

Places

All at sea – a night view of the Tour de la Lanterne in La Rochelle



Enchanted by la vie en rose in La Rochelle

Catherine Murphy followed the in-crowd to Charente

Moments after arriving in La Rochelle, I already know it's a place I'll come back to.

Anchored between land and ocean in the Charente-Maritime department of France's Nouvelle-Aquitaine region, this small city by the sea feels like holiday heaven – with plentiful sunshine, shopping and, above all, seafood.

Nothing turns my head quite like a steaming bowl of mussels or an oyster platter. Passing by lively restaurant terraces, I eye up long tables laden down with *les fruits de mer*.

I check into Hôtel Saint-Nicolas (hotel-saint-nicolas.com), a comfortable three-star situated in a former fishermen's neighbourhood now home to indie shops and art galleries. The hotel features an appealing living-room-style bar and restaurant – but I can't linger. I've a date with a guy called Langoustine.

A five-minute walk brings me to the old port and past La Rochelle's iconic towers which served as medieval navigational landmarks. By night, they're bathed in a pink light that guides me along the quays, through historic alleyways to Concorde beach and my first seafood fix.

At La Yole De Chris, I want everything on the menu. This seafood bistro is named after chef Christopher Coutanceau and the boat he fished from as a young boy with his father. He's best known for his three-star Michelin restaurant next door – but I enjoy La Yole with its buzzy atmosphere and tasty crustaceans.

The following morning, I set off on a tour of the old port with guide Anne Lepelletier. The pace of life in La Rochelle is relaxed, the way of life is green – it introduced Yelo city bikes in 1976, decades before other cities and towns even dreamed of the idea.

Electric water buses and tourist cruisers sail over and back, past the St Nicolas, Chain and Lantern towers. I climb the tower stairs for mesmerising views and a touching piece of history.

La Rochelle became a Protestant stronghold during the Reformation, when the Lantern Tower was used to imprison Catholic priests. During the French Revolution, it was again used as a jail in the Wars of the Vendée.

The walls of the tower are still scratched with the inscribed names of prisoners – some of them Irish. It's incredible to think of those men, hundreds of years ago, leaving their mark for us to find.

GETTING THERE

● Catherine Murphy was a guest of the Charente-Maritime region.

● Aer Lingus flies from Dublin to Bordeaux, which is half an hour from Angoulême. (aerlingus.com). Ryanair flies to La Rochelle from Dublin between March and October (ryanair.com).

● For further tourism info, go to larochelle-tourisme.com; atlantic-cognac.com; angouleme-tourisme.com.

● For La Rochelle stays, invest in a La Rochelle Ocean Pass (from €35 for two days); larochelle-oceanpass.com. In Angoulême, the Discovery Pass offers a multitude of discounted activities.

● For info on Les Sources de Fontbelle, its sister bistro restaurant and Maison des Sources guesthouse, go to sourcesdefontbelle.com.

● Sunset boat trips cost around €55 per person with kelone.fr.

From history to food, and we stop off at the market to taste local products. At Cave Le Taste Vin we sample Pineau de Charentes – a popular local drink, made of 70pc grape juice and 30pc Cognac. It gains depth and interest as it ages, and often finds its way into the suitcases of home-bound tourists.

Next, shucker Didier Roumegous offers us seven different types of oyster. "It takes three years to make an oyster, and three seconds to eat it," he says. It's the best 21 seconds of my day.

La Rochelle is easy to get around with beaches, restaurants and shopping areas all close by. Anne takes me along the Rue Bletterie's shopping arcades, past buildings covered with slate to protect their wooden structures from the sea air.

There's plenty to see and do, with six beaches, four harbours and three nearby islands, including l'Île de Ré, nicknamed "the 21st arrondissement" due to its popularity among wealthy Parisians. It has many annual events, including major nautical shows and excellent jazz and film festivals.

You don't need a car to get around La Rochelle, as public transport links are good and cycle routes are plentiful – so consider stepping outside the old sea port to visit some of the surrounding villages, or travel 15km to Charron in June for the annual Moul'Stock festival of mussels and music – worth visiting for the name alone.

No La Rochelle holiday would be complete without a sunset sailing trip – a *balade en mer*. We stroll through what is now one of the largest marinas in the world to meet Bertrand, our skipper.

Bertrand has achieved his dream of living on the ocean and offers a range of sailing trips to visitors through his company (kelone.fr). The beauty of a sunset trip with him is that you can sit back and relax with a sundowner or help him to sail the boat – your call.

His is an enviable way of life, and it's no exaggeration to say that by the end of the evening, half the women in the group are eyeing up his wedding ring finger.

Charente-Maritime, situated on the south-western Atlantic coast of France, has many faces. My plan is to enjoy a relaxing seaside holiday then move inland to explore the culture and history of the region.

From La Rochelle, I travel to the town of Cognac and spend a day exploring contrasting sides of the local industry – from a slick tasting tour and educational boat ride at the Hennessy Distillery, to a five-generation family distilling business at the Normandin-Mercier estate.

I travel on to Angoulême, known as the Capital of Comics – thanks to its annual International comics festival, which celebrated its 50th anniversary in January. Street names in the town centre are written in comic book speech bubbles.

Until now, I knew nothing about the art and history of this vibrant city, despite its links to one of my favourite Netflix series. *Call My Agent* creator Dominique Besnehard has a great love for Angoulême, and acts as a self-appointed ambassador for the place – as well as being founder of its annual Francophone film festival.

It's easy to see why he loves it – the contrast between Angoulême's medieval history and modern street art; the treasures of its 12th century cathedral; its membership of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network and the fact that half of France's animated movie productions are created here.

Angoulême is 30 minutes from Bordeaux and just two and a half hours from Paris – so it's easy to get to.

I check into the Saint Gelais (hotel-saint-gelais-angouleme.com), a four-star hotel with an outdoor pool and self-confident boutique style. It pays homage to Wes Anderson's *The French Dispatch*, which was filmed in the town, with posters and signed images of the cast who stayed there.

A word of warning here – Angoulême is really quiet on Sundays and Mondays, but a

unique experience awaits at the cathedral. "Trésor De La Cathédrale d'Angoulême" is a publicly commissioned work by artist Jean Michel Othoniel, combining Romanesque artefacts with a modern perspective.

The high point is 'The Extraordinary' room where Othoniel has created a flamboyantly theatrical yet sacred exhibition. As I admire the artist's intricate and inspired work, a mass choir sings below. It's a moving experience.

The room is bathed in gold and blue colours with 10,000 pieces of glass used in the central piece – and simply standing alone in the room is the best way to experience and remember it.

I find more theatricality and ingenuity at Restaurant Sources, a one-star Michelin restaurant at Les Sources de Fontbelle, where chef Guillaume Veysière's style is as arresting as the concrete, steel and glass architecture of the building.

Motorbike-lover Veysière is a self-made chef who began cooking at the age of seven. It's no surprise to find his wife and daughter sharing front-of-house duties while his young son is perched on a kitchen counter-top, watching us as we begin a chef's table experience.

Veysière, who is on his way to a Michelin green star thanks to his use of local produce, cares deeply about guests' experi-

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La Rochelle has six beaches, four harbours, three islands, and one million cafés

ence. While we eat in order of flavour with each dish explained and wine-paired, it's clear he likes to have fun with haute cuisine. Our meal includes snail croques (croquette), pollock with beet, apple, butternut and grey shrimp sabayon, cauliflower sorbet with hazelnut crumble, tarragon and chervil and grapes with vine shoot smoke, vanilla and Cognac ice cream.

His approach is a nice contrast to the monastic vibes at Maison des Sources, a guesthouse next door which was once a priory. It now offers contemporary accommodation to those looking to enjoy the Restaurant Sources experience as they explore the many sides of Charente-Maritime.

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