

Travel news

■ Norwich International Airport is holding its annual **Travel Show** today (10am-3pm) in the airport terminal building. The Travel Show is open to everyone with free entry, and free parking in the short



stay car park. There will be more than 20 tour operator, airline and local business representatives offering expert advice. There will be special discounts and airport holiday parking offers, competitions and a prize draw too.

■ Dealchecker (www.dealchecker.co.uk (0203 474 0268) offers two night bed and breakfast at the five-star Vale d'Oliveiras Quinta Resort & Spa in the **Algarve** from £149 per person (two sharing) including breakfast and flights from London. Book by Monday for travel between February and June 2014.

■ Esprit (www.espritski.com; 01483 791 900) offers seven nights at Chalet Pepi Gabl at the ski resort of St Anton, **Austria**, from £325 per person, down from £719 per person (based on two adults and two children under 12). Includes catered board, free child care worth £519 and flights from London Gatwick on February 9.

■ Letsgo2 (www.letsgo2.com; 0208 329 2855) offers seven nights at the four-star Turtle Beach, **Barbados**, from £1,789 per person, with a saving of £1,089 per couple (two sharing a Junior suite) on an all-inclusive board basis, including flights from London Gatwick. Book by this Friday for stays from now until April 10.

■ Citalia (www.citalia.com; 0843 770 4443) offers three nights at the four-star Hotel Bonvecchiati in **Venice** from £359 per person, saving £344 per couple (two sharing), including room upgrade and flights from Manchester, departing February 6. Book before this Friday.

Local offers

■ Latest holiday offers with flights from Norwich. Telephone Travel Norwich Airport on 01603 428700, email enquiries@travelnorwichairport.co.uk or visit www.travelnorwich.com to check availability.

■ **Tenerife** - February 17, seven nights, 4S named in Puerto De La Cruz, half-board from £459pp - saving £232 per couple

■ **Malta** - April 15, seven nights, 4* named in Qawra, half-board from £439pp.

■ **Majorca** - May 6, seven nights, 4T adult hotel in Cala Bona, half-board from £459pp - saving £312 per couple

■ **Ibiza** - May 7, 14 nights, 4T adult hotel in Es Cana, all-inclusive from £719pp - saving £442 per couple

■ **Turkey** - May 11, seven nights, 4* named in Hisaronu, half-board from £449pp

■ **Lake Garda** - May 25, seven nights, 3* named in Torbole, bed and breakfast from £559pp*

■ **Tunisia** - June 20, seven nights, 3* named in Port El Kantaoui, half-board from £299pp - saving £280 per couple

■ Prices are correct at time of going to print, all subject to availability and based on maximum occupancy.

DAVID THORPE finds a slice of Mother Nature's paradise in western France.

Abundance is the word that comes to mind when trying to describe le Pays de Gâtine.

Exploring the rich landscape of this little known area of western France we sometimes felt we were walking through Mother Nature's personal larder.

Footpaths took us under canopies of wild fruit trees, our feet crunched on hazelnuts and sweet chestnuts, the hedgerows were full of all kinds of edible berries surrounded by wild flowers and button mushrooms appeared like shining white pebbles.

Reaching up to feel the ripeness of a plump peach above our heads, it came away in the hand as if it had been waiting for us – and gave us a new benchmark for succulence and taste. Meanwhile, every cottage we passed seemed to boast an allotment-style garden bulging with competition sized veg.

It turns out there is a prosaic reason why this little-populated pocket of Poitou-Charentes, midway between the tourist hotspots of the Loire and the Dordogne, is so rich in natural resources (which includes the bird life, with fellow holiday makers spotting 41 species in a week).

The gently rolling landscape has too many small hills, plunging into wooded valleys, to be viable for agriculture on an industrial scale. So the fields are filled with honey-coloured Parthenais cattle and the lanes and hedgerows are left entirely unpolluted by chemicals, making it a paradise for walkers, cyclists and horse riders.

And it gets better. For tucked away at the end of a track, hidden in its own pretty valley alongside a burbling trout brook, lies a four centuries old mill which has been beautifully converted into a luxury four-star auberge where the cuisine, for carnivores and vegetarians alike, is out of this world and the wine – literally – flows freely.

Le Moulin du Chemin guests find themselves being spoiled not just by sumptuous four-course dinners but by the introduction of two new regional wines each day, as well as different nightly 'digestif'. And, if that's not enough, there is a communal drinks room where complimentary wines, beers, local ciders and soft drinks are freely available all day.

Hosts Carolynn Grimaldi and Peter Roche entertain up to ten people at a time – and I do mean entertain. The evening meals are arranged like a dinner party, with aperitifs served from 7pm, either on the wisteria-adorned patio or, in cooler weather, around a log-fired stove in the lounge.

Your hosts then join you for a relaxed

communal meal with Peter making – and changing – the seating arrangements every night and ensuring that glasses are never empty.

This is a time for making friends between being beguiled by tales of treasures hidden under the old mill's stone steps, of gold prospectors and of Le Moulin's history as a meeting place of the French resistance.

As well as all the wine you can drink, daily picnics are included in the price of the holiday with a delightful option offered on Wednesdays (weather permitting) when,



Get away from it

“
As escapism goes it doesn't get much better...”

instead of packing it in your rucksack, you can meet up at a pre-arranged time at a lovely spot by a lake, where Carolynn and Peter are waiting with an alfresco spread fit for a king.

As escapism goes it doesn't get much better with no TVs, no promise of a mobile signal other than “it's sometimes good 25 metres up the road.”, free postcards for writing home, an inexhaustible supply of books to take to the sun loungers by the heated swimming pool – and plenty of interesting places to explore.

Among them were gentle walks from our poolside apartment door.

One way goes directly up an ancient hillside bridleway to join a marked forest trail, another across the stream into meadows, a third down the lane into a maze of traffic free lanes and tracks.



all in lovely France

You can wander further afield, aided by a comprehensive supply of route notes and maps, to nearby abbeys, markets and pre-historic rock formations.

And a short drive takes you to the region's two biggest tourist attractions, the steeply hills of the Mervant-Vouvant national forest park, with its beautiful lake and picture-book villages, and the Marais Poitevin, which is a magical marshy region of shady green tree-lined canals known as the 'Venise Vert'.

If you choose to stay closer to Chez Moulin there is the strong possibility of finding yourself accompanied on your wanderings by the canine host, Domino, especially if you make the mistake of whispering either "walk" or "marcher" in his hearing.

A bi-lingual dog – just one of many lovely surprises in 'Paradise Found'.

■ **Main picture, View from our room over the swimming pool at Le Moulin du Chemin.**

Right, guests gather for aperitifs by the pool as Peter Roche mans the barbecue.

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■ **For more travel features online visit our website - www.edp24.co.uk/lifestyle**



Travel facts



■ **Looking over the Mervent Forest from the top of the tower at Vouvant.**

■ Le Moulin du Chemin, which dates back to at least 1643, has, for the past 20 years, been an independent auberge run by English couple Carolyn Grimaldi and Peter Roche, originally to cater for horse riding holidays but now welcoming walkers, cyclists and bird watchers as well.

It is at the end of a quiet lane just outside the tiny hamlet of Scillé, in Deux Sèvres - a department of the Poitou-Charentes administrative region, just over an hour's drive from the regional capital of Poitiers, half an hour from the city of Niort and about an hour and a half from the bustling port of La Rochelle.

A maximum of ten people are accommodated in spacious ensuite doubles. Ours was on two levels with mezzanine bedroom, sitting room and bathroom, just a short hop from the heated swimming pool and next door to the open all hours drinks room.

■ One of the main reasons we chose Le Moulin is its reputation for vegetarian food, though carnivores are equally well catered for. But for some the biggest attraction might be Peter's wine cellar, with a chance to taste 12 or more of the region's wines over the course of the week.

■ For 2014 Le Moulin is open for six-night holidays starting most Sundays from the start of April to the end of October. Their six-nights prices for self-guided walking, bird watching, horse riding or cycling holidays - covering everything except travel, including all food, drinks, route maps and even postcards - range from £706 (low-season standard price) to £783 (high-season) per person..

■ Cycling prices including bike hire range from £737 (low-season without excursions) to £864 (high-season to include car transfers to and from Morais-Poitevan and Mervent-Vouvant).

■ We flew by Ryanair from Stansted to Poitiers. Although Poitiers itself is well worth a separate stopover its airport is so small that there were no taxis available when we arrived and we had to get into the city centre to collect our hire car. If we returned we would fly into La Rochelle, which is a bigger airport with more user-friendly car hire options. Alternatively, flights also go from Stansted to Niort. Le Moulin will collect you for no charge from Niort station for trains arriving before 5.30pm (£71 after 5.30pm).

■ For full details go to www.moulinholidays.com

■ Those looking for alternative walking holiday packages should check out the 2014 Headwater brochure. Headwater specialises in tailor-made walking holidays but also organise cycling and even canoeing breaks. For 2014 they offer a choice of 67 holidays in 20 countries. Some are guided, where you walk in a group, others are independent, where you are given walking notes and left to explore at your own pace, choosing from a selection of options. www.headwater.com