



SPORT

**HENRY WINTER
ROONEY HOLDS THE
KEY FOR ENGLAND**

SPORT S2&3



COMMENT

**LIZ HUNT
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The Daily Telegraph

Wednesday, April 1, 2009

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REUTERS

Rates rise cut saves £600m for small businesses

**By Rosa Prince
Political Correspondent**

ALISTAIR DARLING unexpectedly cut a proposed rise in business rates hours before it was due to come into force yesterday, saving firms a total of £600 million this year.

The Chancellor made the surprise announcement after coming under pressure from

When in France say 'Ooh, Le Loir'

There is much more to this picturesque region than its famous vineyards, says Nick Trend

THE PERFECT BREAK

Why go?

Everyone knows of La Loire – the sprawling river valley, with its historic *châteaux* that make it one of the great touring destinations of France. But very few tourists have discovered Le Loir – the region just to the north. It is named after one of the tributaries that runs into the Loire, and has its own selection of rather more modest, but just as beautiful, riverside villages and castles.

In many ways it is even more picturesque; a quiet, rolling landscape of oak and chestnut forests, apple orchards, water meadows and, on the sunnier hillsides, some of France's most northerly vineyards. The

prettiest villages are on the sinuous meanders of the Loir itself, where the local quays are lined with fishermen, and almost every bend seems to hide a water mill and an old stone weir.

As well as offering the simple, serendipitous pleasures of touring, it also works well as a family break, with lots of activities possible, including cycle paths, canoeing, riding and woodland walks.

Go soon for the apple blossom, the strawberries and the asparagus; enjoy the warm, dry summer; or wait until the autumn for the local apple festivals, fresh mushrooms and the spectacular turning colours of the woodlands.

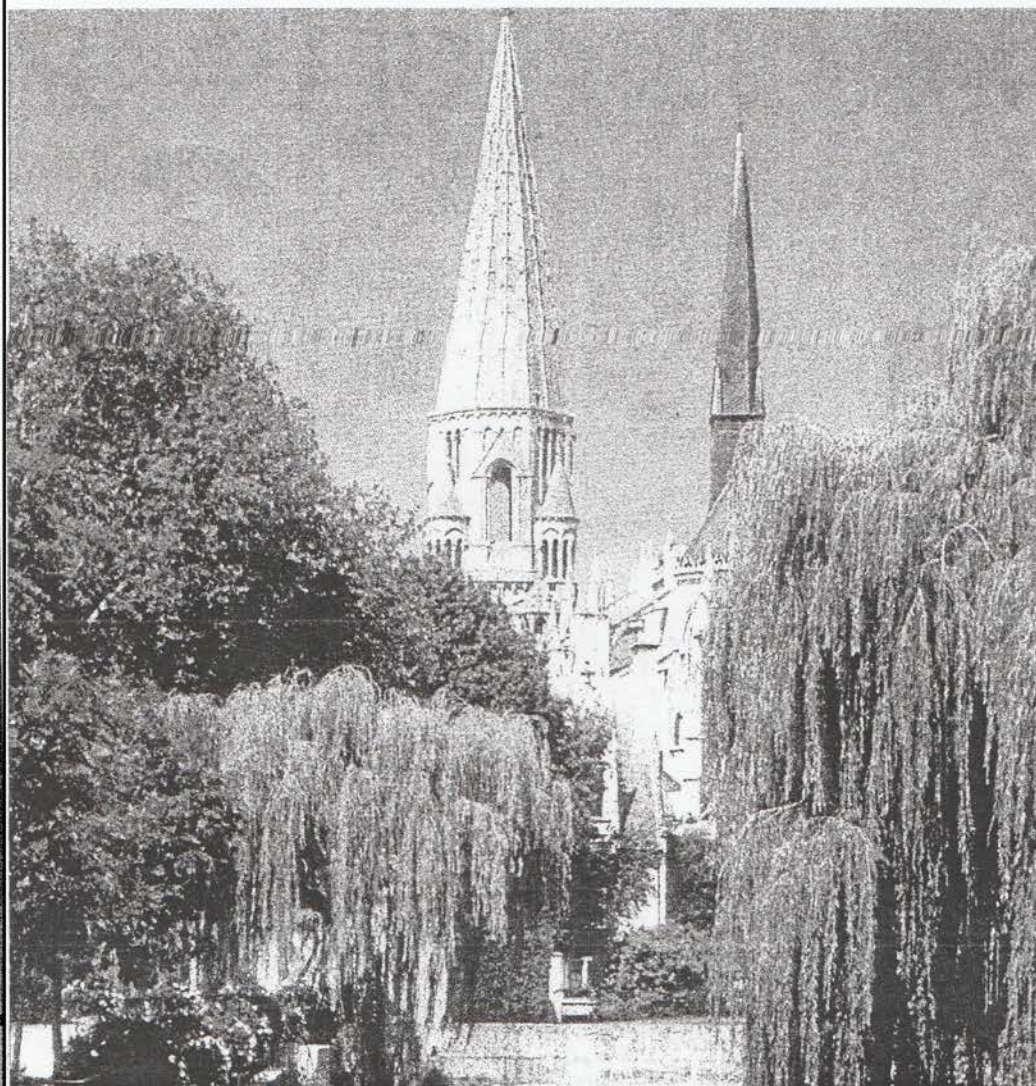
Get there...

By train. The high-speed rail link from Paris is extremely quick – about an hour to Vendome, for example. The

journey from London involves changing trains and stations in Paris, but you can still make a comfortable connection from London in less than five hours. Return fares from London to Le Mans are from £79, and from London to Vendome from £91 with Rail Europe (0844 848 4070, www.raileurope.co.uk). You can also travel out to Le Mans and back from Vendome, or vice versa, for £91. From Le Mans station you can hire a car through Holidayautos (www.holidayautos.co.uk) from about £105 for three days.

Where to stay?

The 18th-century Château de Chambiers (0033 2 41 76 0731, www.chateauchambiers.com) – in the heart of the forest of Chambiers, north-east of Angers – is still in private hands, and staying here is like being part of a relaxed country-house party. Bedrooms cost from 100



Bankside beauty: the Loir river flows through Vendome, above, which is one of the prettiest small towns in France

Subterranean accommodation Pictures of unusual cave hotels around the world telegraph.co.uk/travel

euros per night for a double, with a *table d'hôte* dinner from 30 euros a head (must be booked in advance). In La Fleche, the three-star Hôtel du Vert Galant (0033 2 43 94 0051, www.vghotel.com) is a former 18th-century coaching inn in the centre of town with comfortable doubles from 92 euros.

Spend the first day...

In and around La Fleche, a classic stone-built French market town aggrandised by a royal college that was founded by Henry IV in 1603. It is now an elite military academy whose immaculate uniformed cadets cluster on the street corners. And the Moulin de la Bruère (which is open to the public) is one of the largest working mills on the Loir.

Have dinner at...

La Fesse D'Ange (00 33 2 43 94 7360), an atmospheric restaurant on the edge of one of the market squares in La Fleche. It has an excellent menu of regional dishes at 18 or 30 euros a head (30 euros only on Friday and Saturday nights).

Spend the second day...

In and around Vendome, one of the prettiest small towns in France. The Loir river splits into several streams and gushes under bridges and through sluices at different points through the town. Among the many medieval buildings and backwaters, be sure to visit the Abbey church – an extraordinarily flamboyant gothic structure. The town museum is accessed from the cloisters alongside the church.

For more information on the Loir, visit www.vallee-du-loir.com

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