

Au Chateau: It's so simple any holidaymaker can do it

Conor Power

Published 16/02/2015 | 02:30



Open Gallery 3

AU CHATEAU: The magnificent chateau at Sequoia Parc. Arriving felt more like entering one's stately home than one's caravan

The southern Charente-Maritime is beloved of Irish holidaying families and in the summer, the coastal campsites are understandably full of holidaymakers enjoying the fine beaches and hundreds of kilometres of cycle lanes that the area enjoys.

The last time we stayed in this area, it was in the highly popular and family-friendly coastal resort of La Palmyre. The only trouble with it was that it was too difficult to leave and we ended up missing out on some of the other sights of the area, such was the lure of campsite life by the beach and the atmospheric sand-dusted lively streets at night.

But with our children growing into teenagers, we wanted to broaden our scope a little. This time, we stayed about 10km in from the coast in a countryside campsite called Séquoia Parc - run by Les Castels. They have a superior range of campsites that are frequently built around old country chateaux and/or castles. The long drive into the site was certainly promising. It felt more like entering one's stately home than one's caravan.

It's a big place, with superb children's facilities, slightly expensive restaurants and a large open central terrace area where evening shows and bar/restaurant seating spills out for the entertainment of guests of all ages (who seemed to be mostly Dutch and Irish with a few British and French thrown in for background atmosphere).

Our mobile home was comfortable and well-equipped on a calm "street" full of flowering trees and with lots of comfortable "elbow room" around us.

We set forth to Oleron Island (France's largest offshore island after Corsica) on the third day of our stay, having become thoroughly familiar with the campsite layout and the various routes to the nearest beaches.

In the morning we left the children by the pool complex and went for the more adult-oriented pleasures that Oleron offers- namely wine production.

Vineyards on Oleron are not the kind you see in movies: they're not delightful old mansions set upon an ancient hillock at the end of a dusty track. Winemakers on Oleron are down-to-earth farmers who produce inexpensive and highly drinkable wines that taste of the sea and the sun.

The vineyard we were visiting was such a place. Upon arrival, it looks like a modern farmer's bungalow in the countryside with a shop attached and what looked like a milking parlour across the road. The "milking parlour" turned out to be where the wine was maturing in oak barrels and the shop was where winegrower Pascal Favre sells almost all of his produce over the counter.

His is the only organic vineyard on the island and at 10 in the morning on an ordinary working day in early June, a queue was already forming outside his door.

I had never tasted organic wine before and I was to find out that there's an immense difference in terms of smoothness in drinking it and the complete absence of fuzziness in the brain afterwards. We bought a box of red and a box of white, as well as some Pineau de Charentes - a local desert wine made from a blend of grape juice and brandy.

In the afternoon, we returned with the children for something more active. Stand-up-Paddle (in France, they call it "Le Stand-up-Paddle") is spreading in popularity with viral speed and I can see why. For someone approaching middle age like me, it's a relatively easy sport to start: it's really hard to pull a muscle or break some part of you and the skills involved are so simple that by the end of a session, you can actually get moving.

I've been surfing three times in my life and never managed to travel more than about 10cm on a board so the feeling of achievement was brilliant. I had finally found a physical activity that I could do just as well as my teenage sons.

"You see," said our instructor Didier Lafitte at the end of the hour-long session in beautiful sunshine. "Anyone can do le stand-up - just like I said!" It was true: that was exactly what he had said.

Only 20km from our campsite in the other direction lies the town of Rochefort. This is a city built in the middle of a marsh by a very determined monarch about 300 years ago. The sole purpose was to set it up as a ship-building centre to rival the British (who were already ruling the seas, as the song goes).

Now as you approach Rochefort, the tallest structure on the skyline is the replica of one of its most famous ships - L'Hermione. It's the result of 20 years of local fundraising and the ship is due to make its maiden voyage to America this Spring.

In the meantime, the entire fascinating story of its construction is on display with the enormous civic pride of a community that raised itself from the dead.

Although you would never guess it from the pretty appearance of its streets today - laid out in grid-like military formation - it was a run-down mess in the 1960s until a musical starring Gene Kelly and Catherine Deneuve (Les Demoiselles de Rochefort) played a starring role in its revival.

The other major historical site lovingly restored and worth checking out here is the surprisingly fascinating former rope factory (La Corderie Royale). It's the longest building in France (it had to be in order to make long ropes!) and a visit includes making your own length of rope.

Now where else would you get that?

Getting there

Conor Power and family travelled with Stena Line - the only ferry company with a year-round Ireland-France ferry service. www.stenaline.ie.

They stayed at the 5-star Séquoia Parc, part of the upmarket Les Castels group with 41 sites throughout France. Very mature, clean and well-run family campsite - perfect for families with younger children. For further details, see www.les-castels.com

More Information: www.en-charente-maritime.com, www.rochefort-ocean.com, www.oleron-island.com, www.diabolofun.com (for marine activities including stand-up paddle).