

Uncover another side of France

MANY moons ago, I worked as a tour guide bussing Americans around France.

Countless times I've led a morning visit around Mont Saint Michel on the Brittany coast, before making the cannonball run down to the Loire Valley in time for dinner.

We'd flash through tantalisingly pretty places like La Fleche on our way with barely time to think "that looks nice" before ploughing onto Saumur, where an ancient aggressive Virginian called Maynard once made me cry by jabbing me in the chest and growling: "Get me some service over here."

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Bridget Galton takes a trip down memory lane to explore Gallic charms and is reminded why she enjoys the getting there as much as the arriving

busy, and its charms are more compact.

If it's Chateaux you want then Le Lude, not 15 minutes from La Fleche is as good as anything on the Loire – and better than many

slumbering companion.

The town itself is small and pretty, with a mill race and lovely walks by the river bordered by a camping site and the town hall.

The old mill houses a restaurant Le Moulin des Quatre Saisons where we enjoyed our best French meal for years. There was a great children's menu of melon, fish fillet in butter sauce and ice cream with real strawberries. The amuses bouches of salmon pate and tomato consommé were gulped down by the one-year-old, and the wine list was as long as Chile offering the best of the region. A half bottle of Vincent Pinard's excellent Sancerre went a treat with my salmon and grapefruit cebiche as well as the halibut

compact 19th century Italian-style theatre, the Halle au Ble, which has been lovingly restored by the townsfolk and which still hosts a programme of plays and music.

Travelling with two small children, Chambres D'hote are a good alternative to hotel stays where you have the security dilemma of whether to leave a slumbering baby in a distant locked room.

As with British B&B's, there's a wide spectrum in quality but on the edge of town, M Bremaud and Mme Legros' 19th century pile La Douvelle was several cuts above with its heated outdoor pool (into which the one-year-old hurled himself fully clothed), large garden and elegant salon



The Chateau de Maumont, 3km outside of Angouleme.



Inside the Chateau de Maumont.

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(At Chambord, we put them on separate coaches as the political, geographical and temperamental divide between them proved unbridgeable.)

So I was more than happy to hop off the metaphorical bus to spend time in the picturesque town on our way down south to this year's holiday Gite.

France was my first taste of abroad, I've holidayed there every year since the age of 11 and I love the getting there as much as the arriving. It seems almost every stopover has a historic centre worth a stroll around, and La Fleche is no exception.

Stretching from Angers to Vendome, the Loir valley is a great halt on any north/south French journey. Some 30 miles north of the better frequented Loire, it is less expensive, less

busy, and its charms are more compact.

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La Fleche is the home town of composer Delibes, who gets a statue in the square, and to a famous school: The Prytance National Militaire. During the summer months presumably before heading off to Saint-Cyr, the upper year pupils, already with ramrod military bearing at the age of 16, will give you a tour of the chapel, grounds and long halls bearing the names of old boys; French top brass killed or honoured in centuries of wars.

There's also a beautiful,

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Best of all was M. Bremaud's passion for music and 50s Americana. Our room had a Wurlitzer (25c for three plays) a slot machine, a typewriter and Bakelite phone that recalls scenes from old film noir movies.

The upstairs guest salon has a working juke box, pool table and other memorabilia so our arrival was played out to the evocative crooning tones of Elvis, and our breakfast, thanks to M. Bremaud's skilful playing was eaten to more traditional French accordion tunes.

A dozen days later we found ourselves on the road again, after a restful time lazing by the pool in the baking southern heat at a gite 2km west of the Dordogne bastide town of Montpazier.

This time our stopover was in the Poitou-Charentes region best known for its coastal areas La Rochelle, Royan and the Ile D'Oleron.

There are many delights inland. Angouleme is another of those towns you tend to drive around to get to the motorway but



it's worth a stop for its cobbled centre with attractive squares. Around 20 minutes east is the stunning Chateau at Rochefoucauld, one of the most beautiful castles in France, where the Renaissance-style galleries and grand staircase were built by the Chatelaine from drawings by Leonardo da Vinci.

And 45km west of town are the vineyards that supply grapes for the famous brandy Cognac, produced since the 18th century via a double distillation process.

Both Cognac and Jarnac (birth and burial place of French President Francois Mitterrand) are well worth a visit and top houses such as Hennessy, Martell, Remy-Martin and Courvoisier offer excellent guided tours of their estates with obligatory tasting.

We stayed at another top notch Chambres D'Hote at the Chateau de Maumont, 3km outside of Angouleme.

Parisians Minka and Xavier Alas Luquetas have created an elegant, tasteful rural idyll with lush grounds overlooking the Touvre river.

They live in the 19th century

extension, leaving the 16th century grand rooms and suites for the guests. Minka's grandfather was a friend and collaborator of American sculptor Alexander Calder and the rooms blend antique family heirlooms with modern artworks such as her grandfather's Calder-esque mobiles.

The rooms are top notch, like a posh hotel, there is great attention to detail with luxurious smellies, baby soft towels and crispy linen. The room with a bath and four poster is favoured by honeymooners as is a split-level suite decorated in contemporary chic. Ours had adjoining rooms to stow the children separately while we luxuriated in a four poster.

Minka and Xavier have three children so the house is extremely family friendly. They supplied a high chair, feeding bottle and suitable breakfast for the baby while the five-year-old tore around the grounds. Helpfully they offered Table D'Hote, allowing us to settle down to a 30 Euros per head home-cooked four-course meal with wine (seafood salad, lamb tagine, tarte au citron and cheese) while the baby slumbered in his travel cot upstairs.

On a baking hot August evening, the meal was served on the terrace and as the dark descended and we chatted with our amiable hosts about Paris, London, moving to the country and restoring an old chateau. I was reminded why I come to France every year, and why the getting there is just as fun as the arriving.



Le Moulin des Quatre Saisons in La Fleche

FACTFILE

- ❑ Rooms at La Douvelle start at 88 Euros, bookings on www.ladouvelle.com
- ❑ For hotels, restaurants and local information on La Fleche and the area go to www.tourisme-paysflechois.fr
- ❑ Rooms at Chateau De Maumont from around 100 Euros, bookings on www.chateaudemaumont.fr
- ❑ Further details on the Poitou Charente region on www.poitou-charentes-vacances.com