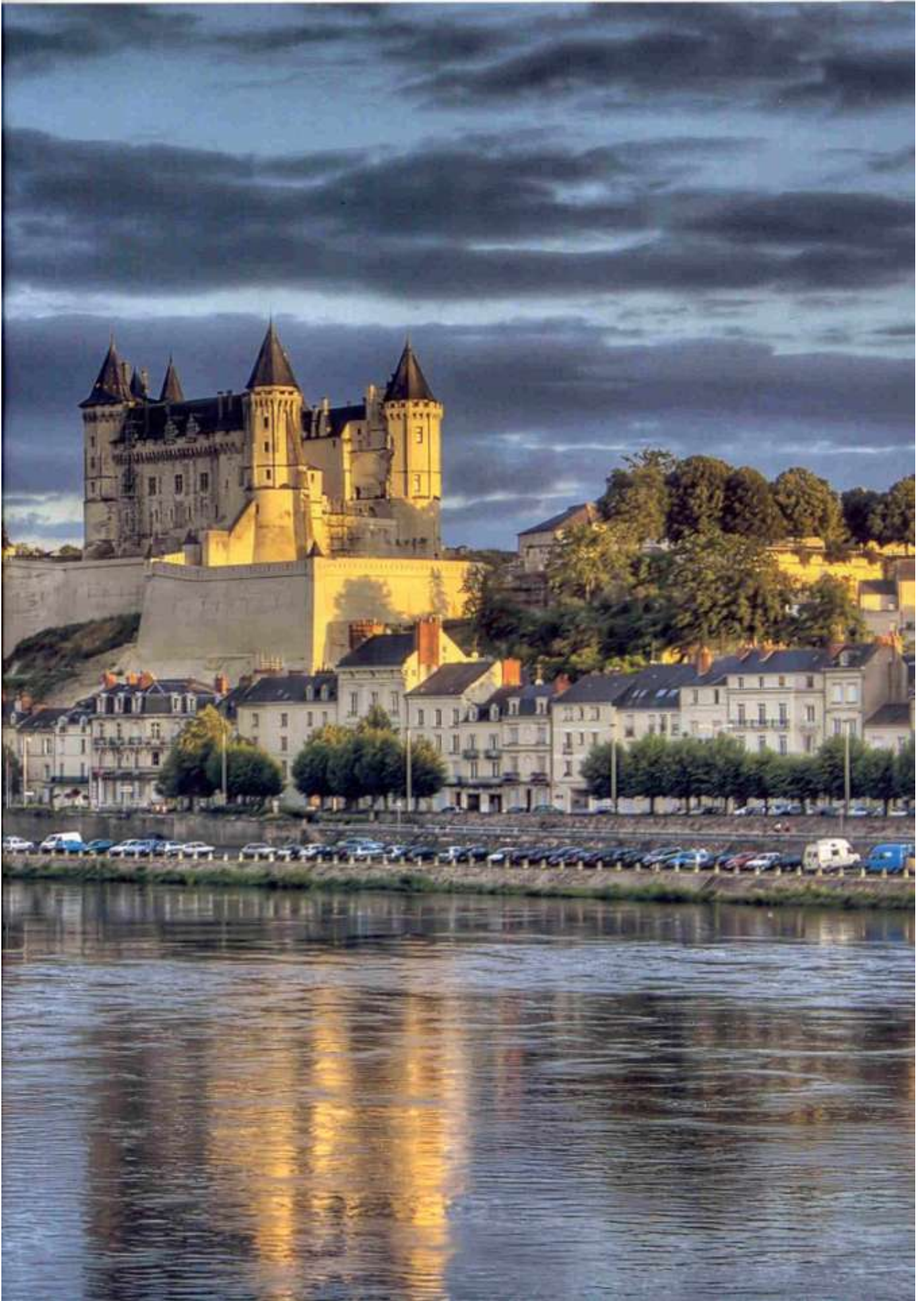


Romance of the river

Winter is a magical time in the Loire Valley.
Jane Gifford explores the beauty of the
area after the crowds have gone home ▶







ABOVE: The beautiful Parc Naturel Régional Loire-Anjou-Touraine
RIGHT: Market stalls in Saumur

Wintertime brings a special romance to the Loire Valley. The river wraps its banks in mist. Above the fog, smoking chimneys and glistening rooftops appear through a rose-gold dawn. Melancholy silhouettes of castles and churches melt and fade away, and soft grey veils of rain can suddenly open onto a shocking blue sky. Sunlight flashes off the water, picking out every detail. Shadows deepen, then evening fades into a purple haze as the mists rise again. Tourists are scarce and often you are alone.

From a rare rocky promontory on the south bank of the River Loire, below Saumur, there is a commanding view of the river. Fields, neat ranks of trees, occasional villages and low wooded hills stretch off into the distance. The ancient Gauls and then the Romans used this lookout to guard the valley. The sun rises and sets over the river and this is the perfect spot in which to enjoy its changing moods. A Benedictine priory with a parish dedicated to Saint Pierre was established here between the 10th and 12th centuries. The monks fled with the invasion of the Normans but the priory remained. Although the region was devastated during

the Wars of Religion from 1562 to 1598, the priory survived and was rebuilt in the Renaissance style. Since then, Le Prieuré has successfully moved with the times and is now a hotel. Early morning mist swirls around the tower, seen through stained-glass windows depicting bearded knights in armour and ladies with doves in their hair. The first rays of sun catch a lichen-covered statue of a woman gazing into the distance through the trees.

Picture this

We are above the village of Chênehutte-les-Tuffeaux on the Rue des Ducs d'Anjou (D751). Below, the 11th-century tower of the beautiful little Catholic church of Notre-Dame-de-la-Prée-les-Tuffeaux catches the first light of morning – the local white stone reflects the colour of the day, as does the river. The welcoming church is lovingly kept and still in use – full of flowers. The local stone, tufa – found in the name of church and village – is one of the main reasons for the prosperity of the region. Miners tunnelled for many kilometres under the hills here to provide the clean-cut blocks of luminescent limestone at the heart of the

PHOTOGRAPHY: FRANCIS WELCH; TRAVEL: HILARY HARRIS; PHOTO: LISA COOM
 ALL OTHER PHOTOGRAPHS: JANE GIFFORD



region's elegant architecture. The population of Chênehutte-les-Tuffeaux swelled with miners and sailors but with the demise of the river as a main source of transport, the village settled down to become the sleepy riverside hamlet seen today.

The mines however, have undergone a major transformation, proving the ideal environment in which to grow all kinds of mushrooms. The region produces most of France's *champignons de Paris*, the familiar white closed-cup variety commonly used in French cuisine. The constant cool temperature and dark also proved ideal for producing the famous sparkling wine of Saumur made by the *méthode traditionnelle* – fermentation in the bottle.

A gentle trinity

The D751 runs alongside the water here at Chênehutte and it's a pleasant six-kilometre drive up-river to Saumur. Trèves and Cunault, two medieval villages twinned with Chênehutte and steeped in history, are roughly the same distance away towards Gennes. From Gennes a quiet lane leads a further six kilometres down-river through gentle countryside to Saint-Rémy-

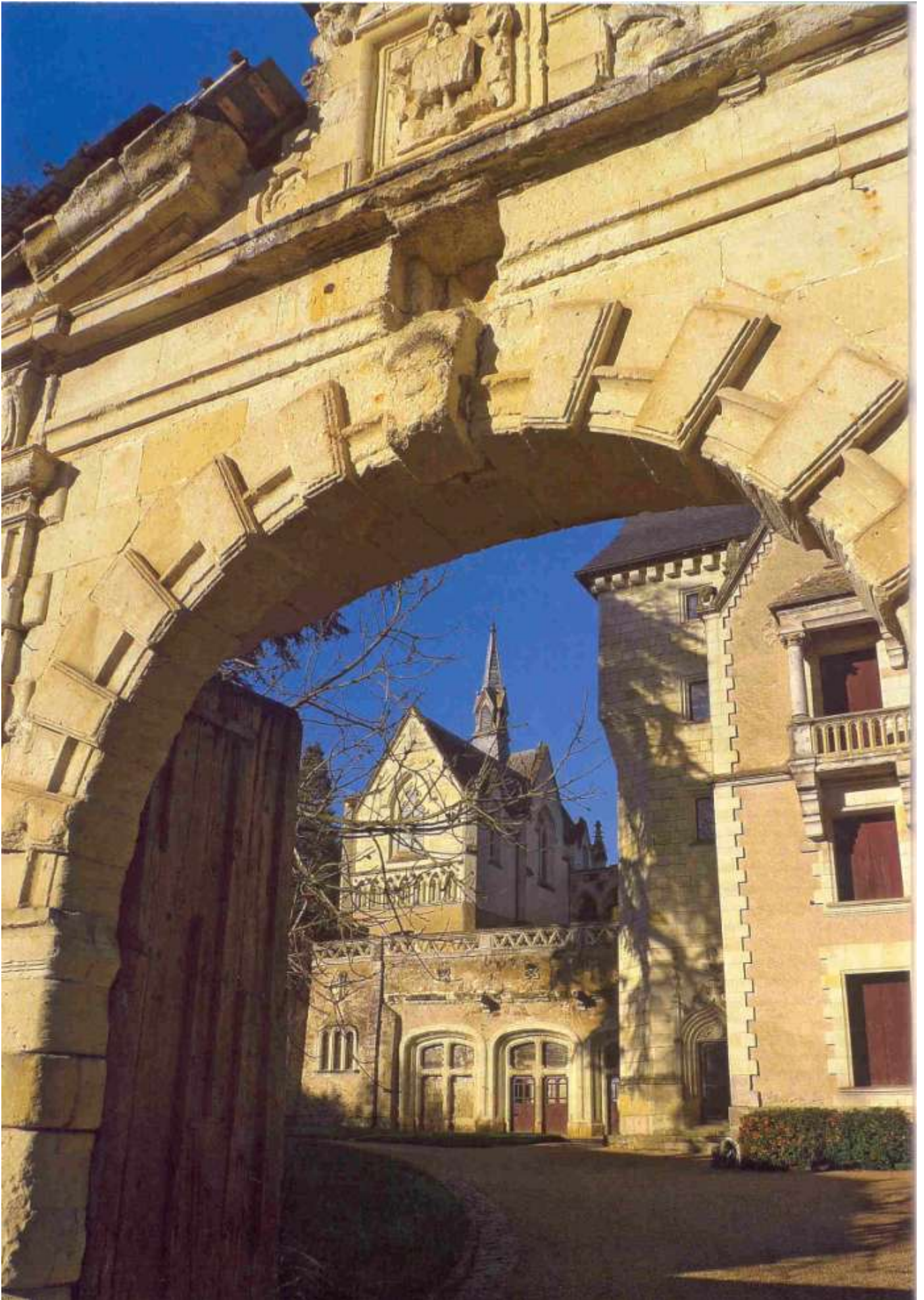
la-Varenne. All this is in the beautiful Parc Naturel Régional Loire-Anjou-Touraine and easily accessible along a 20-kilometre stretch of the river.

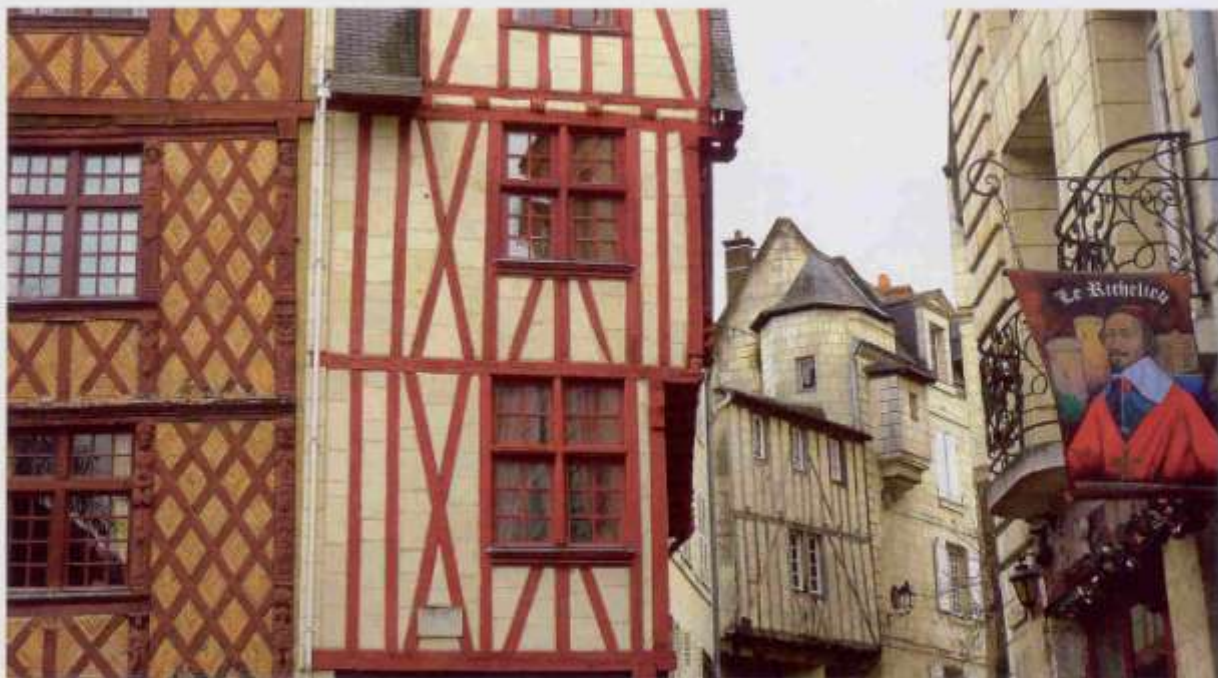
Morning dawns bright and clear – perfect for a trip down the river.

The beautiful village of Trèves resonates with the history of the former province of Anjou where Catholic and Protestant

dynasties have battled down the centuries for the French and English crown. Today, the tiny, atmospheric 11th-century church of Saint Aubin, rescued from ruin mid-19th century by Monseigneur Maupoint of Chênehutte, is bare inside save for an ancient font and the tomb from 1443 of Robert le Maçon, Baron of Trèves, Chancellor of France and friend of Jeanne d'Arc. The keep of Trèves castle, where Maçon garrisoned Jean Nicolas 'Terreur des Anglais', towers above the church. ▶

Along the Route du Thoureil the Loire shines through regimented trunks. Fish are jumping, swans glide by





Over the imposing Romanesque entrance to the medieval priory of Notre Dame in nearby Cunault, the sculpture of Jesus is headless and limbless and Mary has lost her hands – more evidence of religious conflict. Like Le Prieuré at Chênehutte, the Château de Cunault is now a hotel.

The winter trees are particularly lovely. A persimmon leans over a high estate wall in Gennes, bare branches with hundreds of bright orange fruit glowing in the sunlight. Along the Route du Thoureil, the Loire shines through regimented trunks with bristling globes of mistletoe in the crowns. Fish are jumping, swans glide by, herons and cormorants can be seen.

In Le Thoureil, I am once again right by the water on the Quai des Mariniers, with a far-reaching view up-river. Traditional flat-bottomed boats strain at their moorings mid-stream. It's a lovely place for an afternoon stroll. From here head to pretty Saint-Rémy-la-Varenne, with its 12th-century priory. On the way you pass the enormous Benedictine Abbaye de Saint-Maur, built on the site of a Gallo-Roman temple, dedicated to a river goddess. From Saint-Rémy follow the circular footpath La Boucle de la Loire which takes you down to the river opposite Saint-Mathurin-sur-Loire and through the open countryside past local landmarks. The Route de la Petite Loire also makes a charming short excursion following a minor tributary of the Loire.

The Château de Saumur is an impressive sight. Bristling with slender turrets and spires, like a fairytale

palace it oversees the town and river from a heavily fortified knoll. The view of the castle across the Loire from Pont Cessart is hard to beat. A castle was first built here in the 10th century, at the same time as the priory at Chênehutte. Today's château dates back to the 14th century. In the 15th century Duke (later King) René of Anjou made it his home. This was the castle's heyday and King René is still a local hero. The 600th anniversary of his birth was celebrated this year. During the 16th century, Château de Saumur became the property of King Henry IV of France and Navarre and the town became a Protestant stronghold.

Château de Saumur is an impressive sight. Bristling with slender turrets and spires, a fairytale palace

After the failure of the Royalist rebellion in Anjou, the castle was turned into an army barracks. Napoléon Bonaparte later converted it into a state prison and it then became a munitions store. Listed as an historic monument in 1862, it now houses two museums.

Saumur is known for its uniform, sleek 18th-century architecture built from the local tufa. Saumur town centre is not large, so everything is within reasonable walking distance. Start at the wonderfully ornate 15th-century town hall on Place de la République.

It's Christmas Eve on Place Saint-Pierre and preparations for the festive season are in full swing. Cardinal Richelieu looks on from a sign above a bar and wooden carvings on medieval timbered houses sit above the market stalls. Bistrot de la Place is one of the best places to eat in town – central, full of atmosphere ▶

FAR LEFT: The pale golden-stoned Château de Cunault is now a hotel ABOVE: Like the door of the bar Le Richelieu, the medieval timbered houses on Place Saint-Pierre will soon be decorated for Christmas



ABOVE: As night falls over the Loire in winter, shadows deepen and the river reflects the purple sky

and reasonably priced. Across town, gargoyles have been added to the exterior of 12th-century Notre-Dame de Nantilly, Saumur's oldest church, to remind the congregation that religion should not be fun. Monsters and monks lean out as if to vomit over those below. On Rue Dacier, wild bearded men carved above the bank strain under the weight of the building, while their voluptuous and somewhat cynical female counterparts above the shops on Rue d'Orléans brazenly bare their breasts in the face of so much earnest respectability. The Christmas market spreads from Place Saint-Pierre down through the pedestrianised town centre to the carousel on Place de la Bilange. Oysters, saucissons with local cèpe mushrooms, dozens of goat's cheeses – you won't be able to leave without sampling something.

Saumur is known as the *capitale de l'équitation*, home of the dashing horsemen of the Cadre Noir. In 1763 Louis XV built a training school here for officers of the French cavalry, the very grand École de

Cavalerie. On the war memorial in the park opposite, two centaurs grieve over the dead, sombre against the soft grey winter skies. The tradition of unrivalled horsemanship continues and today the École Nationale d'Équitation boasts a team of elite riders who organise riding events and stage spectacular shows from 1 April to 30 September. They still belong to the Cadre Noir but can have either civilian or military status.

Back on the D751 it's time to stock up on another local essential – Saumur Brut. At Les Caves Buvet Ladaubay there is a jovial atmosphere with staff in party hats and a considerable amount of sampling before locals depart with cases of delicious sparkling wine. The walls are covered with the 330 medals and distinctions won over the last 30 years of production. Courtesy tours of the cellars and wine-making process are on offer for those wishing to return with a stash of wine. Winter may be a quiet season in the Loire Valley, but there's much to discover away from the crowds at this special time of year. ☺

FRANCOFILE

Plan your own trip to this part of the Loire Valley

GETTING THERE

Jane Gifford travelled with Brittany Ferries from Portsmouth to Saint-Malo and drove down to Chênehutte-les-Tuffeaux. Jane's travel and accommodation was booked through Brittany Ferries.
Tel: (UK) 244 0744
www.brittany-ferries.co.uk

WHERE TO STAY

Le Prieuré
49350 Chênehutte-les-Tuffeaux
Tel: (Fr) 2 41 67 90 14
In 1957 Monsieur René Traversac fell in love with Le

Prieuré. This fairytale location inspired him to launch the hotel chains Châteaux et Hôtels de France and Les Grandes Étapes Françaises. For an unbeatable view over the Loire, book a room in the priory itself. The dining is *haute cuisine* and the excellent lunch and dinner menus are also available for non-residents. B&B or half-board is €24 or €35. Rates on Christmas Day and New Year start at €55.

WHERE TO EAT

Les Pieds Bleus
49350 Préban

Tel: (Fr) 2 41 67 95 64

M. and Mme Lemonnier's restaurant inside the mines offers meals specialising in the many varieties of mushroom grown here. Closed on Christmas Day, Boxing Day and New Year's Day. €20-€23.

L'Auberge Saint-Pierre

6 Place Saint-Pierre
49400 Saumur
Tel: (Fr) 2 41 51 26 25
www.auberge-saintpierre.com
A lovely old building on the square where you can eat well for a reasonable price. Closed on Sundays and Mondays in winter. €10-€25

Bistrot de la Place

16 Place Saint-Pierre
49400 Saumur
Tel: (Fr) 2 41 51 13 27
www.cafedestplace-saumur.com
Bags of atmosphere for lunch and dinner €10-€25. New Year's Eve menu offers six courses for €46. A take-away service is also available.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Office de Tourisme du Saumurois
Place de la Bilange
49400 Saumur
Tel: (Fr) 2 41 40 20 60
www.ot-saumur.fr



Classic elegance

Inspired by the châteaux of the Loire Valley? Then book a visit to four-star Le Prieuré hotel for an awe-inspiring view across the River Loire. As part of the Grandes Étapes Françaises collection of hotels, the former Benedictine priory prides itself on its historic location and ancient history. Located in Chênehutte-les-Tuffeaux close to Saumur, Le Prieuré sits in its very own 25 hectare park above the verdant valley below. Double rooms in the hotel's adjoining residences start from €104 per night and from €119 in the main hotel, breakfast from €8.

Tel: (Fr) 2 41 67 90 14, www.prieure.com

14 FRANCE MAGAZINE



Jane Gifford

Jane has written and illustrated numerous magazine articles and books on subjects ranging from natural history to travel. This month she discovers the Loire in winter.

What did you enjoy most about writing about the Loire? In winter the Loire comes in to its own, shrouding the valley in mist and reflecting the wide sky over the plain. It's tranquil at this time of year and you can hear the sounds of the river as nature reclaims it for a while.

What is your favourite French festive food? On Christmas Day, three enormous griddled scallops served with lightly battered salsify, buckwheat blinis and a cream and cider sauce put a big smile on my face. As does Saumur Brut!