



**June 2009      Issue 2**

# **NEWS FROM LA VIEILLE DISTILLERIE**



The apple blossom is finished and now the grapes have sprouted their leaves very fast and soon we shall see the fruit.

Often our guests remark how quiet and peaceful it is here. Indeed some say where are all the people? There are various explanations for this. First there is the French lunch break from about midday to two o'clock or two thirty often taken at home behind shutters closed for the sun or the cold in winter.

There is also a superb road network, serving the whole of Europe but with much less traffic per kilometre than in the UK. But perhaps most of all it is the land area. The population of Metropolitan France is 62.5 million plus 2.5 million in the Overseas Departments (Outre Mer) This gives a density over Metropolitan France of 115 people per square kilometre compared to the UK of 246 people per square kilometre. Where we are in the Charente with its 400 thousand people that works out at 57 people per square kilometre

One of the most enjoyable and interesting days out here is to take a trip in on the Charente river. It is steeped in history and has lots to keep the curious traveller entertained. At the small historic port of St Simon, just a short drive from La Vieille Distillerie, you can board a replica vessel known as a gabare, a flat bottomed barge which allows visitors to enjoy a glimpse of life aboard during the River's heyday. St Simon was a leading barge-building centre during the 19th century and there is an excellent museum recalling the village's barge-building past.



Gabare's were used during the middle ages to transport casks of wine and brandy to the coast for shipping, returning laden with fresh cargoes of salt and oriental spices. This pattern continued for centuries until the trade eventually abandoned the river in favour of road and rail network



Ever since earliest times, men have always lived in close harmony with the River Charente. Eaux de vie, stone paper and cannons were transported down the river to the coast. Other produce, such as fish, cereals, coal and, in particular, salt were transported inland from the sea. On a river trip from Cognac you pass by world-renowned Cognac vineyards, churches, castles, bridges, canal locks and other buildings which are a reminder of the past when the land and the river brought people together.

The Charente is one of France's most beautiful rivers. Its crystal clear waters are perfect for fishing and swimming and its pretty river banks are home to an abundance of flora and fauna. Meadows of grazing cattle and fields of vibrant sunflowers typify this peaceful land famed for its magnificent cognac distilleries, ancient Roman sites and beautiful Renaissance châteaux.



At the end of June we have National Music Day across France. There will be festivals of all types of music, classical, popular, and of course Jazz and Blues. Our biggest local festival is at Cognac - the annual outdoor summer jazz festival which begins during the weekend of 21 July for 6 days. The Blues Passions festival is recognised as one of the leading European festivals for Afro-American music attracting artists from over the world and providing a great Street Party helped along by the local beverages.



The town of Cognac, half-an-hour's drive from La Vieille Distillerie, the second largest city of the region, and one of the most popular tourist destinations in France. The surrounding landscape is dominated by the vines which follow the contours across the countryside providing beautiful scenery all year round.

Half way between the Atlantic Coast and the forests of Périgord stands the Grand Champagne region is a land dedicated to the grape with people dedicated to grape production. Ten marked pathways criss-cross the Grand Champagne. From village to village the tracks

roll up and down dale and from every hill top there is a stunning view of either a Romanesque church, a Renaissance castle, a windmill or a watermill by a river.

The Otard Chateau in Cognac is alongside the Charente river. Situated in the old town of Cognac called "the old Cognac" it was the birthplace of Francis 1st who became the king of France in 1515. Otard offers a fantastic guided tour through their distillery now housed in their historic Chateau. There are hundreds of Cognac producers throughout the area and most welcome visitors and provide guided tours of their distilleries where you can learn the secrets of making Cognac. They will tell you about the heritage of Cognac making and you will get to have a taste - for those who don't like Cognac you can sample one of the Cognac cocktails!



For anyone looking for something different to do, in a beautiful area you can spend an amazing day llama trekking. You can join these gentle, friendly and inquisitive animals walking in an organised group, usually of 12 people, along designated paths along woodland tracks and down leafy lanes explaining the history of various landmarks along the way. Children, from 9 years of age are welcome. Its a unique way to enjoy the countryside, and at the same time benefit from gentle exercise.



The location of La Vieille Distillerie makes it an ideal base from which to discover the beautiful Atlantic coast with its ancient towns and villages of the Gironde estuary with their picturesque harbours.

The town of **ROCHFORT** dates from the seventeenth century, when it was created by Colbert, Louis XIII's navy minister, to protect the coast from English raids. It remained an important naval base until modern times with its shipyards, sail-makers, munitions factories and hospital. The arsenal and the corderie which forms part of it is now a listed building.



An 18th century ship, the *Hermoine* is being recreated and the visitors can see the impressive work in progress. The original *Hermoine* set off in 1780 for America carrying the French major general Lafayette en route to help the Americans in their struggle for independence.

We are often asked what it is like to live in south west France. There are many attractions that make life here so enjoyable. Of course there is the wine, the cognac and the cuisine. There is the natural beauty of the countryside and its superb coastline which the mild and sunny climate allows you to visit out of season. In winter there are the 'blue sky' days. The tranquility of a region with little traffic once you leave the motorways. There is space all around us, it is quite normal to travel for miles on country roads and not see a car.

We stay because we have found a quality of life that counts. We are surrounded by peaceful countryside, chateaux, historical castles we have yet to explore and of course we live in a gourmet lovers paradise! Most importantly, we have found a relaxed way of life where people have time for one another and for their families. And, of course, the lovely weather that stretches from May until the end of October.