





Ruins of feudal château, Lavardin



# TRAINS, TOWNS AND TROGLODYTES

A visit to Loir-et-Cher reveals a small region full of diverse history and attractions—both on and off the fast TGV track—as **PENNY PARKIN** discovers



PERCHED BESIDE THE LOIR Valley tourist train on a bridge in Varennes, we watched transfixed as the TGV Atlantique shot past underneath. Monsieur Germain, our driver, leapt down from his cab and explained that on 20 May 1990 the train had beaten the TGV record, thundering along a similar stretch of track at an astonishing 320mph. Back aboard our 1950s-style green and yellow carriage, we continued our journey at a much more sedate 20mph. Despite his elderly passengers, M Germain wasn't done with his agile theatrics. Scrambling past us to disembark at an unmanned level crossing, he proceeded to wave a red flag at the almost non-existent September traffic.

Reversing back along the track, we headed on past a fairytale landscape of verdant forests and white limestone cliffs to the sleepy town of Montoire-sur-le-Loir, which sprang to fame during World War II on 24 October 1940, thanks to a meeting between Hitler and General Pétain. The town's remote location, four-line railway station and 509-metre-long tunnel offered a number of escape routes and protection from an air attack. Montoire itself was so remote that it could easily be shut down for a day in order to pre-empt any assassination attempts on Hitler's life.

Hitler's main reason for the meeting was to secure France's co-operation in breaking English communication lines in the

Mediterranean. After failing to invade Britain, he needed access to France's considerable fleet in Africa with Pétain's consent. Despite his misgivings, Pétain agreed to the meeting because defeated France wanted to mitigate the armistice conditions signed on 22 June 1940. However, he refused to accept another war without Parliament's backing as the French people were exhausted and poor. Nevertheless, the meeting marked the beginning of collaboration between the Vichy government and Nazi Germany.

After World War II, many war films detailed the use of the French railways during the battle and the Château du Loir railway station starred in many such epics, as



our guide explained. The station itself, including various annexes, platforms and a level crossing, was used in the film *La Bataille du rail* by René Clément, which was shot in 1945 and received a Palme d'Or the following year. The station's restored swing bridge, La Rotonde, is the last swing bridge of its kind in Western France and remains at the front of the former engine depot close to the station. Neglected over time, it is in need of either renovation or retirement.

Back towards Montoire, the small town of Trôo offers some relief from the trains if you're not an enthusiast. The town itself is famous for its quirky troglodyte dwellings, which nestle inside the town's white tufa rock cliffs and peek out in neat rows linked by ramshackle paths with steep stone steps. Some of the dwellings retain their privileged cave-dweller status to this day. Renovated by enthusiasts, they are now equipped with modern comforts and have electricity and running water. If you fancy a peek inside one of the dwellings, don't miss the Cave Yuccas. Narrow and dark, it is nevertheless clean and habitable with tiny windows and low ceilings, and exudes nostalgia of bygone days.

A short distance further along the River Loir, Vendôme is known as a town of art,



NOSTALGIA: troglodyte building  
La Cave Yuccas

stunning but sinister gargoyles and offers free concerts in its old cloisters nearly every weekend in summer.

A tour of the town also offers some interesting literary landmarks. Starting in front of the rather grand town hall, the parc Ronsard pays homage to the famous 16th-century poet, dubbed 'prince of poetry' by

Oratorian College from 1807 to 1813. Folklore has it that he hated the place, was often given the strap and was once even locked up in the 15th-century turret of L'Hôtel du Bellay for his unruly behaviour—an experience later replicated in his novel *Louis Lambert*.

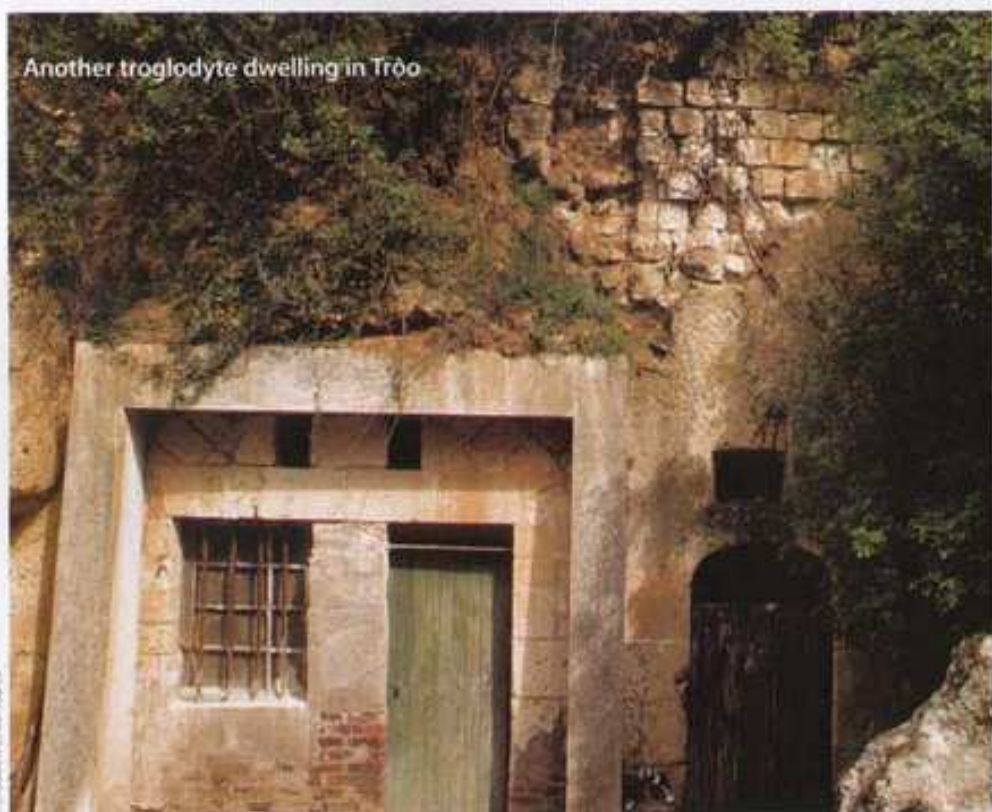
Today the town has a less disciplinarian

## The town is famous for its quirky troglodyte dwellings, which nestle inside the town's white tufa rock cliffs and peek out in neat rows

history and flowers, and was an important pilgrim stop en route to Compostela in Spain. Trinity Abbey (pictured page 62) retains the town's Gothic feel with its

the French, who apparently owned the Renaissance manor house at the entrance to the park. The novelist Honoré de Balzac is said to have attended Vendôme's

feel. Despite Balzac's poor performance at school, modern legend has it that if you kiss the cheek of his statue in the town square you will pass your exam. In July and



Another troglodyte dwelling in Trôo



Fresco at St-Genest  
Lavardin



**RELAX BY THE RIVER: the  
Loir at Vendôme**




August you can also escape any scholarly overtones with a relaxed row along the river under all the old bridges.

The nearby village of Lavardin is another delight—it is one of the *plus beaux villages* de France. Its Gothic, fairytale castle sits atop an imposing rock outcrop above a cluster of picturesque houses and a Gothic bridge straddling the lazy Loir. Despite the castle's prominence and original four-hectare expanse, only the keep and part of its ramparts remain owing to its destruction by Henri IV. The village's steep walkway up to the viewpoint *La Rotte aux Biques* as expected provides a great vantage point over the town and leads past a number of inhabited cave dwellings, one of which was for sale as we wandered past. At the bottom of the hill meanwhile, the early Romanesque church of St-Genest, famous for its 12th- and 13th-century frescoes, is also well worth a visit.

When you get tired of walking, you'll

be grateful for a rest at Le Relais d'Antanasian pub or Le Caveau restaurant in the village square. The local Coteaux du Vendomois wine is a great accompaniment to any meal and characteristic of the region's northern climate. Keen to taste more, we headed to M Jumert's cellars in the village of Villiers-sur-Loir where we met with a curious operation comprising a ladder, grape skins and what looked like a wine fountain, although we were hastily reassured that this contraption was all part of the process. The vineyards face south and are grown on a clay and flint soil. Apparently 2003 was an excellent year yielding small, high quality grapes as in 1947 and in 1843.

Boarding the TGV in Tours on our journey back to Paris, we felt we'd come full circle and learnt a lot about the tranquil charms of a small, authentic region packed with trains, history and some strange but charming visitor attractions. 

**FRANCOFIE**

**HOW TO GET THERE**

**By train:** Eurostar from Waterloo to Paris, then TGV from Paris Montparnasse to Vendôme. Rail Europe reservations: Tel: 08705 848 848 or visit [www.raileurope.co.uk](http://www.raileurope.co.uk)

**WHERE TO STAY**

**Hôtel le Capricorne**  
8 bd de Trémault, 41100 Vendôme  
Tel: (Fr) 2 54 80 27 00  
[capricorne41@hotmail.com](mailto:capricorne41@hotmail.com)  
**L'Hôtel de France**  
20 place de la République  
72340 La Chartre-sur-le-Loir  
Tel: (Fr) 2 43 44 40 16  
[hoteldefrance@worldonline.fr](mailto:hoteldefrance@worldonline.fr)

**WHERE TO EAT**

**M et Mme Maubouet**  
Auberge de la Madeleine  
6 place de la Madeleine  
41100 Vendôme  
Tel: (Fr) 2 54 77 20 79  
**Hôtel du Pont**  
15 rue du Maréchal de Rochambeau  
41100 Thoré-la-Rochette  
Tel: (Fr) 2 54 72 80 62  
**Le Caveau**  
10 rue Vaux Boyers, 41800 Lavardin  
Tel: (Fr) 2 54 85 31 11  
**Le Védauais**  
Place de la Liberté, 72500 Vaas  
Tel: (Fr) 2 43 46 01 41

**CONTACTS**

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[www.loir-valley.com](http://www.loir-valley.com)  
**Vendôme Tourist Office**  
47 rue Poterie  
41100 Vendôme  
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Monsieur Germain, La Mairie,  
Tel: (Fr) 2 54 72 80 82  
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**Château du Loir Station**  
Monsieur Régis Hamel  
L'Association pour l'Animation  
Ferroviaire en Vallée Du Loir  
Tel: (Fr) 2 43 44 00 00  
**Trôo Exhibition Cave**  
Les Amis de Trôo, 41800 Trôo  
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**Wine Cellar**  
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