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Living

TRAVELOGUE

Wrong Coast, Right Place

*Donkeys in trousers and beached whales. It might be on the wrong side of the Riviera, but the western coast of France is no less charming a place, says **Jayati Vora***

DISCUSSING urine therapy with two construction workers was not what I expected when I thought about visiting the south of France. Then again, the places we went to were anything but run-of-the-mill. No celebrities sunning themselves on the Riviera, no international film festivals to attract the rich and the famous. Just regular people going about their lives in tiny, quaint villages in the most drop-dead gorgeous surroundings I have ever seen. When my friend Lulu, a newly-licensed tour guide, outlined our haphazard itinerary for the next five days, she wasn't surprised to find that I had heard of none of the places. "They're not big cities," she explained. "But they're beautiful. Trust me."



The last whale washed up on the St Martin de Ré shore in 1922. The lighthouse of the whales towers over this old lighthouse

Our first major stop was the Île de Ré. A minuscule island off the West coast of France, it is known for its salt pans, and the donkeys which wear *culottes*. History has it that when donkeys in the fields came back covered with mosquito bites after a hard day's work, their owners, in an effort to make them more comfortable, stitched little pants for them, to cover their legs. I saw no suited donkeys, but bought an adorable blue-and-white trouser-sporting stuffed toy all the same. In the main town St Martin de Ré is the towering *La phare des baleines* or the lighthouse of the whales, which is open to visitors. (Many whales have been washed up on the shore; the last one was in 1922, and its skeleton is displayed in the museum at the foot of the lighthouse.)



Heaving and puffing, we climbed the 57.10 m to the top, to discover the land and a blue sea stretching gently away from beneath us. On one side was *La tour des baleines*, the old lighthouse. Blue waves pockmarked by gusts of wind flirted with a pebbly beach made golden by the rays of the setting sun. On the other side, white houses with red roofs dotted the sprawling countryside.

The next morning, we headed for a different sort of town—Saint-Emilion. In the famous Bordeaux region, Saint-Emilion is home to a number of chateaux that produce some of the country's finest red wines. Of course, going to Saint-Emilion without

a dégustation (tasting session) and guided tour of one of the wine cellars is like going to Paris and not seeing the Eiffel Tower. I'm a white wine lover myself, but after one glass, I was tempted to switch loyalties.

Pleasantly high from all the wine, we made our way to our next pit stop, the seaside town of Biarritz. In the summer, Biarritz is thronged by families and honeymooners, but in the late September sun we found it blissfully tourist-free.

Our stomachs faintly growling, we strolled around until we found a bar that looked inviting. We had stumbled upon a treasure—a bar that boasted beers from over 20 different countries. From the Australian Fosters to the Irish Guinness, from the Basque Eki to the Corsican Colomba, whites, blonds and browns—it had them all. Naturally, it took us longer to decide which beer we would have than the time we had taken to decide which restaurant to eat at, and what food to order combined.

Biarritz, Saint-Emilion and Ilé de Ré were all great, but my favourite town remains St Jean de Luz. Very close to the Franco-Spain border, this *très touristique* town borders the ocean. It's lined with cobblestone lanes and charming squares where you can rest your tired feet at a nearby *café terrasse* and watch the world glide languidly by.

GO WEST

- Don't miss these regional specialities
- *Crêpes*, or French pancakes, with caramel made with the salted butter of the Ilé de Ré
- A bottle of powdered chillies or *piments* can be bought in most souvenir shops
- A glass of *cidre* (apple cider)
- Sample sinful French chocolate—no branded varieties here—at a corner *Chocolaterie*
- The Basque *linge* or linen embroidered with the rounded Basque cross makes for great aprons or table accessories.
- A pair of *espadrilles* or shoes made with cotton and jute. Buy a pair two sizes too small, since they stretch with wear

Sipping Sangria and luxuriating in the shade, we were engaged in conversation by two men sitting nearby. They were curious as to my nationality and how it was that I was speaking French. Upon learning that I was Indian, they grilled me at length about the merits and demerits of urine therapy.

Somewhat disappointed that I was not an expert on the subject, they smiled politely and left us to finish the rest of the Sangria alone. A little later, we paid homage to the church where Napoleon married his second wife, Anne of Austria, and regretfully took our leave of St Jean de Luz.

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