewashed houses, dotted with craft shops.

Fancy Somewhere Bigger?

As seaside resorts go, **Les Sables-d'Olonne** is at the top of its game. Home to the legendary Vendée Globe solo round-the-world yacht race, the place is sailing mad. Thousands of yachts line the local marinas, but the resort is also home to dinghy sailing and these colourful boats bring an added atmosphere for holidaymakers basking in the sunshine on Le Grande Plage. It's one of the Vendée's safest beaches and is just a few strides away from all the facilities you'd expect.

A fishing village in the Middle Ages, **La Rochelle** is famous today for its old port, guarded by medieval twin towers. Pick up a town guide from the tourist office in the colourful Gabut district beside the harbour. Once a collection of old fishermen's huts, the brightly painted clapboard buildings now house shops and cafes. Step on board the ships of the Maritime Museum and visit the aquarium – opposite the tourist office and one of Europe's largest with 12,000 marine animals. Easy to explore on foot, La Rochelle also operates a bike hire scheme with 160km of designated cycle tracks, accessible to everyone thanks to a fleet of 350 yellow municipal bikes, or Yélos. There's also an electric boat service between the old harbour and the library.

Okay, so it's not quite on the coast, but tucked inside a loop of the Charente river some 20km inland **Rochefort** has been heavily influenced by the sea. It was a quiet fishing village until 1666 when 'Sun King' Louis XIV ordered the building of a royal dockyard

and arsenal. Step back in time at the Corderie Royale (royal rope factory), which was once the longest factory in Europe and is now an interactive museum. And visit the Hermione boatyard to see the building of the replica 18th Century frigate before it sets off for a 3800-mile trans-Atlantic trip in 2015. (Don't forget to book!)

Island-hopping

Ile de Niormoutier

At just 20km long and 7km at its widest point, this small sandy island packs plenty of magic into its tiny frame. Nature, culture, beaches, watersports and great local produce all go into making it a cracking place to visit. There's the unforgettable Passage du Gois, a 4.5km-long cobble paved causeway connecting the island to Beauvoir-sur-Mer which attracts thousands of visitors to see the incoming and outgoing tides cover up and then reveal Le Gois. With 50km of beaches to choose from, you're sure to find your perfect one. Chill out, collect shellfish, stroll along quiet sand dunes or get the pulse racing with windsurfing, kayaking and land sailing. Several beaches have water wheelchairs (tiralos) for disabled visitors.

Ile d'Yeau

Known for years as the first tuna fishing port of the Atlantic coast, the island still has an active fishing industry landing sea bass, monkfish and turbot, plus many different kinds of shellfish. Discover its long, sandy beaches and dunes, a wild coast with cliffs and sandy coves, marsh and bocage countryside and houses with low tiled roofs and colourful shutters.

Ile de Ré

Take the toll bridge to the place known as The White Island for the quality of its light and whitewashed houses. Follow a network of trails by bike or on horseback and check out the Vauban ramparts of Saint-Martin-de-Ré, where you might even spot one of the famous donkeys in trousers! At the far end of the island, climb 257 steps to the top of the Phare des Baleines for a panoramic view of the coast, and then take a trip through the salt marshes in a family-size canoe.

Ile d'Oléron

France's second largest island (after Corsica) is linked to the mainland by a toll-free bridge. Enjoy a laid-back lifestyle, 25 sandy beaches, watersports galore, horse riding and bike hire. Climb the Chassiron lighthouse or visit the citadel of Le Château-d'Oléron and the Marais au Oiseaux bird reserve before taking a guided tour of an oyster farm to find out why Marennes-Oléron oysters are considered the best in France. Around 45% of French oyster production comes from the island and the Seudre estuary on the mainland opposite. Try the delicious fresh fish and shellfish landed daily at La Cotinière.



Marshes of Ile Madame



Ile de Ré



Old Château-on Ile d'Yeu



Le Château-d'Oléron

Ile d'Aix

Just 200 people live on this tiny, traffic-free island that's only 3km long and 600 metres at its widest point. Its shores are only accessible by boat from the Pointe de Fouras, near Rochefort. Napoleon Bonaparte spent his last days on French soil here in 1815 and you can visit the house where he surrendered to the English. Visit the Mother of Pearl House (La Maison de Nacre) to discover the island's only craft industry.

Ile Madame

Cross the causeway from Port-des-Barques at low tide to this even smaller island of just 75 hectares – but check the tides before you set off! It's an ideal spot for ramblers, bike riders and seashore fishermen and has an aquaculture farm breeding fish and shellfish.

Photos: La Rochelle: Wikimedia Commons, William Scott; Ile d'Oléron: Wikimedia Commons Peter Gugereil; Plage des Soux: Wikimedia Commons Clément Bucco-Lechat; Forêt de la Coubre: Wikimedia Commons Cobbler17; Ile Madame: Wikimedia Commons Salix; Ile de Ré: Wikimedia Commons Gcotent; Fortresse d'Oléron: Wikimedia Commons William Scott.

Mick Austin is a freelance journalist based in the Pays-de-la-Loire. He has had his work published in several expat magazines and newspapers and has also written the Mayenne Tourist Board's only English-language brochure. He also runs a gîte business at www.gitfortwo.com.

COASTLINES FACT FILE...

Département Info:

Vendée: dépt. 85
Charente-Maritime: dépt. 17
Deux-Sèvres: dépt. 79

Ile de Noirmoutier: Vendée
Ile de Yeu: Vendée
Ile d'Aix: Charente-Maritime
Ile Madame: Charente-Maritime
Ile d'Oléron: Charente-Maritime
Ile de Ré: Charente-Maritime

Airports to support these coastlines:

Charente-Maritime & Vendée: Aéroport de La Rochelle
Vendée: Aéroport de Nantes Atlantique
Charente-Maritime: Aéroport international Angoulême-Cognac

Are we there yet, Dad?

All the places mentioned are within comfortable reach of the Deux-Sèvres for a day out or short break. With the help of Google Maps, here are average distances and travel times from Niort. Some of the quicker routes will have tolls.

| Destination | Distance | Travel time |
|-------------------------------|----------|-------------|
| La Rochelle | 63kms | 1hr 10min |
| Royan | 115kms | 1hr 15mins |
| Ile d'Oléron | 100kms | 1hr 30mins |
| Rochefort | 60kms | 1hr |
| Ile de Niormoutier | 170kms | 2hrs |
| Ile d'Yeu (La Barre-de-Monts) | 150kms | 2hrs |
| Les Sables d'Olonne | 140kms | 2hrs |

Contacts

First port of call for accommodation, places to eat etc:

www.visit-poitou-charentes.com
www.discover-poitou-charentes.com
www.vendeetourism.com

Tourist Offices:

- La Rochelle: 2 Quai Georges Simenon, Le Gabut, 17025 La Rochelle Cedex 01. Tel: 05 46 41 14 68. Website: www.holidays-la-rochelle.co.uk
- Rochefort Avenue Sadi Carnot, 17300 Rochefort. Tel: 05 46 99 08 60. Website: www.rochefort-ocean.com
- Les Sables d'Olonne: 1 promenade Joffre, 85100 Les Sables d'Olonne. Tel: 01 51 96 85 85. Website: www.visitlessablesdolonne.co.uk
- Ile de Ré: www.holidays-iledere.co.uk
- Ile d'Yeu: www.yeu-island.com
- Ile de Noirmoutier: www.uk.ile-noirmoutier.com
- Ile d'Oléron: www.oleron-island.com
- Ile d'Aix: www.rochefort-ocean.com/rochefort-ocean/office-de-tourisme-de-lile-daix

Others:

- Hermione boatyard: www.hermione2015.com
- Royal rope factory: www.corderie-royale.com
- Donkeys in Trousers (Les Anes en Culotte): www.ane-en-culotte.com/fr
- Island cruises (Croisières Inter Iles): www.inter-iles.com