



TOURING IN FRANCE

By Tony Nowak and Richard Keech, with a few additional destinations from Brian Hope

Are you a PPL holder who is getting bored flying around the same bits of the UK? Then why not pop across the Channel for a thoroughly enjoyable tour of some of the wonderful airfields and destinations that are on offer in France? This article will, hopefully, whet your appetite for French touring and give you a few ideas to consider should you wish to explore further than Le Touquet or Abbeville.

It's worth remembering that a tour around France, or anywhere else for that matter, is only a series of individual flights and, let's be honest, GPS has taken the sweat out of navigating, while all of the additional information you need is readily accessible via the internet. So there really isn't any reason not to go. We can assure you that once you have taken that leap of faith, you will wonder why on earth you were so apprehensive. And what better way to build the experience and long distance cross-countries you need to go for your LAA Wings.

As with any trip, planning is key so on page 35 we've listed a number of websites that will help you with part of your trip. It's also really advisable to take the latest charts. For France there's four that cover the entire country –

(Above) Amboise, on the banks of the mighty Loire and dominated by the gorgeous 15th century chateau

NE, NW, SE and SW – and the new editions usually come out around March/April time. You will notice a few differences to the UK half mill version but they're not difficult to interpret.

When it comes to booking hotels, it can be worth having a bit of flexibility, just in case your flying is delayed by the weather. If you must pre-book, choose a hotel or chain that allows late cancellations without penalties. August is the traditional French holiday month so you might then consider pre-booking at the more popular holiday locations.

Finally, and importantly, you will always eat well in France. This is a country that take food seriously, whether it's an airfield or roadside café or a quality restaurant. Enjoy.

● Abbeville (LFO)

This is a popular destination for a first land-away when visiting France. There is a restaurant and a motel on the airfield, and a

few other chain hotels in town (just a couple of miles down the road). Abbeville is a typical Normandy town and a good night stop location for the crossing home.

● Alés (LFMS)

A convenient stop for visiting the delights of Orange, including a superb first century Roman amphitheatre and the nearby three-tier Roman aqueduct, the Pont du Gard. Alés was once a centre for silk making and we stayed at a converted silk mill B&B (chambre d'hôte in French). One of my most memorable flights was a trip from Alés to Rodez taking in the Pont du Gard and the Norman Foster-designed Millau Bridge.

● Amboise (LFEF)

Around 5nm south of the town, this quiet grass club airfield by the river Cher is a good place to tie-down for a night or two. Amboise itself is dominated by the mighty Loire and the remains of the 15th century chateau that sits above it. There are some fine old hotels that overlook the river and no shortage of interesting restaurants (try L'Epicerie). You can find the final home of Leonardo da Vinci in the town and it's now a museum set close to a public park.



(Above) The grand cathedral dominates the skyline of Amiens



(Left) Argenton

● Amiens (LFAY)

While this friendly airfield has a French-only AFIS, this might well be changing to a French/English AFIS service in 2016, which will be good news for many visiting pilots. The interesting town is close by, with its cathedral and other historic buildings. There are plenty of hotels in town as well as one or two near the airfield, but these are located in a business/industrial zone (nothing interesting to see but there is a bus stop nearby which can save you the taxi fare into town). The Somme passes through the town and there are some nice riverside restaurants.

● Ancenis (LFFI)

Ancenis is located on the River Loire and is a perfect place for an overnight stop. The interesting Château d'Ancenis, a medieval and Renaissance castle, faces the river near the picturesque bridge. The town also has an old quarter which is worth exploring to see the interesting mediaeval houses.

● Andernos (LFCD)

A typical small club grass airfield just to the north of Archachon, and great flying over the renowned local sand dunes (Dune du Pilat).

● Angers (LFRJ)

There is lots to see in this historic town. While the airfield is around 10nm away, occasional public transport is available while a taxi costs around €40. There are many hotels and restaurants to choose from in town, with an aviation museum on the airfield.

● Annecy (LFLP)

With the town of Annecy boasting a lakeside setting, this really is a great destination for flying near semi-alpine countryside. As a beautiful and very popular tourist destination, there are plenty of hotels, but it can get really busy during peak holiday times so it's well worth booking a hotel before arriving.

● Arcachon (LFCH)

Located close to the Bassin d'Arcachon, Arcachon is a pleasant seaside town famous for its local oysters. To the west of the airfield can be found the high Dune de Pilat sand dunes that look quite spectacular from the air. Arcachon is likely to get busy at peak holiday times, so it's well worth pre-booking hotels.

● Aubigny-Sur-Nere (LFEH)

A quiet club airfield situated a few nm to

the west of this small town and a very good location for a night stop. The hotelier from the Hotel-Restaurant La Chaumière (a nice hotel with an excellent restaurant+33 2 48 58 04 01) picked us up from the aerodrome and drove us into town, which is fairly isolated in the forested area some 21nm to the north of Bourges. The town of Aubigny contains some ancient buildings with beautiful floral decoration during the summer months.

● Avallon (LFGE)

Within walking distance of this grass airfield, Avallon is a very pleasant walled city with quite a large section of its ramparts intact. We recommend the Hotel Vauban, a classic French Hotel, as well as the nearby excellent Le Relais des Goumets restaurant. Avallon is a good night stop en route to Vichy for the RSA Rally.

● Bagnoles (LFAO)

Delightful Bagnoles was once the Parisians' favoured spa town and remains a lovely place to visit for a day or two of rest and relaxation. There are plenty of hotels and some good restaurants, plus a casino and a lake in the heart of the town. You can walk from the

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Cahors, Valentré



Laval

Fly into Deauville to visit beautiful Hon Fleur



Dune de Pilat



Montargis

airfield to the town, taking the footpath through the woods at the end of the runway farthest from the clubhouse, and it's downhill most of the way.

● Bernay (LFPD)

A typically friendly club airfield where they used to build Jodel and Mudry (CAP) aircraft. The airfield is situated on the outskirts of the town, perhaps two miles downhill to the centre, although there aren't too many hotels to choose from – try the Lion d'Or (+33 2 32 43 12 06). Look out for lovely old timbered houses, large farmers' and general market Saturday.

● Blois (LFOQ)

Blois is situated on the Loire and famous for its chateau and other old buildings. The town is 6nm from the airfield, but we didn't have any problems getting a taxi. There are plenty of hotels in town, while the airfield AFIS is usually English speaking. Blois is home of the annual Microlight Salon, which unfortunately usually clashes with the LAA Rally.

● Briare (LFEI)

The airfield is located 3nm from Briare, a pretty town which is famous for the aqueduct, constructed by M Eiffel (of Eiffel Tower fame), which carries the Canal de Briare over the Loire. We stayed in the small family-run Hotel des Voyageurs (+33 2 38 27 01 45) in Bonny sur Loire, a few miles to the south, which had a very good restaurant.

● Caen (LFRK)

If you are just looking for a Customs stop farther down the coast than the usual Channel options, Caen offers a considerably less expensive option than Deauville. It's also the closest field to Bayeux and its tapestry, 1066 and all that, while the Normandy invasion beaches are accessible from here too.

● Cahors (LFCC)

Rumour has it that Cahors got its runway because a past President had a mistress living locally and he wanted easy access in his executive jet. There is little traffic for what is nice long hard runway and the town is certainly well worth a visit. The river Lot winds its way through the town and is crossed by the stunning 14th century Valentré bridge. The town is also known for its annual Blues festival, held in July.

● Cannes (LFMD)

Cannes is a perfectly accessible airfield with reasonable fees if you are only staying a day or two. It can get turbulent on the approaches in windy conditions due to nearby high ground.

● Charleville Mezières (LFQV)

Located close to the Belgian border and only a few miles to the northwest of the town, Charleville Mezières has an unusual square (Place Ducal) and a marionette museum. A reasonable selection of hotels is available and good restaurants, especially in Place Ducal.

● Chartres (LFOR)

This popular club airfield is located close to the town, which is famous for the lovely Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Chartres which dominates the skyline, making it easy to locate the airfield in less than perfect vis! The town is located on the River Eure and has the typical old quarter with narrow streets and interesting

old buildings. As well as the usual selection of hotels in town, there is a Novotel (+33 2 37 88 13 50) and a (less expensive) Campanile located on the airfield boundary.

● Chauvigny (LFDW)

Here's a friendly club-run grass aerodrome from which it's easily possible to walk down a footpath into the town. It's just 12nm to the east of the city of Poitiers. The old town boasts no less than five medieval castles and the Romanesque church of St Pierre. There are markets held every Thursday and Saturday, which offer a great chance to buy a mouthwatering selection of seafood, cheeses galore and patés. In the town's centre is the hotel le Lion d'Or, probably the most convenient place to stop and boasting a good restaurant to boot. Tel: +33 5 49 46 30 28.

● Cherbourg (LFRG)

A large, but quiet, airport that is another popular destination for entry into France (if you don't mind all that water!). Approximately 5nm from the town, taxis are – reportedly – a bit pricey. Luc and Edith run the popular airport terminal restaurant/shop (closed Sundays), speak fluent English, are very helpful and can arrange a hire car. Their number is +33 2 33 54 68 68. Tie-downs at the south-east corner of the apron and Wi-Fi is available in the terminal building.

There's a very good gîte close by the aerodrome run by Carine and Alain who usually offer to pick-up flyers from the terminal – +33 2 33 54 13 81/+33 6 12 28 36 19, www.lesdeuxcaps.fr

● Deauville (LFRG)

Close to the northern French coast, this airfield is a Customs designated aerodrome that caters for occasional scheduled flights and GA, for which there is a grass parking area (not usually available during the winter months). The airfield is relatively close to Honfleur, a definite 'must-see' location for anyone with a sense of history. Closer and just a few NM to the west of the field are the towns of Deauville and Trouville. Deauville sports a casino and likes to think itself very stylish, while Trouville is much more a 'real' and interesting place with, like Deauville, an impressive beach and a long boardwalk. Trouville hosts a fish market held on the quayside each day and a large general market every Wednesday and Sunday morning throughout the year. A simple little ferry regularly crosses the river to Deauville. Well worth visiting. For accommodation in Trouville try the Hotel Le Central, +33 2 31 88 80 84, www.le-central-trouville.com

● Dieppe (LFAB)

A once popular destination, Dieppe was one of the victims of the cull of Customs fields about five years ago. A great shame as it is a delightful little town with a busy harbour and plenty of good restaurants and hotels. If you're heading down the coast to pay a visit, be careful to avoid the nuclear power station a few miles to the north.

● Dinard (LFRD)

This is an airport of entry that handles a little commercial traffic, but with a good-sized grass GA parking area. A PC is available landside in the terminal for checking Met/NOTAMs via the French OLIVIA system, but no Wi-Fi was available when we last visited in Jun 2015. The town is well worth visiting, especially the old

north-east part from where regular ferries cross to St Malo. The slightly quirky, but charming, Hotel Printania (our favorite) has superb views across the estuary (+33 2 99 46 13 07) – same for the little restaurant just across the road.

● Dinan (LFEB)

This is a quiet club airfield just 8nm south of Dinard airport and beneath the latter's CTR. It's a short taxi ride into town and is well worth staying overnight here. The old town has its 3km protective wall almost completely preserved and within are street after street of late medieval houses together with plenty of bars, crêperies and restaurants. The old town sits above the picturesque River Rance. Another 'must visit' place.

● Granville (LFRF)

Here's a club airfield located on the south-west of the Cotentin peninsula some 27nm north-east of Dinard. There is a walled citadel that, unlike, say, St Malo, is remote from the modern town. It has a commercial port and a long beach which stretches away to the north of the town. For this reason it can get very busy in August so advance hotel booking is recommended during the summer holiday period. Granville is a gritty sort of place that, nevertheless, is worth seeing for at least one night.

● Joigny (LFGK)

Some 65nm south-east of Paris, it's a 10-minute walk down through the vineyards from the airfield into the town, which sits by the River Yonne. As well as the elegant houses located on the slopes overlooking the river, within the town itself are some old half-timbered buildings that escaped the fire of 1530 that destroyed much of the old town.

● La Baule (LFRE)

A purely GA airfield with fuel payable by regular credit card. Good facilities and a bar, but the aerodrome restaurant only opens during July and August. The town is very much a modern beach resort with a large beach, but the historic and completely walled old town of Guérande is only a few miles away to the north-west. Here the Hotel Des Remp'Arts (+33 2 40 24 90 69) is affordable, comfy and only just outside the town walls, and has a superb lunchtime bistro. Otherwise, there are lots of restaurants to choose from in this touristy old place.

● La Rochelle (LFBH)

It's well worth visiting this historic port situated approximately halfway down the Atlantic coast. La Rochelle is an active airfield that caters for a little scheduled traffic and GA. It is also a designated Customs field, so flights directly to and from duty-free fuel stops in the Channel Islands are possible. The airfield is fairly close to the old port, so taxi transfers are not too expensive. Whilst there are modest landing fees to pay, tying-down on the grass GA parking area is free. The Vieux Port, the Porte de la Grosse Horloge, is very much the focus of the town with its two impressive towers guarding the marine entrance. Leading north, the Rue du Palais runs towards the cathedral with a few museums in the vicinity. Just south of the old town is a relatively new marina that contains many millions of Euros worth of yachts together with a large frigate. For accommodation try the Hôtel le Bord'O +33 5 46 41 31 22 or the Hotel Champlain France Angleterre, + 33 5 46 41 34 66. ➤

TOURING IN FRANCE



Pont du Gard

Oradour-sur-Glane



HINTS AND TIPS

Take care when planning your routes to ensure you don't infringe ZITs (temporary prohibited airspace), controlled or military airspace. Although generally laid back, the French can - quite rightly - be aggressive towards those who contravene airspace without clearance. Flying through a ZIT can also be very painful on your wallet so don't take any chances; keep clear of ZITs by a good margin.

Don't be afraid to request a clearance through military airspace as the controllers speak very good English and a crossing will seldom be refused. Do take great care though with the AZBA/RBTA restricted areas since clearance through such areas is most unlikely when these are active (check the SIA website for activity hours). You will have to go above or below to ensure you keep well away from very high speed military aircraft. Do note though that, in general, the military restricted airspace is not active at weekends.

Having a transponder is necessary to enter controlled airspace, but is not necessary if remaining within Class G airspace. Some airfield's Class D CTRs may have exemptions for non-transponder equipped aircraft but you will need to check the SIA VAC plates for specific information.

We have never really experienced any French language issues on our travels (my French language skills aren't good!) but it is always handy to carry a French aviation terms/circuit calls crib sheet with you. Alternatively, restrict your visits to GA airfields offering an English AFIS and do note that all air traffic controllers must speak English when required.

Also, usually at uncontrolled fields, no one will answer the radio anyway, especially when they hear an English voice calling.

Always fill up with fuel whenever the opportunity arises. Unlike in the UK, where airfield opening hours and fuel availability is usually an expected seven days a week, some French airfields have days when they are completely unmanned. You can still arrive and depart, but it's unlikely anyone will be there to assist. And this can appear to be quite random in nature - just because the pump and clubhouse is manned on a Wednesday afternoon doesn't mean it will be manned Thursday or Friday! Check the SIA VAC sheet for the airfield details regarding hours of operation and fuel availability.

Always carry plenty of cash with you although card-operated (not necessarily credit card) pumps are getting far more common now. However, many of these only accept local cards so as a last resort you may have to ask a local to use their card for the fuel and pay them the cash.

And finally, before we get to the fields themselves, do note that the standard overhead join procedure isn't standard as is in the rest of the World, and that includes La Belle France. Apart from Le Touquet on a nice weekend, the French fields tend to be much quieter than their English counterparts and, other than at those Customs fields and those that handle regular commercial flights, landing fees are rare. As one French official once told me, "If we charge landing fees you will not visit us and then you won't be able to spend money in our beautiful town!"

● Laon (LFAF)

The airfield is located just a short distance from an interesting hilltop town with an ancient cathedral, lots of old historic buildings and a reasonable selection of hotels. The airfield can be deserted mid-week but someone usually seems to arrive in the afternoon. There is an active parachute club operating from the airfield.

● Laval (LFOV)

The airfield is just a few miles from the town, which is situated on the Mayenne river. Laval has an interesting old medieval centre and is very pleasant to explore with some interesting artefacts and buildings from the Middle Ages such as half-timbered buildings. The dramatic Laval Castle stands poised above the town on one side of the river.

● Le Mans (LFRM)

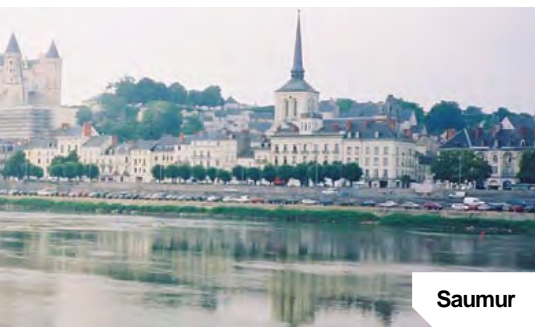
A town made famous by its annual 24 hour race, the racetrack, together with its interesting museum, is adjacent to the aerodrome. Although all this is situated on the southern edge of the city, it is definitely worth a taxi ride into the ancient town to see the old quarter and magnificent cathedral. There is also a monument here to commemorate none other than Wilbur Wright who astounded the pioneering French aviators by his demonstration flights in a Wright Flyer back in 1908.

● Le Touquet (LFAT)

A very popular destination for visiting British pilots, the town is well worth a visit for a seaside stroll and its excellent selection of restaurants. There are plenty of hotels in town as well, although they can fill up very quickly during the popular holiday periods. There are generally bicycles for hire at the terminal building although you can walk to the town in around 30 minutes.



Oyster beds near Arcachon



Saumur

● Montargis (LFEM)

Montargis feels a little bit like a mini Bruges with canals, streams and rivers in and around the town. It was very colourful when we visited, with lots of planted boxes and flower beds in town.

● Moret (LFPU)

This is a small club grass airfield located fairly close to Fontainebleau and its famous palace. The town of Moret is situated on the Le Loing river and has the very picturesque Pont sur Le Loing, one of the Ile-de-France's oldest bridges. Only a few hotels in Moret, so best to pre-book if staying overnight.

● Mortagne-Au-Perche (LFAX)

Another very quiet club airfield that's just a short distance from the old town which has now lost all of its fortifications with the exception of the Porte St Denis. This is a 15th century arch topped in the 16th by two ordinary storeys of rooms which now contain an exhibition about Percheron horses. The town is set in the heart of the Perche region's forests, famous for its goute boudin or black pudding, and holds an annual international pudding festival. A couple of nice hotels and a few restaurants make this a good place to stay for a night or two.

● Paris

There are numerous GA fields around Paris. On the east side, Lognes (LFPL) is good for EuroDisney, with hotels near the airfield and the train station is about a half hour walk. Disney is a couple of stops outbound, while central Paris is inbound. I like St Cyr L'Ecole on the western side of the city, it's a bit of a wriggle in around a couple of other airfields and below the TMA but you can see the nearby Palace of Versailles from the circuit. The train station is only ten minutes from the airfield and you are quickly into the centre of the city.

● Pons (LFCP)

Pons is a pretty little town and an easy stroll from the airfield, which is just as well as I was once stuck there for three days due to bad weather. There are only a couple of good restaurants so choice is limited. Cognac, which has its own airfield of course, is only a bus ride away and has a number of famous brandy distilleries which you can visit and taste the wares.

● Quiberon (LFEQ)

Situated at the end of a peninsula in the magnificent Baye de Morbihan, Quiberon is a pleasant seaside resort. The airfield has a campsite right across the road and the town, with plenty of hotels, is within walking distance. You can take a boat ride to Belle Ile with its Napoleonic fortress and quaint town, or you can fly across as it too has a small airfield.

● Saintes (LFXB)

The airfield is only a few miles to the south of this small, picturesque town that is situated on the Charente river. As well as a Roman amphitheatre (well worth a visit) the Arch of Germanicus, an interesting triumphal arch, can be found by the river. A reasonable selection of hotels is available in town. The airfield is shared with the military so make sure you land on the civil side.

● Saumur (LFOD)

The airfield is located close to the pretty town, with a chateau close by, and a reasonable selection of hotels in town, all of which are situated on the Loire. The town's military pedigree is marked by tank and cavalry museums.

● St Foy La Grande (LFDG)

Another grass club airfield that's about 12 miles west of Bergerac in this pretty part of France. There is a restaurant/hotel on the airfield, Les Jardins d'Eole (+33 5 53 63 25 62, www.Jardins-deole.com) but note that it needs to be booked the day prior. The old town, by the river Dordogne, is slightly run down, but well worth exploring. The hotel/restaurant Le Grain de Sel is fine and very close to the town's centre (+33 5 57 41 25 43).

● St Jean D'Angely (LFIY)

A quiet grass club airfield about 30nm SE from La Rochelle, the town is a short taxi ride away, but do go on-line in advance to find the local taxi's number since it's not posted in the flying club's window. The old town is well worth visiting and we recommend staying at the English-run L'Etoile du Port, which is run by Claire Pickering (+33 5 46 32 08 93, www.etoileduport.com) and is delightful. A good selection of restaurants in town, especially good is the Scorlion in the centre and close to the very interesting library.

● St Junien (LFBJ)

A pleasant enough town but perhaps the best reason to visit is to take a trip to the village of Oradour sur Glane, destroyed by the Germans during the last war following the murder of most of the inhabitants as an act of reprisal. It is now a memorial, the burned and damaged houses still containing relics of furniture, with old burned out cars parked on the streets. A thought provoking but rewarding place to visit. Limoges is not far away if you seek city life, it too having its own airfield.

USEFUL WEBSITES

We have not included details on the requirements and formalities of flying to France as these can change, but you can find a very good reference by David Wise at tinyurl.com/perzmvw

- For an informal guide on French circuit procedures (also by David Wise), go to tinyurl.com/o517uvj
- For VAC airfield plates, low flying area activity notification (AZBA / RBTA) and general information use the excellent SIA website www.sia.aviation-civile.gouv.fr/default_uk.htm
- For weather briefings, NOTAMS and a FPL filing facility use the OLIVIA website www.olivia.aviation-civile.gouv.fr
- Before you even have to commit money to buy the French paper IGN 1:500,000 charts you can plan your route at home by going to this website and viewing current French IGN charts online carte.f-aero.fr/carte-aero-v2
- The SkyDemon flight-planning programme is an easy and convenient way to plan flights, view weather and NOTAM as well as filing flight plans. Just about all French accommodation has wi-fi internet access so, nowadays, all flight-planning can take place within the comfort of one's hotel room. www.skydemon.aero
- As well as all the usual hotel booking apps available, I find the ViaMichelin website particularly good for locating hotels close to airfields. The traditional Michelin maps with airfield depictions are available online here: www.viamichelin.co.uk

● Semur En Auxois (LFGQ)

Not to be confused with Saumur, Semur is a charming little walled town within walking distance of the airfield. The ramparts are impressive and on the two or three times I have visited it has not been overly busy with tourists. Well worth a visit.

● Troyes (LQFB)

Troyes is a good first Customs stop if you want to fly in farther than the near coast airfields and are perhaps heading down the Rhone Valley. The town is often overlooked but it has a delightful old area with fine houses and shops. There is a small restaurant at the airfield but if that is closed there is a hotel about 400 yards away where you can get a very good lunch.

● Vichy (LFLV)

Vichy is the current home of the RSA Rally which is held in mid July. The town has the unfortunate history as the home of Marshal Pétain's collaborative government during WWII, a history that you will be hard put to find any trace of. However, the town's real claim to fame is its thermal springs and the wonderful 19th century buildings and covered walkways. There are plenty of hotels but a surprisingly limited choice of good restaurants. ■