

Travel



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France retains legendary chateaus, charm

Loire Valley: land of Renaissance kings

Last week Contributing Travel Editor Iris Jones last week took us to France and the Normandy Province where 40 years ago Allied forces secured a beachhead to begin a campaign that would eventually end World War II in Europe. This week Jones' travels take her to Mont St. Michel, through the Loire Valley and to Paris.

By Iris Jones
special writer

IT APPEARS at the end of the road exactly as you've seen it in the tourist magazines: a small island rising in rocks, stone walls and rooftops to the spire that pierces the Norman sky.

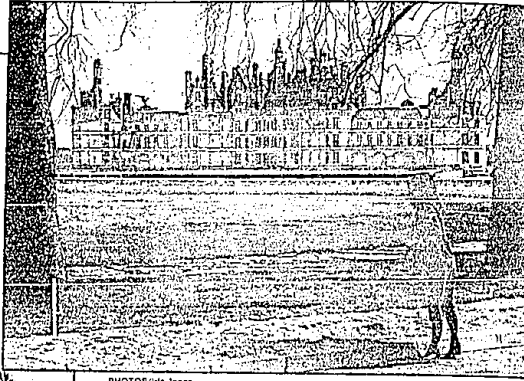
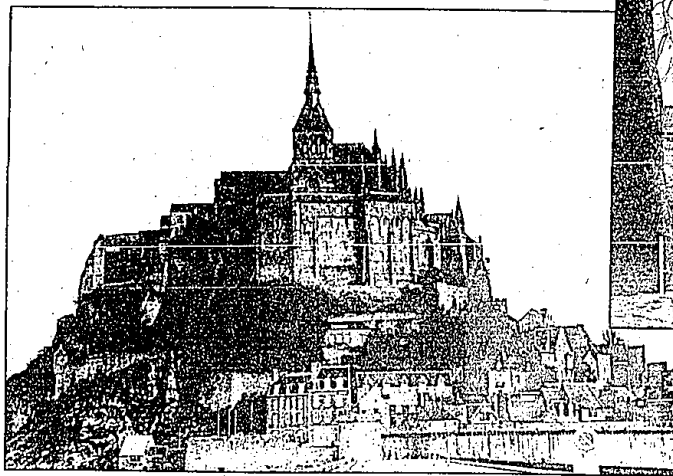
At low tide, Mont St. Michel sits in a gleam of tidal flats, boats lapped and waiting for the sea. Ancient pilgrims called it St. Michael in Peril from the Sea because so many pilgrims were drowned, or sucked into the quicksand, while wading across those tidal flats to the island.

Modern pilgrims approach it across a long causeway, on foot or in the convey of tourist buses that crowd the road in summer. Pedestrians create a traffic jam through King's Gate and up the Grand Rue — a narrow stone lane that winds up hill between fifteenth and sixteenth century buildings leaning over the street.

At street level there are restaurants, patisseries, gift shops, museums and an incredible array of tasteless souvenirs. From the ramparts, between the top of the town and the bottom of the Abbey, you can look down past a tiny walled garden to the rooftops and the tidal flats below.

HERE BETWEEN the town and the crisscrossed rooftops of the Abbey, with tourists out of my sight and sound, it is easy to imagine the drama that has been played here for the last 1,000 years.

Scene one took place in the eighth



PHOTOS/Iris Jones

The spire of Mont St. Michel pierces the sky. The dominating structure is on an island off the coast of the Normandy province in the Gulf of St. Malo. Above, the imposing Chambord chateau in the Loire Valley.

century, when the Archangel Michel told the Bishop of Avranches to found a small chapel on the island. Over the next 1,200 years, the chapel was replaced by a series of Carolingian, Romanesque and Gothic churches, each grander and higher than the last.

You can eat pastries from open windows at street level, but the specialty of the region is the omelet served at either one of the two 'original' Mere Poulard restaurants. At Les Terrasses de Poulard we see the eggs beaten to a froth, cooked on one side and folded, so that the uncooked inner froth oozes like

whipped cream onto the plate.

There are accommodations on the island or in nearby towns. We stayed immediately across the causeway in Hotel de la Digue, a simple hotel with plain, clean rooms and a sensational view of the island from its upstairs dining room.

OUR TOUR BUS leaves Mont St. Michel after lunch and begins the long afternoon ride towards Tours and the chateaus of the Loire Valley. The lush grass and pitched roofs of Normandy blend with the fenced velvet hills of Brittany. The cows pastured on the distant slopes are black and white, brown and white, against a green carpet of spring.

You can't be a tourist all the time. We nap as the bus hurtles through the spring rain, rousing only when our guide begins to talk about the royal castles ahead.

There is a great irony in the tourist industry developed among the grand chateaus of France. The aristocrats who built these beautiful castles were beheaded by the peasantry during the French Revolution, and now the descendants of the peasantry make a good living selling the life of the kings.

THE CASTLE at Le Lude, for example, was just another deserted royal house until the town people decided to convert the chateau into a tourist attraction.

They created a Son et Lumiere, a sound and light show, called Sumptuous Nights on the Banks of the Loir and now must reserve long in advance to get a seat in high season.

It is impossible to see all the chateaus in a day or two, so we are scheduled to see the medieval castle of Langeais and to visit a small winery at Vouvray before the sun goes down.

FRIDAY: LOIRE VALLEY

This is my first visit to the Loire Valley but somehow I've seen it all before. Every movie I've ever seen about the French kings and their swashbuckling royal courts were set here among the grand chateaus of the Loire.

Henry the Second married Catherine of Medici and romanced Diane de Poitiers in castles rising like Disneyland above the Loire River. Joan of Arc stormed the city of Orleans upstream. Leonardo da Vinci died a few miles away at Amboise.

That's a lot of history to carry on the current of a river winding lazily past my tour bus window in the morning mist. It's also a lot of color and pageantry to absorb for the tourist who has a limited time to visit the grand chateaus of the Loire Valley.

A tour bus is one way to see it in a hurry. We have two ways to see the chateaus, from the medieval castle of Lan-

gais near Angers to the grandiose murets of Chambord. Our home base is in the ancient city of Tours, a busy city of traffic jams and hipster skyline centrally located on the Loire.

THE BEST tour guide of the area is the Michelin guide "Chateaux of the Loire," comprehensive enough but small enough to hold in my hand.

It gives us a brief but satisfying history of the valley from the Romans who founded Tours and the Normans who invaded it to the several generations of French kings who played, hunted and conspired here. Most of the ancient cottage industries have disappeared, along with the commercial traffic on the river, but we are enjoying the fruits, vegetables and flowers that still make this the Garden of France.

My favorite chateau so far today is Chenonceaux, a sixteenth-century castle on the Cher, one of many tributaries of the Loire. Even in the heavy morning mist you can see downstream, in a sound of birds, to the graceful chateau walking in arches of stone across the water.

It is too foggy to photograph but here it is easy to imagine the time of Diane de Poitiers and Catherine de Medici, when sailboats flattered on the river and sixteenth-century dresses made colored patches in the gardens and among the trees.

CHENONCEAUX is a single castle in its own park, approached down a long avenue of trees. We approach Amboise by squeezing past morning shoppers on a busy town street.

From the ramparts we look past the chapel where da Vinci is buried, to the busy main street and the river, or over our shoulders to the King's Apartment, all that is really left of the estate.

Charles VIII was born here. The Wars of Religion culminated in the repression of the Conspiracy of Amboise here. From the rooftops we can see the life of 20th century France going on in a great bustle below.

That is one of the most interesting aspects of this area, experiencing the life of our French contemporaries in the setting of the Renaissance kings.

Sunday in Paris: what a show!

On Sunday Parisians are jammed in a queue of spring raincoats at the entrance to Angelinas, waiting to join the low roar of voices in the three colonnaded rooms. It is a Parisian experience, not only to try the coffee and cakes here on the Rue Rivoli but to watch the Parisians, fresh from the Tuilleries and the Louvre, maneuver the line.

There are at least 30 people in line. The patient wait their turn. The creative ooze forward along the edges of the crowd and into the available spaces. The bold push through, head high, saying "pardon, pardon," as if someone was in there waiting for them. They march shamelessly to one of the piazzas marble tables leaving confusion

and disbelief among those of us who are still in line.

The men and women leaning over the tables, talking animatedly, are not tourists, they are Parisians. Just as well. Most Americans would be furious by the time they braved the line, were seated knee-to-knee and served a tiny cup of black French coffee. But a wise traveler enjoys the show, and it's a great show.

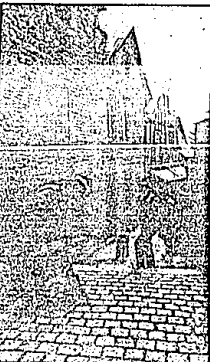
The setting is an elegant 19th-century salon with tall and mirrored walls, carved ceilings and archways leading off to other rooms. The Parisians dress in their own individualistic style, whether it's a leather jacket, a fashionable raincoat, a red jogging suit or a silk dress.

YOUNG COUPLES lean in laughter across the tables, waitresses in black uniform and white aprons weave through the crowd carrying trays of silver tea pots, wine glasses and carafes of water.

Trays of cakes trundle by, three-layer chocolate, coconut with chocolate layers top and bottom, petit fours, all of them rich and delicious.

What am I doing here on a wet spring afternoon? This is day two of an escorted bus tour of France, a dozen American travel writers being escorted around the country by Maupointure of Lawrence, Kan.

I enjoy Paris in the rain today. Tomorrow we will tour the city including Luxembourg Gardens, and Notre Dame.



Left: One of the colorful aspects of France — a resident keeping the street clean in Mont St. Michel.



At right: Chenonceaux is one of the many chateaus visitors can tour during a trip through the Loire Valley.

Escorted bus tour is good way to go

This trip through France was the first time I've ever taken an escorted tour. I traveled on a press trip with Maupointure, a tour company that was rated by the readers of Travel/Holiday Magazine (May 1984) as the number one tour company for tours outside of the United States.

Other tour companies rated highly for their tours outside the U.S. were Olson Travelworld and Westours. Tauk was given the highest rating for tours within the continental United States.

OUR ITINERARY, a slightly abbreviated version of Maupointure's "France Highlights," included: Paris, Chartres, Giverny, Reims, the beaches of Normandy,



Mont St. Michel, and the chateaus of the Loire Valley.

The logistics are standard on any Maupointure. A tour director is in charge throughout the trip, acting as guide, problem solver and friend. Expert guides join

the tour temporarily as you pass through their area. No smoking is allowed on the tour bus.

You stay in the top hotels available in an area, which may mean an elegant hotel in Paris or a tiny roadside motel beside the causeway at Mont St. Michel.

The tour starts with a reception, so that you can be introduced to your trip-mates. Not all meals are included, but those that are included offer fine food in interesting restaurants. Things are regimented so that you cover everything offered in the tour brochure (even if there is only one person).

THERE IS no eating or drinking of any kind on the tour bus. Our tour director, a

warm knowledgeable man named Maury Kilburg, insisted that passengers rotate seats on the bus daily, so that everybody got a chance at the various seat positions and so that they could get to know one another.

If those kinds of rules don't suit you, maybe you shouldn't be on a tour bus. I don't really know what the alternative tour bus styles are. If you have any travel experience on a scheduled bus tour, share your experiences with us.

Call me at 477-1488 or write to me immediately: Iris Sanderson Jones, travel editor, Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, 38251 Schoolcraft, Livonia 48150.

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