



Stunning flower display at the entrance to the town.

by Mick Austin

Shhh! Don't shout it out loud but there's a pretty French town in the Deux-Sèvres that surprisingly few people have heard of. It's perched on a cliff, flanked by a lovely river, has many old streets and houses, churches and an imposing château. It has an abundance of cultural and historical treasures, it hosts probably the best market in the region and it's off the tourist trail. What more could you ask for? Oh, yes, it's name: Thouars.

The main town in the Thouet Valley, Thouars has impressive credentials. It is classified as one of France's Villes d'Art et d'Histoire (Cities of Art and History) with the highest number of listed buildings per inhabitant in the region and has Ville Fleurie four-flower status in recognition of its superb parks and gardens (especially the Parc Imbert).

Part of its charm is its relative anonymity on the tourist map, but all that changes over the first week in September when the population explodes as 15,000-plus people invade the town. But more on that later...

There's so much to see and do around Thouars you can spend a week discovering its treasures, but here is a taste of a few of those 'don't miss' places.

Churches/Châteaux

Eglise Saint Médard has long been the best known and most visited monument in the town. All that remains from the first early 11th Century church are small fragments of the façade and the lateral walls. Henry II of England laid siege to Thouars in 1158 and had the castle and its walls razed. He then proceeded to rebuild Saint Médard between 1170 and 1180. The church evolved over the Middle Ages and was largely remodelled during the 15th and 16th centuries. Since 2005 the southern wall has been brightened up by contemporary stained glass windows from workshops in Limoges.



Château et Pont des Chouans

The Eglise Saint Leon was founded in 1021 and is probably best known as the resting place of Margaret of Scotland, daughter of King James 1 of Scotland and wife of the future king of France, Louis XI. Don't miss the fossils in the paving stones!

Almost anywhere you go in Thouars, you can't help but notice the magnificent Château des ducs de La Trémoille. First built in the eighth century, with later work done by Versailles architect Jacques Lemercier, it has been a barracks, a prison and now a college. Tours are scheduled from April to September by the Department of Architecture and Heritage. Check out the local tourist office for details.

Museums/Exhibitions

Interested in World War Two history and the bravery of local Resistance fighters? Then you won't want to miss possibly the largest collection of wartime exhibits in the region at the Centre Régional Résistance et Liberté. Occupied Thouars suffered heavy fighting and bombings and a visit from the arch-Nazi himself, Heinrich Himmler. Audio guides, multimedia terminals, small-scale models and an audio-visual archive transport you back to a time when the local Thouarsais were, literally, fighting for their very existence.

Musée Henri Barré hosts an art and history collection with exhibitions and activities all year long. The main attraction is a collection of French and foreign earthenware. You can also brush up on local history, particularly that of the La Trémouille dukes, whose contribution to life in Thouars was extensive.

Ecomusée du Moulin de Crevant is on the Thouet river just below the town. Built in 1840, it was a farm until 1989 and run by four generations of millers from the same family. Today it has been restored and opened to the public and has a picture museum explaining the history of the water mill and includes a video made by the last miller. A guided visit shows the working methods of the mill as well as technical development since the end of the 19th Century. It's a superb example spread over four levels with a series of 150 belts and 300 pulleys and all in perfect working order.

The Centre d'Interpretation Géologique du Thouarsais (CIGT) is an earth science, educational, cultural and scientific area hosting a permanent stone exhibition demonstrating the natural, architectural, historic and industrial heritage of Thouars. Display panels, video clips, models, tools and ornaments show geology in an original and unexpected manner. If you like this sort of stuff then you can also visit the two ancient open-air quarries at the Toarcien Natural Reserve (Réserve Naturelle du Toarcien) just outside Thouars.



Food and Drink

If you like French markets you'll just love Thouars. Rated as one of the biggest and best in the region (2000 people every Friday morning can't be wrong), soak up the sights, sounds and smells as you wander around stalls laden with local produce including goat's cheese, jams, the famous Thouarsais melons, fresh fish, chicken, wine, honey and loads more. Try the local aperitif Duhomard (made from aromatic plants) and the brownie-style Saint-Michel chocolate cake. There's also a smaller market on Tuesdays.

And now, last but not least, why some 15,000 people will invade the town on the first weekend in September - **La Montgolfiade de Thouars!**



La Montgolfiade de Thouars



It's a great family day out in a festival atmosphere as around 40 hot-air balloons provide a magical spectacle in the skies of the Deux-Sèvres. This year's event - on Friday-Sunday, September 5-7 at the Hippodrome de Villeneuve racecourse - celebrates its sixth anniversary with all the crowd favourites. Expect to see bands, fireworks, a vide grenier, a parade of vintage cars and a new feature

of three small remote-controlled balloons. And don't miss the female trapeze artist performing underneath one of the balloons (no, not one of the remote-controlled ones!)

Weather permitting, of course, you can book yourself a 'discovery' flight on the Montgolfiade website, where you download a booking form. The flights cost 180€ and are due to lift off at 7pm on Friday and 7.30am and 7pm on Saturday and Sunday. You will need to be there 90 minutes before your flight to meet your instructor and prepare the balloon.

If you can't get a flight during the La Montgolfiade weekend, there are more personal *baptism* flights throughout the year. They cost 250€ and the booking form is also on the website. The organisers will then contact you to arrange a date and time. The website also has full programme details and a plan of parking for the La Montgolfiade weekend.

THOUARS FACT FILE...



Tourtenay: 20 minutes
Moncontour: 30 minutes
Airvault: 30 minutes
Saumur: 40 minutes
Bressuire: 40 minutes
Parthenay: 45 minutes
Chinon: 60 minutes
Angers: 80 minutes



Airports:
Poitiers (70 minutes), Nantes (110 minutes), Tours (110 minutes)

Thouars is in the North of the dept. of Deux-Sèvres (79) in the region of Poitou-Charentes

Population: 9622 in 2011

Airports: Poitiers (70 minutes) Tours (110 minutes) and Nantes (110 minutes)

- ✓ Aire e Camping Car
- ✓ Cycle Routes
- ✓ Picnic Locations
- ✓ Bars & Restaurants
- ✓ Fuel Stations
- ✓ Supermarkets
- ✓ Campsite
- ✓ Plan d'eau

Contacts

- Ecomusée du Moulin de Crevant. 1 promenade de Pompiers, 79100 Thouars. Tel: 05 49 68 38 59. Website: www.facebook.com/EcomuseeMoulindeCrevant?ref=ts&mfref=ts
- CIGT, Les Écuries du Château, Rond-point du 19 Mars 1962, 79100 Thouars. Tel: 05 49 66 42 18. Website: www.thouars-communaute.fr
- La Montgolfiade de Thouars website: www.montgolfiade.fr
- Centre Régional Résistance et Liberté, Les Écuries du Château, Rond-point du 19 Mars 1962, 79100 Thouars. Tel: 05 49 66 42 99. Website: <http://www.crrl.fr>
- Local tourist offices for more info, accommodation, bookings, times, prices etc:
- www.tourisme-deux-sevres.com
- www.tourisme-pays-thouarsais.fr
- www.thouars.fr/vah/
- www.visit-poitou-charentes.com

Photos: Thouars armes fleuries, WikimediaCommons: Père Igor; Thouars Château et Pont des Chouans, WikipediaCommons: Alertomalibu; La Montgolfiade de Thouars, David Brennan.

Mick Austin is a freelance journalist based in the Pays-de-la-Loire. He has had his work published in several expat magazines and newspapers and has also written the Mayenne Tourist Board's only English-language brochure. He also runs a gîte business at www.gitfortwo.com.



« Regards sur l'Occupation »
Photography exhibition



Centre Régional «Résistance & Liberté»

To understand and live our freedom

Explore the history of the Resistance movements through the Second World War.

Journey to the past to get a better understanding of our current world through this interactive and unique exhibition with original photographs, clandestine newspapers, letters and videos.

Audioguides in English.

2 to 6 pm
Every afternoon *
2 € to 4 €
* closed on public holidays



Écuries du Château
Rond-point du 19 mars 1962
79100 THOUARS
05 49 66 42 99
info@crrl.fr --- www.crrl.fr

Thouars Loudun Scout & Guide Group

Thouars Loudun scout and guide group is a member of Les Scouts et Guides de France association. This is a scouting association which is attached to the catholic church but open to anyone, whatever their religious beliefs, nationality or social origin.

There are about 20 youngsters (most of whom are French but we do have some British children) in the Thouars Loudun group and we hold roughly two events per month throughout the school year, on Saturday afternoons, Sundays or weekend camps.

The group has Farfadets (6-7 year olds) with one leader, the Farfadult, and then different parents help out with the activities on a rota basis. The Louveteaux and Jeannettes are between 8 and 11, the Scouts and Guides (11-14) and the Pionniers and Caravelles (14-17). The units camp every summer.

In 2015 the Pionniers and Caravelles will be attending an international European Jamboree near Strasbourg.

From September our group needs new leaders, particularly for the Scouts and Guides unit. Training can be provided and you

can work for the BAFA (state recognised youth leaders' qualification which means you can look for paid work in out of school activity centres and holiday camps). The group can help leaders pay for their training if they sign on for 2 years and 2 camps. You need to be 17 years old to start the BAFA training.



If you know anyone who might be interested in becoming a leader or in giving a helping hand now and then, please contact us through our facebook page: www.facebook.com/sgdf.thouarsloudun?fref=ts, or come and meet us at **The DSM Trade Fair on September 20th.**

We will also be at the **Forum in the Leclerc Shopping centre in Thouars on Saturday 6th September** and at **La Foire St Michel in Thouars during the last weekend of September.** You can also phone us on **06 86 23 39 82.**

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