

Travel: France

Carry on camping

Bridget Galton and family find a break on a five star campsite in Charente Maritime offers plenty for grown-ups and children

My parents fell in love with Marennes more than 30 years ago, lured to a then little known corner of south west France by the promise of cheap seafood and a visit to the summer house of their friend RA president Sir Roger De Grey.

Based in the tiny hamlet of Bien Assis, he would paint the flat, wide expanses of salt marshes and oyster beds on the edge of the Atlantic.

Mum and dad's daily routine on their now annual trip still includes forays to bathe in the sea at Royan followed by a lunch of the local gros-plant white wine and half a dozen oysters.

South of the densely touristed Vendee – and the UNESCO world heritage site prettiness of Parisian favourite the Ile de Re – this part of Charente Maritime was relatively quiet until the attraction of its Atlantic beaches, whitewashed Charentais houses, 17th century forts and proximity to the Ile D'Oleron brought a growing army of visitors.

This summer that included our family of five. Despite an aversion to seafood we wanted to combine beaches with historic sights and activities for our children ranging from 3-11. After a pleasant ferry crossing from Portsmouth to Caen it was under five hours drive to Marenne and one of France's top campsites, Sequoia Parc, part of

the Les Castels group – a reliable badge of quality and luxury.

It's based around a historic house and stone buildings, housing a bar, shop, reception, restaurant and clubhouse for the onsite kids club. We'd hired a mobile home from the site owners, although British companies like Eurocamp and Keycamp also have a presence here.

The main draw is an extensive pool complex that boasts slides, a lazy river you can bob along on a giant rubber tyre, fountains and dedicated shallow pools for the under fives which made it super easy for us to amuse our three-year-old on hot days.

There's also pony riding, a mini farm, sandy play area, football and tennis courts, spread across acres of land.

On site 'animateurs' lead everything from kids club sessions to poolside singalongs and evening entertainment.

In August it was madly busy – book early for facilities like bike hire or beauty treatments – but it was never less than impeccably clean and the generous plots allowed us to eat al fresco on a decked outdoor area, sunbathe on loungers and play badminton on the grass.

The real draw for families though is the fabulous freedom it offers to urban children used to being ferried everywhere. Here they can safely roam the

■ **Above the lazy river at Sequoia Parc picture: Peter Allan (right) the golf course and chateau at Domaine Des Ormes and (below left) a classic Perigord salad at La Paille Basse in the Dordogne region**

FACTFILE

Three more Les Castels sites I can personally recommend:

■ Back in 1990 I worked a season on the lovely Dordogne site at Domaine De La Paille Basse – in the hills above Souillac not far from the river, it boasts a pool with a view to die for, old stone bar and restaurant serving local fare

■ Domaine Des Ormes – perhaps the ultimate French campsite on

the Normandy/Brittany border is within striking distance of oyster heaven Cancale, the lovely walled port of St Malo and of course UNESCO heritage site Mont St Michel. But with pony rides, pedalos, a big top, climbing wall, indoor and outdoor pool complexes, wave machine, zip wires and mini golf you need never leave

■ Five star Parc de Fierbois is

close to Chambord, one of the Loire Valley's stunning Royal Chateau and near numerous other stately chateau and wine growing regions. Based around a lovely lake, it's beautifully laid out and offers watersports, a skate park, play areas, pool complex with wave machine, a thatched bar with entertainment. One of France's best sites.

■ camping-castels.co.uk

site on bikes, fetch freshly baked croissants from the shop and hook up with newfound friends – even the three-year-old headed off every evening with her bucket and spade to a sandy play area within sight of our deck.

We alternated days on the campsite with trips out; body boarding on the spectacular surfing beach at Phare de le Coubre, exploring the walls of the once sea-encircled salt-trading citadel of Brouage, and taking the causeway out to Vauban Fort Louvois which overlooks the bridge to the Ile D'Oleron.

Check tide times to make sure you don't get caught out, although if the water does cover the pedestrian walkway, there's a boat service back.

Built in the 1690s as part of a string of coastal forts to protect

the seaward approach to the naval base at Rochefort, it was designed to catch unwanted vessels in a punishing crossfire with its sister fort on the Oleron.

This, ahem, backfired in 1945 as Resistance fighters hoisted their flag above the liberated Louvois and the furious departing Germans on the Oleron promptly blasted half of it to bits.

Worth a visit for youngsters is the well laid out zoo at la Palmyre, the wildlife and beaches of the Oleron, or a boat trip from the lovely beach at Fouras out to Ile d'Aix where Napoleon built a holiday house that he barely had time to use before being shipped off to spend the rest of his days on a quite different island. From Ile d'Aix you can see Fort Boyard, now famous for the gameshow but once built by old boney

himself.

Back at Sequoia Parc we were grateful for its well-landscaped well-laid out facilities including the child-friendly Carousel restaurant with its high beamed ceilings decorated with merry-go-round horses. Unwilling to cook on our last night we took advantage of their fine dining menu, a beetroot and goats cheese starter; fillet steak and salted caramel ice cream. After the kids had scoffed the children's menu, they disappeared to play and we finished off a bottle of red in relaxed style. It summed up a holiday that had neatly combined something for us and plenty for them.

■ **Bridget Galton travelled to France with Brittany Ferries brittany-ferries.co.uk**

