The allure of Avallon...

When you hear the word 'Avalon' you may think of mythical legends or iconic 1980s music. For **Martin Ferid**, Avallon is a French destination that ticks all the boxes…

Main The ramparts at Avallon provide a lovely walk in the summer sunshine. **Photo: Martin Ferid.**

What could the old Cinque port of Tenterden in Kent, the Abbey of Glastonbury in Somerset and the pop group Roxy Music possibly have in common? The giveaway is in this month's destination, all of which have a connection with Avalon, the mythical 'isle of fruit, or apple trees' to which King Arthur is said to have gained nautical passage after his death.

As with most myths and legends, there are several versions to be had and this proves to be no exception. Geoffrey of Monmouth (1095-c.1155) documents King Arthur as being killed or mortally wounded at the Battle of Camlann and laid to rest at Glastonbury Abbey.

The late 12th-century French poet, Chrétien de Troyes, has the nidus of the legend near Avallon in France, after the battle of Déols and the defeat of Arthur Riothamus by Euric, king of the Visigoths. It is in this version that we are first introduced to Sir Lancelot du Lac (Lancelot of the Lake), whose relationship with Queen Guinevere lead to civil war and the end of Arthur's kingdom.

Years ago, in a hard-to-imagine world before aeroplanes, locking wire and synoptic charts, as a student of classical English literature, one of my in-depth study pieces was Sir Thomas Malory's (c1415-1471) *Le Morte d'Arthur*. His work has particular relevance as it was the first version to be both written and published in English. It was published in 1485 by William Caxton only 12 years after the publication of *The Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye*, the first-ever English publication.

Since the Norman conquest, French had been

Right Parc Vaubin is in the heart of the old town and a popular venue for locals to play boules.

Middle The Tour Horlage (clock tower) with walkway through its base. **Photo: Martin Ferid**

Below Avallon is a typical sleepy French airfield during the week so don't rely on being able to get fuel. **Photo: Martin Ferid**

"My first visit to Avallon was after a particularly dry spell on a hot, hazy summer's day when and all around was parched and the runway blended into the surrounding countryside"

> “Auxerre, Dijon and Bourges are well within reach in differing directions, with the greatest attractions being the impromptu discoveries en route”

England’s official language and even though the majority of the population used English in day-to-day conversation, the aristocracy and all official documents continued to be in French, up until the beginning of the 18th century.

In spite of King Arthur’s Avalon being spelt with a single ‘l’ and the Avallon of France having two, British historian, and an authority on the subject Geoffrey Ashe (b1923), still seemed to favour the French location.

Nowadays it really doesn’t matter whether any ancient works from yesteryear are historically accurate, but we rather enjoy ‘the story’, getting a feel for the moral compass of the times and some insight into the period. “Better is peace than ever war”: Sir Thomas Mallory, *Le Morte d’Arthur*. A good lesson from history, which works just as well today, if only people were to pay heed.

Tenterden’s claim to fame is in that it is twinned with Avallon, or Aballo, the original Celtic name of the Roman settlement, which gives some credence to the theory that the ‘island of apple or fruit trees’ might well have been in the Avallon area as aballo means apple in Celtic.

Modern-day Avallon is a typically French town, it has a lovely historical centre, and has been a regular destination for years. For those with the range, Troyes, about 30 minutes to the north is still good for customs.

Below Typical of the delightful alleyway cafés and restaurants. There are eateries to suit all pockets.

Until the last year or so, the only person you were likely to meet at Troyes was the pompier (fireman) to whom you paid your landing fee. These days, however, you can expect customs officials checking documents both in and outbound.

My first visit to Avallon was after a particularly dry spell on a hot, hazy summer’s day when all around was parched and the runway blended into the surrounding countryside. Even though the map said the runway was ‘over there’, it was managing to elude me. In the stifling heat, with frustration building and a desire to be down, it is easy to forget the ‘basics’, as many airfields can be relatively easy to spot from one direction when compared to another. At this point, my old instructor’s words rang in my head: ‘look for something that looks like an airfield’ and, approaching with the sun behind me, the slippery varmint could hide no longer. I’m sure in that moment of pressure we’ve all had the feeling that you’ll never get down, but if you keep calm and fly the aeroplane, the “aviate, navigate and communicate” mantra makes good sense.

Universal norm at airfields

The airfield is on a self-announce basis on the French Unicom frequency 123.5 and, like most French airfields with no controller, pretty relaxed. Fuel is technically reserved for home-based aircraft, although I have managed to get some before now. If it’s a problem, Troyes is probably the best bet as conveniently its fuel pump is self-service and has a credit card facility, which in my view should be the universal norm at airfields everywhere.

To get into the town, once out of the gate, turn left and at the roundabout take the ‘straight on’ minor road, not much wider than a narrow lane. Continue to the end where it meets a major road that leads into the heart of the town and turn left. It’s about a mile, all told.

One of the cheapest hotels is the three-star Le Brit Dak Hotel 119 Rue De Lyon, 89200, but it’s on the other side of town. Alternatively, as you walk in on the right-hand side is the slightly more expensive, but wonderfully French, Citotel Avallon Vauban 53 Rue De Paris, 89200 at around £55 a night. It also has quite a nice in-house restaurant making it very convenient if you’re just stopping off before going on the next day.

The last time I stayed there I was en route to a Swiss fly-in, thwarted by a cloud base at around the same height as the Jura Mountains, which either required experience in mountain flying or knowledge of the local

Above Street entertainment during a medieval fete added additional atmosphere during one of our visits. **Photo: Martin Ferid.**

area, neither of which existed. The 1971 hit record *Love The One You're With* by Stephen Stills has great relevance for the touring pilot who crosses several weather systems. I'm not suggesting a return of 'free love' for the silver surfer, but really, 'if you can't get where you were going, just enjoy where you are'.

My co-conspirator for the trip was a chap giving his plans-built RV9 its first taste of French airspace and, despite the fact that the Swiss border was only 40 minutes away for me, and even less for him, Burgundy didn't feel like the poor relation.

The first year my partner entered the world of aviation and rolling maintenance, her Christmas present from me was a tool kit, a very nice tool kit, but a tool kit all the same. After showing willing most of the winter in preparation for the coming season, I needed to choose places not only to impress but also make her feel that all those hours in a cold, draughty hangar were worthwhile.

As an early destination, I chose Avallon and the centrally located l'Hostellerie de la Poste, an 18th-century coaching inn with quaint rooms, a restaurant and a nice courtyard.

On arriving in the town, we found a medieval fête in progress with a vibrant, festive atmosphere. Throughout the day actors and minstrels could be found secreted in the nooks and crannies, delivering melic prose and age-old facetiae, which was rather wasted on our limited understanding of the language. Dressed in period costumes, the string quartets spoke a language more easily understood and their music from hundreds of years ago made the ambience complete. The pavement cafés were buzzing as the merriment continued into the evening with a classical concert in the church, and a firework display after the sun went down.

With the weekend a resounding success, I would like to claim gentlemanly chivalry, or even romantic foresight, but I have to admit that our being there at that specific time and the ensuing revelry was not by design but purely coincidental.

A walk around the ramparts is almost compulsory. Starting from the Auxerre Gate, you'll pass below the Vaudois Tower and several other 15th century bastions, before ending up near the Beurdelaine tower for a lovely view of the Cousin Valley below.

For food, the choices are endless. At the cheaper end is Les Cordois Autrement, which has a modern and minimalist interior, is much nicer in the courtyard and food is fine. 15 rue Bocquillot, 89200. Tel: +33 3 86 33 11 79. (*http://www.lescordois.fr*)

More bistro style and right in the centre is Les Capucins with a reasonably priced hotel upstairs. 6 Ave Paul Doumer, 89200. Tel: +33 3 86 34 06 52. (*www.avallonlescapucins.com*)

One of my personal favourites is Le Relais des Gourmets, where the meal is likely to take most of the evening and not really suitable if you're on any kind of diet. 47 rue de Paris, 89200. Tel: +33 3 86 34 18 90. (*www.relaisdesgourmets.com*)

The Saturday morning market is typical of markets up and down the country, with all sorts of French fayre, clothing and local produce.

For things to see, the Musée du Costume has an elegant and interesting collection of period clothing, all presented in a lovely old house. 6 rue Belgrand 89200.

Musée de l'Avallonnais is right in the centre in a side street and documents the history of Avallon. 5 rue du College 89200.

Although the old town is relatively small, as you wander through the alleyways, like so much of France, its inert charm is all around you and can be seen in its buildings and architecture.

In the centre, you'll also find a small park, where the locals still play boules and are found drinking an aperitif at the surrounding cafés and bars. Dominating the entrance is an 1873 bronze statue of Vauban, whose name is ubiquitous throughout France. Sébastien Le Prestre de Vauban, (1633-1707) was a renowned French military engineer and is credited with revolutionising the art of siege-craft and defence fortifications. I think the best way I could describe him would be as 'one clever bloke' – he not only became a prolific writer but was also an innovative statistician.

From relatively lowly beginnings he eventually became a Marshall of France and has been described as 'the most honourable and virtuous man of his age… incapable of lending himself to anything false or evil'. Now, how's that for an epitaph? Something we can all hopefully aspire to!

Weather window

After the success of our first few trips to carefully chosen destinations, I no longer had to employ the hard sell or any manoeuvring tactics in convincing my partner to go flying. With the appearance of a weather window, she'd be packed and ready to go at short notice. And although Avallon aerodrome became a favourite, we didn't always stay there.

There is an industrial estate immediately outside the

airfield where you will find a branch of Europcar with special weekend rates (Friday afternoon to Monday morning) of around £65. Zone Artisanale Nord, 18 Rue de la Grande Corvée, 89200 Avallon. Tel: +33 3 86 34 39 36. This opened up a whole new world in more ways than one.

Firstly, we could pick a different direction each time, discovering the splendours of France in general, from the villages to the hotels, restaurants, the outstanding scenery and, of course, the wine! If I was restricted to drinking wine from only one region in the world, it would be the wines of the Bourgogne, so I naturally tend to gravitate to the South East once I'm out of the airfield.

Passing the villages, the names of which we know from wine lists, negociants and cellars is almost like driving through an encyclopaedia of fine wine. After chatting with one of the resident pilots at the airfield, having the car meant we could top up the tanks with Mogas as he kindly loaned us his two 20-litre fuel cans. And visits to the local supermarket for drinks, snacks or picnic ingredients for an unexpected beauty spot became almost compulsory.

Places to go…

There are far too many gems to list here – but Auxerre, Dijon and Bourges are well within reach in differing directions, with the greatest attractions being the impromptu discoveries en route.

More within the vicinity of Avallon itself is the delightful Hotel & Restaurant Le Moulin des Templiers, about five kilometres away and 10 minutes by car. At about £100 per night, the building is an old watermill, which the river passes through. Having lunch on the terrace is nothing short of idyllic, sheltered by the trees in the sunshine, with the sound of the river a few feet away, certainly puts life back into perspective. For a while at least. 10 route de Cousin 89200 Pontaubert. (*http://hotel-moulin-des-templiers.com*)

The Château de Chastellux is what we would refer to as a stately home and well-worth visiting, about 20 minutes away by car. The oldest part of the building dates back to c.1080AD and tours are conducted by the current owners who, amazingly, are direct descendants of the same family that had the château built all that time ago. (*www.chateau-de-chastellux.com*)

Now, it is true that I enjoy most places I go to and naturally seek out points of interest, but whether you're looking for a romantic few days away or a group of friends hoping to enjoy the best of France, you'll be hard pressed to find somewhere that ticks more boxes than Avallon.

The more astute of you may have noticed that there were other connections in the opening sentence as yet unclarified. On the cover of the Bryan Ferry and Roxy Music *Avalon* album, is an ethereal image of Arthur being transported to his final resting place. The whole album is, in fact, a collection of short poems set to music that Ferry had said could easily be put together to make a complete story.

Next month's *Flying Adventure* takes a trip to Seppe in Holland. ■

Right History abounds at Avallon, there are so many little alleyways with hidden treasures to explore. **Photo: Christophe Finot.**

Get touring with the author!

Martin Ferid is a Class Rating Instructor and Revalidation Examiner and specialises in helping qualified pilots expand their horizons by introducing them to the splendours of flying in Europe, both as day trips or a few days at a time.

If you lack a little confidence in crossing the channel, touring in general or indeed any aspects of flying, his details are below.

For anyone looking for a little inspiration, browse through our 'favourite destinations' on the website below.

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Picture a weekend away; a nice town, good food, a glass or two and a bunch of like-minded people. If you would like to join us, you will be most welcome. It makes no difference whether you are a seasoned tourer or have never crossed the channel before, there is enough support and experience around to help allay those fears.

Email the address above and I'll add your name to the list and keep you informed.