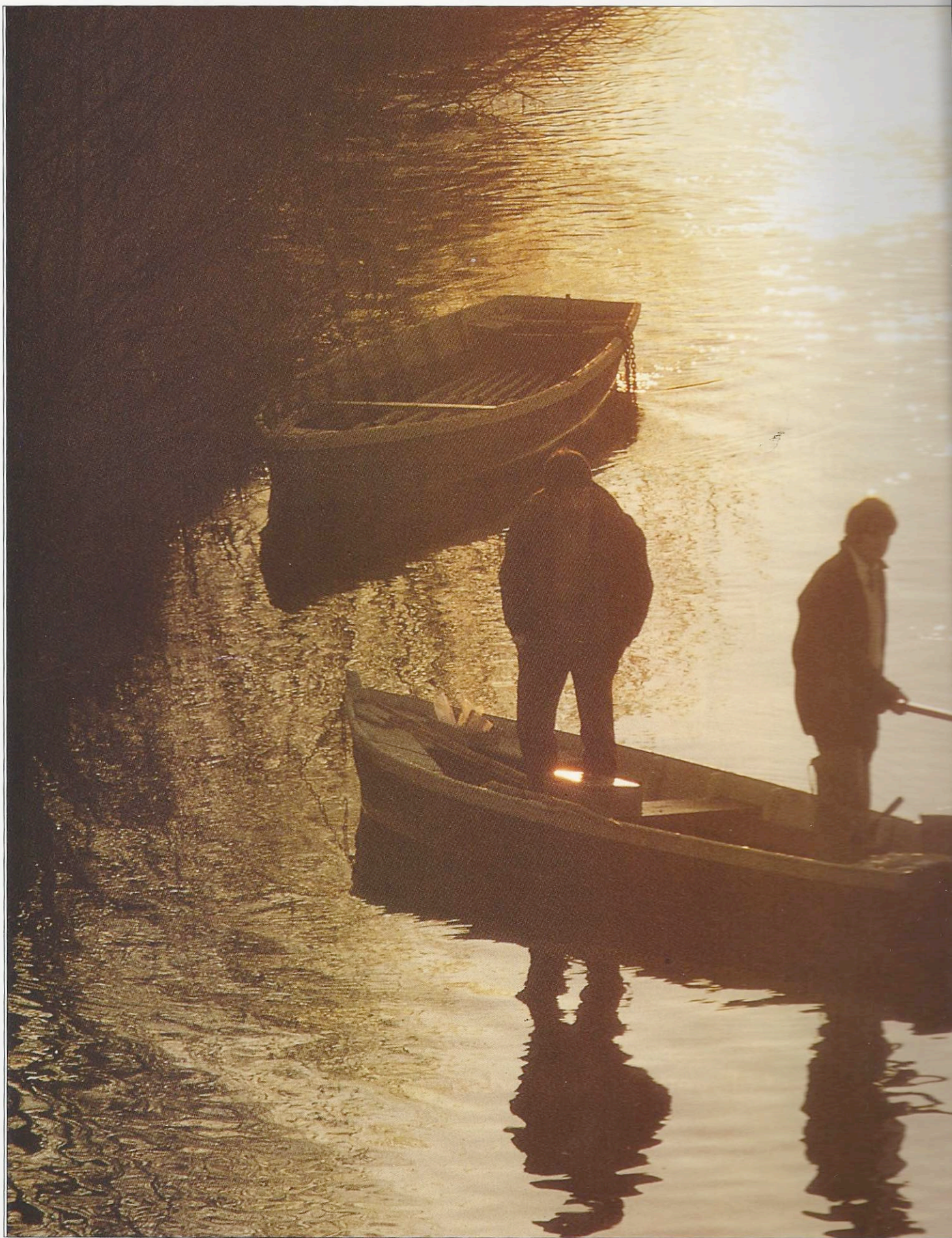


1 9 9 4 D I S C O V E R Y G U I D E

FRANCE

L E S V I L L A G E S







NATURE'S DOMINION

Surrounded by lush forests and vineyards, the pastoral villages of the Loire are a gentle counterpoint to the grandeur of the great châteaux.

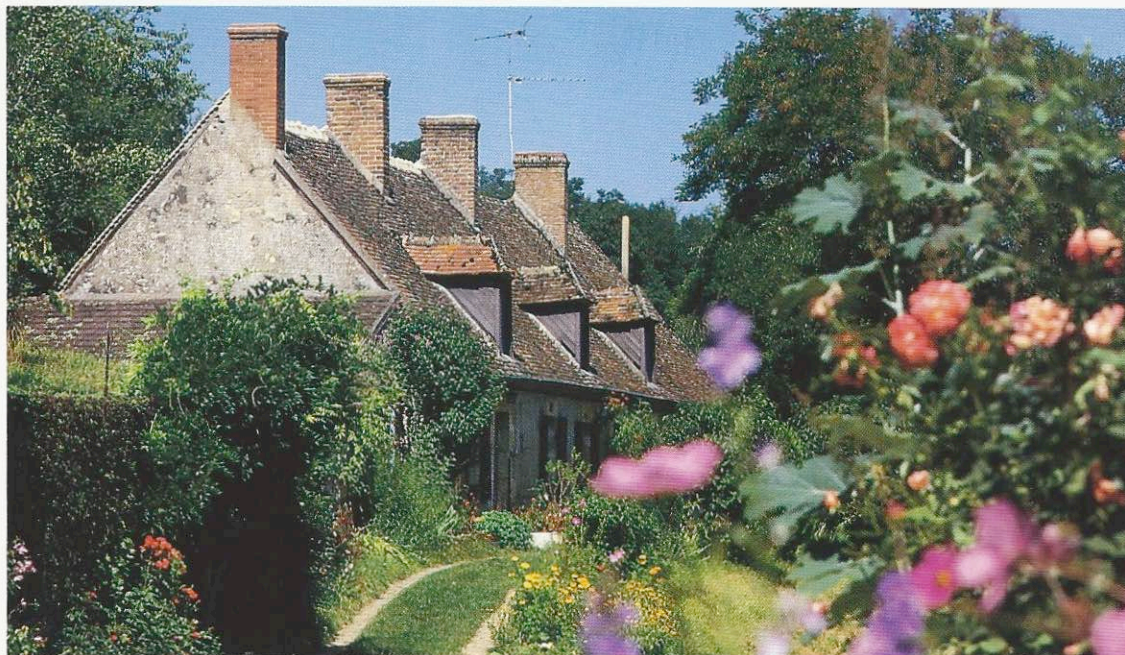
I was standing in the middle of a tapestry forest in Sologne when the hounds burst out of the woods and into my reverie. The small clearing filled with their braying, the horses thundering after them, the sharp commands of their red-coated riders. If a stag had been through there the hounds knew more about it than I did. Then they were gone, disappearing down a narrow lane shrouded by ancient trees which muffled and soon swallowed their echo. I was alone again, but my forest tapestry had a new texture, rewoven with the age-old scene of the hunt.

The Loire Valley is rich with a natural sensuousness, a land without artifice. Willows dip into meandering streams, oaks arch cathedral-like across quiet roads, the fields are lush and green. Its royal châteaux and pastoral villages grace notes to its overwhelming natural beauty.

The region is a vast oval stitched across its width by France's last untamed river, the Loire. To the northwest, as far as Chartres, are wheat fields and farms which have seen the armies of kings and emperors—and more recently of General Patton—marching toward Paris. To the east are secretive, majestic forests which long provided hunting grounds for France's nobility; today the hunters and fishermen are joined by hikers and cyclists.

The Loire itself is only one of many rivers in the region, but like a charmed snake, it has a hypnotic appeal. It twists and winds, free of dams, contained between sandy banks which shelter dozens of species of wildlife (many of them protected). South of the river's arc at Orléans, Sologne was once covered with wild marshes. Now it is known for its nature trails and wildlife, and for its many castles, most hidden deep in the forest. Farther south still is the Berry, celebrated for the magnificent Cathedral St-Etienne in its capital city, BOURGES. The pastoral Berry is also the setting for the novels of George Sand and for Henri-Alain Fournier's *Le Grand Meaulnes*, a classic tale of coming of age in rural France. To the west are the great châteaux and the vineyards for which the Loire Valley is renowned.

Fishing in the Loire River.



ORLEANS is a natural starting point for a tour of the Loire. A few minutes out of the city, tucked down a side road, lies COMBLEUX, a bucolic settlement once home to bargemen who navigated the canal and the river edging the village. Today it is a quiet and comfortable suburb, bright with flowers. The bargemen's homes, like those of boatmen everywhere, open onto the water and what was once their livelihood. Time appears to stand still in Combleux, where there are no shops to keep hours by. People gather at the village restaurant, where on a fine summer day a variety of small fried fish, the local catch, grace the white-clothed terrace tables overlooking the junction of the canal and the river.

Just north of Combleux, the skyline disappears into the *Forêt d'Orléans*, France's largest national forest, which somehow manages to look tidy and wild at the same time, as if lightly groomed for a royal hunt. But it is to the south, in Sologne, that the forests become deeper, more mysterious. Within their white birch and oak recesses, mostly hidden from view, are scores of 19th-century châteaux.

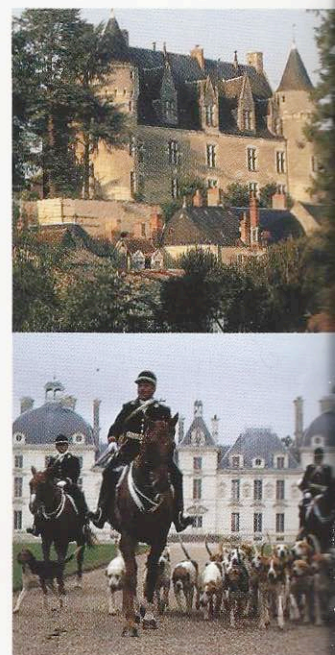
"You have to be humble when you look at these trees, some of them hundreds of years old," says

Roger Marois, longtime mayor of SOUVIGNY-EN-SOLOGNE and the gregarious owner of the Auberge de la Croix Blanche, "think of what they've seen." Souvigny, at the edge of the forest, is an oasis of warm red brick and half-timbered houses, overflowing gardens and a triangular village green with a quirky church. No architect would claim it, but God and man cannot help but be fond of its patchwork design and wooden beams, polished first by loving hands and later by time. A few years ago the citizens of Souvigny stripped the streets of the electric and telephone wires that jarred with their pristine surroundings.

A woman in black, her white apron tied at the back and her arms hugging a load of *baguettes*, neatly sidesteps a young boy on his way home, intent on his fishing rod. Fewer than 500 folk live in Souvigny, but its two restaurants are both known for their gastronomic fare. Not far away, in LAMOTTE-BEUVRON, the *tarte tatin*, France's favorite, thick apple pie, was born. The story goes that an apple pie slipped as it was pulled out of the oven, landing upside down. The two Tatin sisters who had made it served it anyway, crust on the bottom and apples on top, and a national dish was born.

Lovers of food and wine also head for SANCERRE, east of Sologne. The landscape shifts here, grain fields begin to rise and fall and the view opens out. Hilltop Sancerre is a magnificent surprise—the jewel in a crown of vineyards heavy with grapes as the summer ripens. Close up, Sancerre is a nearly colorless but curiously compelling maze, giving out on one side to a panoramic view of the Loire Valley. Narrow, uneven back streets with solid three-story stone houses are home to several wine producers whose caves are the perfect place to sample the wonderful wines—white and red—for which the village is famous. They marry wonderfully with the creamy goat's cheese of nearby CHAVIGNOL.

Nothing could be more romantic than wending down into the Berry region and coming suddenly upon APREMONT-SUR-ALLIER. The gentle Allier River makes its appearance; soon it's bordered by toasted sandstone houses. Leggy flower varieties from a bygone era are planted in every available nook. A castle rises above the village of 87 residents, but it looks as if it was built by a lord who was more interested in the view than in self-defense. Over the centuries some of its towers have given way to homier quarters. Here I found myself yet again in a *tableau vivant*,



Above left, like an Impressionist painting, the toasted sandstone houses and flowers of Apremont-sur-Allier; Berry; top right, the 16th-century Château de Montrésor on the Loire River; bottom, getting ready for the slow-motion game of tag.

this time walking down the path of an impressionist painting: a picture of a family debated the name of a mauve wild flower, while laughing children across the river played a slow-motion game of tag.

Apremont did not always look like a movie set; it has been having an ongoing face lift since the 19th century. Eugène Schneider, of the metal dynasty Le Creusot, lived in the castle; he bought as many of the 16th-century houses as he could and set about restoring them to their original design. Few villages can boast of such architectural harmony. The castle today is greatly enhanced by the exuberant garden created in recent years, and by its extensive park, open to visitors.

"She never slept," the guide said in awestruck tones. I had

through the soft Berry *paysage* into
 Sand country. Her manor
 in NOHANT, a haven for 19th-
 century intellectuals, artists and
 musicians, is open to the public. But I
 found the author's hideaway in
 GARGILELSE. The young woman
 showing us Sand's insect collection,
 and another of elaborate, handmade
 puppets' costumes, was clearly
 inspired of Sand—and the half-
 of us perusing the small house
 are all clearly entranced by the
 hide. Her tiny, heart-shaped face
 and enormous eyes, the rounded
 accent, were straight out of a
 Sand novel. Gargilelle is still
 favorite of artists and music lovers,
 and a major harp festival takes place
 in August. The Café des Artistes still
 serves omelettes, its claim to fame a

Below left, musicians at a Nohant

musicians; bottom, St-Christophe; right,

Gargilelle, once the hideaway of George

and still a favorite of artists and

music lovers.

century ago, and a handful of clut-
 tered shops and galleries make pleas-
 ant ambling. The village twists and
 turns down a ravine; those willing to
 explore a bit on foot are rewarded
 with spectacular views.

One of the best views in the
 entire area is from the top of the dun-
 geon tower in the secluded semi-
 ruins of CHATEAUBRUN, a 15th-
 century castle about ten minutes
 from Gargilelle. "I'm not lord of the
 castle, I'm just its caretaker," says
 proprietor Guy Baudet, flicking his
 Prince-Valiant hair out of his face.
 Not only does Baudet come from a
 long line of local potters, he is also an
 experimental musician and has an
 international reputation as a sculptor.
 His magical and humorous oversized
 garden creatures, as well as a three-
 ton oak dining table, add an irre-
 sistible theatrical dimension to
 Châteaubrun.

Out of Berry and into Touraine,
 a castle of a completely different ilk
 dominates MONTRESOR. Still inhab-
 ited by the Polish family which has
 held it for two centuries, the stone
 fortress and its attendant medieval
 village bend around the narrow
 Indrois River, creating a kind of
 amphitheatre, softened by a swath of
 vegetable gardens. Their bounty col-
 ors the Saturday morning market in
 the old, open-air weaver's hall.

Some of us buy the odd, occa-
 sional bric or brac at country mar-
 kets, but near TOURS I met a couple
 who live like a pair of peacocks in a
 world of bright plumage built from
 scraps of the past. The first thing that
 struck me about the CHATEAU DE
 MONTGOUVERNE, where *chambres*
d'hôte are available, was the picture-
 book prettiness of its exterior, the
 next was the comfortable antique
 decor inside. The owner Christine
 Desvignes discovered that she had
 found a hat-lover in me and eagerly
 produced the headgear that some-
 times tops off her waist-length red
 hair—out of her cupboard tumbled
 some 50 antique hats.

ROCHECORBON held another
 surprise. It was once the chic 18th-
 century suburb of Tours, and some of
 its finest homes began as extensions
 of habitable caves. This stretch of the
 Loire, in fact, has hundreds of
 troglodyte homes—the houses start
 in caves and are built outwards—and
 even a unique troglodyte hotel, Les
 Hautes-Roches.

Less than an hour northwest, in
 the winsome valley of the Loir (a
 tributary of the larger Loire), dozens
 of troglodyte dwellings make TROO
 a wanderer's delight, with most of
 the village growing out of the sloping
 hillside's caverns. LAVARDIN, one
 hill away, has a beautiful little wood-

en 15th-century bridge and a small
 but elegant center. It, too, is lined on
 one side with caves, these mostly
 used by residents for storing their wine.

Circling through the Loir
 towards Chartres, villages become
 more frequent, the fields cultivated,
 the roads now leading to Paris.
 Monsieur and Madame de La Motte
 Saint-Pierre, who own the castle
 perched above MONTIGNY-LE-
 GANNELON, seem to really like
 showing visitors through their home,
 in particular the dining room with its
 huge full-length portraits of the kings
 and popes, and the Ladies Room,
 where noblewomen and royal mis-
 tresses hid their love letters. Madame
 de La Motte Saint-Pierre's father, she
 says, used to love to recount that as a
 child he had watched American troops
 marching down the road below on
 their way to liberate the capital.

When the cathedral at
 CHARTRES was built nearly a mil-
 lennium ago, its architects dreamed
 of an edifice so grand it could be seen
 from the unimaginable distance of
 twenty miles to the west. Sure
 enough, at just that spot, the spires
 appear, catching the eye and herald-
 ing the border of nature's dominion
 in the Loire.

WRITTEN BY ELLEN WALLACE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SCOPE

