

FRANCE

Travel • Food & Wine • Culture • Holidays

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NOËL!**

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'Tis the season for Christmas markets and mugs of mulled wine

Welcome

Christmas has come early for me. The 'desk' I'm currently sitting at has just been cleared of a dinner tray, leaving a glass of wine that is now waiting to be finished.

I'm on the Eurostar on my way back from a trip to Paris, and what a thrill it is to finally be writing that. To say I was excited to be travelling to France again – and to one of my favourite cities – would be an understatement, and the experience has been even better than I dared hope it would be.

I've been reunited with an old friend yet at the same time have seen the city through new eyes – which also happened to catch sight of Joanna Lumley strolling around Montmartre. She graciously stopped to speak to us and looked as happy to be there as we were. It seems there's a Paris-based programme in the pipeline...

As we move into the festive season you'll find plenty of Christmas cheer in this month's issue, from magical

marchés de Noël to visit (p25) to drinks and nibbles to serve for an *apéro dinatoire* (p68), while our gift guide on page 76 is full of present ideas for the Francophiles in your life. Or why not treat them to a subscription to your favourite magazine? Details on page 50.

Joyeux Noël!



Vicky

Vicky Leigh,
Editor



VICTORIA GIBSON

After many memorable holidays in France – including one epic road trip – travel writer Victoria decided to make the move to the Tarn-et-Garonne area over a year ago. On page 80 she follows in the footsteps of explorer and adventurer Lamothe Cadillac.



TODD MAUER

Originally from Seattle, freelance journalist Todd Mauer lived and studied in England and Scotland before settling in the Loire Valley. Keen on cycling and history, he's ridden his bike in the tracks of Joan of Arc, Lawrence of Arabia, and on page 52, Henry II of England.



PAOLA WESTBEEK

Paola is a food, travel and wine journalist with a huge passion for all things French, spending many a blissful summer in Lot-et-Garonne. A regular contributor to our Bon Appétit section, this month Paola examines the oh-so-French tradition of the *apéro*, page 68.



FIVE MEN ON A BIKE

Cycling in the final footsteps of King Henry II of England, **Todd Mauer** embarks on a two-wheeled journey of discovery in the Pays de la Loire

When we left La Ferté-Bernard, we were five men on a bike.

By the end of our journey a few days later, only one of us would still be breathing. Of course, technically, four of us were made of plastic, but why quibble? Raided from my sons' old toy collection and now mounted on the crossbar of my touring bike were my four polymer cycling companions-in-arms: a mace-wielding figurine that would serve as Henry II of

England, his power-hungry son Prince Richard the Lionheart, the equally ambitious King Philip Augustus of France, and Robin Hood because... well, just because. With the midday sun of Sarthe beating down upon our merry crew, it was time to set off on a medieval race to the death.

Setting the scene

Our quest: to cycle in the final footsteps of Henry II, the titular subject of the Oscar-winning 1968 film *The Lion In Winter*. Henry's last days

Above: La Ferté-Bernard, Sarthe

Top right: Todd and his band of merry men

would encompass enough historical high drama to rival Shakespeare's *King Lear* – and, like *Lear*, it would all end badly for Henry. But as the five of us were about to discover, many of the towns and monuments that served as a backdrop to Henry's final act are still standing more than 800 years later, and the larger-than-life king couldn't have chosen a more scenic setting to shuffle off this mortal coil.

The story begins in La Ferté-Bernard. Today it's a pretty



Sarthe town clustered around the 15th-century Notre-Dame des Marais church, a lovely example of flamboyant Gothic architecture. The marshes referenced in the name of the church have long since been drained, but relics of the town's swampy past remain in its many canals which have earned it the epithet the 'Little Venice of the West'. Canals, medieval gatehouses, half-timbered buildings and charming boutiques all combine to make La Ferté-Bernard worth a visit today. But it was here that the clock of mortality began ticking on Henry.

After a nearly 35-year reign in which he was arguably the most powerful lord in Europe – ruling the Angevin Empire that stretched from the borders of Scotland all the way to the Pyrenees, including Ireland and most of the western half of France – Henry had reached the ripe old medieval age of 56.

His two surviving sons, the future kings Richard and John, were doing everything they could to precipitate the end of his reign. His oldest son Richard was so worried that John would be named as Henry's heir that he'd even allied himself against his father with Henry's main rival, the young King Philip of France. In June 1189 the Pope wanted a resolution to the conflict and organised a peace conference between Henry, Richard and Philip in La Ferté-Bernard.

The exact location of the conference is unknown, but was most likely the town's castle, some traces of which can still be seen on the Allée du Château near the tourist office. The conference negotiations collapsed shortly after beginning. Henry angrily refused Philip and Richard's exorbitant terms and set off in a royal huff for Le Mans, the first stop on my bike ride.



Change of pace

For me, the 55km ride between La Ferté-Bernard and Le Mans was a scenic and gentle jaunt along rural backroads. For Henry – whom historians think was slowly dying from a bleeding ulcer – the same journey would have been both physically painful and heavy with personal significance.

When the ailing Henry arrived in Le Mans, he must have felt that his life was coming full circle. He had been born in the palace of Le Mans (now its town hall) and baptised in its cathedral. According to medieval chronicler Roger of Howden, Henry loved the city 'more than all others'. Henry's parents – Geoffrey V (founder of the Plantagenet dynasty) and the Empress Matilda (William the Conqueror's granddaughter) – had married in Le Mans. Henry's father was buried there. And now, in failing health and with his empire under unprecedented assault, Henry was returning to his place of birth, unloved by his imprisoned queen Eleanor of Aquitaine, and betrayed and threatened by his own sons. Perhaps he deserved his fate, but looking down at the plastic Henry on my bike, it was hard not to feel sorry for him.

Le Mans today is of course world-famous for motor racing, but there are plenty of Plantagenet-related things to do for the more medieval-minded. Just a five-minute walk from the tourist office, you can first visit the Carré Plantagenêt museum, which contains a striking enamel effigy of Henry's father, Geoffrey, which was rescued from his burial site in the vast Le Mans Cathedral.

Cross the avenue and you can admire the Palace of the Counts of Anjou and Maine, where Henry was born in the very room which now serves as the mayor's office. Venture up the ancient steps to the left of the palace and you'll find yourself in the old town (helpfully called 'La Cité Plantagenêt') – an alluring warren of cobbled streets and half-timbered buildings that have frequently served as backdrops to films. And if you still haven't had your dose of the Plantagenets, you can also visit the beautiful Cistercian Épau Abbey just outside the city, and pay your respects to the tomb and effigy of its founder, Berengaria, Queen of England, 'Lady of Le Mans', and wife of Richard.

Even if Henry sensed that his end was nigh when he arrived ▶

Wild poppies laid out a royal red carpet for us as we coasted through the countryside

in Le Mans, he was not to be allowed to die in peace. Philip and Richard, unsatisfied with the bitter end of the failed peace conference, decided to attack. The outnumbered Henry first tried to slow down his approaching adversaries by setting fire to the city's suburbs, but the fire spread and soon engulfed the city. Henry, with 700 of his knights, was forced to flee.

At first Henry headed north towards Alençon but, perhaps due to his worsening health, he then turned towards Chinon, his forces fighting a desperate rear-guard action to slow down Philip and Richard's advancing forces. At one point, Henry's captain William Marshall – servant to five kings, and considered by some to be the greatest knight who ever lived – unhorsed Richard and could have killed him, but chose to kill his horse instead. Ultimately Henry made it to Chinon, where he stayed for two weeks, weakening by the day.

A detour in Tours

My cycle route wouldn't take in this zig-zagging part of Henry's last month, but would pick up near the city of Tours where Henry was soon forced to travel to meet his tormentors. However, in honour of the fact that Henry was being chased and quite literally running for his life, it did seem appropriate for me to pick up my pace for this part of the ride.

Once again privileging country backroads, I rode the 90km from Le Mans to Tours in one day through relatively flat farmland. Perhaps it was because I was riding with

royalty perched on my crossbar, or perhaps it was because it was mid-summer, but wild poppies laid out a royal red carpet for us as we coasted through the countryside. In Tours I was able to join the well-signposted Loire by Bike long-distance cycle route, so the rest of my ride would hardly require a map.

In Ballan-Miré, just outside of Tours, Henry met his rivals again. An unassuming street called Le Chemin de la Rencontre marks the site of the momentous meeting, which appropriately took place during a thunderstorm. It was here that Henry was given a list of the nobles who'd joined the rebellion against him, including, at the top of the list, his favourite son, John. Henry was heartbroken, and knew his time was up. The next day, on 4 July, in a medieval fortress which is now the site of the elegant Renaissance château and gardens of Villandry, Henry signed the Treaty of Colombiers, agreeing to all of Philip's terms.

By this point Henry was so weak that he was transferred back to Chinon by litter (a wheelless transport carried by people). Although I wasn't quite being transported by litter, riding along the flat Loire by Bike route is about as close to effortless cycling as one can find. The route essentially hugs the untamed but placid Loire.

In practice this means that one is spoiled for pleasant views. Look to one side and you'll see the sparkling Loire, dotted with sandy isles and green riverbanks offering shelter to birds, fluttering butterflies, and the occasional coypu. Look to the other side



Main:
Villandry and its gorgeous gardens

Above:
Fontevraud Abbey

and you'll see charmingly restored stone farmhouses, pretty medieval villages and gorgeous Renaissance châteaux.

Charmed by Chinon

The Loire by Bike route offers a direct route from the centre of France to the Atlantic coast, but it also offers short diversions to other notable sites of interest. Such as to the lovely town of Chinon, famous for its vast fortress which was one of Henry's favourite residences and a pillar of the Angevin Empire.

Crossing the bridge into



reunion in all its dysfunctional glory, is brilliantly written and contains stellar performances from Peter O'Toole and Katharine Hepburn, not to mention introducing Anthony Hopkins and a future James Bond, Timothy Dalton, in their first film roles.

For poor Henry, however, Chinon was not a beginning but an end. After a 35-year reign in which he'd dominated and outsmarted his many foes, in which his major legal reforms would provide the foundation of English Common Law, in which he'd built significant fortifications including Dover Castle, he was now a dying man at the mercy of his grasping sons. A bitter and exhausted Henry had himself carried to the castle chapel of Saint-Melaine, where, pronouncing 'the curse of God' upon his treacherous progeny, the seemingly indefatigable king finally died on 6 July. A modest plaque in the grassy courtyard marks the spot of his death.

Race to the finish

Mounting my trusty two-wheeled touring steed once more the following morning, there was just one final funereal stop left on my cycle ride. Henry is buried in the majestic and fascinating Fontevraud Abbey, a mere hour from Chinon by bike.

The well-restored abbey has long been associated with the Plantagenet dynasty. It contains the remains not only of Henry and Eleanor, but also Richard, Isabella of Angoulême (Queen of England and second wife of King John), and the hearts of both John and his son Henry III.

The principal draws to the abbey, however, remain the four polychrome effigies of Henry, Eleanor, Richard, and Isabella. Henry and Eleanor, who were believed, at first, to have harboured a genuine affection for each other before later learning to despise one another, ▶



Above left: Chinon, queen of the Loire Valley

Above right: Funerary plaque of Geoffrey Plantagenet in Le Mans

old Chinon with its beguiling half-timbered houses and tuffeau limestone mansions draped in garlands of wisteria, a cobblestone path leads visitors from the medieval intersection of le Grand Carroi up to the fortress entrance. In a Loire Valley most commonly associated with stately Renaissance châteaux, the Royal Fortress of Chinon is arguably the region's most compelling reminder that it is also graced with a rich medieval heritage.

Situated at the crossroads of the Anjou, Poitou and Touraine



regions and surrounded by the rolling vineyards made famous in the satirical tales of Rabelais, the fortress, with its vestigial air of a time-battered clifftop Camelot, dominates an escarpment overlooking the Vienne river and the well-preserved medieval town at its feet. Although the Oscar-winning film *The Lion In Winter* was actually shot in the south of France, the fortress of Chinon was the film's ostensible setting. In spite of some clumsy action scenes, the film, depicting a Plantagenet family Christmas



Above: A rest stop with a view

repose peacefully side by side suggesting a marital serenity that belies the cruel reality of their tumultuous union.

Surveying the vast royal necropolis of Fontevraud from a nearby hill, it was time for me to say goodbye to the formidable but long-suffering 'Lion In Winter'. I couldn't help but feel a tinge of sympathy for the tormented Henry, who spent his final month in considerable pain, betrayed by his sons, and with his empire under siege. Although Henry's story was

more redolent of Shakespeare's Lear, I took some solace in the Bard's words from Richard II: "Though death be poor, it ends a mortal woe". And besides, as I gave one final look back at Fontevraud from my bike, I knew the plastic Henry figurine perched on my crossbar would live on for another 800 years – as would his plastic son Richard, his plastic nemesis Philip, and the plastic 'just-tagging-along-for-the-ride' Robin Hood.

The king was dead. Long live the legend of the Lion in Winter! ♡

PHOTOS: TODD MAUER

Francofile

TOURIST INFORMATION:

tourisme-lafertebernard.fr; lemans-tourisme.com; azay-chinon-valde Loire.com
Départements: Sarthe (79), Indre-et-Loire (37)

HOW TO GET THERE

By car: If you're not keen on cycling but want to travel in Henry's footsteps, the simplest, most flexible solution would be to travel by car. Driving from Paris to La Ferté-Bernard takes about two hours on the A11 motorway.

By rail: From Paris Montparnasse, you can catch a TGV to Le Mans, and then a local train to La Ferté-Bernard. Alternatively, you can catch a Eurostar train to Lille, and then a direct TGV to Le Mans.

WHERE TO STAY

Au Jardin de Lisa

La Ferté-Bernard:
Tel: (FR) 6 88 57 13 63

aujardindelisa.fr

In the village of Cherreau, this *chambres d'hôtes* offers comfortable and spacious rooms from €79 per night. Picnic baskets can be provided for fun days out.

La Demeure de Laclais

Le Mans
Tel: (FR) 2 43 81 91 78

lademeuredelaclais.fr

This charming B&B is just opposite the cathedral where Henry's parents were married, where he was baptised, and where his father was buried.

La Commanderie de Ballan

Tours
Tel: (FR) 7 83 12 79 99

lacommanderie.biz/fr_fr

During the events of the story, King Philip Augustus of France stayed in a local Knights Templar fortress called 'La Commanderie de Ballan', now a lovely B&B.

WHERE TO EAT

La Perdrix
La Ferté-Bernard
Tel: (FR) 2 43 93 00 44

La Perdrix is a perfect choice if you like your fine, artfully presented French dining to come with just a hint of playfulness. Menus from €32.

Le Bistrot de la Vieille Porte

Le Mans
Tel: (FR) 2 43 24 03 76

Unpretentious bistro fare served with a French twist in the Cité Plantagenêt. Menus from €20.

La Part des Anges

Chinon
Tel: (FR) 2 93 99 93
Informal ambience but formally gorgeous food. Why not accompany your meal with a local Chinon from Couly-Dutheil. Menus from €30.

WHAT TO SEE

Carré Plantagenêt Museum

Le Mans
Tel: (FR) 2 43 47 46 45
lemans.fr
Explore the history of Le Mans at this fascinating museum, admission free for permanent exhibitions.

Royal Abbey of Fontevraud

fontevraud.fr
An unmissable Unesco World Heritage Site. Tickets from €11.

Château de Villandry

Villandry
Tel: (FR) 2 47 50 02 09
chateauvillandry.fr
Admission to the château and world-famous gardens €12.

Royal Fortress of Chinon

Chinon
Tel: (FR) 2 47 93 13 45
forteressechinon.fr
The Royal Fortress hosts temporary exhibitions and events throughout the year. Admission €10.50 for adults.

