

Welcome On Board !



LES SALINES
Ship for an extraordinary travel

Route de l'Aubraie
85100 Les Sables D'Olonne

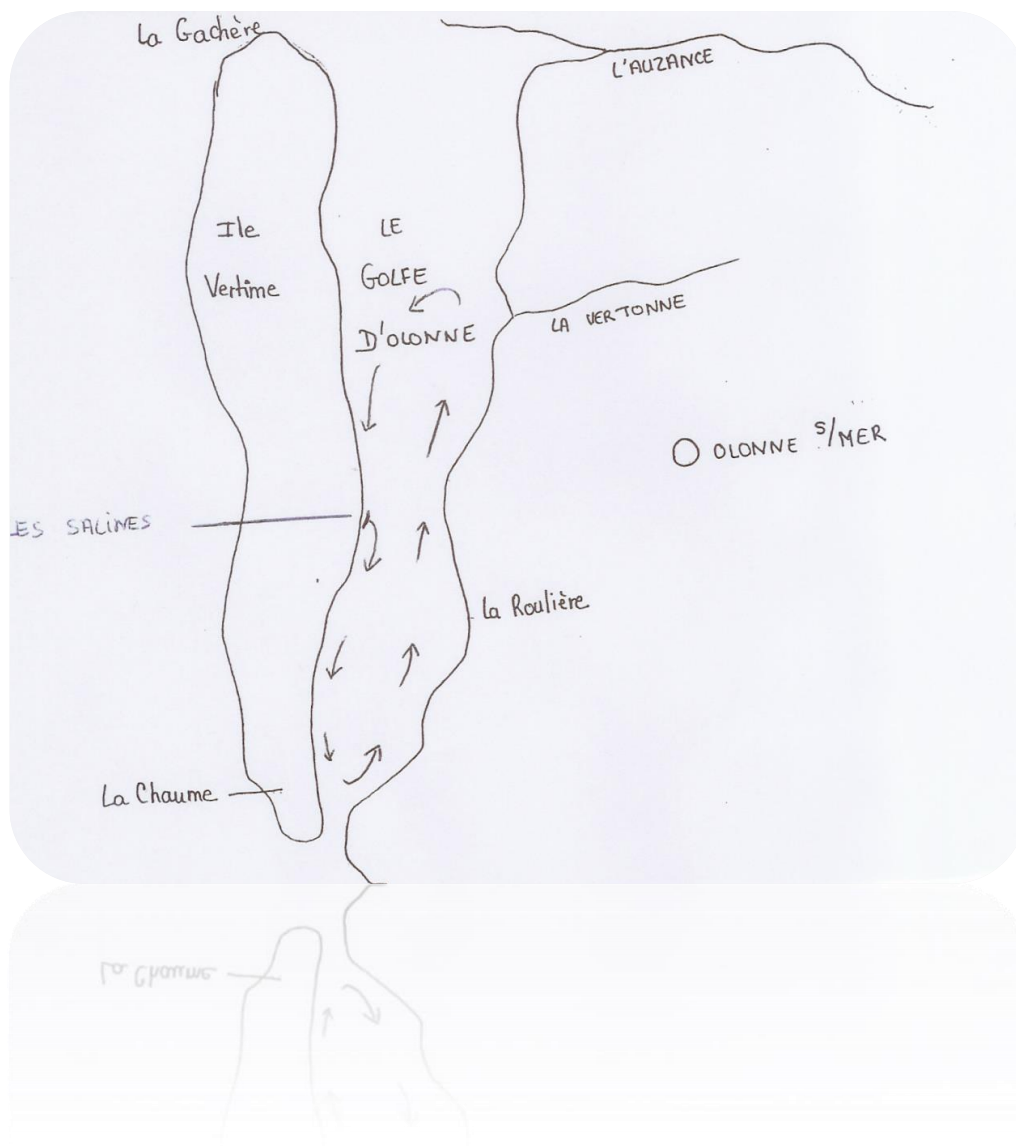
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We are on a seaway which, for many centuries, has permitted the sailing of boats up the salt marshes of the « white » region of Olonne.

We are steering towards the source of the salt water : the sea.

As in times past, it is the sea which bathes the whole of the Olonne salt marshes. In front of us is the Rocade floodgate, a passage which connects the Olonne region to the sea. Though proud of their maritime history, the people of Olonne seem today to have forgotten their salt-making past.

Here the sea becomes calmer. We are embarking on the quiet waters towards « La Route des Salines » - the salt-workers' trail.



(Beginning of speech)

Stretched out in front of us, as it has been since Roman times, is the Bay of Olonne. The inlet was protected on the left by the isle of Vertime, which sheltered the boats from the « Route de l'Étain » (the 'tin road'). The first port, Olonne sur Mer, is situated on the right, hidden deeper in the bay at the foot of Olonne hill. Trade ships and fishing boats found safe moorings close to the hamlets on the edge of these quiet waters.

As time went by, the rivers Verdonne and Auzance deposited clay sediments which partly filled in the gulf. When the tide was low, a huge area of mud could be seen. Men started to convert the marsh, winning land from the sea by building large clay dikes. Thus protected from the tides, the first salt pans were created.

Who had this idea ? The mystery remains intact... Maybe the Romans.



However, toward the year 1000 we know that monks of the Sainte Croix, of Talmont Abbey, of the Bois Grolland and of the Saint Jean d'Orbestier Abbey organised this vast hydraulic network. A new profession was born ; that of the salt-maker (le saunier).

These men were firstly farmers and, as well as their land jobs, they learnt to extract the salt from the sea. Doing a job which was peaceful and free, the salt-marsh workers lived in harmony with nature. The windy conditions and the periods of sunshine between June and September were vital for the evaporation of the sea water. This helpful climate, combined with the toughness of the people of Olonne, created the strongest local economy in the Middle Ages.

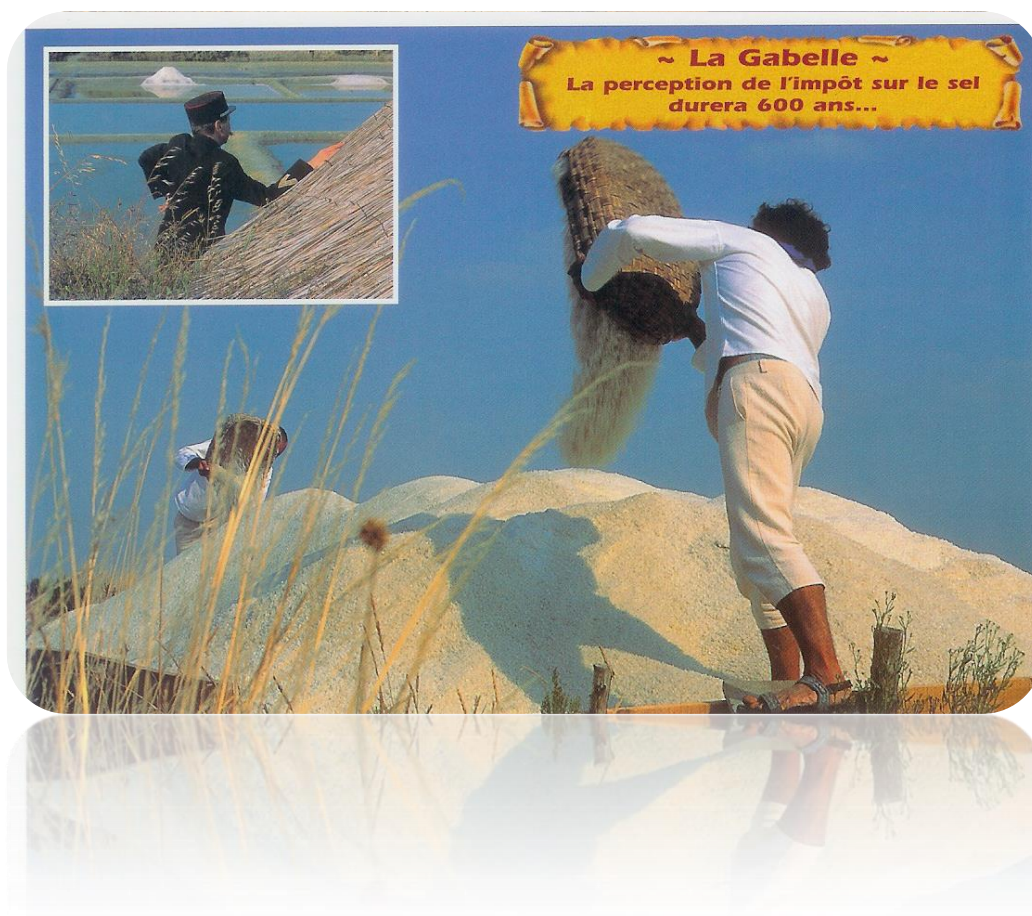


In the seventh century, trade developed around the centre of Gaul, on the old Roman routes, the salt worker's ways, and also along the river Loire, where heavy ships could come and go continuously. A little later the salt transport opened up to the North Atlantic.

Olonne supplied Ireland, Holland, Norway, and even Saint-Pierre-and-Miquelon (French islands off the coast of Newfoundland). Many trade ships would unload their ballast on arrival at les Sables d'Olonne port ; these stones were used to protect the mud barriers from the lapping of the waves in the harbour. You can still see them lining the channel.

History is all around us, within hand's reach, written in stone.

In 1340 the unpopular « gabelle », or salt tax, was introduced. The cost varied between ten and twenty times the initial price of the salt. In order to prevent smuggling, the customs administration stationed customs officers on the marshes to enforce this state monopoly. The salt smugglers were sent to slave ships, prosecuted, or killed during fights with the customs officers.



In the 17th century the port of Les Sables supplied salt for the cod-fishing fleets of several different countries. Before heading towards the fishing grounds off Newfoundland about a hundred boats would line up, hull against hull, awaiting their load of salt was necessary for the conservation of the fish they were to catch.



The former port of Rouliere, on our right, would have seen the heavy barges pass relaying the salt between the marsh and the ships. Later, its inhabitants also practised oyster farming in the basin which surrounds us.

On every side of the marsh you can see small hamlets such as la Girviere to the right, on the landward side, and l'Aubraie to the left, next to the side of Vertime. They have known the heyday of the salt industry, have seen the trade decline and almost disappear. Today the new generation of workers are devoting themselves more intensely to the first jobs of their ancestors – market gardening.

With the rising tide, the sea invades the channel which we are following (here we call it « la ch'noue »), then the water threads its way through the labyrinth of secondary canals, which we call « cordes ». They feed the salt marshes with water during the season and also bring saltwater fish. It is here that the work of the salt-maker begins as he directs the water towards the evaporation basins.

MUSIC SALINES

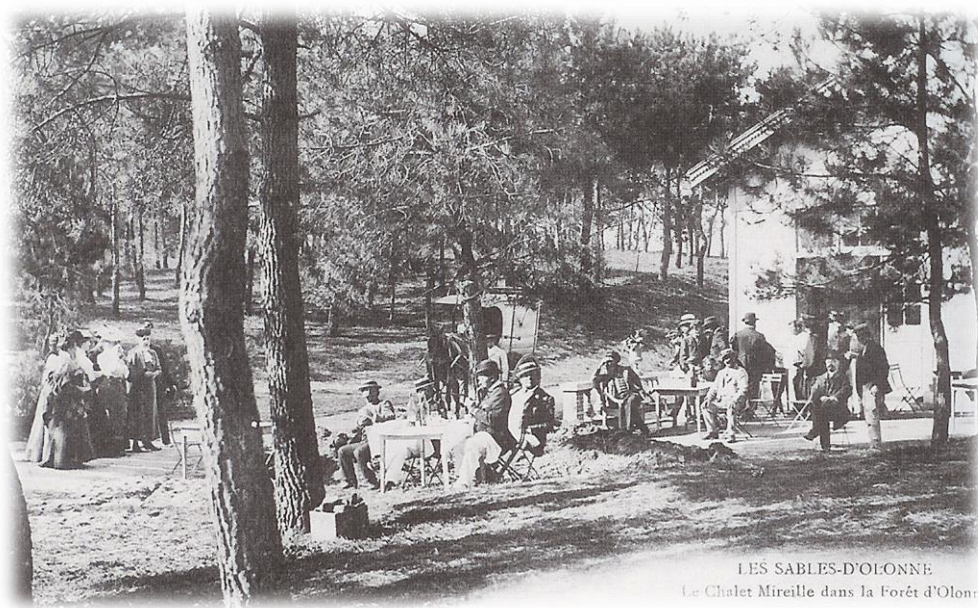
We are near the forest of Olonne, which covers two-thirds of the island of Vertime. Formely the empty dune was dotted with spindly, shallow-rooted holm-oaks. Under the strong winds, the dune itself moved in slow but relentless waves. It continued like this until the 18th century when the hamlets of Parisse and Montauban disappeared, swallowed up under the sand.

It wasn't until 1839 that the authorities undertook the plantation of maritime pines and other vegetation, including the tough and hardy marram grass, which stabilised the dune. Today, in the heart of the forest, roe deer and wild boar live in freedom.

MUSIC SALINES

In the peaceful Mireille Oasis, during the last century, stood the « Chalet Mireille », a busy open-air cafe where one could go on Sunday across the salt marshes by boat or on foot.

MUSIC SALINES



LES SABLES-D'OLONNE
Le Chalet Mireille dans la Forêt d'Olonne

The decline of the Olonne salt industry dates from the mid-19th century. In effect the development of the railways brought competition from salt-producing areas in the south of France and from salt mines, and the Olonne region was not able to compete with their industrial methods of extracting salt.

After they were abandoned, the salt marshes were changed into ponds for fish farming.

Although they did not know much about science, the men from the marshes have always known how to observe nature acutely. They have also learnt to exploit and take advantage of fish travelling upstream. In the former salt marshes they hollowed out pits – these had to be about two metres deep to avoid overheating of the water in summer and to protect the fish from freezing in winter. The fish farmers also had to clean the marsh to get rid of silt which had settled, and to remove the seaweed which invades the surface and the depths.

The Olonne marshland is a vast 1400 –hectare (3500 – acre) fish feeding ground, whose resources of plankton, shrimps and lugworms allow the fish to fatten up in these basins called « vasas ».

The fish do not reproduce in these enclosures, therefore it is necessary continuously to capture fish with traps set in the floodgates which allow in fish that have been brought up by the tides. In the winter this will be eels, in the summer it will be grey mullet, sea perch and sea bream. Several years later, the mature fish are caught, either by sluice traps or by nets.



At the foot of the banks is a typical vegetation of the salt marshes. Amongst these salt-loving plants we find the most common :

- obione, whose wisps of bluish green protect the base of the embankment.
- artemesia maritima, or sea wormwood, used by our great-grandmothers as a cure for worms.
- Salicorne, or samphire, an excellent condiment that the salt-marsh workers harvest in June and then pickle, like gherkins.
- At the top of the banks some holm-oaks and, finally, whipped by the strong sea wind, the « tamarin », or tamarisk.

MUSIC

The salt river follows its course, and after passing through the mars hit meets the sea again at le Havre de la Gachere. The canals give many opportunities for canoe outings, starting from the village of l'Aubraie, and there, in the heart of nature, you really have a feeling of being away from it all.

Lost in the marshes, on the landward side, we shall catch a glimpse of the village of Olonne sur Mer in a few moments, which was the original Roman port. It remains, today, witness to the link between two societies : that of the salt workers and that of the fishermen.



Let's now indulge in the magic of the marsh. An osprey takes flight behind a copse, showing us the beauty of its wingspan. The cries of the birds in the distance barely disturb the silence. The water laps softly. Everything is quiet here. Nature takes her time.



We are going to stop in a few moments to look at one of the last working salt pans in the Olonne region.



TO DISCOVER SALT MARSHES

The saltmarsh is composed of two parts :

- A water reserve
- In front of us, clay basins.

The salt-maker lets water in from the canal, and allows it to flow around (In the direction of the white, blue, green and red arrows) as if it is gently trickling down a series of steps. During this time the sun and the wind evaporate the water, leaving a progressively stronger concentration of salt. The increases tenfold, from 30 grams (1 ounce) per litre (i.e. sea water) to 300 grams (10.5 ounces) per litre at the point of crystallisation.

(If heavy rain falls, it dilutes the salty water and the whole process has to start again.)

The harvesting is carried out in the lowest basins, called “oeillets”. Salt first appears on the surface. This first salt is called “fleur de sel” (flower of salt) and is always very white. Next comes the grey cooking salt called “sel gris” which lies underneath, on the clay bed.

With a long-handled tool called a “simouche” the salt-maker pulls the salt on to the “maitr chemin” (the edge of the basin) where it drains during the night.

The next day it will be heaped into a “mulon”, or pyramid of salt.

Olonne salt is collected during the warm months, from June to September.

In winter the salt is stocked in shelters called “salorges”, and the salt marsh is submerged under 50 cm (20 inches) of water.



At the end of your ride



Discover the shop Salines



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