

Get to know France's forgotten county

Creuse is the least touristy part of the world's most visited country – so where better for a taste of la France profonde? Anthony Peregrine can't get enough of its charms

There are many things that puzzle me in the world of travel – Spanish eating hours, the appeal of rock-climbing, the purchasing of cuckoo clocks – but the key one presently is: why does nobody visit the Creuse département of France? French statistics are slippery but it appears that, in the world's most visited country, the Creuse is the least visited of its 96 counties.

This is crackers, notably given the widespread taste for la France profonde, or “deep France”. Deep-France-wise, the Creuse – found where the Massif Central cedes to the Limousin region – is as far down as you can go. France's second-least populated county, it is not so much off the beaten track as off the one after that.

And it's marvellous, a bit like the Yorkshire Moors but with fewer dry-stone walls and no one banging on about God's own country. Here be moorland and heath, forest, pastures heavy with Limousin cattle and decent little hills keen to get you hiking and biking, riding and, Lord help us, climbing. The Creuse is the way the whole world would be if I were in charge.

The landscape is punctuated by outstanding bits of elegance. Boussac (population: 1,250) has not one but two of the most rewarding castles you could find on any given day. One you may stay in, experiencing an echo of ancien régime splendence; the other should be visited for treasures spanning centuries. This county might also be the only place in the world where you could encounter JRR Tolkien and Claude Monet in under 90 minutes.

Tolkien first. He crops up in Aubusson, where they've been producing tapestries for 500 years. It is possible to underestimate one's interest in tapestries. I did. And the sense of anticipation wasn't much enhanced by the news that Aubusson's latest endeavour had been 16 wall-filling tapestries inspired by illustrations from Tolkien's works. Thus was Aubusson rendering tapestry cool and contemporary.

Creditable, except that I have an aversion to Tolkien novels which verges on the psychotic. The writer's middle son, Michael, taught me Latin (very well) long ago. He would reward success in exams with works by his dad. I wasn't bad, so gained *The Hobbit* and several hundredweight of *Lord of the Rings*, through which I slogged from a sense of duty and shall never slog through again. Ever.

Weirdly, though, those tapestries that are finished – there will ultimately be 16 – work well as stand-alone items, brooding with colour and a vague sense of distance which tapestries impose, as if letting you in on a secret, but not entirely. The best is maybe Rivendell. You don't need to know much, or indeed anything, about *The Hobbit* to appreciate a valley-scape of mystery and force. I'd have it on my wall, if I could clear a 10 sq metre space – and afford at least £4,000 a sq metre.

The next project tackles the world of Hayao Miyazaki, Japan's foremost animated film maker.

All this happens at the Cité Internationale de la Tapisserie, Aubusson's tapestry HQ, where the museum bit covers art from the 15th and 16th centuries onwards. Thus we travel – quite quickly, in my case – from mythical scenes and abundant greenery (as seen in a million châteaux) to 20th-century stuff from Picasso, Braque, Le Corbusier and Jean Lurçat. This century, things have become bracingly loopier with trompe-l'oeil, a huge tapestry depicting a coiled rope and, most joyful of many, a family slotted into a tropical jungle teeming with life and colour – by Argentinian artists (cite-tapisserie.fr; £6.50).

Aubusson itself is a disarming little town. Its medieval segment stretches along the River Creuse, and its record with la fondue creusoise is good. Unlike Alpine fondues, this version combines camembert and local goudon cheese melted with cream and spices, then bids you to dip your chips in. There may be mountain ham as an accompaniment. If tapestries have set you upon the route to happiness, this will finish the job. Try Le Lissier on the Grand'Rue (facebook.com/lelissier).

It worked for me, sending me surging the next day across the vast plateau de Millevaches (“a thousand water sources” not “a thousand cows”; the etymology is complex). As moorland and forest tumble into remote villages, so people come out to stare – not so much because you are a tourist, more because you are in a car. It is bracing and wild, the wildest elements being hell-fire logging trucks thundering along lanes made for packhorses.

At some point in the middle of



Creuse-ing along: historic charm abounds
Escape to the château: La Creuzette



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nowhere, I came upon Lake Vassivière, 2,500-acres flooded post-war to generate electricity. It has settled in nicely, furnishing fishing, sailing, canoeing or, in my case, walking round the edges and thinking, “This could be Canada, if only there were moose”.

Later, I drove over the Monts de Guéret, proper granite hills rolling up and down and hosting, somewhere in their forested midst, the Chabrières animal park, full of wolves. I don't approve of wolves, so continued to Boussac.

In 1964, Lucien and Bernadette Blondeau rescued its main medieval château, which had been wrecked by service as a gendarmerie, then a cattle-shed. Over subsequent years, they



turned it into a wizard spot with a sense of centuries, alive with style and more treasures than anyone could possibly count. These include a world-class collection of walking sticks, extraordinary furniture from every epoch, and tapestries featuring ponies depicted by artist-monk Dom Robert when exiled to Dartmoor. Why the exile? “He approached too close to a monastery gardener,” whispered Mme Blondeau who, though small, is the sort of grande dame you don't call by her Christian name. Nor do you criticise the British Royal family in her presence. She is, in short, 100 per cent admirable, and her château is an astounding achievement (chateauboussac.com; £10).

The same is true of Boussac's second castle, La Creuzette – a fine small 19th-century château. Stay here and you're co-opted temporarily into the French nobility, the sort who haven't let the republic lower standards. You will wander from salons to library, up and down the monumental oak staircase, under chandeliers and next to marble, giant flower arrangements, gold leaf and ancient furniture buffed to a gleam; sleep in hand-embroidered bed linen, stroll grounds big enough for a herd of unicorns and eat in splendour that might have embarrassed Louis XIV. You will reflect how good the French are at this sort of thing, and then note that the French had nothing to do with it.

It is the work of two South African chaps, a banker and an artist, and their colleague DeVerra Aurret. They have beautifully burnished a French past for contemporary conviviality. During dinner, talk turned to the cigar-smoking 19th-century novelist George Sand, a frequent visitor to the Creuse, sometimes with her ailing lover Frédéric Chopin (in one letter, Sand referred to him as “my beloved little corpse”).

More recently, the trouser-wearing writer apparently also inspired a kamikaze pilot who, having survived his Second World War suicide dive suffering only the loss of both legs, made a pilgrimage in old age from Japan to the hill outside Boussac where his heroine Ms Sand would wander. “Oddly, it made only a couple of lines in the local paper,” said a dinner companion. Thus did La Creuzette cruise effortlessly into my top three French château chambres-d'hôtes (lacreuzette.fr; B&B doubles from £135; three-course dinner, with champagne and wines £54).

I set off along winding roads – windows open, aromas of spring flowers, cut grass and cows wafting in – and ended up an hour later in La Souterraine. What a grand little spot, its old stones warmed by the sun and small-town commerce. There's a Gallo-Roman crypt under the 12th-century church and, up stairs near the medieval Puycharraud town gate, a volunteer-run British café and library. You have to be sharp to catch it – the place opens 10am-12.30pm on Tuesdays, Fridays and Saturdays – and you'll need to pay the annual subscription if you want to borrow books. But it's only a tenner, the choice is large and the friendliness redolent of a parish coffee morning.

Just out of town, at the Artbotanic gardens in St Agnat-de-Versillat, gardener Lionel Ewertz all but flattened me with his enthusiasm. Particular passion was generated by a well-protected *Wollemia nobilis* pine, the species apparently discovered only in 1994 when an Australian fell into a ravine. The seven-acre valley bottom spread abounded in other rarities from across the globe, plus birds, a zen garden and,

this year, tea rooms. If horticulture is your thing, this is your place (artbotanic.jimdofree.com; £4).

Next we come to the Valley of Painters and, finally, meet Claude Monet. He was the most prominent of dozens of bearded blokes drawn to the Creuse valley between the villages of Fresselines and Crozant in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Here, three rivers meet, forest flourishes, rocks rise to a ruined fortress and the countryside has controlled elemental chaos sufficient to appeal to artists wide-eyed at the

new possibilities of painting outdoors. Monet was there in 1889, just long enough to rattle off his first series (of 24 works) and spearhead what became known as the “Crozant School”. Some say it should rank alongside Barbizon and Pont-d'Aven. Others say it shouldn't. Best bet is to go there and visit Crozant's Hôtel Lépinat, once the artists' boozier, now a centre devoted to the story. Follow up at Fresselines, where Monet stayed, and where the Espace Monet-Rollinat continues the tale, before kicking it into the 21st cen-

tury with upcoming projects such as “urban art in a rural setting”. It's a hell of a place to find in a farming village, where you'd think art might culminate with a Virgin statue from Lourdes.

Finally, you must walk down the pasture and steep wooded hills to the rushing river waters. You may come to two conclusions: firstly, you don't give a damn where the Crozant School ranks; and, secondly, maybe it's no bad thing that the Creuse remains unvisited. You have it to yourself. Best keep it a secret.

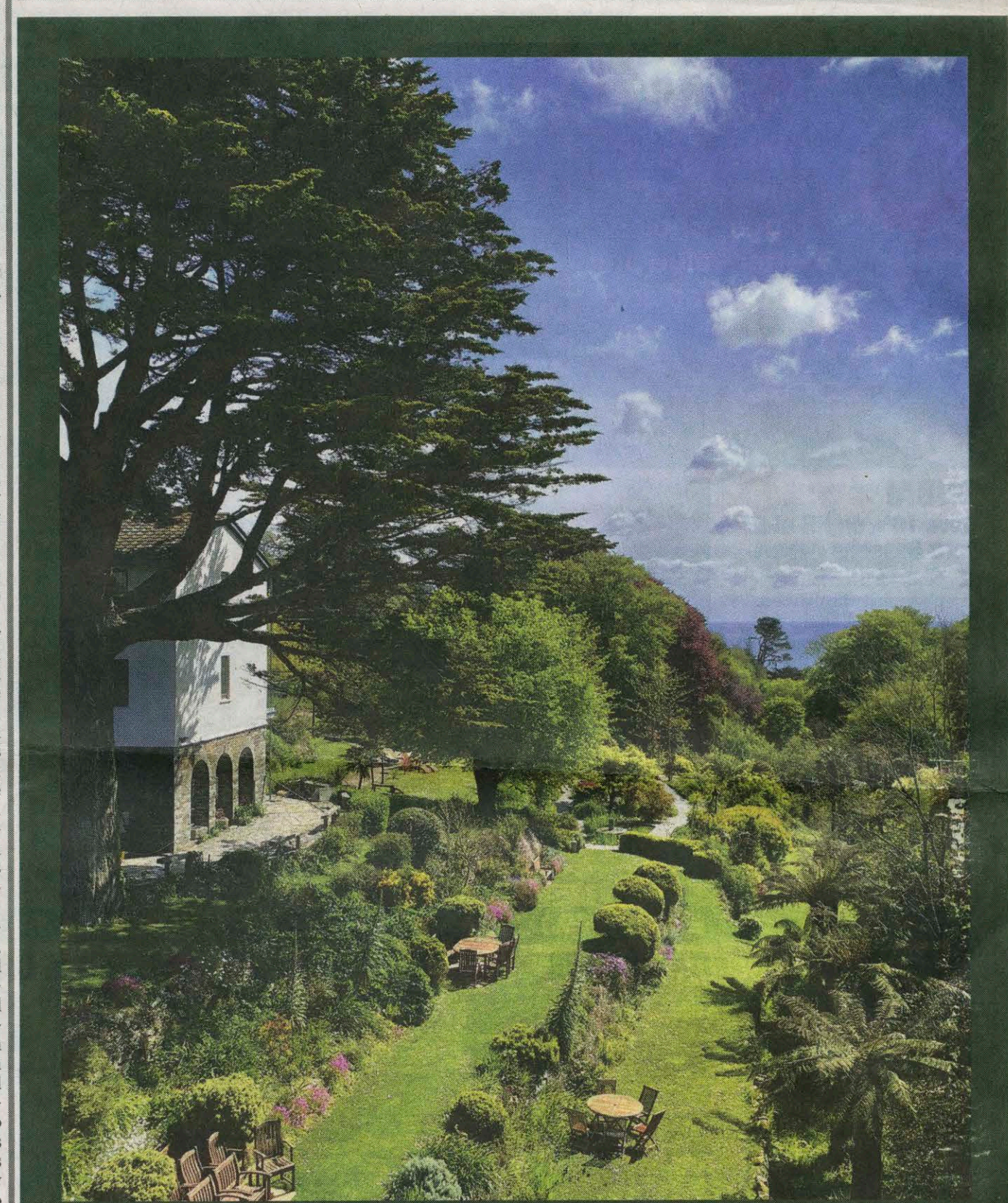
Essentials

Where to stay

In Aubusson, Les Maisons du Pont slots contemporary studios into old stone surroundings right by the river (lesmaisonsdupont.com; room-only doubles from £63). Handy for La Souterraine and Crozant and recently taken over by a charming couple, the Domaine de la Jarrige is the loveliest sort of chambres-d'hôtes: former outbuildings invested with modern rooms, spa, pool and great gardens, and an excellent table-d'hôte dinner (domainedelajarrige.fr; B&B doubles from £82). For La Creuzette at Boussac, see main article

Getting there

In season, fly to Limoges from Stansted, Leeds-Bradford, Bristol, Manchester and East Midlands (ryanair.com), from Gatwick (easyjet.com) and Southampton (ba.com). You'll need a hire car for the Creuse: try holidayautos.com. La Souterraine is an hour away, Aubusson 1h50. By train, London to La Souterraine, via Paris, takes around seven hours (thetrainline.com)



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