

# The Grumpy Green

## Water wheels

Using pedal and paddle power, Kevin Rushby and family enjoy a slower pace of life in France's Marais Poitevin wetlands

It was not until we clambered into the canoes that I began to see the magic of the trip. We set off down a narrow winding waterway fringed with gnarled ash pollards, leaving the village of Coulon behind. The water was dark, speckled with fallen catkins, and fizzing with marsh gas disturbed by our paddles. Half-remembering an old trick that I'd read about, I put a cigarette lighter to it, not expecting much. There was a satisfying whoosh and a brief flash of blue and yellow flames.

Good trips, in my experience, are like Greek tragedies: they have their dramatic turning point, the peripeteia, that moment when things flip over and are never the same. The fire from water certainly sharpened Maddy's eyes.

"Look there, Daddy!"

A deer peered from the long grass under a canopy of white poplars; a purple heron stood as still as stone while we drifted past scarcely breathing. Then a little further along, Sophie pointed to a V-shaped ripple of

water. At the same moment, I heard a rustle to my left and spotted a large beaver-like head in the shadows of the water margin.

"Otter," whispered Maddy. A reasonable guess for a five-year-old, but this was actually a coypu, a South American invader that has proliferated in the waterways of this part of France, the Marais Poitevin wetlands, east of La Rochelle.

We had come by bicycle from the railway station in the city of Niort (a five-hour journey from London) and it had been pleasant, but not special. The handover of bikes at the station had been efficient. The wobbly progress of five-year-old Maddy through the streets had been a moderate success - French motorists treating her like the Tour de France's yellow jersey. They did not know that her friendly waves were actually because she was attempting, and failing, to cycle one-handed and suck her thumb. Leaving Niort behind, we followed one branch of the river Sèvre, then climbed a low ridge and dropped down into the Le Marais

Poitevin marshes, an area of 970 km<sup>2</sup> that spreads its watery fingers for about 70km down to the Bay of Aiguillon.

Wetlands are one of those environments that governments and rulers have quietly been "improving" for centuries, partly because such places often harboured rebels and ruffians, partly because big money was to be made from the drained and fertile soil. More recently demands for water have taken their toll too. The net result is that many major world rivers either trickle pathetically into the sea, or like the Indus, fail to reach it at all. The vast delta wetlands, home to millions of fish, birds and animals, are either denuded or gone.

The "improvement" process in Europe started in the Middle Ages, but accelerated with the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution; later came the destruction of the Americas - the Hoover dam, for instance, caused the salination and death of the Colorado river delta. Complex and colossal ecosystems simply disappeared, as did the inhabitants and the creatures they



hunted. In a few places, however, a little flavour of the past clawed its way back into the soulless canals and dikes. The Marais Poitevin is one such area, the second largest wetland in France after the Camargue, and much less well-known.

In Coulon we were never far from reminders of the village's connection to the water. The riverfront was thick with rowing boats, both for locals and visitors, while the attractive stone-built houses included several restaurants specialising in eels and frogs. We ate pike in L'Auberge de l'Ecluse (0033 5 49 35 90 42, [tinyurl.com/p2lw9n](http://tinyurl.com/p2lw9n)), a few kilometres downstream, one of those places that reminds you why French food still deserves its reputation.

Coulon's museum of the Poitevin on the waterfront gave us an idea of what has been lost since the monks started draining land in the 11th century. But here at least, the complex and intricate system of waterways has created something else: a waterborne peasant culture that has thrived amid annual inundations and political turmoil. There were still faint echoes of it to be seen in the transportation of animals by traditional flat-bottomed boats, or occasional floating markets (the next is held in Le Vanneau on 25 July).

After a day exploring the cycle paths around Coulon, we made the swap to canoe. And, after a little fire worship and an improvement in the weather, we began to understand the magic of this area. Each village, for example, easily accessed by road these days, was originally only accessible by water. Somewhere around the back we would find a little port, a leafy peaceful pool inhabited by ducks and coypu where locals still tied up their rowing boats and used the fertile soil on the



**Paddle pushers . . . At Port d'Arçais (main picture), messing about in boats is a way of life. In a bar-tabac in Le Vanneau (above) time stands still, while Maddy (above right) gears up for a ride beside the Sèvre Niortaise**

riverbanks to grow fat tomatoes. Away from the settlements, however, the land was left to wandering cattle.

In sleepy Le Vanneau we left a couple of ducks guarding the canoe and baggage, then wandered the quiet lanes. This was the France where houses have name plates announcing the occupants; cheese-making is a religion; boats are measured in feet not metres, and oysters sent up from the coast are sold in baker's dozens. In the bar-tabac we sat in a place unchanged for several generations, and read the regional newspaper. A 62-year-old local man was in court for slapping his 87-year-old mother. He complained that she had criticised his choice of girlfriends. She said he

was promiscuous and had wantonly destroyed her garden. He claimed to have only chopped down her cannabis plants. The judge fined the man €1 for his lack of maternal respect. Plus ça change...

We re-embarked and paddled further. Cows were cropping gently amid swathes of flowers. We passed under several bridges - the area being criss-crossed by a network of cycle paths. It was like being inside a watercolour that Corot had dashed off between oils: a pale, aqueous scenery of limpid greens. We spotted more deer watching us. Sunlight dappled through the early spring foliage. Maddy leant back and sighed with pleasure.

"I love canoeing," she said. "It's much better than cycling."

We nodded indulgently. "Because we are close to nature? With the birds and coypu?"

She frowned, her hand hovering near her mouth. "No, because I can suck my thumb."

Having dallied in the watery groves as the light faded, we arrived late at



our hotel, La Maison Flore, in one of the prettiest villages, Arçais. With its ground-source heating, strictly organic and local food, plus a dozen other exacting eco-standards, I had wondered if this place might be too worthy to be the cushy retreat I was hoping for. On top of that, we were famished.

The owner, Séverine Lambertton, came to greet us. "Did you know it's a public holiday? I'm afraid the only restaurant in the village is closed."

This, however, was just a tease. Smiling, she took us up to the terrace and waved a hand at a well-laden table. "So we ordered something for you earlier..." The dishes included deep-fried eels, a fish I have disliked ever since trying the jellied version. These, however, were delicious.

Next day we had to cycle back to Niort station, regretting that we had not scheduled a couple more days canoeing. The nearby coast was beckoning, however, and I was keen to combine our wetland adventures with a visit to La Rochelle - and its famed oysters.

## Way to go



### Getting there

Rail Europe (08448 484 064, [raileurope.co.uk](http://raileurope.co.uk)), return from London to Niort from £100.

### What to do

La Bicyclette Verte (+33 549 354256, [maraispoitevin-bicyclette.com](http://maraispoitevin-bicyclette.com)) can arrange bike hire and luggage transfers; bikes from €14 per day, €26 for three days, bike transfers €22. Cardinaud (+549 35 9047, [tinyurl.com/pzdaxe](http://tinyurl.com/pzdaxe)) rents two-person canoes for €40 for eight hours. The local tourist office (see reportage on [vacances-autrement.net](http://vacances-autrement.net)) organises activity packages including two-day bike hire, foot massage, half-day canoe hire and a night's B&B in Arçais hotel from €170pp.

### Where to stay

Hotel Maison Flore (+5 49 76 27 11, [maisonflore.com](http://maisonflore.com)), singles from €52 and doubles from €65, room only. Camping de la Venise Verte (+5 49 35 90 36, [camping-laveniseverte.com](http://camping-laveniseverte.com)), chalets from €50 per night, mobile homes from €45.

### Further information

Tourist information for Marais Poitevin des Deux-Sèvres: 0033 549 359929, [marais-poitevin.fr](http://marais-poitevin.fr).