

## The Unexpected French Coast

When Americans think of coastal France, the French Riviera or Normandy comes to mind. However, in-the-know travelers looking for an accessible and 'real' seaside French experience should check out the Charentes coast.

Read on to learn why Explore Cognac including La Rochelle, Ile d'Oléron, Royan Atlantique are must-see spots and what to do in each.

First stop:

**La Rochelle:** This city by the Atlantic Ocean may be best known for the historic towers in the Old Port. It offers a stimulating mix of history and architecture (dating as far back as the Middle Ages), natural escapes and culinary ingenuity.

*What to Do:*

Cognac cocktails and pairing classes – Cognac is the star beverage in the region. Giving new meaning to the expression 'what goes together grows together', family-owned producer [Normandin Mercier](#) collaborates with local La Rochelle chocolatier La Cabosse Enchantée to pair seasonal flavors with different expressions of Cognac. Fancy Cognac VSOP with L'île aux Trésors (chocolate flavored with sea salt from nearby Ile de Ré)? At Le Mary Lili, La Rochelle's first cocktail bar, play mixologist for the day as you create your own Cognac cocktail with the help of the bartender.

Thalasso – Sea water treatments (Thalasso) using water from the nearby Atlantic are a rejuvenating and relaxing way to refresh.

*Where to eat and stay:* Christopher Coutanceau's eponymous three-Michelin-starred restaurant naturally focuses on seafood. Stay in the 5-star Relais and Chateau La Villa Grand Voile, a shipowner's mansion built in 1715.

*How to get there:* 2 hr 30 min train from Paris

**Next hop on a boat from La Rochelle for the 50 minute ride to [Ile d'Oléron](#):** the largest French island on the Atlantic coast is known for its wild and lush nature.

*What to do:* Sail on a catamaran with Ile ou Aisle to nearby Fort Boyard or car-free Aix Island where Napoleon spent his last days before exile. Cycle around the island exploring the beaches, nature reserves, or forests. Make a pit stop at Domaine Pinard, a 4<sup>th</sup> generation winery, for a tour of the farm and tasting.

*What to eat:* Oysters! Dating back to Roman times when rich families cultivated them for their banquets, Marennes oysters have been an integral part of the island. Oyster farms dot the island; visit one and observe the cultivation process. Shuck and slurp and pair with Cognac.

*Where to stay:* Le Grand Large. Situated on the dunes amongst one of the most beautiful beaches on the Island, this 5-star hotel is a peaceful haven.

**A 1 hour drive from La Rochelle will lead you to [Royan Atlantique](#):** this territory has 34 beaches and is surrounded by water from the Atlantic to the estuaries.

*What to do:* Take the 5 senses tour at Domaine Les Hauts de Talmont. At the foot of a cliff, a walk invokes the visual, tactile, tasting and hearing as it starts with a panoramic view of the estuaries, a walk through biodynamic vineyards and ends in the cellar tasting vintage Cognacs.

*Where to Drink:* Sit on the terrace overlooking the estuary at La Dame Blanche and sip on a cognac cocktail or glass of organic wine from this family-run estate.

*Where to Stay:* All the rooms at Hotel Hemen offer views onto the ocean. The hotel also offers lessons in paddle-boarding and electric foil surfing.

If the ocean isn't your preference, go inland and follow the Charentes river. Cycle alongside it or rent your own riverboat. Perhaps a solar-powered sightseeing tour or a gourmet cruise tasting local delicacies? Stop in Saintes, a 2000-year-old village with Roman ruins or take a pit stop in Angouleme, the UNESCO Arts capital. Pause in Cognac and visit the famous producers such as [Hennessy](#) where in the Destination Cooperage experience visitors can meet the master coopers and observe the barrel-making process. Tour [Martell](#) at night ending the evening with a nightcap on their rooftop. What about a safari through the vineyards in a 1960 Peugeot? Take a drive with Frederic Bourgoïn through his biodynamic vineyards.

For more information, please visit [ExploreCognac.com](http://ExploreCognac.com)

#### About Explore Cognac

Explore Cognac offers a myriad of opportunities to explore an exceptional spirit and territory. An unexpected and timeless parenthesis in the lands of Cognac, Charentes and their inhabitants, in the heart of Nouvelle-Aquitaine. The destination is ideally situated between Paris and Bordeaux, easily accessible by train, car and plane.

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