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To the manor born

If you fancy a short break playing a *comte* or *comtesse*, then book yourself into one of the splendid properties that belong to the *Bienvenue au Château* network, says Annaliza Davis.



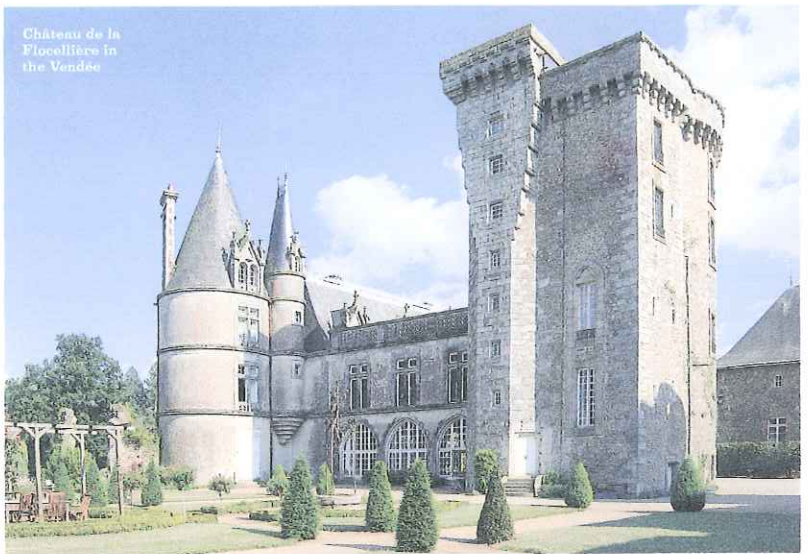
Château de Saint-Maclou, Normandy

The phrase 'French *château*' conjures up images of turrets, grand entrances and ornate gardens, but for the French, a *château* includes not just stereotypical fairytale castles, but also square medieval forts and even monasteries and manors. Every region has its own statuesque stately home and over the centuries these properties have passed through the generations, but unfortunately, often crumbling through want of investment, or sold on and commercialised but rarely managed to remain as family seats.

Some do get state funding and grants for major works but to do so a *château* has to be selected as a *monument historique*. Applicants are assessed on

their cultural and historical importance by a committee and then approved by the Minister for Culture. However, not many are selected and even for those that do qualify, being classed as a *monument historique* requires a *château* to be open to the public for a minimum of 52 days per year, which is not always practical without a team of staff, which is costly.

This is where 'Bienvenue au Château' comes in. Set up in 1990 in western France, and supported by five regional tourist boards, the non-profit association has the goal of encouraging owners of private *châteaux* of all styles to offer accommodation in order to support and therefore protect their heritage, whilst simultaneously sharing their passion for their



Château de la Flocellière in the Vendée

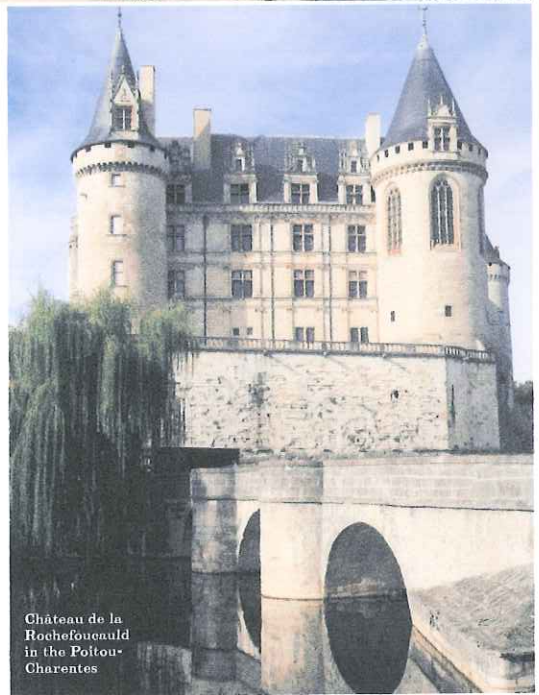
homes by receiving visitors rather as they would receive house-guests. Twenty years on the network now includes over 140 properties with owners and interiors as distinctive as the buildings themselves. Its member properties include the birthplace of celebrated French writer, Guy de Maupassant (Château de Miromesnil), the former fortress of Henry Plantagenet (Château de la Roche Martel), the Breton retreat of Balzac and Victor Hugo (Château de la Ballue), and Château de La Rochefoucauld, where the La Rochefoucauld family, one of France's oldest noble lines, has continued to live for 1,000 years.

Seventeenth century Château de Saint-Maclou in Normandy has a remarkable history of embellished inheritance. The 11th century Château de la Flocellière in the Vendée was partially burned during the Revolution, but is once again a grand residence.

There are fairytale turrets and sturdy forts; private shady gardens and vast ornamental parklands; there are intimate chambers and echoing state apartments, but they all share historic roots that are compelling.

'This is our family heritage and we have a duty to pass it on,' explains Loïc de Ternay, the current Comte de Ternay whose Château de Ternay in the Poitou-Charentes, with its standing stones and Gothic chapel, has been in the family since 1606. 'We are links in a chain, even in a larger sense, of chainmail, stretching back over the last four centuries here and we feel honour-bound to protect it and pass it on, not to be the link that breaks if at all possible.'

'Being a *comte* and *comtesse* doesn't alter in any way our pleasure at receiving visitors. If we thought that welcoming people into our home was any sort of chore we would certainly have found other ways of conserving our heritage. We receive people from very diverse social and geographic backgrounds. The link that unites us is not money but rather an interest in history or even *petites histoires*



Château de La Rochefoucauld in the Poitou-Charentes

– stories and legends – as well as a love of these old stones and a curiosity about human interaction.'

To belong to the network, members pay an annual fee of around €500 per which includes all the advertising, publicity and the prestige that comes with this international brand. For guests, one night's stay costs from €85, depending on the *château*, and the network signifies quality, comfort and history, but also something more.

The key to the network's success is that each property is first and foremost a family home, which means plenty of

personal touches. Guests are greeted by the owners who will always make time to share a drink or even a meal so guests feel part of a household rather than the latest in a long list of clients.

'We aim to provide high quality sites and accommodation, but above all to welcome our guests as friends,' says President Patrice Vignial, a *comte* who is also the owner of Château de la Flocellière near Le Pay du Fou in the Vendée. 'One British visitor noted in our guest book that they came as guests and left as friends – that is precisely what we hope for.'



Left: Château de la Ballue, Brittany. Right: Château de Ternay in the Poitou-Charentes





MANOIR DE KERLEDAN, BRITTANY

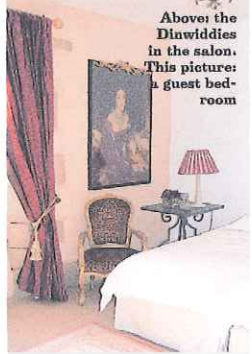
Tucked away in the charmingly understated town of Carhaix-Plouguer in western Brittany is Manoir de Kerledan. It is one of the more recent additions to the Bienvenue au Château network and is also one of its most modest. No fairytale turrets here, but a lovingly restored building that was so derelict when its current owners, Britons Peter and Penny Dinwiddie, found it, that many of the locals had forgotten that there

was ever a building here, let alone one with such beauty and history. 'The agent showed us this wilderness of weeds with a half-hidden house,' says Penny. 'The 'moment' if you will, was walking into that main room and just seeing the space. Strangely, it had real atmosphere straight away, it felt very welcoming.'

The manor dates from at least 1540 according to local records, although architectural details such as the entrance and stone carvings date it some 50 years previously. As you explore, you notice the remains of guard houses flanking the old approach, and different types of stone bearing witness to bygone eras.

After two years of hand-clearing rubble and thorns whilst simultaneously renovating the shell of a building, Peter, formerly a thatcher, and Penny, now have a home that is restored and stands proudly in a setting of formal Italianate gardens where aperitifs do not look out of place.

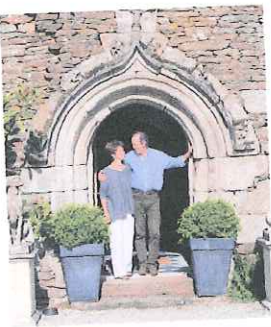
The couple were initially sceptical about being accepted into such a prestigious group, but are delighted to have completed their first season as fully-fledged members. 'Looking at the guidebook or website you'll see that our manor is dwarfed alongside some of the others, which are



Above: the Dinwiddies in the salon. This picture: a guest bedroom

immense stately homes and castles,' says Penny, 'but we are all deeply proud and fond of our homes and we want to share them with others.'

Indoors, the bedrooms are spacious but not austere; Penny's eclectic collection of period furnishings from both sides of the channel add grandeur, while canvases painted by her son remind you that you are spending time in a family home, not just a stately one. 'I've always loved this sort of décor and get inspiration from magazines and



CHÂTEAU DU MESNIL GEOFFROY, NORMANDY

Staying with a prince and princess in a Normandy château sounds very grand, however, just a brief conversation with the Princess Anne-Marie Kayali and it's easy to forget her title. And she's not one to stand back and let others do the work - breakfast includes a range of home-made preserves made by her own fair hands to 18th century family recipes.

In fact, Princess Anne-Marie was once a marketing professional working in Paris but then married her very own prince after falling in love with a cardiologist of French-Syrian descent and a cousin to the Aga Khan.

Until they bought Château de Mesnil Geoffroy, they lived in a château in the Loire Valley. 'But increasingly, we wanted to be closer to our children and grandchildren in Paris,' says Princess Kayali. 'Twenty years ago we found Mesnil-Geoffroy and it was in a terrible state but essentially intact, nothing had been changed for 250 years. It was like history preserved and we were smitten. We have always adored the 18th century, its style and its architecture.'

Château de Mesnil Geoffroy, was originally the property of Prince

Montmorency Luxembourg, cousin of Louis XVI, and is classed as an historic monument, and much-admired for its style. Moreover, its ten hectares include the biggest rose garden in Normandy with over 2,000 different varieties, collected internationally by the prince.

The château has been part of the Bienvenue au Château network for 14 years. 'To be completely frank, it was partly for financial reasons, to help with the restoration and daily maintenance of the property,' says the Princess. 'But it's also very much about engaging with others. The guests who love these properties are, of course, history-lovers, people with an interest in meeting the owners whose everyday life goes on in these walls, and people who appreciate the period furnishings and the sense of being transported to another era. Mesnil Geoffroy has such a deep sense of history, a truly French soul that is wonderful to be able to share, as you would with any interest you feel strongly about.'

The château has a secret corridor hidden behind a panel in the library, and in one of the private rooms there's a priest's hole in which persecuted individuals



This picture and below: the elegance of Château du Mesnil Geoffroy

doubtless hid in fear during the Revolution. 'Thankfully, this building was never ransacked during the Revolution as the owners apparently had never provoked local anger,' says the Princess. 'During the Second World



War the Germans were based here, but it was a little too far from major cities to be attacked and the Germans themselves left everything intact as did the Americans after that.'

The château is said to have a resident ghost. 'It's a funny story, really,' begins Princess Kayali, a smile twitching her lips. 'About 13 years ago, a couple stayed in the room just above Montmorency's bedroom and the next morning at breakfast they told us they'd met our ghost. We accepted the story graciously but then the following year, another couple experienced the same thing, saying the ghost was in 18th century dress and was delighted we'd brought life back to the château. In all, it's happened three times. Personally, I'm not completely convinced but if it is true, at least he seems a friendly presence!'

books on interior design,' says Penny. 'Some pieces I've been hoarding for years, just waiting for the right place.' The couple first opened their doors to guests in spring 2004 and today they - including children Joe, 23, and Hannah, 21, when they are home - live in the attic rooms, while the more elegant rooms are given over to guests. 'I suppose we are up in the servants' quarters, but I prefer to think of it as the eagle's nest, up with the moon and stars and the owls hooting,' says Penny. 'It might sound corny but it feels like an honour for us to be here as custodians for a house as lovely as this. It's a piece of living history.'

'Life is very short when it comes down to it, and a house is usually only a small part of one's life but I feel very attached to this place,' adds Peter. 'Even if all we do is stop it from falling to bits and help it to continue for coming generations that will be a great achievement.'

The Dinwiddies have no staff and with guests potentially all year round theirs is hardly a regal lifestyle. It's a wonder that they even keep up with the organic cottage garden let alone maintenance, *parterres* and building projects for the next season. 'It's certainly round-the-clock, you need to love it,' admits Penny. 'My quiet time of the day is to take the dogs out for a stroll around the gardens in the morning before serving breakfast, mentally noting any urgent garden jobs or if there are certain vegetables ready for dinner, even raspberries I can add to the breakfast table; it's a wonderfully peaceful garden.'

And this is one of the great delights of staying in a stately home: there is space for everybody. Even in the supposedly small-scale Manoir de Kerledan, there are sun-loungers with views of the croquet lawns, private seats shaded by fruit trees and of course, soft settees with plump cushions to curl up in and flickering fires in winter. *Parfait*.

In the Middle Ages, the meat of the boar was a recognised part of a noble Christmas feast, and Norman lords would demand its inclusion. The boar's head would be brought into the banquetting hall with great ceremony, roasted and decorated with bay and rosemary and preceded by someone carrying the falchion that had killed it. There were songs to accompany the event, such as the one that was written down in the late 1400s and begins:

Caput apri deferro, Redens laude Domino. (The head of the boar I bring in, Giving praise to God.)

The cheeks would be sliced off and given to honoured guests, usually accompanied by 'a messe of mustard'. The sprigs of herbs would also be distributed as marks of the lord's favour.

These days the boar's head is rarely served whole; a terrine is more usually made from it. Boar meat is much more readily available in France. However, it is as well to have some idea of the age of the beast and the likely quality of the meat. It can be roasted like pork if young and tender, but an older animal can be rather tough and will need to be marinated or braised to make it palatable. The flavour is, not surprisingly, pork-like but with a gamey tang to it.

Farmers blame wild boar for damage to crops, but this is often unfair. Anyway, the government will compensate for damage that can unequivocally be attributed to a *sanglier*.

* Bienvenue au château extends from Anjou through Berry, Bretagne, côte Atlantique, côte Manche, Maine, Normandy, Poitou-Charentes, Touraine, the Loire Valley and the Vendée. Visit www.bienvenueauchateau.com where you will find links to the individual websites of all properties in the network.

Wild France

This month Mike George looks at the hunter's favourite - wild boar



Come autumn and winter weekends, the air rings out to the sound of gunfire as hunters head out for the day. Many will be hunting *sanglier* or wild boar.

This substantial animal is probably the most hunted mammal in France. It is legendary for its ferocity and strength, and is well-armed with sharp tusks several inches long, and sharp hooves. A large boar - they weigh about 200kg, with some as heavy as 300kg - is more than capable of severely injuring and even killing a man. Many a hunter will, with little prompting, roll up his trouser-leg to show the scar he received from the tusk of a *sanglier*.

In fact, the creatures are normally shy and retiring, and will only attack if cornered or, if female, to defend young. One can hardly blame them.

Wild boar tend to live in dense forest or undergrowth, and are mainly nocturnal. They have poor eyesight, but a highly developed sense of both smell and hearing. Their tusks, as well as being used in defence, are used for digging the soil - their diet is mainly roots and fungi, as well as worms and insects found in it. They also eat berries and fruit. Acorns are a favourite.

The females give birth to a litter of between four to seven piglets, and while older male boars are often solitary, females and younger animals live in close-knit family groups. They live to about 12 years of age.

In the days before firearms, a boar-hunt was an even more perilous undertaking than it is today. The main weapon available was the spear, which would be held, not thrown. A boar-spear had to have a cross-piece fitted some half a metre above the tip, as a boar is strong enough to force its way up the spear-shaft and attack the person holding it. To get within spear-range of the boar required the use of hounds who would corner the boar and encircle it. They would then give a long howl or 'bay' to alert the hunters, hence the term, 'to bring to bay' (*mettre aux abois*). After the spears had done their work, the *coup de grace* was usually given with a falchion, or stout curved sword.

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