

In Search of Soap

I had been meaning to visit the soap factory in Fontevraud ever since we moved to the Loire Valley. Bank Holiday Monday presented just the right context and opportunity in so far as we had run out of soap and as we were expecting guests to arrive, and as there was no chance of finding a market where we usually buy 'soaps from Provence', or even a * **pharmacie beauté** * open, the * **Savonnerie Artisanale** * 'Martin de Candre' at * **Fontévraud** * was the only conceivable place to go to find traditional hand-made soaps.

This is a wonderful, unique place filled from top to bottom with soaps of all descriptions and sizes. Soaps and essential oils and fragrances are all decked out amongst ancient soap making equipment, and within old wooden crates. The look is of an old apothecary with large jars on display filled with sumptuous looking, and pungent smelling oils, plants, petals and resins. The air is heavily scented with rose, lemon, pine, and geranium and of course * **lavande** *.

At the back is the soap factory itself where the soaps are created by hand using traditional soap making methods derived from Marseilles. These are soaps in their purest form, 100% **vegetal** with no synthetic additives used. Martin de Candre, a family run business – a Mother, a Father and now two delightful daughters/sisters - has been operational for 36 years.

The soaps were originally made for a young family, and then for the local doctors and dentists who needed to wash their hands using effective, but natural cleansers, and the word soon caught on just how wonderful and pure the soaps were. These are organic, vegetarian soaps and are especially suitable for those who have allergies.

This is an inspiring place, with its display area and a 'factory' and also the fact that there is a strong educational element that the visitor is exposed to. On the walls are large illustrations showing the development of the soap making process. When visitors arrive they are greeted with smiles and the process of soap making is described. The family clearly have a passion for soap, and all things soap related and freely give the visitor a whistle stop tour of the process of soap-making. The soaps are made using olive, copra and palm oils and natural, distilled pure essences are added. Some of the oils are sourced from France – others from abroad, but all of them are without a doubt of superb quality and smell delicious. Locally collected moss, resin and also soda, is used to set the ingredients. Ultimately the soap is packed in boxes where they are left for 8 months until they are ready for display and distribution. Our guests were treated that night to a very special kind of soap and I felt that I was beginning to make some headway in terms of becoming more 'organic' again and minimising my carbon footprint.