

# T SUNDAY Travel

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STEVE HAGGERTY PHOTO

The "Old Town" of Montmorillon, seen from the church above the Gartempe River, 28 miles from Poitiers in Poitou-Charentes.

## Château, sweet château

Lodging decisions are difficult  
in France's Poitou-Charentes region

By ANNE Z. COOKE  
NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT

If you've got them on your bookshelf, save them. You won't find these travel guides at Amazon.com.

In fact, the best information on France's country inns and small hotels — those family-owned places where the owners meet you with a smile and the cuisine is typical of the region — doesn't come from guidebook companies at all.

These guides come from various French government agencies, both regional and national, who distribute them free — in France, naturally — at tourist information centers.

This isn't much help when you're sitting at home, planning a trip. Happily, the French Government Tourist Office keeps a few in stock in the New York office to send to travelers. When I called for information on Poitou-Charentes, formerly the Duchy of Aquitaine in Western France, I wasn't sure what to expect. Aquitaine was big news during the Hundred Years War in the 14th and 15th centuries, but it doesn't get much play these days, compared with Provence and Normandy.

But it should. The summers are sunny, the beaches are sandy, the tourists are few, and the countryside, a succession of rolling hills and rural valleys, is postcard-perfect. For sleuths, it's a dream location. Every mile tells a tale.

from 6,000-year-old prehistoric burial mounds and Roman ruins to moldering 12th-century churches and ancient battle sites.

Eventually a packet arrived, with a paperback guide called "Bienvenue au Château," the Western France version. Written in French and English and organized by region — Poitou-Charentes, Normandy, Brittany and the Loire country — the book lists inns, châteaux and manor houses with descriptions, amenities, directions, phone numbers and e-mail addresses in English and French.

Also included were two smaller publications called "Hotels: Esprit de Poitou-Charentes," and "Hotels-Inns." The first highlights 14 of the area's most "convivial" inns and châteaux with text and photographs. The second lists 350 small and medium-size hotels and inns. Both books have maps and contact information.

Our first destination, the Relais du Lyon D'Or, is in the walled medieval village of Angles-sur-l'Anglin, east of Poitiers, where we began our trip. The choice proved an auspicious start because owners Heather and Guillaume Thoreau — she's English, he's French — are a fount



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of information for just-arrived travelers who are looking for advice.

The couple bought the property, a three-story stone structure, in 1993, rebuilt it from the

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# Rustic inns offer relaxation for families, couples

## FRANCE

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ground up and opened for business in 1994. The 11 rooms, in three wings dating from the 14th, 17th and 18th centuries, are country fresh, of different sizes and shapes and individually decorated with flowery fabrics, quilts and handmade pillows.

Some rooms — the doubles under the eaves — are romantic, while the two-room suites are outfitted for families, with bigger closets, more floor space, fewer frills and extra day beds for kids. All have television and private modern bathrooms. The recreation room, outfitted with children in mind, has games, a VCR and movies. A small park is less than a block away.

At Heather's suggestion we spent a morning exploring the village, a preserved 11th-century site on the bluffs above the Anglin River. The location, chosen for its impregnability, saved it from destruction over the centuries. And though Angles-sur-l'Anglin now depends on tourism, the village remains an important center for traditional lace-making.

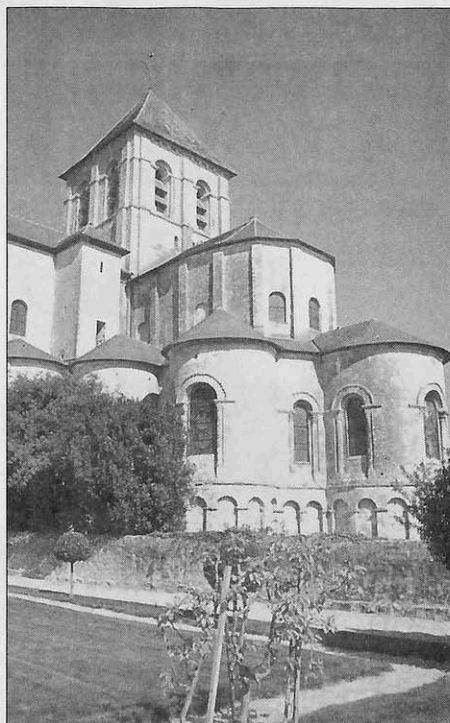
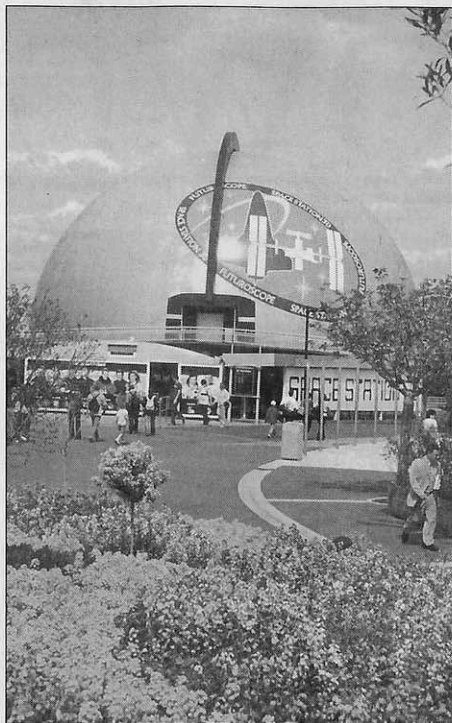
As for meals, the Thoreaux's restaurant, which specializes in regional cuisine and wines, is so successful that people drive from miles around for dinner. If you book "half-board," breakfast and dinner are included in your room rate.

Our next stop was the Hotel Les Orangeries, in Lussac-les-Châteaux, where we planned to visit the four ancient castles in Chauvigny, and the Romanesque Abbey of St. Savin, a Unesco World Heritage site.

Les Orangeries, built in 1800, is a typical manor house of the period, the kind novelist Jane Austen described so well. A rectangular two-story box with a tile roof and shutters, it has an entrance hall with oak plank flooring, a center staircase and rooms to the left and right. A long hallway leads to the rear where the door opens onto several acres of lawns, gardens, dwarf orange trees in pots, a greenhouse and a 115-foot swimming pool. Two hundred years ago, this was all open land. Now in the middle of the town, the front garden has been pre-empted by a busy street. But most guest rooms are at the rear, overlooking the garden and pool and the walls, of stucco applied over stone, are so thick that street noise is barely audible.

Owners Olivia Gauthier and her husband run the inn — she's there to welcome guests — and the atmosphere is warm. The rooms are all different, and decorated with blue or beige or dusty rose patterned quilts, matching drapes over casement windows and simple furniture.

The lighting was romantically dim — the French must not read in bed. But the rooms have television, bathrobes,



STEVE HAGGERTY PHOTOS

**Futuroscope, left, the science theme park in Poitiers, is geared mostly toward kids. The Romanesque Abbey of Saint Savin, on the Gartempe River in the town of Saint-Savin, has the region's finest 11th- and 12th-century murals and a 15th-century spire. A modern museum and hands-on exhibits in the restored monks' dormitory illustrate monastic life during the medieval period.**

a hair dryer, an electronic safe and luxuriously large bathrooms. A large recreation room upstairs is equipped for families, with comfortable sofas and chairs, tables, a pool table and a cupboard full of board games. The *pièce de résistance* is the dining room, which serves superb regional cuisine, some based on time-tested family recipes.

A place we found by accident is the Logis du Château du Bois Douset, a "listed" historic lodge and chateau in Lavoux, about 20 minutes from Poitiers.

The owners, the Viscount and Viscountess Hilaire and Genevieve de Villoutreys, are the authentic article, the last of an aristocracy rooted in French soil. He calls himself a "farmer" and is devoted to improving the estate; she runs the inn and organizes the kitchen in a house filled with treasures collected over two centuries. While we were looking around, their grown daughter, in a T-shirt and jodhpurs, stopped to say hello then left to feed the horses.

The actual chateau next door, surrounded by a moat, appears to be closed for renovation. The guest rooms are in the lodge and in an adjacent wing, remodeled for guests.

The largest room is furnished as a suite for families.

Formal gardens in front and back and adjacent farm fields surround the lodge and chateau; there isn't much to do except relax, listen to the crickets sing and marvel at this charming remnant of a vanishing lifestyle, one threatened by taxes, labor costs and the low prices paid for produce. Still, we would stay here in a minute, making the lodge our base camp for daily touring.

If, as your trip ends, you want to stay near Poitiers, where you can catch the high-speed train station back to Charles de Gaulle airport or to Paris, try the Château de Vaumoret.

A rambling 17th-century manor house in a 40-acre park, the chateau was a ruin when owners Monsieur and Madame Vaucamp bought it, along with drawings of the original. Their plan was to live in it and run a B&B after he retired.

After a lengthy remodel, the house has been re-created from the foundation to the roof, complete with modern facilities. Comfortable and elegant, it has a big front gate, gardens and a spacious driveway and parking area.

The main house has an elegant living room, a dining room and study. The Vaucamps live in the wing to the left; the opposite wing has six guest rooms, including doubles and a suite that sleeps four. There's also a private living room, a modern kitchen with stove and fridge where guests can store food and prepare meals, and laundry facilities. The setup, ideal for a large family or couples traveling together, lets you be as independent as you wish.

Although surrounded by country, the house is a 10-minute drive on the highway from the center of Poitiers. Historic walks, antique shopping and dining out are conveniently close, as is the much advertised Futuroscope, a science theme park that children seem to love.

You can plan ahead by locating these and other properties on the Internet, at [www.hotelstravel.com/france-86.html](http://www.hotelstravel.com/france-86.html). Or visit <http://us.franceguide.com>. Still, it's nice to have the guidebooks in hand when you come to a crossroads, the left fork beckons and the spirit of adventure answers the call.

Anne Z. Cooke is a Marina del Rey-based freelance writer.

## IF YOU GO

### GETTING THERE

Fly round-trip to Paris' Charles de Gaulle airport and take the train to Poitiers from the airport station. The trip is about two and a half hours long. In Poitiers, rent a car, essential for touring rural France. Bring a Michelin road map from home.

### STAYING THERE

Le Relais du Lyon d'Or is 25 miles northeast of Poitiers, at 4 Rue d'Enfer, F-86260 Angles-Sur-L'Anglin. Rooms for two start at 65 euros in summer. Half-board is available; a minimum three-day stay is preferred. Children 16 and younger pay less; under 3 are free. Low-season rates are less. The inn closes in January and February. Telephone 3305-49-48-32-53. Fax to 3305-49-48-02-28. Or visit [www.lyondor.com](http://www.lyondor.com). E-mail Heather at [thoreau@lyondor.com](mailto:thoreau@lyondor.com).

The Hotel Les Orangeries is 21 miles south of Poitiers, at 12 Avenue du Docteur Dupont, F-86230, Lussac-les-Châteaux. Double rooms start at 55 euros; breakfast is extra. Telephone 3305-49-84-07-07; fax 3305-49-84-98-82. Or visit [www.hotel-lesorangeries.com](http://www.hotel-lesorangeries.com) (French-only site). E-mail to [orangeries@wanadoo.fr](mailto:orangeries@wanadoo.fr).

Le Logis du Château du Bois Douset is about eight miles east of Poitiers, at 86800 Lavoux. On country road N139 between Bignoux and Lavoux. Double rooms start at 65 euros. Telephone or fax to 3304-49-44-20-26. An unofficial French-only Web site is [www.bienville-au-chateau.com/detail-fr.php?reg=4&dep=86&id\\_propriete=105](http://www.bienville-au-chateau.com/detail-fr.php?reg=4&dep=86&id_propriete=105).

The Chalet de Vaumoret is five miles from Poitiers, at Rue du Breuil Mingot, 86000 Poitiers. This inn is most suitable for independent travelers who want the atmosphere of a house but the privacy of a hotel. Rooms for two start at 76 euros and include continental breakfast. Telephone 3305-49-61-32-11, or fax to 3305-49-01-04-54. Unofficial site: <http://partner.fhr.fr/cgi-bin/WebObjects/fhr.wa/wa/visit?id=9226454&part=AF008>.

### GENERAL GUIDELINES

The decor and amenities provided in independent inns, small châteaux and B&Bs varies depending on the age of the house and tastes of the owner. Be aware that shampoo, hair dryers and washcloths may not be supplied. When booking, request a written confirmation, and bring copies of your correspondence.

### GUIDEBOOKS

For travel information, contact the French Government Tourist Office in New York at 212-838-7378, or visit [www.francetourism.com](http://www.francetourism.com).

For Poitou-Charentes, visit [www.poitou-charentes-vacances.com](http://www.poitou-charentes-vacances.com).