It all happened a very long time ago...

Gargantua was on his way from La Rochelle to Niort when, following a heavy drinking session the night before, he had to stop for a call of nature. With one foot on Luçon cathedral and the other on the bell tower of the church at Niort, he turned to the west and as he relieved himself he flooded the countryside right across to the ocean. And that, as legend has it, is how the Marais Poitevin was born...

France’s second largest wetland after the Camargue and covering almost 1000 square kilometres (nearly 400 square miles), the Marais Poitevin (meaning marsh of the Poitou region) is a unique landscape created, shaped and maintained across the centuries by water.

Once covered by the ocean, reclamation of the marshland began in earnest by monks in the Middle Ages who dug out the canals considered today as a keystone in the drainage and clearing up of the land. The work of those monks was modernised in the 1600s by Dutch engineer Humphrey Bradley and improvements were continued by Louis XIII and Louis XIV before work lapsed until 1808, when Napoleon I had the Sèvre Niortaise river - the backbone of the marshes - cleaned out and widened. This reduced flooding and improved navigation for boats between Niort and those ports open to the Atlantic.

Today, those who have inherited this amazing place have the challenge of safeguarding a landscape made of channels and canals with their banks lined with pollarded ash trees.

The marshland is split into three zones, each with its own distinct personality. The wet marsh (Marais Mouillé) with its maze of weed-choked, tree-lined canals and shady pastures is probably the most interesting and most visited of the three and is often called France’s Venise Verte (Green Venice).

In the far west, the Sèvre-Niortaise flows into the Baie de l’Aiguillon on the Atlantic coast north of La Rochelle. This seashore belongs to fishermen and birds. Rich mud banks exposed twice a day at low tide separate salt meadows from the sea and provide a haven for hungry wading birds. Out in the bay mussels are farmed on lines of vertical poles (bouchots).
Water always has a soothing effect, and as soon as you enter the Marais Poitevin you can feel the pace of life slowing right down. It's a magnet for wildlife - both flora and fauna - including some that are in danger of the Marais Mouillère.

The Marais is full of charming waterside towns and villages and one of the best is Coulon, capital of the wet marsh and home to the Maison du Marais Poitevin discovery centre and its 700sqm of exhibitions and sales of regional products.

Now listed as one of the most beautiful villages of France with its narrow streets of white houses and red-tiled roofs, Coulon once throbbed with cargo boats passing through (2700 during 1840, according to records).

With all that water around, the best way to see the sights is to enjoy a guided tour in a traditional flat-bottomed boat (platte) or punt (pigouille). Learn about the plants and the animals and the legends of the marshes. The length of visits varies, departure times are indicated and booking is necessary. In general, if you want to make the most of the natural environment and its wildlife this time of year, the best time to visit is early morning or late afternoon.

You’re spoilt for choice with all the locals at the embarcadères (piers or wharfs) offering to show you the Marais from the water from dawn ‘til dusk and many English-speaking tours are available upon reservation. For the more adventurous who prefer a rowing boat or paddling their own canoe, the boatmen can provide you with a detailed map and there are plenty of arrows to follow. But again, don’t forget to book.

**Things to See**

**The floating market at Le Vanneau,** which takes place on July 26th. Around 15,000 visitors turn up to see people, animals and produce transported along the canals of Green Venice in one of the more unusual traditions of the Marais Poitevin. Do your shopping differently this year - by rowing boat!

**St Maxire flower boat festival.** Since 1942 on the last Sunday in July more than 6000 people line the banks of the Sèvre to watch boats decorated with flowers made of crepe paper. There’s a different theme each year and two processions - one at 5pm and the other once it’s dark - and the day ends with fireworks (well, this is France).

**Bird sanctuary at Saint-Hilaire-la-Palud.** A twitcher’s delight. More than 70 species of birds in the heart of the Marais. Discover them by boat either on your own or with a guide.

If you don’t fancy getting your feet wet there are horse-drawn carriages or a miniature train (Petit Train Pibalou). Or you can hire a bike and explore miles of marked, level trails. All are available around Coulon town centre or check out the Coulon tourist office.

**Food and Drink**

The Marais Poitevin is home to Angelica, one of the world’s best known aromatic plants. This Jack of all trades is said to be a tonic, an anti-spasmodic, a purgative, a digestive and can also keep away the plague! It’s supposed to heal TB, malaria, typhus, smallpox, cellulitis, gout, impotence, bites, toothache… the list goes on. Today the plant is made into liqueur, candied stalks, sculpted objects, cream, jam, sweets and chocolate. It’s also used in recipes for Suze, Pernod, Chartreuse and Benedictine and also flavours vodka and gin.

Other local delicacies include the Mogette (or Mojette) bean and Echiré butter. Echiré has been classed as one of the world’s most refined butters since 1904 and has been served at banquets in the Elysée Palace and Buckingham Palace. Mogettes (white beans) are grown in the black earth of the wet marshes. Part of the harvest is eaten fresh while the rest is dried on sticks (tourettes) on which the plant is put after it is pulled out of the ground.

**Did you know?**

Ever heard of Spirodela polyrhiza? That’s its Latin name, but you and I probably know it better as duckweed. It forms a mat on the river water’s surface and tends to turn it green - and there’s loads of it in the Marais Poitevin. Perhaps that’s why it’s called Green Venice!
Contacts

- Poitou-Charentes regional website: www.visit-poitou-charentes.com
- Deux-Sèvres tourism: www.tourisme-deux-sevres.com
- Marais Poitevin official tourist site (in French): www.marais-poitevin.com
- Coulon Office de Tourisme and Maison du Marais Poitevin
  5 Place de la Coutume, 79510 Coulon. Tel: 05 49 35 81 04. Guided tours, exhibitions and answers to all your questions.
  Website: www.maison-marais-poitevin.fr
- Petit Train Pibalou, 6 Rue de l'Eglise, 79510 Coulon. Tel: 05 49 35 14 14.
  Website: www.lemaraispoitevin.fr/Petit-train_a46.html
- Fête des Bateaux Fleuris website: www.bateauxfleuris.com
- Parc Ornithologique les Oiseaux du Marais Poitevin
  Le Petit Buisson, 79210 Saint-Hilaire-la-Palud. Tel: 05 49 26 04 09.
  Website: www.oiseauxmaraispoitevin.com

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 gite business at www.gitefortwo.com

The Marais Poitevin was awarded National Park status in May 2014!

The Marais Poitevin spans three departments, Deux-Sèvres, Vendée & Charente-Maritime.

Surface Area: 970 sq km

Airports:
- Poitiers (76 minutes), La Rochelle (57 minutes)

Distances from Coulon:
- Benet: 9 mins
- Niort: 25 mins
- Fontenay-le-Comte: 37 mins
- Melle: 45 mins

The Marais Poitevin

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Tel: 05 49 35 81 04 ~ Email: contact@maison-marais-poitevin.fr

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Above: Footbridge in Le Vannéau.