

Spring is in the aire

Travelling at the cusp of camping season, a ten-day trip across western France, finding islands, vineyards, oysters and lively coastal towns where we least expected them

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ABOUT US...



US Margaret Ratcliffe and husband, Joe. We enjoy all forms of holidays, mostly those which have a focus, be it sport, history, literature, music or art

OUR 'VAN Goldie is our second Vantage Neo. We particularly love the layout and consider it our villa on wheels



We have always felt as though, in the past, we neglected France – opting for more exotic destinations. But this year we decided to remedy this with a ten-day trip to western France. Our chosen slot was the end of March/early April – just as the campsites were opening for Easter.

Arriving in St Malo early morning, our first stop was the local Carrefour. Stocking up on French produce (including wines), we could be self-sufficient for a few days. This proved to be a good move since our first campsite's brasserie was not open so early in the season.

Our first stop – 273 miles from St Malo – was on the Île d'Oléron. Never heard of it. South of La Rochelle and Île de Ré. Due to the irritating habit of accepting new arrivals only after 3pm, we pattered through deserted villages, crawling over interminable speed bumps and 30km speed restrictions. The rain tested my patience. Why aren't we on an autoroute? Did I sign off on this? I couldn't be too tetchy as it was the driver's birthday.

As we approached the Vendée, I became fascinated. I had no idea it was so flat and so laced with canals. The approach to Oléron was exciting; over a long bridge – it was a genuine island, and with vines! We intended to stay at La Brée-les-Bains on the northeast coast of the island. Camping Antioche d'Oléron was nicely situated, a mere 150 yards from the beach. A birthday meal of shrimp, duck confit and mille-feuille in the comfort of the 'van was not too shabby.

Fortunately, the next day dawned fine

and clear, and we walked in the morning, turning right along the promenade and into the village. Lunch outside the 'van and an afternoon walk along the golden sandy beach and blue water, with Île de Ré just visible in the distance.

Oléron is a cyclist's paradise. Our island map, handed out at reception, outlined cycle routes to circle the whole island. There was also a host of bus stops, but not a single bus. This was a holiday isle with lovely houses and hamlets – but little human life. Perfect also for the adults-only brigade, since I don't think we saw a child the whole time we were there.

Blue sky and strong wind the next day, so – going against our usual inclinations – we drove the 'van around the island. First to Le Phare de Chassiron. Built in 1836, this was the lighthouse at the very northern tip of the island, with generous dedicated free parking for motorhomes.

There were various short walking trails close to the lighthouse, a lovely place to stop for lunch. From there we drove south to St-Trojan-les-Bains for a look at the viaduct from a different vantage point.

Next, we made for Le Château d'Oléron, which I naïvely expected to be a château. But it wasn't; it was a proper town with coastal ramparts and fortifications, all of which were free and accessible with – again – dedicated motorhome parking in just the right place.

The original castle, built in the tenth century by the Dukes of Aquitaine, was demolished in 1630 when Cardinal Richelieu ordered the construction of the present citadel. ►

LEFT Porte de la Grosse Horloge, La Rochelle



TOP TIPS

We found that if you present your ACSI card at reception, passports are not required
Many large supermarkets are open on Sunday mornings

ABOVE LEFT Stylish mural on a gable end in Bergerac

ABOVE MIDDLE The main gate of the citadel at Le Château d'Oléron

ABOVE RIGHT One war we never think of. The Memorial at Le Château d'Oléron

BELOW INSET Trips on traditional flat-bottomed boats are available close to the campsite in Bergerac

I haven't mentioned oysters. They were everywhere. The battlements overlooked a harbour with flat boats – with no sides – arriving via a channel to navigate the mudflats with the tide out. Oyster farming is big business here.

The following morning, we set off to our next destination, Bergerac, 151 miles away. We could see a long line of nasty black cloud as we left the island and, indeed, rain was soon the result.

It was a straightforward drive – with lots of vines – to a wonderfully situated site on the banks of the Dordogne, less than ten minutes' walk along the river to the town, which had an out-of-season air; clearly a tourist hotspot in summer.

Cyrano de Bergerac featured heavily. His name was everywhere, with more than one statue. We spotted an inviting brasserie – much patronised by the locals, which is always a good sign.

We had planned to stay three nights in Bergerac, but the forecast was poor and, in truth, we had 'done' the medieval old town sufficiently and hadn't planned to do a château/wine tour on this trip. So, we made tracks to La Rochelle a day early and so began our little adventure.

Never, ever, have we seen as many vineyards; uninterrupted for the 146 miles to our next chosen site, sun shining beautifully near the coast.

"Campervan for four nights, please," I said in reception.

"We're not open," said the receptionist – a bit stony-faced, I thought.

"When do you open?" I asked.

"Tomorrow."

Well, of course, they did – we were a day earlier than planned. What to do? No plan B. I asked if the girl could recommend anywhere else. No other campsite in La Rochelle, she said. "You could try Pont Neuf," I thought she said. Paris seemed a little far. She sighed and wrote on a Post-it: Port-Neuf.

So, we keyed in the coordinates and set off with much trepidation. What aire would have room in the late afternoon? A mere six miles away we came upon rows and rows of white motorhomes. "It'll be full," I panicked. It wasn't quite full. There were 171 spaces. Most with electricity. Nearly all French units. Tightly packed. Good value at €14.40 a night, including electricity.

I asked the attendant if one could stay



THE ROUTE

For the route go to...
W motorhome.ma/larochelle

BELOW All three La Rochelle towers: St-Nicolas, la Lanterne and la Chaîne

for more than a night. "Stay as long as you like," he answered with a Gallic shrug. The aire had been a campsite in a previous incarnation. A short walk brought us to a parade of shops: a boulangerie, a pâtisserie (of course), a poissonnerie and a charcuterie. Fresh food paradise.

The following day dawned fine and clear and we set off walking in the general direction of the sea. Sails on the sea and cyclists and joggers on land. Walking back, we passed numerous very well-appointed municipal pitches catering for just about any sport, with an emphasis on rugby union. One pitch was primed for usage: a two-day Sevens tournament – spectators gathering, teams warming up, catering gazebos serving not only bacon baguettes but plates of oysters.

And so we returned the six miles to Camping Beaulieu. Very pleasant, allocated pitch with decent hedging. Indoor and outdoor swimming pools.

Brasserie. The bus ride into town had been well researched. Just across the road. The number 4.

What we hadn't anticipated was the sheer scale of the retail park where the bus stop was. Anchored by a massive Super U hypermarket on steroids, every other possible retail outlet was represented, several restaurants and, of course, a pâtisserie, together with an indoor cabaret act (with seats) just outside the supermarket (48 hours later, passing this area, we saw it had morphed into a car showroom). Finally, our first sight of La Rochelle proper.

On a glorious day it was very impressive, its three historic towers – Saint-Nicolas, la Chaîne and la Lanterne – dominating the skyline. Dating from the fourteenth century, these medieval fortifications have a long history. They can be visited, but there didn't seem to be anyone outside on the battlements and ➤



← THE JOURNEY

We drove from Leeds to Portsmouth, took the ferry to St Malo from where we drove to our first campsite on the Île d'Oléron for three nights. From there we travelled to Bergerac for two nights before moving on to La Rochelle. Our first night in La Rochelle was on an aire. The remaining three nights were on a campsite on the outskirts of La Rochelle. We returned to St Malo for the ferry back to Portsmouth

£ THE COSTS

Fuel: Average 35mpg (1,430 miles)	£269.14
Ferry	£637
Site fees	£162.06
Total	£1,068.20



we didn't want to be inside on a lovely day, so we carried on walking and came upon a small beach.

The waterfront on two sides was entirely – not just mainly – made up of restaurants, and they were all the same! And they were all packed, some had queues outside, and all these hordes of visitors were French!

We chose a restaurant almost at random. The menus were all fish or fish, so we had two variations of fish. This was Sunday, so weekenders, I reckoned. "It'll be quiet here tomorrow," I said. "At least half of these restaurants will be closed." Wrong on both counts.

We had other fish to fry the following day: a two-hour boat trip out to Fort Boyard and Île d'Aix. Different views of the three towers as we left the harbour and sailed past the largest yacht harbour in Europe, with berths for 5,000 vessels. Masses of masts.

Fort Boyard dates from the Napoleonic era and was intended to protect the mouth of the River Charente from English naval attacks. However, by the time it was finished, it was obsolete. These days it is used as a film set.

We didn't land on Île d'Aix (other,



ABOVE LEFT Cyrano de Bergerac is everywhere in the town

ABOVE RIGHT Hôtel de Ville, La Rochelle

BELOW Parking for motorhomes was plentiful at le Phare de Chassiron on the Île d'Oléron

longer trips did). A small island, it somehow needed two identical lighthouses – side by side – both operational and dating from 1889. One tower has a white light: the other a red.

Back to land and ready for lunch, we chose a fish restaurant for its views of the Lanterne and Saint-Nicolas towers.

A great day, finishing with good downtime with the awning deployed back at the ranch and preparing mentally for the following day's journey north.

The deserted villages looked different with the backdrop of sunshine and blue sky. No traffic issues on our 243-mile journey and so we were far too early in St Malo for an 8pm sailing. We decided that, rather than fighting for a parking space in the town, we would detour to the coast.

Cancale looked interesting, but it was not motorhome-friendly, so we continued to Pointe du Grouin. Great decision. Easy parking and lovely coastal walks. Back to St Malo port via the coast road, with lots of coves, beaches and campsites.

We had been fortunate with the early April weather and thoroughly enjoyed every stimulating minute exploring so many all-new places in our packed ten days. [MMM](#)



WE STAYED AT

Camping Antioche d'Oléron, 16 Route des Proires, 17840 La Brée-les-Bains, France

T 0033 546 479200

W camping-antiochedoleron.com

Aire de camping-car Port-Neuf, 6 Bd Aristide

Rondeau, 17000 La Rochelle, France

T 0033 546 411468

Camping La Pelouse, 8 Bis rue Jean-Jaques Rousseau, 24100 Bergerac, France

T 0033 553 570667

W night-and-day.fr/en

Camping le Beaulieu La Rochelle, 3 Rue du Treuil Gras, 17138 Puilboreau, La Rochelle

T 0033 546 680433

W camping-la-rochelle.com