

A trip through western France



A lovely spell of weather gave **Graham Downie** the perfect opportunity to make a long-anticipated journey from the La Rochelle coast inland to Vienne. We join him for an inspiring property-finding tour

Last month, I was training a new addition to the FrenchEntrée property finder network. Jacqueline Miller is the buying agent covering the area north of La Rochelle and we were talking about how pretty it is and the incredible demand for houses on the exclusive Ile de Ré.

This chat served as a reminder that I have always wanted to take a tour starting on the coast and working my way inland through Fontenay-le-Comte, Parthenay and Thouet, finishing at Chinon on the banks of the Vienne. Having since been able to take advantage of the fine weather we have been enjoying, I thought that you might like to share in my adventure...

Where better to start the journey than the World Heritage Site that is St-Martin-de-Ré. It is the capital of the Ile de Ré and the place where the Duke of Buckingham and his English soldiers were defeated in the attempted siege of La Rochelle in 1627. Today it is a small but lively port, full of beautiful restaurants hosting equally beautiful people with not even a whiff of conflict in the air.

The island is a popular tourist destination with a limited supply of houses for sale

"I had crossed from the Charente Maritime, into the Vendée, Deux-Sèvres and even touched the Vienne"

and a relatively constant demand – for this reason, prices are always at a premium. Jacqueline told me that many properties don't even reach the open market and this is truly a situation where having local knowledge pays dividends.

We downed our coffees and made our way across the 3km bridge back to the mainland. Rather than heading for La

Rochelle, Jacqueline took me to the lesser known but delightful Bretignolles-sur-Mer.

The average price of a family home in the 'Rochelle' sector of the Charente-Maritime is €269,900 (compared to a departmental average of €197,100) but this is misleading as certain prime areas distort the figures.

Jacqueline tells me that some of the lesser known towns and villages offer excellent value.

As an example, Jacqueline took me to a nearby house on the market for €177,450. It has three bedrooms and lovely

mature gardens of 1,000m² which I think is the perfect size for a holiday home. It has a swimming pool and room for a BBQ, aperitifs and a family kick about but it's not too large as to require constant upkeep.

I parted company with Jacqueline and made my way to Coulon, capital of the famous 'Venise Verte' area and an excellent starting point for exploring the marshy region. It is listed as one of the most beautiful villages in France and I can see

why. Pale stone houses line the medieval waterways and restaurants, shops and cottages are reflected in the still waters.

Val Walmsley was my guide and she took me to see a cottage with direct access to the water and its own private mooring. I nearly toppled into the river when she said the owners were only asking €147,000 for it.

From Coulon, Val took me up to Vouvant,



the 'Village of Painters'. This is a village that takes great pride in hosting regular art exhibitions and is officially one of the 'plus beaux' villages in France.

The River Mere flows through the heart of the village and there are spectacular views to be had from the Melusine Tower.

Vouvant is in the Vendée department in the region of Pays de la Loire. Average property prices are €119,400 compared to an average of €167,300 for the Vendée as a whole. This makes property most affordable and Val explained that it's an area that she feels is still to be 'discovered' and offers good, long term, growth potential.

We then made the short trip up to Fontenay-le-Comte on the banks of the River Vendée. The 'Mille Ans d'Histoire' walking route takes you past two imposing châteaux and the Notre Dame Cathedral.

Although 40km from the coast, Fontenay is a former port and was a fording town on the old Roman coastal road from the Atlantic coast to Niort. Many of the villages through which this road passes still have streets named 'Quay Road' and signposts for the port. The medieval centre of the town has some spectacular architecture and

you must take a stop at the ornately carved fountain that gives the town its name.

Fontenay-le-Comte certainly deserves its reputation as one of the most popular spots in Southwest France and the surrounding countryside is home to the traditional (and much sought after, according to Val) Vendéen farmhouses with their distinctive red roofs.

My final guide for this most enjoyable journey was Alison Morton who lives and works in the area around Thouet. We visited the Château de Thouars and spent some time strolling around the market, marvelling at the range of fresh produce. Sadly, we couldn't spend too much time sightseeing as Alison had promised to show me three houses for sale, so that I could get a feel for the market.

Before setting out, Alison told me that a family home in the Deux-Sèvres has an average price of just €109,800 making it by far the most affordable in Poitou Charentes.

The first house she took me to was east of Thouars and marketed at €329,100. Built in the 1830s on a plot of 5,000m² it is an L shaped property with a whopping 300m² of accommodation with landscaped gardens and a swimming pool. It was instantly clear to me that you can get something special here, without breaking the bank.

Above and left: Graham made a stop-off in the medieval town of Thouars; This beautifully restored *longère* sits on the edge of Allonges, north of Saumur. It's on the market for €290,000.

The second house was just as spectacular. Just across the river from Saumur was a magnificently restored three bed *longère* on the edge of a town and with views over open countryside. The agents are asking €290,000 and I suspect that it won't be on the market for long.

Finally, we just had time to visit a lovely house south of Doué la Fontaine. Built around 1850 and lovingly restored 10 years ago, it was another three bed *longère*. The owners are asking €262,500 and the gardens were most attractive with both a formal lawned area and a woodland area.

With this, my journey was over. I had crossed from the Charente Maritime, into the Vendée, through Deux-Sèvres and even touched the Vienne and Indre-et-Loire. It's a trip that I won't forget in a hurry and if you're looking for a property in western France, it's one that I would encourage you to take! ■

● **Graham Downie** is the FrenchEntrée Property Finder covering the Charente Valley. See his website at www.cognacproperty.com or email graham@frenchentree.com

SIX OF THE BEST: French property blogs

Whilst we all know that the best French property advice is to be found in the pages of this very magazine, I thought it might also be useful to present to you some of the best online 'blogs' on French property and life in France:

1. FRENCHENTRÉE BLOG
<http://blog.frenchentree.com>

Thoughts from the expert FrenchEntrée team, including residents from Bayeux in the north to Perpignan in the south.

2. A LITTLE DROP OF COGNAC
<http://cognacproperty.blogspot.com>

An award winning blog from Graham Downie, offering random thoughts from the Charente Valley in Southwest France.

3. HALFWAY DOWN ON THE LEFT HAND SIDE
<http://poitouproperty.fr/blog>

Val Walmsley writes about her life and work in the Vendée, Deux-Sèvres & Vienne.

4. VIEW FROM THE FOOTHILLS OF FRANCE
www.property-finder-french-pyrenees.blogspot.com

Nadia Jordan blogs about living, working and raising her family in the foothills of the Pyrénées.

5. COTE ABODE
www.coteabode.blogspot.com

Rebecca Russell writes about her love of the Côte d'Azur, property and interior design issues from her home in Nice.

6. SOUTH OF THE RIVER
<http://ltps.eu/blog>

An excellent blog, full of useful information, penned by Alison Morton on life 'South of the River Loire'.

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