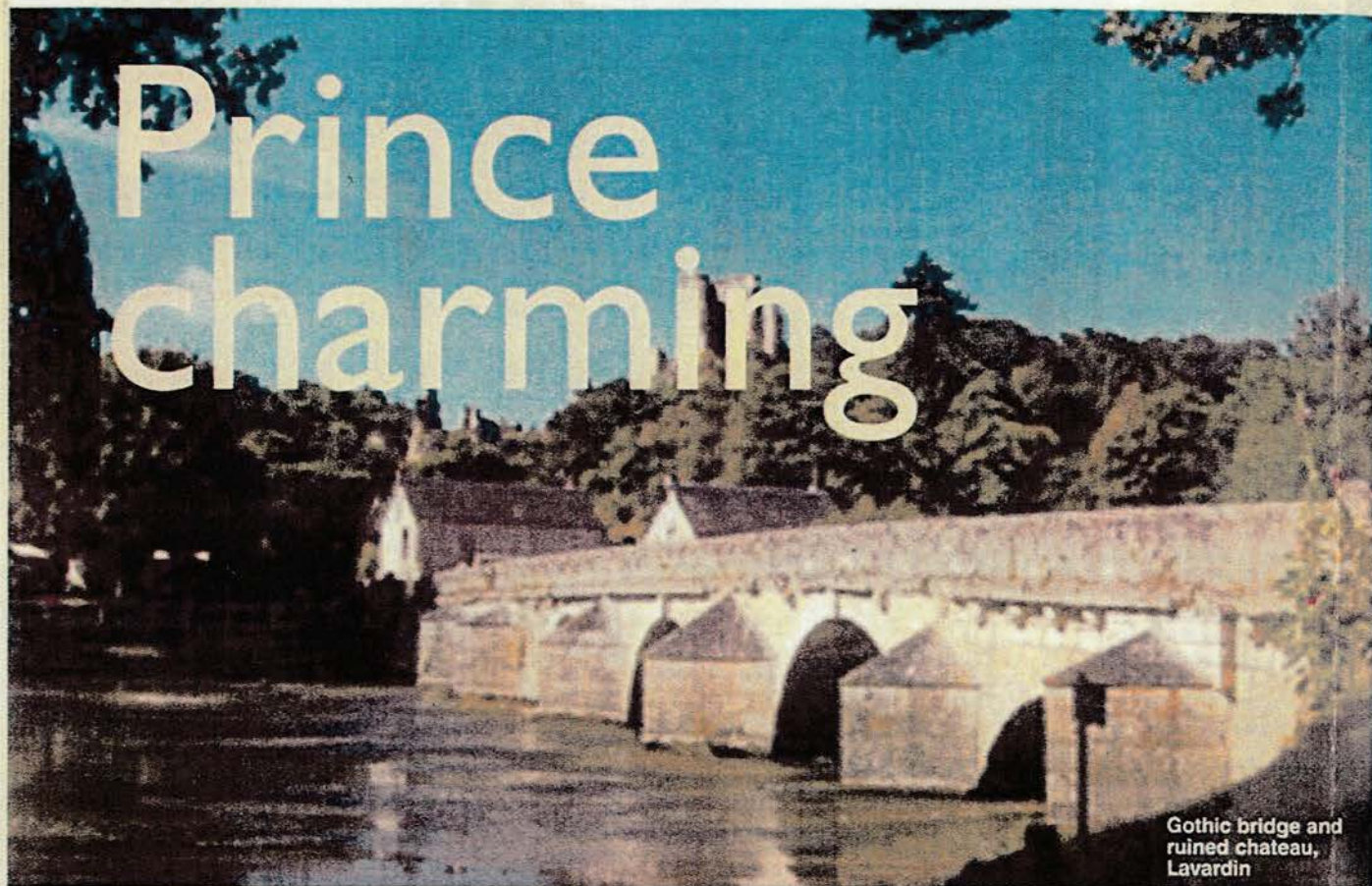


Prince charming



Gothic bridge and ruined chateau, Lavardin

Follow the course of the Loire, known as The Little Prince of Rivers, sleep in restored water mills and chateaux, dine outdoors by a lazy river, and explore history. Keith Ward reveals the "other Loire".

WHAT's in a name? Or a single letter? One of the great waterways of France is the Loire, revered for the châteaux along its verdant valley. In its 1,000-kilometre course it almost crosses this huge country, east to west. But if La Loire can claim to be the queen of French rivers, then slightly to the north of its lower reaches, so closer to the Channel ports for us, is a less known and worthy little prince — Le Loir — at 311 kilometres. Note, masculine in gender, without that feminine final "e". Rising near Chartres, it courses lazily through pretty, award-winning, flower-bedecked villages and a series of towns full of history — Vendôme, Montoire-sur-le-Loir, La Chartre-sur-le-Loir, Chateau du Loir, Le Lude, La Flèche and Durtal — before skirting Le Mans and eventually merging into the tributary complex of the grand dame Loire itself.

This little prince Loire closets its own display of "crown jewels", most of them squeezable into a four-day visit, though you may be tempted to spend longer. Véronique Richard, promotions chief of the Valley of the Loire, is defiant when people point to the famous châteaux of its sound-alike.

"Yes, they are wonderful, but they are relatively few and tend to be unfurnished. Here in the Loire our châteaux are much older — 12th and 13th century rather than 17th or 18th. If we include our manoirs and large houses, we can count about 500 'châteaux', many of them furnished and lived in, so I think more interesting."

Straddling both eras is the magnificent chateau at Le Lude. A mediaeval fortress, it was briefly occupied by the English in the 15th century before being converted into a grand residence by a French royal courtier. Lavishly maintained since, it is today the home of a Count and his family, who open its doors to the public during the summer for guided tours, music recitals and special events, including jam-making in its huge cellar kitchens.

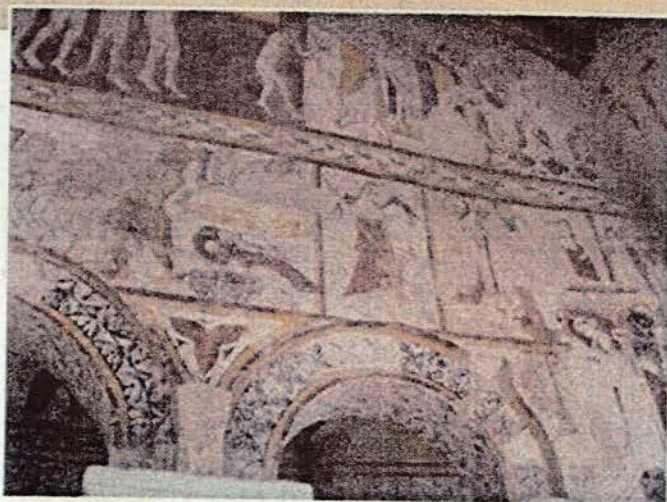
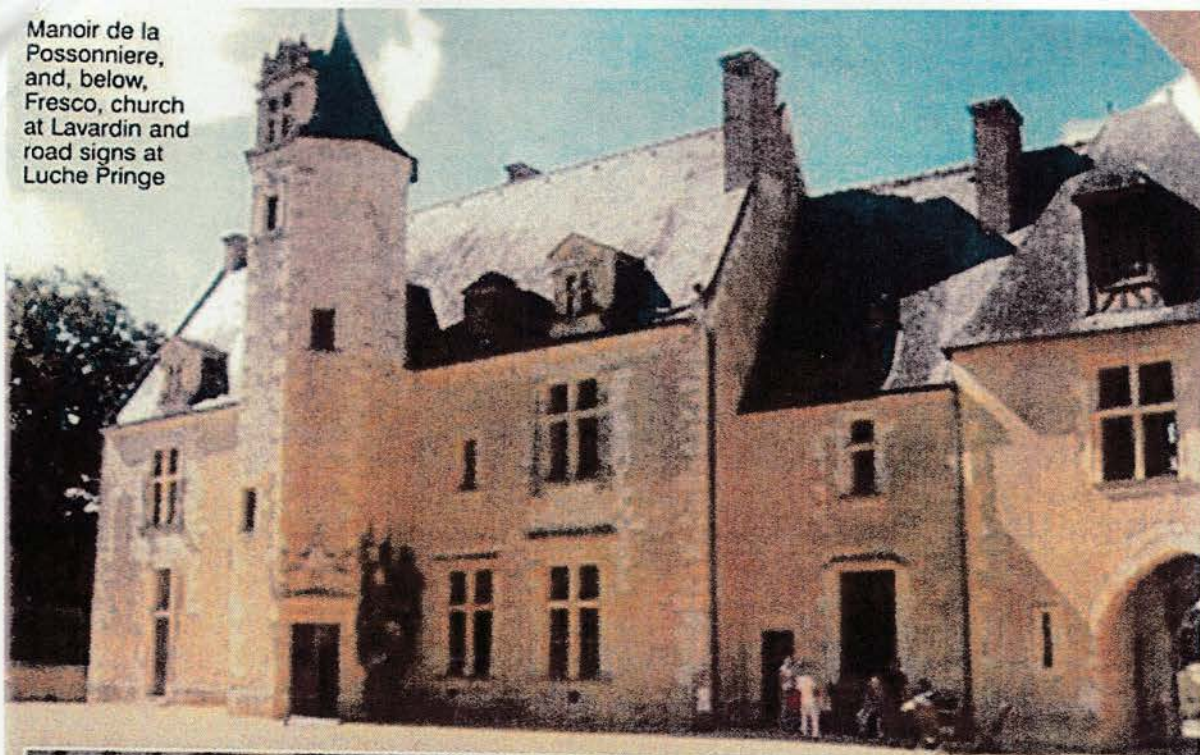
The chateau and its setting in immaculate gardens sweeping down to the Loire we admired too from the air, in a short sight-seeing flight, from as little as 20

euros per person for 15 minutes, from the nearby airfield at La Flèche (see tourism office details below). You also get a bird's eye view of the town's nationally famous zoo, although we failed to spot the latest acquisition among the 1,200 animals — rare Kruger white lions.

Our pilot, of 55 years' experience and ex-military, was Claude Beauchamps. With a mane of silver hair, splendid handlebar moustache, casually slung scarf and carefree manner, he could easily in another era have been scrambling into a Spitfire. Towering dramatically above Lavardin, dubbed one of France's most beautiful villages, is the stark silhouette of its ruined 11th century chateau. It was for a time coveted by the opposing armies of France and England, who were knocking sept's clothes out of each other for around 100 years. Richard the Lionheart having failed to take it, it was rather peevishly destroyed in the 16th century on the orders of King Henry IV after his soldiers captured it from the Catholic League. The village below is a treasure trove of history: a town hall with interiors from the 11th century, rare murals from the 12th in its church of St Genest, a bridge from the 13th and houses from the 15th.

It courses lazily through pretty, award-winning, flower-bedecked villages and a series of towns full of history

Manoir de la Possonniere, and, below, Fresco, church at Lavardin and road signs at Luche Pringe



The story goes the villagers once destroyed the bridge to foil their enemies. Unfortunately the Loir froze and the foe simply marched — or presumably skated — across the ice.

La Possonniere at Couture sur le Loir (www.pays-de-ronsard.fr) is a 15th-century, relatively plain manor house with exotic connections. It was the birthplace in 1524 of Pierre de Ronsard, chief romantic poet of the Renaissance, whose name is given famously to a rose. Only traces remain of the mediaeval living quarters but, as expected, the rose garden attached to the house is a joy for thousands of visitors.

Dating from the 15th century as a rugged fortress, the château at Bazouges sur le Loir is another lived-in castle, with comfy couches in front of huge fireplaces, whose owners open it to the public on certain days in summer. It has shaded Italianate gardens for strolling on hot days.

Homes of a different category in the region, notably at Trôo, are

caves, either natural or hewn out of the dazzlingly white "tuffeau" limestone rock of the valley sides. It ensures a constant year-round temperature for storage — of wine, for example — or human occupation.

Once simple cave dwellings for the troglodyte poor, some are now being renovated into fashionable dwellings, or gites for tourists, boasting all mod cons. There's a new breed hereabouts of international trendy troggies: New Cave Man. We came upon a Dutch owner, a trog in clogs you might say, happy to interrupt work to show us proudly around. Regular features of the banks of the Loir are the many old mills, which once took power from the river and its tributaries. Some have been converted into characterful gites and B&B's, well worth seeking out as a different place to stay.

This being France, be aware of local gastro specialities including "black fowl" capon, a traditional breed noted for its quality and

associated with La Flèche. You're on a river — look for freshwater fish such as zander, trout, pike and perch. Prytaneen chocolate, taking its name from the renowned military academy in La Flèche, is a praline-flavoured, crushed nougatine dessert. Jasnières and Coteaux du Loir wines — ranging through white, gris ("grey") and rosé to red are from local, south-facing vineyards claimed to be uniquely rich in flint clay. Taste them among other places at La Chartre sur le Loir in the cave of Jôel Gigou, a passionate producer eager to convince you of their worth. Notable local cheeses include Trefle, Petit Vendôme and Petit Trôo. Finally, point scoring: Watch out for locals seeming to claim their Loir as the longest river in France — plainly not so. What they are saying is it's the longest rivière — in French a tributary, flowing into another. A river proper is a fleuve, which by definition must end up in the sea. Like the Loire. Gettit?

Handy facts

GETTING THERE
Driving, take Brittany Ferries (www.brittany-ferries.com) from Portsmouth to Caen as the handiest landing. From there allow a drive of four hours or so to Vendôme, on the Route Nationale N10, worth exploring and a good starting point for your Loir tour. Alternatively, Vendôme is a mere 40 minutes from Paris by TGV, then hire a car.

WHERE TO STAY
Moulin Frabault (Mme Stéphanie Ginisty) in Vendôme (02 54 73 16 58; www.vendome41.com). Arty mill conversion. Doubles from 68 euros incl breakfast.

Candlelit dinner, romantically set on the riverbank, 30 euros per person excl wine. Superbly cooked and presented.

Le Grand Moulin (Mme Daniele Millet-Lecourt) at La Chartre sur Loire (02 43 44 65 78). B&B and family gites newly and tastefully converted from an 18th-century mill in the heart of the town, but secluded. Dinner nearby in Le Relais de Ronsard restaurant of the Hotel de France, a popular overnight stop for generations of Le Mans-bound British sports car drivers, whose photos adorn the bar.

Château de Chambiers (M et Mme Elie Crouan) near Durtal (02 41 76 07 31). Antiques and four-posters furnish the rooms in this comfortable 18th-century family home. Doubles from 90 euros incl breakfast. Dinner from 28 euros served by the attentive owners on the terrace.

MORE INFO
For accommodation in chateaux, caves or mills and other information local tourist offices with English-speaking staff will help: www.vallee-du-loir.com or tel from UK +33 (0)2 43 38 16 60; www.tourisme-paysflechois.fr; also the French Government Tourist Office in London (www.franceguide.com or e-mail info.uk@franceguide.com)