

Travel

Perfect Poitiers is a cut above the rest for fun and intrigue

Jenny Woolf took her son Sid to sample the child-friendly delights and attractions of this unique, Romanesque, French city

Middle-class English people traditionally visit France for its scenery, gastronomy and culture, and certainly Poitiers won't disappoint. This medieval town by the Clain river contains the oldest Romanesque church in Europe. Its local specialties include a black-crusted cheesecake, and the Poitou-Charentes region is also famous for fine cognacs ... and so on, and so on.

But nine-year-olds frankly aren't interested in any of this. So, for young Sid's benefit, we decided to seek out the region's other, less cultural attractions. These turned out to include gigantic snakes and crocodiles, chocolate paintbrushes, state-of-the-art play equipment, boats with built-in water-pistols, and more. And since Poitiers is less than two TGV (Train à Grande Vitesse) hours from Paris, the trip door-to-door from Camden compares very well with the hassle of the plane.

Indeed, after arriving on the morning Eurostar, we picnicked under the Eiffel Tower, caught the TGV and were in Poitiers by mid-afternoon.

The biggest family attraction in the region is Futuroscope, France's second-largest theme park, though, frankly, when we first entered, we were baffled. It cer-

tainly looked very interesting, with creative, original (mostly grey) architecture and fantastic gardens, but where were the bright colours, the cartoon characters, and the parades?

After an hour or so, though, we got into the spirit of the place and discovered that Futuroscope offers much better opportunities than most theme-parks for children to make their own fun. Magnificent playgrounds include huge slides and elaborate climbing frames, mini self-operated versions of mild thrill rides, and unusual ICON outdoor interactive play equipment using electronic game technology.

Interactive artworks

Water is also an important part of the design. Visitors can ride on water-tricycles with huge orange tyres, float about in giant bubbles, and chug round a lake while squirting water-pistols of industrial strength. There are no conventional fairground rides, but you can dance with industrial robots in a disco setting and view all kinds of IMAX movies on topics from Van Gogh to prehistoric monsters. And chilled-out Cite Numerique has the latest Playstations and fascinating interactive artworks.

There are also some conventional theme park rides,

of which the most popular is Arthur. I'd never heard of the film it refers to, but this bumpy ladybird chase through swarms of horrible giant bees was scary enough for anyone.

We also liked the mad cartoon dash through futuristic traffic in Pizza Hill, enjoyed the 8th Continent, in which the audience compete in removing rubbish from the oceans, and had fun on a comical simulator tour of the Vienne region.

It wouldn't have been France without at least one fancy restaurant, and Restaurant Le Cristal's menu is light-heartedly based on the park's attractions. Sidney's tuna-fish "ladybird" (with tomato wings spotted with sauce), was impressive, but nothing compared to my Van Gogh dessert, with chocolate biscuit "paintbrushes" and a paint-tube of mango coulis.

Beautifully landscaped, with many surprises, Futuroscope is a good place and we spent two days there. Over 90 per cent of visitors are French, though, so we were glad of the dictionary.

Hardly anyone spoke English in Ile aux Serpents either, but they were friendly and welcoming, and we loved this attractive, eco-conscious reptile centre.

Not everyone adores snakes, but some specimens,



■ Futuroscope's intriguing architecture

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like a huge yellow-and-white albino boa-constrictor, seemed like positive works of art to me. The centre's other residents include lizards, turtles, otters, meerkats and mongoose, all happy, active and beautifully clean.

Inspired by the snakes, we then headed for nearby Planete des Crocodiles. This modern project is heated by dis-

Poitiers facts

■ For more information about the Poitiers area, Poitou-Charentes tourism visit <http://www.visit-poitou-charentes.com/>. Or call at 300 High Holborn, London WC1V 7JH.

■ RailEurope return fares from

London to Poitiers start at £112 in standard class. www.raileurope.co.uk or 0844 848 4070.

■ Eurostar has up to 18 daily services to Paris from £69 return, from 2hrs 15 minutes. www.eurostar.com or 08432 186 186.

charge from a nearby power station, and housed in a Millennium-style glass dome. With a nod to a botanical glasshouse, it contains many huge, exotic plants, and the crocodilians lounge about in appropriate settings, like shacks on the bayou or African jungles complete with fake elephant skeletons.

Boggle-eyed babies

Sid learned lots. Nile crocodiles have triangular heads, alligator heads are U-shaped, and gavials have a pointy snout, he informed us.

They open their mouths to cool down, and reproduce by laying eggs – and there's a nursery of boggle-eyed newly-hatched babies to prove it.

We'd hoped to visit a monkey refuge in the area, (not to mention a nearby museum of macarons – surely

unique) but sadly, we ran out of time. However, we did take Sid around Poitiers town.

Poitiers deserves an article all of its own, but suffice to say that it's charming, and has enough chocolate shops to satisfy any child. Sid was interested in the Romanesque church, Notre Dame, whose exterior boasts intricate carvings of many curious monsters, like two-bodied animals or birds pecking their own tails.

Nobody's sure what they all mean, but after the kid-friendly attractions, it was sobering to examine these mysterious and lovingly preserved images from a long-gone era.

More curious than anything in Serpent Isle or Croc Planet, they will no doubt be puzzling visitors to Poitiers long after today's attractions have gone.



■ Sid excited to be at the Gare du Nord



■ Sid outside the futuristic Crocodile Planet (Planete des Crocodiles)