

LES ANGLAIS SONT ARRIVÉS

...The British have arrived! By Roger Wheeler

The British have been crossing the channel for hundreds of years; in the past it was to fight the French, today it is to live amongst them. Over the past 20 or so years we have been descending in our hundreds on many parts of France, from Normandy to Provence but no area has been quite as popular as **Poitou-Charentes** in the south west, around **La Rochelle**, **Bordeaux** and **Angoulême**. We discovered that some long lost relatives had recently moved there and they invited us to visit. Their house being only 300 miles from Dieppe, this was an invitation that no one would refuse. Let's go and see what hundreds of our fellow countrymen had found quite so fabulous about this particular area.

The drive was indeed very easy; the French motorways are very efficient, if a little expensive and we were soon crossing the big bridges spanning the Loire valley near the famous city of **Tours** and then on towards **Poitiers** and **La Rochelle**. The scenery, after the rolling hills of Normandy, becomes quite flat and very agricultural but on the motorway you really don't see much of the country, although you do pass a lot of large signs



FUTUROSCOPE

advertising beautiful nearby chateaux. No time to stop we were 'en route'. One of these signs is advertising **Futuroscope**, the famous multi-media theme park. Since it opened 25 years ago it has attracted over 40 million visitors, though we decided not to add to that impressive figure.

Just 10km further and you arrive in the ancient city of Poitiers, the regional capital, with a population of 92,000. The RAF bombed it heavily in 1944 and today, thanks to a massive amount of renovation and reconstruction it has a very modern feel. It's an easy place to wander around, mainly for the designer shopping. The centre is being completely re-designed; again, how this new look will sit alongside its 80 historic monuments is too early to tell. The tourist office right by the beautiful 12th century cathedral is housed in an incredibly ugly building and was probably the most unhelpful and unfriendly I have ever visited. They were probably just having a bad day. Poitiers didn't exactly excite us. If you live in the area then it's fine; a big modern town with all the shops and supermarkets that you could want, but from a tourist point of view it seemed to lack



POITIERS CATHEDRAL

any sort of 'vibe' that we could identify. You can fly to Poitiers with **Ryanair** from **Stansted**.

Things pick up quite a lot when you head the 87 miles to La Rochelle, one of the most glamorous resorts on the Atlantic coast of south west France. With a population of 80,000 it is one of the most visited towns in



France, with 75,000 of its annual three million visitors coming from the UK. This exceptionally beautiful city is built around a wide bay and has no less than four ports and marinas, one of which, **Port des Minimes**, is the biggest marina in Europe.

The historic port is beautifully preserved with a quayside bustling with boats small and large, the seafront is packed with lively cafés, bars and restaurants. Tourist attractions are everywhere. Walk through the striking Gothic gateway, **Porte de la Grosse Horloge**, and you enter a maze of pedestrianised streets, flanked by 17th and 18th century buildings, which are now boutique shops selling everything from high fashion, books and antiques and of course lots of patisseries selling wonderful calorific pastries. There are plenty of excellent places to eat. **Rue Saint-Jean-du-Pérot**, known locally as 'Restaurant Street', is full of restaurants and cafés, some can be pricey and the cuisine is mainly seafood, but all looked pretty good to us.



RUE SAINT-JEAN-DU-PÉROT



ILE DE RE

La Rochelle is not a beach resort. The man-made beach is not up to much but there is an enormous selection of great beaches along the coast and on the several islands that dot the bay, **Ile de Re**, **Ile d'Oleron** and **Ile d'Aix**.

There are plenty of hotels to suit all budgets. We stayed at the **Mercure**, right on the old port, which had small, clean and comfortable rooms and free parking. You would expect a city like this to be quite gay, but there are only a few cafés and bars and one sauna listed as being gay. But the place is so cosmopolitan the boys and girls are everywhere.

La Rochelle is served from April until September by **easyJet** from **Gatwick** and it's on the **TGV line**, three hours from Paris. Just 14 miles from La Rochelle, over a spectacular bridge, is the famous **Ile de Re**, with visitors such as Brad, Angelina and Johnny Depp to name a few. But that's another story altogether.



Why are there so many Brits here? The weather is usually very good, the countryside is lovely, the coast and beaches are great, the French know how to enjoy life, the wine is cheap, the food is good and the ambiance is very seductive. Most importantly though is the price of property; it's about 30% of UK prices. And my cousin's house was great, so we will be going again. Vive la France!

www.visit-poitou-charentes.com

