

The green grass of Venice?

Posted On 22 Feb 2014 By : Roger Wheeler

Roger Wheeler pays a visit to South West France and finds a little paradise.



River Sevre

Venise Verte or green venice is the phrase used to describe one of the most beautiful parts of France that I have ever visited. Down in the south west in the department of Deux Sevre lays this stunning area of water meadows and canals that hardly anyone ever visits.



Coulon

It is basically a large area of marshland called Marais Poitevin with its centre in the lovely little town of Coulon. We knew about the area but found it almost by accident.

The EU has awarded it its European Destination of Excellence – yes that's crazy EU spelling for you but it gives the acronym EDEN to the Marais Poitevin. It's quite close to La Rochelle but the nearest large town is Niort.



This labyrinth of waterways, lined with tall and dense vegetation, is worth exploring as it is the largest wooded marshland on the Atlantic coast (49,000 hectares) and has one of the richest natural habitats in France. The long winding paths can be explored on foot, or by bike. When we arrived it was living up to its name of green as it was raining, heavily. But even the awful weather could not distract from the sheer beauty of the place.



We stayed at the Hotel au Marias, right on the riverside, parking was free, the staff exceptionally friendly and the price was very reasonable at 80€ per room. From Coulon you can hire one of the little traditional barques either by yourself or have a young man take you round the many canals and little rivers, it really is very beautiful.



Citadel at Parthenay

This area of France is not on the traditional tourist routes and is really very quiet but there are several very interesting places to see. Not least is the little 13th century walled town of Parthenay. One of its main claims to fame is that it lies on one of the many medieval pilgrimage routes 'El Camino de Santiago' to Santiago de Compostela in northern Spain. Even today people have been known to walk for weeks along this route. The old centre of Parthenay is very atmospheric but nowadays the town is surrounded by a major by-pass which has just about every major shop that you can ask for. The comparison between the 13th and 21st centuries could not be more stark.

Wandering around this region is fascinating; we just drove wherever the roads took us, much to my navigator's alarm. We ended up near a little town called Vasles (pronounced Val), with one shop, one bar and one church and as it was getting late we realised that we had nowhere to stay.



Les Tranchees Gite exterior

This region is full of great surprises and we literally stumbled, across a tiny hamlet called Les Tranchees. Some years ago we stayed in a gîte in Brittany and weren't very impressed so when we were told that there was a gîte right here that was available we were cautious.



Les Tranchees Gite interior

We quickly discovered that there was no need for caution as this gîte – called Les Tranchees – is quite fantastic. Run by an ex-pat English couple, Suzanne and Keith, we were welcomed like long lost friends. The accommodation is part of an old farmhouse, they weren't too certain quite how old, but they have modernised it to a very high standard of comfort with modern facilities. We had a huge sitting room with TV, fully equipped kitchen and great bathroom. The bedroom on a mezzanine overlooking the sitting room was spacious and very accommodating. Our hosts were exceptionally friendly but we had complete privacy. There were large gardens at the front and rear with sun loungers which we were welcome to use. A small outdoor pool is planned for next year.

We were there in June when the weekly rate of 395€ was exceptional value for money. This proved to be a great location to explore the local region and enjoy the local hospitality, which was very agreeable.

There is a local drink Pineau des Charentes which they seem to drink quite a lot of and so did we. It is a kind of sherry and very drinkable and you can now get it in the UK. The area does have quite a number of ex-pat Brits so although we were in the middle of truly rural France an English accent was not unusual.

Not to visit Deux Sevres would be to miss one of the most fascinating parts of France, there is a lot to see and enjoy.

For information, view:

www.lestrancheesgite.com/

www.discover-poitou-charentes.com/

www.marais-poitevin.com/