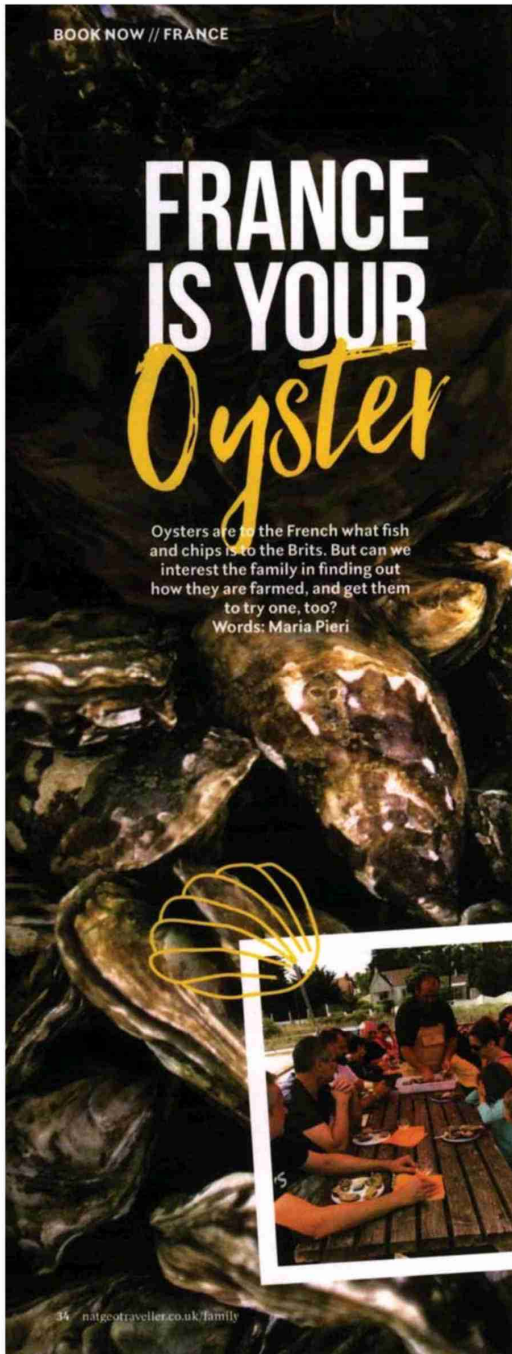


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“It smells of the sea,” says my daughter, Rae, wrinkling her nose. “And I’m worried about the dog.”

“I’ll keep an eye on him,” says her brother, Luca. They’re doing that, while we’re trying to listen to our guide, the owner of Huitres oyster farm, David Lecossois, in the Vendée region of France. Translated from French into English, David’s passion for oysters is somewhat lost on my two children, but the setting — in coastal La-Barre-De-Monts — is rich in nooks, crannies, and rock pools for them to paddle in and explore.

“There are 280 oyster farms here, around Noirmoutier,” says David, “with some 100 nursery pools. This region is the third largest producer of oysters in France, after Normandy and Brittany, and the fifth largest in the world — producing over 100,000 tonnes a year.”

The French are the largest consumers of oysters in the world, he adds. “We eat them like the English eat fish and chips. Oysters are really popular at Christmas.”

“Are the shells easy to crack?” asks Luca, before being shushed. We haven’t got to that bit yet.

David is taking his time, leading us from pool to pool, each one home to larger oysters, ending up at the sorting machine, for final selection and bagging.

“It takes three or four years for oysters to breed in the wild. We can do it in 18 months by ensuring constant access to food in the pools. Otherwise, due to the tide, for six-eight hours a day, they wouldn’t have access to plankton and algae. They need the sun and nutrients to grow, and a combination of sea- and freshwater. We’re ideally placed here with fresh water delivered by the Loire.”

Luca elicits a yelp out of me proffering a crab he’s found — then telling me off for scaring it. This isn’t conducive to piecing together David’s intricate farming story. The oysters, he explains, are separated at around 18 months, with the larger ones put in bigger mesh pockets to aide the circulation of water. Around 30 months, this happens again at Noirmoutier to help the oyster reach its market size — around 5cm and larger.

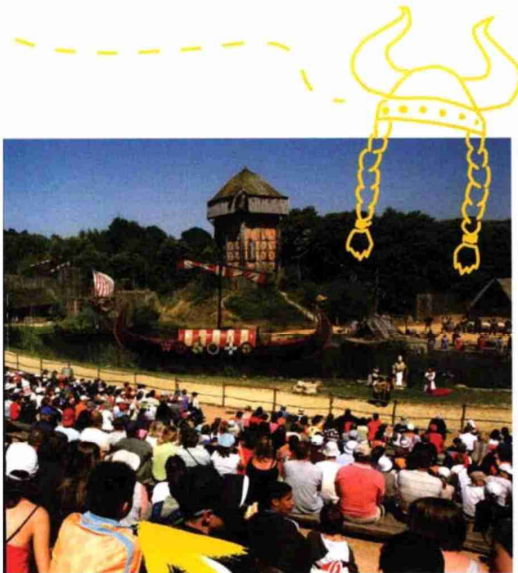
“They can change sex!” I say, but it fails to get their attention. Finally, we learn how to eat an oyster. David explains that freshness is evident when an oyster is firmly closed, to which you take a knife with a blunt blade, and pass it between the two halves of the shell, and wiggle left and right. If you find seawater inside, this is another good sign, and the oyster should ping open but stay attached at the hinge.

Of course, I can’t get my children to try one. We talk about pearls on the way home — although I think I’ve lost out on this adventure to the crab... and the dog.

huitres-cadoret.fr



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BOOK NOW // FRANCE

THINGS TO DO

PUY DU FOU

France's second most popular theme park after Disneyland Paris celebrated its 40th anniversary last year, and features 20 history-themed shows and attractions, including action-packed live performances of 'Viking Attack' and 'Dance of the Phantom Birds'. puydufou.com

BEACHES

The vast, sandy beaches of the Atlantic coastline at Saint-Jean-de-Monts are a 15-minute drive or one-hour walk from Le Domaine de Vertmarines villa. You won't need to fight for a beach towel spot or a good view here.

FOREST ACTIVITIES

Cycling, walking, hiking. A 6.5-acre forest park renowned for its rugged beauty is only a 15-minute walk from the villa.

DINING

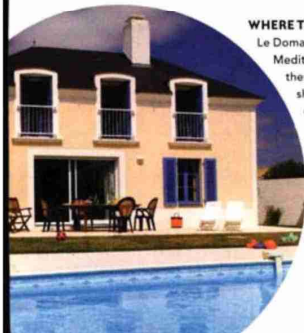
Chez Bastien in Saint-Jean-de-Monts specialises in seafood. We dined on moules frites and camembert with honey. There are also several restaurants serving crepes along the promenade too.

NANTES

The historic city of Nantes is an hour away, as well as La Roche-sur-Yon, in the heart of the Vendée Bocage countryside.

WHERE TO STAY

Le Domaine de Vertmarines is a three-bed Mediterranean-style villa with a nautical theme, contributing to a very French shabby chic. The kitchen is well kitted-out with pots and pans. The gated pool isn't heated but it's a good temperature in the summer, and the garden has both a patio area and a stone BBQ. Located on the edge of a forest, it's also 2km (1.25 miles) from the promenade of St Jean de Monts, and 4.5km (2.8 miles) from the resort centre.



ESSENTIALS

Who

Maria and Chad, and children Rae (10) and Luca (8).

Best for

Adventurous families, looking for a step up from camping and taking everything in the car with them.

Highs

No traffic on the roads. The pine forest nearby, the beach, and the fresh pastries and baguettes in the morning.

Lows

Having to think about the little extras. Load the car before you go with all the basics, as the villa is without any staple supplies.

Need to know

You have to pay for water and electricity, and wi-fi is only available at reception. You will also need to pre-book linen and bring your own towels, and be prepared to clean the villa before you leave (or pay a cleaning charge).

How to do it

A week's stay, commencing 18 August 2018, at Le Domaine de Vertmarines, costs from £354 per person (£1,416 total), for a family of four in a three-bedroom villa with private swimming pool. summerfrance.co.uk

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