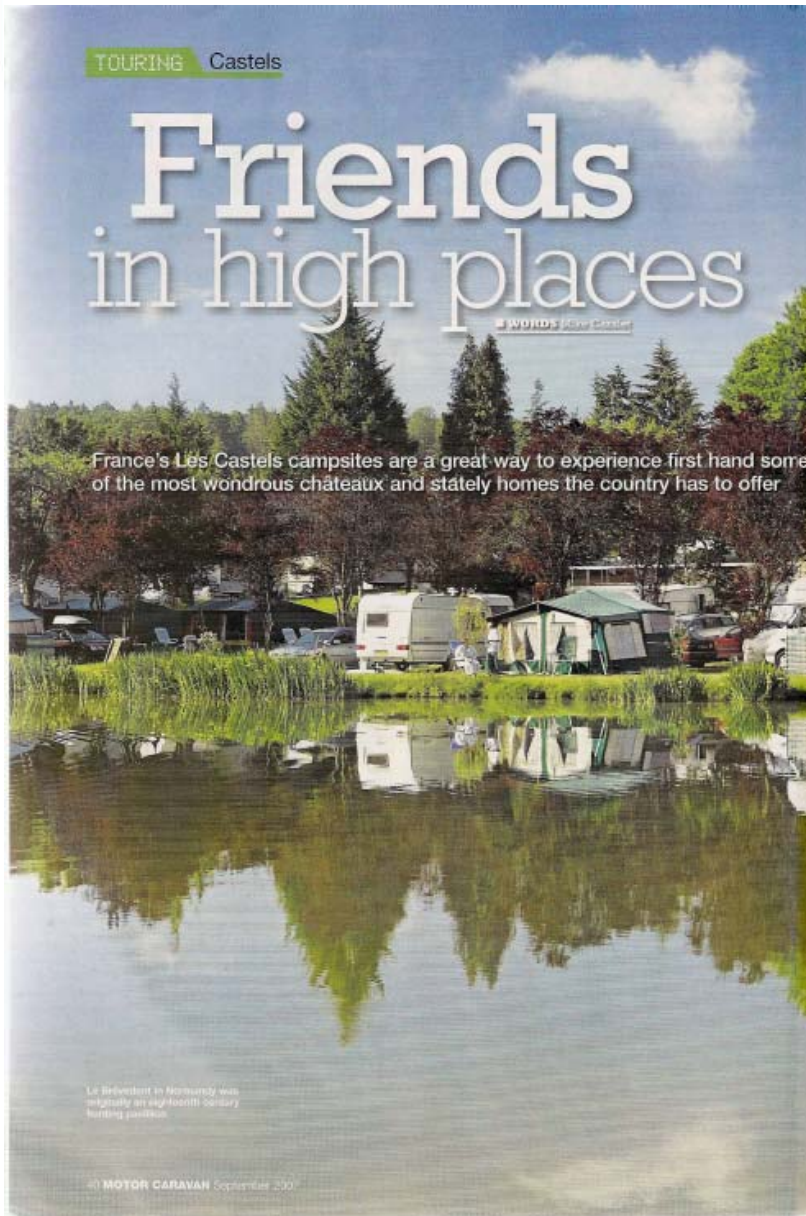




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TOURING Castels

Friends in high places

WORDS *Clive Carter*

France's Les Castels campsites are a great way to experience first hand some of the most wondrous châteaux and stately homes the country has to offer

Le Irévédent in Normandy was originally an eighteenth century hunting lodge.



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With great ideas to take home with you

MOST MOTOR Caravanners have heard of the Castels group of campsites, many have stayed on them, but surprisingly the story of Les Castels may never have been told in Britain.

Les Castels is a unique group of French campsites cultivating tradition and hospitality. Château owners are encouraged to open up their properties to campers to share the heritage and beauty of their region. Some are small, grassy and quiet, whilst others are larger with activities and entertainment. You'll find them all over France in seaside, country and mountain locations. All are four star and have their own personality.

To tell the story of Les Castels, let me first tell you the tale of Camping Le Irévédent, run by my friend Anne Bury.

During the Second World War the Germans naturally were attracted to large country houses, just as the Allies were in the UK. They were turned into hospitals, headquarters, training camps, materials distribution centres and officers' quarters. Inevitably, many were damaged by bombing in the run up to D-Day, and many more were damaged as the Allies advanced through France.

Château Le Irévédent was occupied by the Germans, and after the Normandy landings a disgraced allied bomber was trying to make its way back to safety while looking for somewhere safe to

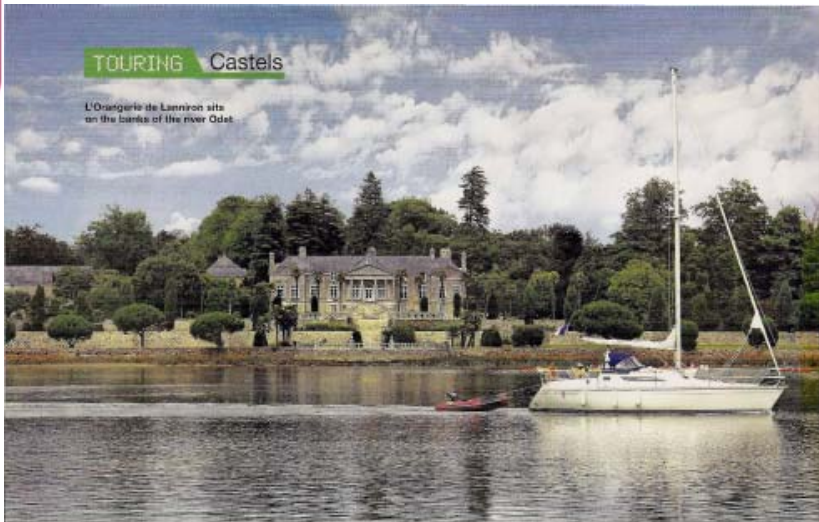
unload its cargo of bombs. Seeing the lake in front of the chateau, the bomber tried to drop its load into the lake, but missed and dropped them alongside the chateau. Unfortunately, the crew perished when they crashed in a field.

When Ann's grandfather the Marquis de Châteauneuf la Palice returned to his family home after the War, he found all the windows blown in and part of the roof ripped off. He had to repair it, but had no money. His first attempt to make some involved planting apple trees, forgetting that trees take a long time to mature and produce a profitable crop.

Another money-making idea was selling farmers' lime extracted from the woods, but that didn't work. Eventually the

TOURING Castels

L'Orangerie de Lanniron sits on the banks of the river Odé



Marquis ended up living in the one remaining habitable room. Fortunately, an old friend told him about a chain of campsites set up in 1957 for owners of family châteaux who had no money to restore or maintain them. In 1965 Le Brévedent joined the Castels chain.

The match between owners of distressed châteaux and camping must have been made in heaven. Firstly, the aristocracy understood a warm welcome. Pre-war, it was a tradition for those with country properties to invite friends and relatives down to the country for weekends and holidays.

Space was not a problem either. Even a fairly modest hunting lodge would have grounds and mature trees among which campers and caravanners could stay. A château, which once would be staffed by dozens of people, provided plenty of empty rooms suitable for reception, a shop and even some toilet and shower facilities.

In the case of Château le Brévedent they had one other attraction – Madame Capoue, who had been the family cook. She quickly

helped establish a restaurant in the grounds of the chateau and was justifiably famous for her dishes, truffe à la crème and creamed chicken with calviados.

Self-preservation

Today, Château le Brévedent is a thriving campsite, but equally importantly the house has been saved. It isn't a grand house in the style of the family's other homes like Château de la Fontaine au Pin, or the magnificent Château de la Pallice – both long since gone. But preserving the (comparatively) more modest châteaux is every bit as important as saving the grand buildings.

Camping Pyrénées Natura isn't centered around a grand country house. The core building is a restored, probably medieval, shepherd's home. Modest, yes, but Castels have realised that camping provides a low impact business proposition, which allows the restoration and preservation of France's historical past. The buildings don't have to be grand to be worth protecting.

In the case of Pyrénées Natura it isn't

just the building which needs protection, but the scene in which it is set. So that the camp facilities don't intrude, the roadways and pitches are sunk below the level of the surrounding grassland so that when a motor caravan is pitched only the window level upwards is visible. In the day you can look up and see eagles searching for food.

In complete contrast is L'Orangerie de Lanniron near Quimper in Brittany. It is a magnificent house, and every spring you can see where the Massol de Bebetz family have invested to restore another part of it. Over the winter of 2005-2006 they used some ancient maps to locate the Neptune – a sort of formal pool. They dug down and found the old pool and restored it to its former glory. You can see it today if you stay there.

Favourite château

If I had to pick a favourite, it would be Jean and Claudine de Houdetot's Camping Château de Poinsoze. Jean didn't expect to inherit the château, but premature deaths left him with a picture-book

Le Brévedent's pitches benefit from lakeside settings



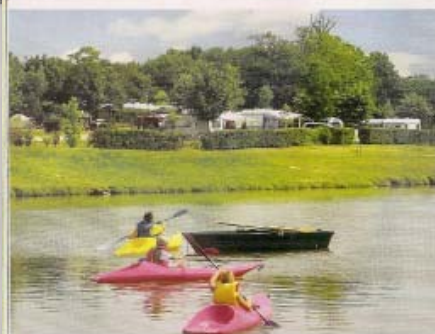
Pyrénées Natura is perfect for nature lovers



TOURING Castels



Poinsoze in north west France is a haven for peace and quiet



Water activities at Poinsoze, which means 'the place of the springs'



Facilities at Poinsoze are top quality so you'll be tempted to take a dip

ARISTOCRATIC TITLES

Many of the Castels site owners have titles, they just never use them. But over a memorable lunch a group of them tried to explain their titles and where they stood in France's aristocracy.

They suggested I consult Almanac de Goethe which lists the French aristocracy in their order of precedence. I don't recommend it unless you like reading the telephone directory. My only advice is that if you see a name like John de Liverpool on site papers the 'de' means 'of'. In this case John of Liverpool, the chances are they live on an island! So when you get back from your holiday, you can boast to your neighbours that you stayed at John of Liverpool's castle in France.

hunting lodge and massive inheritance tax liabilities. Jean and Claudine (the title) built the site themselves, even creating the huge fishing lake, and they still run it today.

The house is private and used as the family home, but the number of artists' easels and camera tripods on display tells you the house is so beautiful you just have to try and capture it with paintbrushes or your camera.

The story of Poinsoze brings us back to where we started. Death duties encouraged Jean and Claudine to create a campsite, and this has helped pay for the upkeep of the château and grounds. Just as in days of old, on arrival you'll be greeted with a warmth you may have thought had long disappeared. And just

as in those days, a thriving château is starting to produce benefits for the local population. Ask Claudine to point you towards the local blueberry farm and see if you can resist parting with some money for their produce.

There are 38 Castels sites in France, each different and all with a fascinating story to tell. I'm proud to be able to number many of the site owners as personal friends, and I think that if you try Castels camping they'll soon become your friends as well. □

TOURIST INFORMATION

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