

On the road to Le Mans

26/07/2013

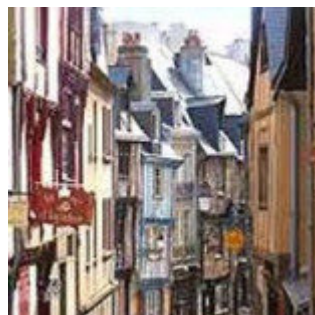
By Roger Wheeler

Roger Wheeler checks out the city with the 24 hour car race



Mention the name Le Mans to most people and all they can tell you that it is the place where they have a 24 hours road race every year, they are not even sure where it is. We were driving from Dieppe down to the south west of France and decided that we should break our journey and take a look at Mans (they tend not to use Le when referring to their city).

Just two + hours drive down the extremely boring but efficient A28 from Rouen, a mere 22.50€ on tolls, we were pleasantly surprised to find a very attractive city with Roman walls.



There is a large medieval quarter, which is known as the Plantagenet City plus a major shopping centre and a host of fascinating sites and architecture. There is a lot more to Le Mans than a motor race. It must be said though that the 24 hours race is probably the one thing that puts the city on the map. The race has been the major event here since 1923. The circuit, just to the south, is in use more often than the one weekend in June, from May through to October there are races for motorcycles, superbikes classic cars, even karting.

During these months forget about driving due south, we thought that we could simply head straight out only to find the road closed because of an event on 'Le Circuit'. The police were very helpful and directed us to another way to the A28, which we actually hadn't wanted, but took their advice.



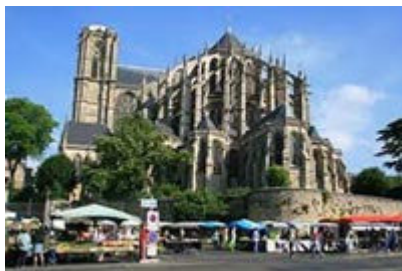
There is quite a good choice of hotels; we stayed at Le Charleston, a nice small hotel near the train station but about a 15 minute walk from the major sites. They charged us 90€ per night (£80), the rooms were small, to put it mildly, but extremely clean and comfortable with the smallest bathroom/shower I have ever seen, but it worked.

Breakfast was 8.50€ and quite good. They have an underground car park, essential as it would be impossible to park in the street, for which they charge 7€ per day, quite reasonable we thought.

People have been living here since 5,000BC, there is a prehistoric standing stone, a menhir, St. Julien's stone, which is thought to have been considered a symbol of fertility because of its phallic shape, that's one big phallus to you and me. The Romans went all over France and Le Mans is no exception, it is encircled by a very well preserved Roman wall, they invaded in 57BC and stayed for about 200 years.



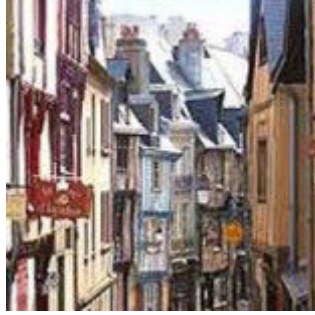
The most impressive part of the town is without doubt the old town or Plantagenet City, covering an area of 22 acres with a hundred beautifully preserved and recently restored half timbered houses. It was in Le Mans in 1128 that **Geoffrey V Count of Anjou** married **Matilda** daughter of our King Henry 1 and started the Plantagenet dynasty, the rest is history!



There is, of course, a large cathedral, St. Julien, it is one of the largest in France and if cathedrals are your thing then it's quite impressive. There are several quite interesting museums; in a town with all this history that's hardly surprising.

Throughout July and August they mount a fantastic free sound and light show (son et lumiere) which they call 'La Nuit des Chimères, they light all the major buildings and present a series of tableaux, virtually site specific performances, should be worth seeing.

Today it is naturally a very modern city with a very efficient tram network and as many big stores that you could ever need. There are of course many very good restaurants, staying near the train



station we found Le Bellifontaine and had one of the best meals we have had in a long time, for 64€ (£57) we had three great courses, two beers and a bottle of good wine. Le Mans does boast two gay clubs, it has a large university so no surprise there, but as they didn't seem to open until about midnight we gave them a miss.

The tourist office was about as helpful as they could be and they speak perfect English. Le Mans is certainly worth a day or two; you will be very pleasantly surprised but beware of the frequent motor events in that you really need to plan your visit and book ahead, as when one of them is on you can't get a bed anywhere.

www.lemanstourisme.com

www.nuitdeschimeres.com

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