



Mark Porter feels the weight of history on a trip through France at the wheel of the trusty Volvo V40

On the map, the Viscount's place in the Vendée didn't look too far to drive in a day. But by the time we got there, four hours later than scheduled, I got the distinct impression his pyjamas were awaiting him. It was way past bedtime in rural France and incompetent navigation seemed a poor excuse.

I was weary and needed a pick-me-up. So, after showing us our quarters at the top of his magnificent pile, our aristocratic host graciously offered me a bottle of local red (and a corkscrew), which went nicely with the battered remains of our picnic. It was well earned after our 300-mile drive turned into 10 hours of Tarmac torture, followed by a long climb with two suitcases up a stone staircase built around the time of the Battle of Hastings.

The heart of France's Vendée region remains largely untouched by recent centuries, long before the invention of road signs. I had half expected to see shepherds on stilts crossing the marshland. We were heading for a historical pageant called the 'Puy du Fou', a fantastical reconstruction of chapters of the nation's rich history that takes place every year in a village close to where we were staying, in the 11th Century Château de la Flocellière.

We'd driven up that morning from the southwest of France, from the fairytale towers of Carcassonne. We were in a Volvo V40, a smooth almost retro-looking car that conjures up images of Roger Moore's 'Saint' from the 60s TV series. Our journey had taken us on the A61 motorway past the rugby and aerospace capital of Toulouse, a modern city whose medieval centre remains intact. After a whirlwind stroll along the banks of the Garonne we pointed the Volvo west towards Bordeaux then

followed the Atlantic north towards La Rochelle, skirting the flat vineyards of Blaye before driving through the Cognac region.

The compact V40 is not an ideal family car. But then no car (or house for that matter) is quite big enough for Ana and the kids. But I thought this elegant and sleek motor was just perfect as it meant a strict limitation on luggage and other paraphernalia that usually bedevil our voyages.

The Puy du Fou proved a great hit with Pierre-Marie (9) and Alexandra (8), who enjoyed every minute of the re-enacted Viking raid on a French village in which, against seemingly impossible odds, the plucky French win the day and the hero and heroine escape unscathed amidst balls of fire as a saint walks across water. "Do you think they will get married?" asked Alexandra, as the couple bowed to the crowd at the end of the show.

The pageant, which lasts from April until September, takes place in a theme park in the village of Les Epesses in the heart of La Vendée, and brings in more than two million

visitors every year. If the Vikings show was a success, Gladiators was a triumph. Set in France during the troubled reign of Diocletian, there are lions, gladiators, chariot races and executions. Blood and Gaul. Nothing, surely could trump this spectacle.

But here I was wrong. To cap the evening was a classical music fanfare that saw Swan Lake and other hits performed in snatches on the small lake in front of the castle, ending with a crazy organ recital performed by a creature seemingly inspired by Monty Python, Liberace and Edgar Allan Poe.

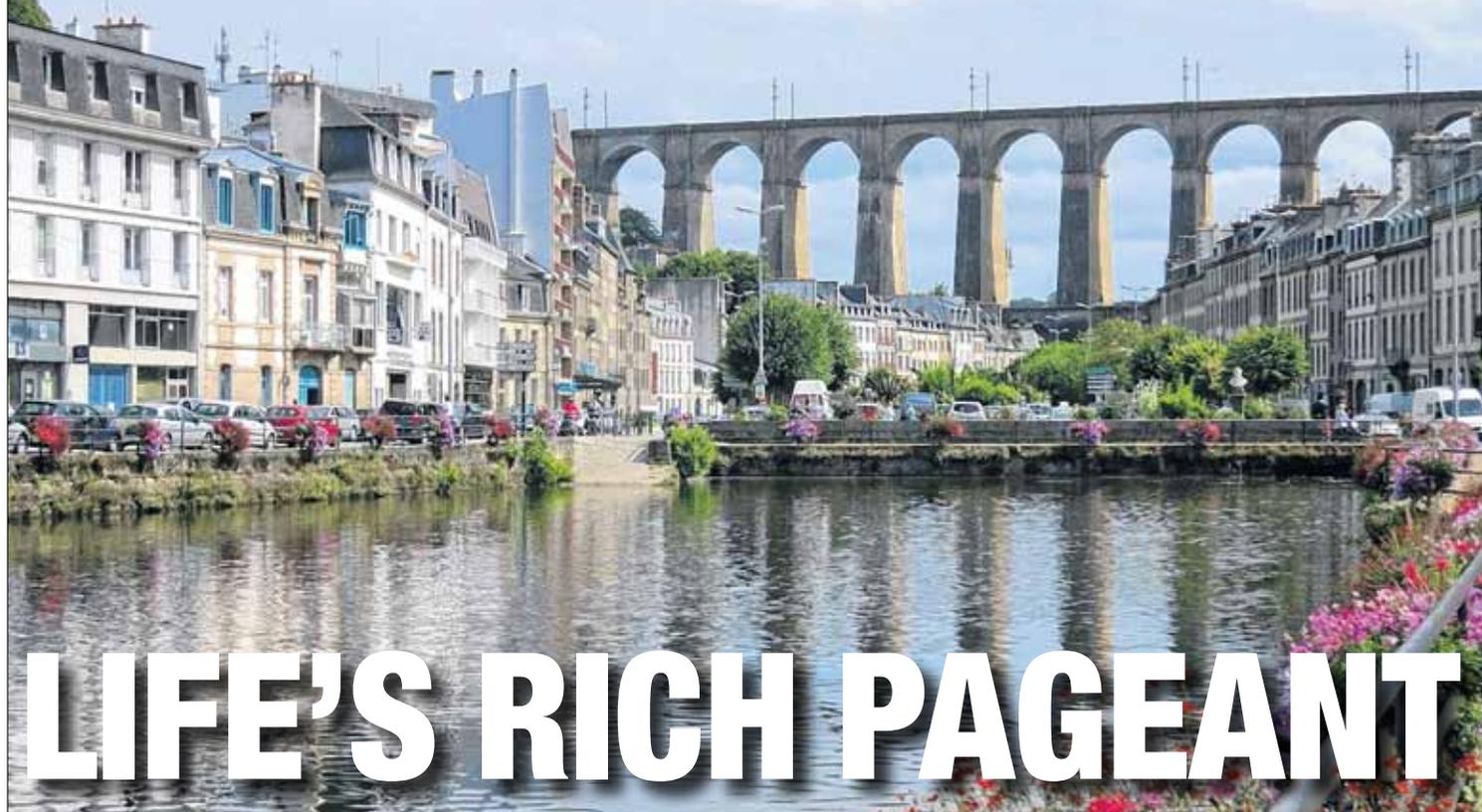
An organ the size of a cathedral, created by lights on the great wall, was 'played' with brutal virtuosity by a grinning maniac, who was dressed like a punk Franz Liszt.

How we laughed, except for Alexandra, who looked the other way. The show, which is the fourth most popular attraction in France, was dreamt up by Viscount Philippe de Villiers, a former French presidential candidate who is building something similar in Ukraine for the



A TRIUMPH: The Roman games begin at the Puy du Fou historic pageant.

SPANNING THE CENTURIES:
The Viaduct at Morlaix, Brittany.



LIFE'S RICH PAGEANT

Drivefacts

Make: Volvo
Model: V40 SE Nave T2
How much: £26,220
How fast: 118mph
0-62mph: 9.2 seconds
Economy: 51.4mpg, combined
Emissions: 127g/km CO2

Roscoff was the point of departure for the Onion Johnnies, who sold their wares in the UK after crossing to Plymouth on locals boats which, once the deep-water harbour was completed in 1968, became Brittany Ferries.

We sailed out as the morning light turned the sandstone port the colour of marmalade and after a snooze found ourselves in Plymouth for tea.



● Mark & family stayed at Château de la Flocellière, (pictured above): chateaudelaflocelliere.com
Vicomte et Vicomtesse Patrice Vignial, 30 rue du Château, 85700 La Flocellière.
T +33 (0)2 51 57 22 03.

● Hotel du Centre, Roscoff. Le Port, Rue Gambetta, 29681. +33 (2) 98 61 24 25.

● Mark sailed with Brittany Ferries on the Plymouth/ Roscoff crossing. Brittany-ferries.co.uk

Russian President, Vladimir Putin. In the morning, after a splendid breakfast at the main dining table of Château de la Flocellière, at which the Viscount joined us and regaled the children with amusing stories, we were given a guided tour of the place by his wife, Erika.

If it is nice to know how the other half lives, it is nicer still to be able to enjoy it for a modest fee and feel like a house guest rather than a customer. If only the British B&B were like this. As the V40 scrunched back up the drive I fancy I detected a wistful look of envy as the Viscount waved farewell.

After two nights mooching around the Vendée we put the Swedish hatchback, Volvo's most recent attempt at making a premium compact car to rival the BMW 1 Series, Mercedes A Class, Audi A3 and Volkswagen Golf, through its paces.

One thing I was truly grateful for was the superb fuel economy as we ate up the miles on the final long leg of the journey to Roscoff, in the northwest corner of Brittany.

Passing Nantes we drove into Vannes and followed the coastline along to the smart port of Concarneau before heading north and through the Parc Naturel Régional d'Armorique. Hills and lakes give way to vast farmlands where artichokes and onions grow in unimaginable abundance.

We headed through Morlaix, with its stunning viaduct, and up to Roscoff which can lay claim to being the prettiest ferry port in Europe. The Hotel du Centre lives up to its name, lying right in the middle of the old town and conveniently opposite one of many delicious crêperies at which Ana and the kids ate, while I opted for oysters and frog legs at the hotel's jolly fine restaurant.