

Rochefort (and La Charente River)



Rochefort (45° 57'N 0°57'W) is south of La Rochelle in the Department of Charente Maritime, and nestles on marshes which served as a major naval dockyard site for the French (Royal) Navy dating back some 350 years. Today it is a bustling town with excellent communications and SNCF connections to other regions of France. The wet basins have been developed into today's Port de Plaisance (marina) and is accessed through a lock gate and a lifting bridge to the inner basin. These open near high water. There is one waiting pontoon immediately outside the lock gate, (dries at low tide). If you have deep-keel yacht you should take a berth on the outside of the long pontoon, in front of the hotel near the distinctive "Corderie Royale" building, some 200m downstream.

Further west on the Charente river is the Port de Commerce and small cargo ships can be seen navigating the river to and from this basin, so keep a watchful eye open both forward and aft for these ships of up to 5,000 tons. You should monitor VHF channel 12 to receive any instructions from the Pilots. Further upstream is Tonnay-Charente, with another berth for cargo ships, and just before the suspension bridge, a small pontoon is available for visitors, but there are no facilities, other than the fact that it is a stone's throw away from the High Street, with shops, bars, etc. This port has a history of shipping cognac so may appeal to some!

Rochefort Marina is well placed near the centre of town and close to restaurants, the market, shops, and visitor attractions. Rochefort is famous for the Corderie Royale where ropes were made to rig the French Navy fleet and you can watch a demonstration on how this was achieved.



The replica frigate L'Hermoine was built at Rochefort and is moored in her own locked basin where the public can visit the ship, and the exhibition of the construction. The National Maritime Museum is equally fascinating as it has an array of model boats that are exact replicas of ships that have been built at Rochefort through the centuries. Scale models of the Naval Dockyard, its defences and town are also on show as are portraits of dignitaries, ship building scenes and many artifacts.

There is a fascinating anecdote to the story of the rebuilding of the "Hermione": the original plans had been lost in a fire during the French Revolution! Ironically, in Greenwich, Great Britain, drawings for Hermione's sister ship, the Concorde, (which had been captured by the British) were found and were used to enable the rebuilding of the replica. In the spring of 1997 that the central keel of the ship was laid. 17 years later, she was afloat, and maiden voyage was in 2015.

Rochefort is accessible by navigating the 17 miles of waterway from Ile d'Aix. The river has transit beacons, (for the coasters), and are also useful for the yachtsman as it helps to keep you off the shoals of mud as you progress up stream. You should sail on the flood tide to Rochefort and arrive just before local high water when the lock gates open. As you sail up-river you will go under the 'Transporter Bridge', the last remaining metal structure of its kind in France.

The bridge is now a visitor attraction between Rochefort and Echillais and you can experience travelling across the river in a gondola. A pathway/cycle track takes you to this attraction.

Pilot books advise that you enter the river at half-tide, or just afterwards, on the flood and leave as the ebb starts to stream, as currents of 2 knots can be experienced and reach 4 knots in some stretches on spring tides.

To access Rochefort, it is advisable to position yourself so that you can arrive at High Water Rochefort. This could mean either anchoring off the Ile d'Aix, but watch out for the ebb tide as this can produce a lumpy sea when the current smacks into any westerly wind. Boyardville is a popular departure point but has an automatic lock gate which opens 2 to 3 hrs before HW, so unless you can motor at 10 to 12 knots, it is not possible to make the trip to Rochefort on the same tide! La Rochelle channel is possible in all but the biggest spring tides, as long as you keep strictly on the leading marks as you exit the main channel, until at least the "West Minimes cardinal buoy. We have managed to arrive in good time sailing from St Denis on Ile d'Oleron but had to get the 'welly-on'! In all locations you need to watch the low water level as often departure is dependent upon the sill/riverbed level.

Rochefort Marina details: VHF Channel 09, Tel +33 (0)5 46 83 99 96 or 06 86 01 64 29. The Marina is a member of the Passport Escales scheme (2 nights free); they also offer 3 nights for the price of 2; Lock gates and road bridge open a few minutes before local High Water and are operational from 6 am to 10.30 pm during the high season. All services are available except for fuel.

Tourism: See website: <https://www.rochefort-ocean.com/en/plan-your-stay/what-s-on-complete-edition>



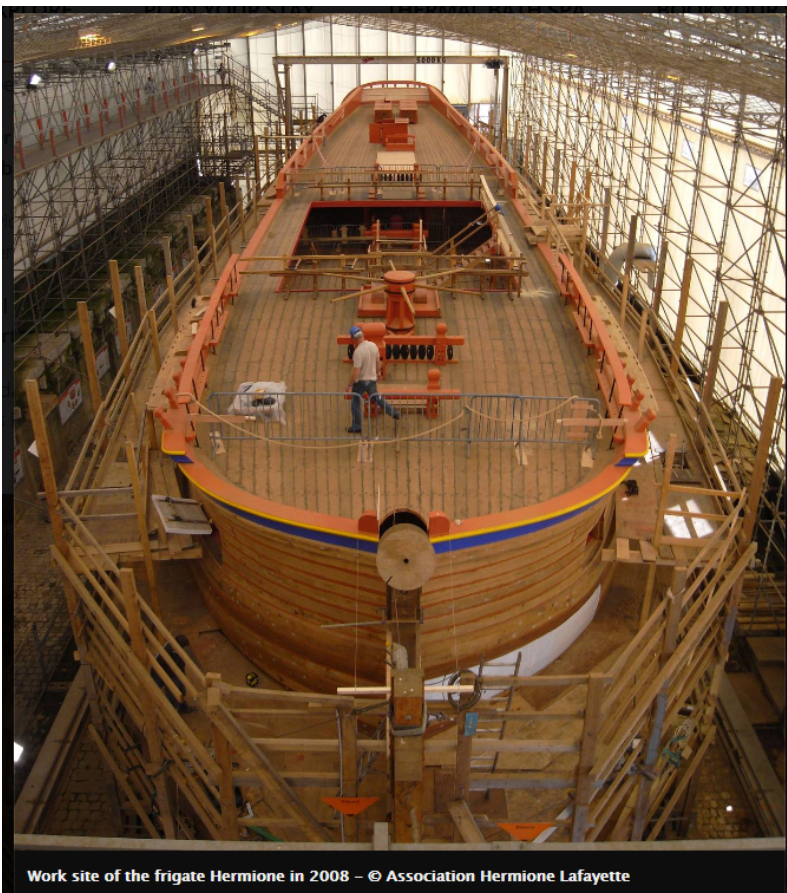
Jesters performing outside the Corderie Royale



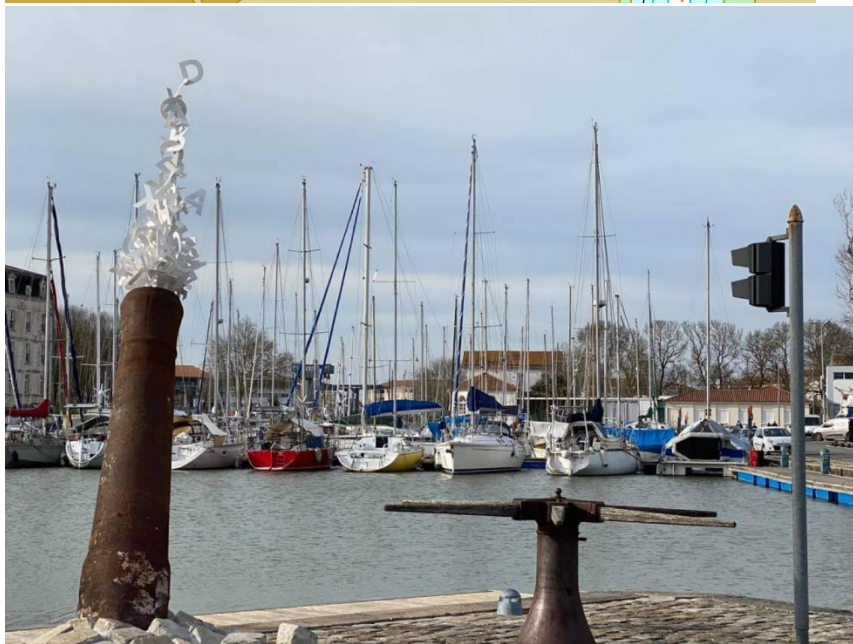
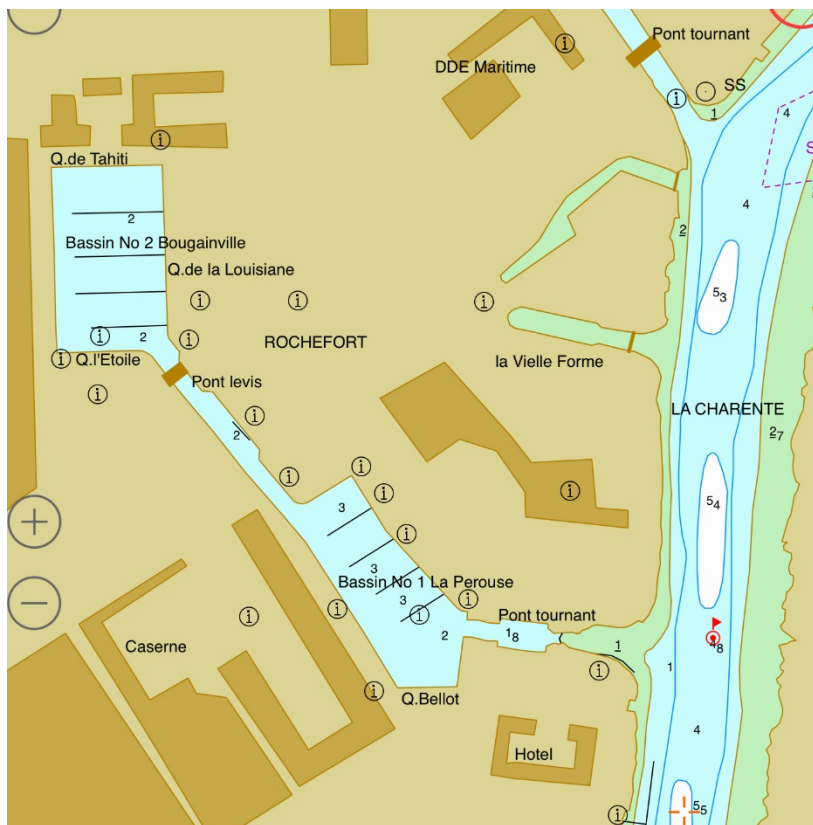
and Dignitaries (Captain Eccles) →



And more photos of the L'Herminette



Work site of the frigate Hermione in 2008 – © Association Hermione Lafayette



Canon firing poetry across the marina!

Rochefort City Centre – plan illustrating the location of the marina and attractions.

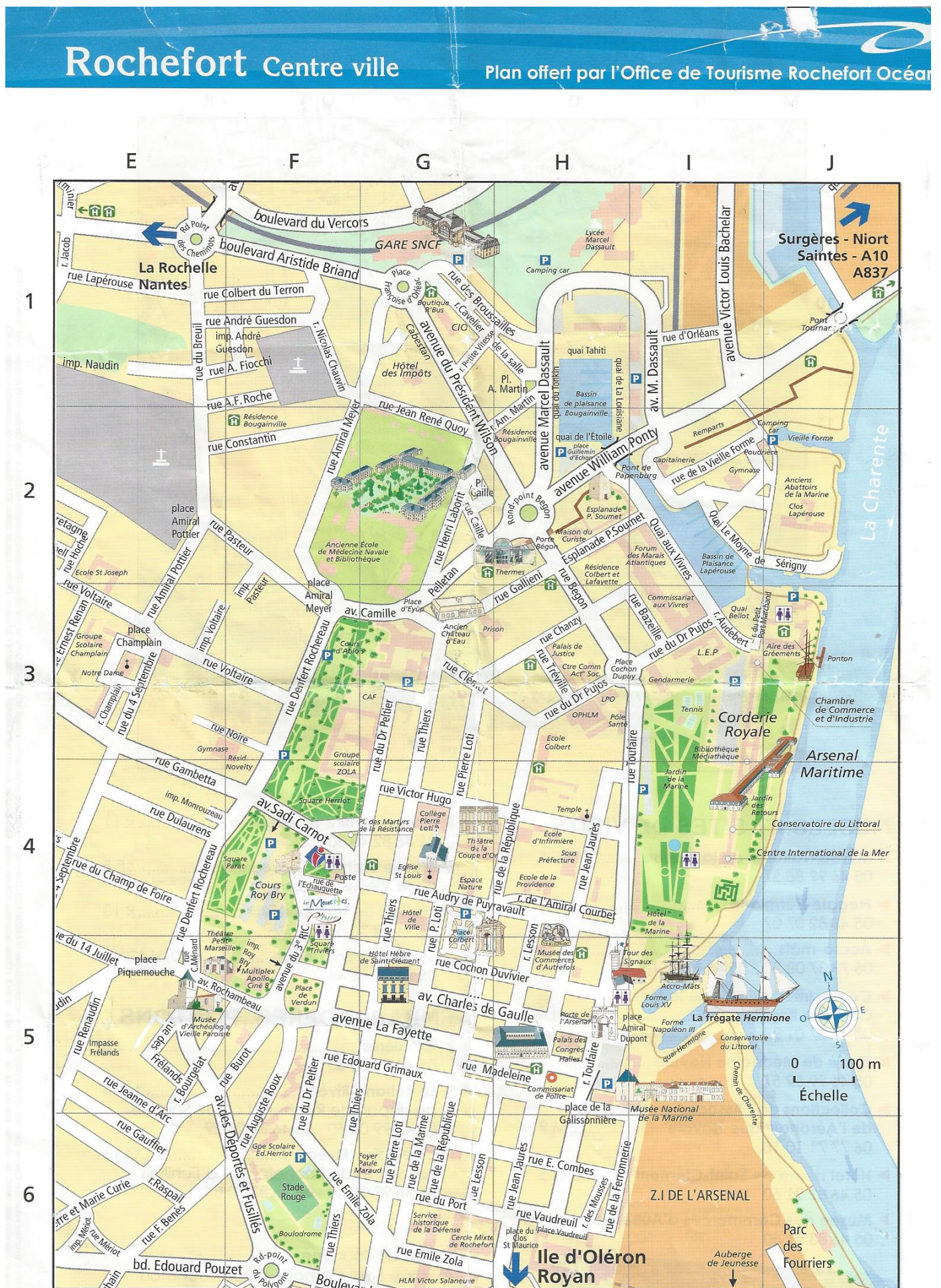


Chart of La Charente illustrating the passage to Rochefort

