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France's answer to Center Parcs is more stylish – and better value



Just an hour from Biarritz, Moliets beach has an undiscovered, frontier-like feel due to its minimally built-up surroundings and long, sweeping expanses of sand backed by dunes CREDIT: ALAMY

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If your family loves [Center Parcs](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/family-holidays/center-parcs-woburn-forest-review-the-best-activities-for-young-children/), try this French alternative - you'll never look back, says Mark Henshall.

On the ground, those brightly coloured climbing carabiners seemed a nifty, well-designed piece of kit. High in the thick pine canopy of Landes forest, as I was about to step off a tiny wooden ledge, they felt a bit fiddly.

“Allez! Go! C’est facile!” shouted Philippe, the French instructor, from far below.

“Just do it already, dad!” bellowed my 11-year-old son, from a zip-wire in front of me. Somehow, as [Man on Wire](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/men/the-filter/11017369/Man-on-Wire-the-criminal-artist-who-walked-on-air.html) images flashed through my head, I shuffled inelegantly across the slack line to some confused, half-mumbled mantra under my breath and grabbed the tree.

The tree-top experience at the [Adrenalin Parc in Moliets](http://www.adrenalineparc.fr/parcours.php5) is one of the many family activities in the south Aquitaine which are now easily accessible, thanks to new direct flights. [British Airways](https://www.britishairways.com/travel/home/public/en_gb) flies twice weekly from Heathrow to Biarritz, while [Flybe](http://www.flybe.com/) introduced a new Southampton to Biarritz route last summer, with three flights per week.

This is in addition to existing flights to Bordeaux (and its wine museum, [Cité du Vin](http://www.laciteduvin.com/en)), just under two hours’ drive away through the majestic [Parc Natural des Landes de Gascogne](http://www.parc-landes-de-gascogne.fr/), one of the greatest expanses of forest in Western Europe and home to thousands of migratory birds.

This peaceful Atlantic coast around the small traditional village of Moliets has an undiscovered, frontier-like feel due to its minimally built-up surroundings and long, sweeping expanses of beach backed by sand dunes. Carved up by generations of farmers and foresters, the space between the woods and the long, thinly populated beaches makes for a spectacular backdrop, and a family trip that can combine both adventure and relaxation.

While not organised as a traditional enclosed holiday village, when you book a week at Moliets, you can book plenty of nearby activities through the tour operator [Summer France](https://www.summerfrance.co.uk/), making bored children an impossibility.

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The morning after playing at being Men on Wires, my son and I found ourselves on the sunny wide open beach for a surfing lesson with [Ecole de Surf du Golf](http://www.ecoledesurfdugolf.com/en/). Our enthusiastic weather-worn surf dude teacher ensured that we were all soon drenched and smiling widely as we stood up for milliseconds before losing our balance.

I never quite embodied the Zen-like “be the wave” philosophy, but all of the children in my lesson laughed as they tumbled about, their hair matted with wet sand, before racing back for more.

- [Why it's time you took your family to Center Parcs](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/family-holidays/center-parcs-woburn-forest-review-the-best-activities-for-young-children/)

This beautiful, largely empty beach was just 1km from our home for the week, the secluded self-catering [Villas La Clairière aux Chevreuils](https://www.madamevacances.com/locations/france/cote-aquitaine/moliets/villas-la-clairiere-aux-chevreuils/), a set of Centre Parcs-like modern villas set in a pine fores, around which deer scamper. Each property has a large garden, wooden terrace and private swimming pool.

Spend a week at Moliets and your family can learn to surf, walk the high wires, play tennis and explore the fabulous markets of Aquitaine
CREDIT: CREDIT: PHILIPPE ROY / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO/PHILIPPE ROY / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Nearby Vieux-Boucau has a weekly food market to pick up fresh local produce for a picnic and there are local bakeries, bars, pizzerias and cafés in Moliets - and this is where a week at Moliets really beats any other holiday activity camp my family has visited.

As well as attracting beach goers, families and birdwatchers, this is also foodie country. Armagnac is distilled from this region's wine, and local delicacies include Perigord truffles, foie gras, canelé (rum and vanilla flavoured pastries) and fresh seafood, including oysters from the Bay of Arcachon, a bit further south along the coast.



You can be a man on a wire in plenty of places - but as my son and his cousins enjoyed riding the bowls and quarter pipes at Louis B Skate Club, the adults relished being in France.

From here, there are ample day trip opportunities: the spa town of Dax (30 minutes away); Biarritz (just over an hour); more ambitious drivers might head over the Spanish border to San Sebastian (an hour and a half) or Pamplona (two hours).

You can easily book all manner of activities via Summer France, the operator - and, indeed, we spent our week going for bike rides along the many pretty cycle paths, trying our hand at golf, and hitting balls at the tennis club (grass, clay and hardcourt) - but we also spent time exploring, an activity which is too often missing from typical British holiday villages.

Ski France/Summer France is offering a seven-night stay at Villas La Clairière aux Chevreuils (sleeps eight-12 people) from August 12, from £3,909 ([madamevacances.com/en](https://www.madamevacances.com/en/)) (<https://www.madamevacances.com/en/>).

Book with another family - or two - and this is excellent value compared with British holiday village houses.

Return flights from London Gatwick to Bordeaux cost from £108 per person with EasyJet ([easyjet.com](https://www.easyjet.com/en/) (<https://www.easyjet.com/en/>)).

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