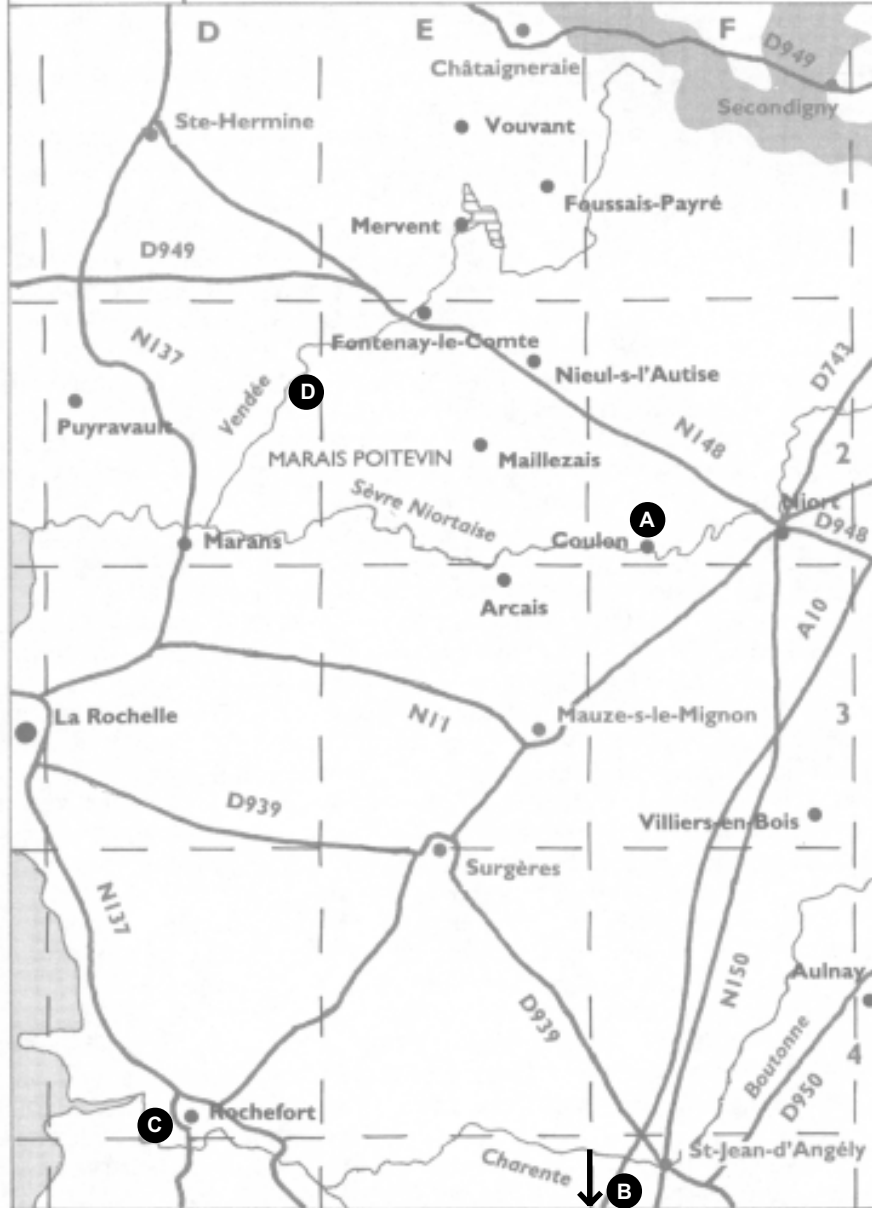


19

*Venise verte*, sharks, *barques*, *Pibalou* and flighty Mélusine. Royal rope. *Pont transbordeur*. Threads of English history. Mighty La Rochelle. Spectacular *spectacle*. Romanesque cloisters

0 5 10 15 20 Kilometres  
0 5 10 15 20 Miles



What varied countryside awaits you as you travel across the terrain covered by map 19. To the north is the Vendée; to the south Charentes, part of Poitou-Charentes, a region which has so many threads of English history running through its turbulent past. Most of the landscape is unassuming – though one section is scenically both unique and curious. **La Rochelle**, just off the western edge of D3, is the most exciting and extrovert of ports.

I'll commence in an unusual way by bringing to your attention a site to the north of map sheet 19. As you travel south, or on your return home, seek out Le Puy-du-Fou, 20 miles north-west of **Châtaigneraie** (E1) and just south of Mortagne-sur-Sèvre. Here, every Friday and Saturday evening, from June to September, the ruined château and lake are the scene of a spectacular *spectacle*, the largest in Europe. The 'stage' is 30 acres; 650 actors and 50 horsemen take part; 2,000 volunteers help out; and hundreds of fireworks are set off. Lasers, synchronised fountains, 1,500 projectors and ultra-modern sound technology all combine to put on the supreme *son et lumière* show – a *cinéscénie* epic. The show is an evocation of Vendée life, as experienced by a humble *paysan vendéen* (Vendée peasant), Jacques Maupillier. If you cannot see the show still visit the site: the permanent stands are massive, as are the car parks. There's an *écomusée* in the grounds, the Grands Parcours: this includes an 18th-century village, jugglers, jousting tournaments and falconry displays. In 1993 Le Puy-du-Fou received world-wide publicity when the annual Tour de France cycle race started from the site. (For information contact Spectacle du Puy-du-Fou, 85590 Les Epesses: tel 20 51 67 65 65.)

Back to map sheet 19. An unassuming landscape? As evidence of my claim consider the Pays de Mélusine. Legend says Mélusine was a siren-lady, ever frolicking through oak forests, from castle keep to country house, from *dolmen* to postern (a castle's back door). The *pays* is the area around **Vouvant** (E1). What a handsome setting the village has, perched above the River Mère: the château is a ruined castle of which the most notable part is the 12th-century Tour Mélusine (enjoy the panorama from the top of the 120-step climb); the Romanesque *église* is a splendid example of a fortified church (with a super front); and the river aspect at Le Vivier includes an old *lavoir* (wash-house).

Other Romanesque churches worth nosing out are at Cezais, north-west of Vouvant; **Fouvais-Payré** (E1), to the south-east of Vouvant, where the *église* has some fine sculptures (admire the Descent from the Cross on the façade); and St-Hilaire-des-Loges (E2), south of Fouvais. There are other good reasons for visiting Fouvais-Payré: enjoy a number of Renaissance stone houses (one, dating from 1552, is on the south side of the church); note, too, the wooden *halle* (covered market).

Two other man-made treats are worth seeing. First, the small moated and fortified 17th-century Château de la Citardière, hidden to the north of Les Quillères, west of Fouvais-Payré. Second, the Abbey St-Vincent in **Nioul-sur-l'Autise** (E2), south

of St-Hilaire-des-Loges; dating from the 11th and 12th centuries, the building has a handsome façade and claims to have the only entirely arched Romanesque cloisters in western France. Your navigation efforts will be well rewarded.

The 12,500-acre Mervent-Vouvant forest (E1), to the south of Vouvant, is on hilly ground. Several roads thread their way through the woods and walks abound. The lake, a winding snake, is man-made. For the best view head for the *hôtel de ville* gardens at **Mervent** (E1); the lake is far below you and in the middle is a postage stamp-sized island café which can only be reached by boat from the far shore.

There are some fine oak trees at the cross-roads south of the Grotte du Père Montfort. Below the cross-roads, to the east, is the 25-acre Parc de Pierre-Brune, a leisure park with 50 different fun games to suit everybody in the family, a two km-long narrow-gauge train track, tennis and mini-golf (Easter to Oct: 02 51 00 28 18). The map identifies two zoological gardens: the six-acre Parc Ornithologique de Pagnolle (road signs say Parc Animalier de Pagnolle) with over 250 species of exotic birds (E1: south-west of Foussais-Payré); and, just to the west, the 13-acre Parc Zoo du Gros Roc with more than 350 animals.

Now descend from the Forêt de Mervent-Vouvant, leaving the flighty Mélusine behind you, to the Renaissance town of **Fontenay-le-Comte** (E2). From afar your first glimpse of the town is the high spire of the Eglise Notre-Dame, for all the world a distant vision of England. One must, before you walk the narrow streets to the east of the church: visit the Musée Vendéen (02 51 69 31 31) which has three floors devoted to the varied history of the town, once the capital of Bas-Poitou. Enjoy the 15th-century church, the Rue des Loges, the stone and timber-framed houses and, to the north, on the right bank of the River **Vendée**, the Fontaine des Quatre-Tias. To the west is the stylish strength of the 16th-century Château de Terre-Neuve – with famed fireplace, wood panelling, fine furniture and other oddities.

To the south of Fontenay is one of the most curious parts of France: the unique **Marais Poitevin** (E2). Study your large-scale map: the *pays* is an intricate maze of canals, rivers, dykes, lush marshes, meadows and wetlands. The alternative name is more apt: *la Venise verte*. The Green Venice is a realistic label for the thousand and one canals, many of which are green tunnels, and where waterways are covered in duckweed and lined with avenues of poplars, willows and pollarded ash trees. Every field is, in effect, an island. Punts are a vital means of transport: for humans, crops, animals and their feed.

Once the 37,000-acre wetlands lay beneath the waters of a shallow gulf which stretched as far as **Niort** (F2). In times past rises of ground were islands – villages such as Chaillé-les-Marais and **Puyravault** (D1) on a spiny ridge of land running west to east.

Over the decades I must have driven every lane in the Marais Poitevin. Perhaps

the best way to see the wetlands by car is to drive from Thairé-le-Fagnoux (D2), east of **Marans** (D2), along the lanes on the banks of the **Sèvre Niortaise**, to La Croix-des-Mary (E2). On a weekday I had the roads to myself with only the company of yellow irises, herons, pike, ducks, swallows and weeping willows. Detour, briefly, to a small exhibition on the Marais fauna at Taugon, south of the river. At La Croix head north, on the D15, to **Maillezais** (E2) where the Gothic architecture of the ruins of the Abbey St-Pierre still appeals; also pleasing is the Romanesque porch of the *église* at Maillé (north of La Croix). Back to La Croix and continue upstream to **Coulon** (F2): *en route* admire the handsome tower and spire of the church at Damvix (E2); and, as you get closer to Coulon, you'll note how much smarter and busier the waterways and houses become. From the D123 you'll also glimpse, across the river, the blue-shuttered cottage which has featured on so much tourist literature.

At Coulon visit the Maison des Marais Mouillés, an evocation of local life, history and costumes, and the L' Aquarium de la Venise verte. At Coulon you can explore the Marais by means other than car. There's a green and white motorised train, *Pibalou*, which takes the strain. Or you can enjoy do-it-yourself or guided punt (*barque*) trips. Punts can also be hired at Damvix, **Arçais** (E3) or Maillezais. Alternatively, you can hire a bike at Maillezais or Damvix; take a minibus ride, *Le Grenouillou*, from Coulon; or a horse-drawn carriage at Damvix.

Let's turn our backs on the unassuming faces of the Marais Poitevin and the Pays de Mélusine and turn our attention to some of the more famed man-made sights. **La Rochelle** (west of D3), once a mighty Protestant stronghold and with so many important historical links, is a port of throbbing vitality: the combination of massive medieval towers, old streets, covered arcades, several museums and buzzing street life will interest and excite everyone. One absolute must: take a boat bus ride from the old harbour. And try to see the Aquarium de La Rochelle where the tunnel through the shark tank is a hair-raising experience (at the Port de Minimes, south-west of La Rochelle's old port).

**Rochefort** (D4) has several man-made treats. Visit the 17th-century Royal Rope Factory, a 378-metre long building beside the **Charente**. Visit the Pont du Martrou, a national monument and France's only surviving *pont transbordeur* (transporter-bridge). Today the bridge is redundant with the opening of the one km long Viaduc de Charente. Spare time, too, for the house of the novelist Pierre Loti, with a number of bizarre 'exhibition rooms of marvellous elsewherees'!

What else? Definitely the 12th-century Romanesque Eglise St-Pierre at **Aulnay** (east of F4); the stone carvings are superb. Further north, at **Villiers-en-Bois**, is the oak and beech Forêt de Chizé (F3); within the forest is the Zoorama Européen, a 62-acre zoo where you can see European animals in a natural habitat. Due north, east of **Niort** (F2), is Les Ruralies; here you can visit a museum of farm machinery, taste examples of regional produce and see local craftwork. Access to the site is from the **A10 autoroute** or the **D948** (near bridge over A10).