

## IN PURSUIT OF A PERCHERON TROUT

**Jon Beer** rejoices in the fine fishing and luxurious facilities to be found in a special part of Normandy.

### I BLAME MYSELF

This was not strictly necessary : there were two other people in the car quite happy to do it for me. In fact, they insisted.

Here's how it happened. It was Whitsun and we were off to France. Judi is a teacher so we can only get away in school holidays. For several years we spent each Whitsun week in France or somewhere similar so that the smallest daughter could revise for GCSEs and A-levels with a friend and away from the distractions of TV and clubbing. When she left school we thought we'd get this Whitsun trip to ourselves. Not a bit of it. She is now an Impoverished Student and a free hols in a free hols.

This year we were off to the Auvergne, a green land of high meadows, roundy peaks and wooded valleys bathed in sunshine under a blue sky : I'd seen the brochures.

It was all sunshine and blue sky in Dover as we waited for the ferry and I reached for the button that opens the car's sunshine roof. Two voices cried in alarm : "Jon! What are you ..." "Dad, don't touché...".

The sunshine roof has been a bit iffy since Judi opened it when the car was sheeted in ice. But you know how it is with blokes and buttons and it was the sort of day that breathes optimism into a chap. And, as it happens, when I pushed the button the sunshine roof opened. Not much, admittedly, and it was a bit grindy, but it opened. I smiled smugly : they have so little faith in me.

The problems came when I pushed the other button to close it. Nothing happened. So I pushed the first button, just to free things up, like, and it opened a bit more. But still wouldn't close.

There was a certain coolness in the car now, and not just from the breeze through the sunshine roof. We drove on to the ferry and set off for France. It was one o'clock. We landed in Boulogne an hour later – three o'clock French time – and set about trying to find a Fiat dealer who could fix the sunshine roof in the last knockings of a Friday afternoon.

We didn't find one. Which was a pity because ominous clouds were gathering to the south. Something similar was happening inside the car as we drove down the coast past Abbeville and on into the lush lands of Normandy. A dozen years ago I had come here to fish the small chalkstreams that trickle across the countryside and run to the sea between Dieppe and Le Havre. At Rouen we crossed the Seine and headed towards the valley of the Risle, most celebrated of France's chalkstreams. The motorway flies high above the broad reaches of the river at Aclou, once the favourite beat of Charles Ritz. The grandiose fishing lodge, originally built by the Duc de Valencay, where Ritz stayed – and where, for a morning, I once fished – is now sadly dwarfed by the pillars of the motorway viaduct. We drove on. Clouds boiled up ahead of us and a rattle of rain spattered the windscreen : but at 80 mph it didn't come into the car much.

Fifty miles further on we left the motorway and crossed the Risle again. It was barely a stream here, just a mile or so from its source in a region of rolling wooded hills and soft valleys. We had entered Le Perche.

The Perche is the Cinderella of France's national parks. It has been largely overlooked by tourism and is all the more charming for that. It is famous for its Percherons, a breed of huge horses, and for its apples and cider. It was once the playground of Parisian nobility and is dotted with ancient manor houses. It is also the birthplace of some of the troutiest rivers of northern France. And one of them, the Huisne, is the westernmost outpost of grayling in France.

It is a fair step to the Auvergne and we had planned a stop in Normandy to break the journey. France is blessed with a vast network of Gîtes de France, rural accommodation in anything from shacks to

chateaux. And the Gîtes de France organisation handles *chambres d'hôtes* (bed and breakfast) through the same website. I had asked the Normandy Tourist Information to suggest a *chambre d'hôte* near some fishing on the Huisne. I had hopes of grabbing a couple of hours that evening – and perhaps a couple of hours the next morning – on the river before the long schlep down south.

Those hopes were fading fast. With the time lost looking for a garage and some more in a futile search for duck tape and plastic sheeting, it was nearly nine when we crossed the little River Coudre and pulled into the ancient mill of Gémages. We'd be lucky if we could still get something to eat.

We were, in truth, a bit frazzled when we arrived. And then the charming Iannaccone family scooped us up and kissed it better. Nicolas found a large sheet of plywood to cover the hole in the car roof : Anna took us upstairs to a cosy dining room and fed us paté and pasta with smoked salmon and duck in a raisin sauce and fruit and cheese. And then their son, Ivan, took us across the courtyard to the lodge – because the Moulin de Gémages has a little something up its sleeve for the weary traveller. Particularly if he is fond of a little fishing. Beyond the lodge, across the little River Coudre, which borders the courtyard, the dying light was glinting on an intricate maze of water, a dozen sinuous lakes ringed by a sparkling stream. All this is fly only fishing for brown trout, rainbows, golden trout, tiger and leopard trout and brook trout.

But not tonight, Josephine.

Shadowy figures festooned with tackle were trudging across the little bridge in the last of the light. Rods and nets were hung on the wall and we followed the fishermen into the lodge.

It's a fishing hut, Jim, but not as we know it. Ivan's fishing lodge is a cross between a gentleman's club, a chic wine bar and Farlows of Pall Mall. There are leather easychairs, real coffee, a bar with all the trimmings and, on the other side of the room, as fine a top-drawer tackle-shop as I have ever cast covetous eyes upon. There is also the inevitable display of penknives to be found in any French sports shop – what do Frenchmen do with these knives ? The chat, though, was much the same as in any other fishing hut or hotel – but the hands were held further apart than I am accustomed to. Judi, Alice and I had a *digestif* and tottered off to bed. I would be up early : Ivan was taking me fishing tomorrow. In the middle of the night I woke to the rattle of rain on the tiles and wondered if the plywood was still in place.

IT WASN'T DAWN or anything like, but it was cool and grey and early when I met Ivan at the lodge. Ivan is a qualified fishing guide and he looked every inch the part in waders and wrap-around shades. We piled the gear into his car and drove through the lanes to the village of Rémalard, where two fishing clubs share a fly-only, "no-kill" beat on the River Huisne. We made our way down to the water across early morning meadows redolent with buttercups and cowpats.

The fills of the Perche are gentle and its streams are much the same, flowing serenely between lush pastures behind a fringe of willow and alder. No fish was rising on that early morning so Ivan settled to trotting a heavy nymph down a channel in the wafting weed while I went exploring upstream. I found a rising fish in the middle of a deep pool scoured below a footbridge but, though I offered it a wide choice, it wasn't buying anything I had to sell. I wandered back to Ivan. He was still at work on the run, casting elegantly and guiding the nymph with all the balanced grace of a matador. But it wasn't doing him any good, either. So we gave it up and went back for breakfast at the mill.

We were full of croissant and coffee when another couple came into the room and sat at the other end of the table. The woman picked up a cup and turned it over to read the maker's mark. I have a friend who does that. He's from Stoke-on-Trent è and so, it turned out, were they, over for a wedding in the next village.

Time was getting on and we would have to be on our way but Ivan was anxious that I catch a Percheron trout. So while Judi and Alice packed the cases, Ivan and I grabbed rods and crossed the bridge by the lodge. The mill was once powered by the Coudre and its waters plunge through a sluice into a tree-lined pool behind the dining room. I crept to the water's edge and cast, feeling rather boy-scouty under the incredulous gaze of the couple from Stoke-on-Trent. Wild brown trout spawn in all the streams of the

Perche but the trout that nosed up from the depths of the pool to take my sly was born in a tank. It was very large and very friendly.

We worked our way up the little stream, working nymphs under the alders on the far bank and hooking half a dozen brownies before we reached the boundary of the fishery. Then we fished our way back to the mill through the maze of interlocking lakes with their bewildering variety of trout and exotic trout-char hybrids, ending with a brookie from the ribbon of water close to the mill.

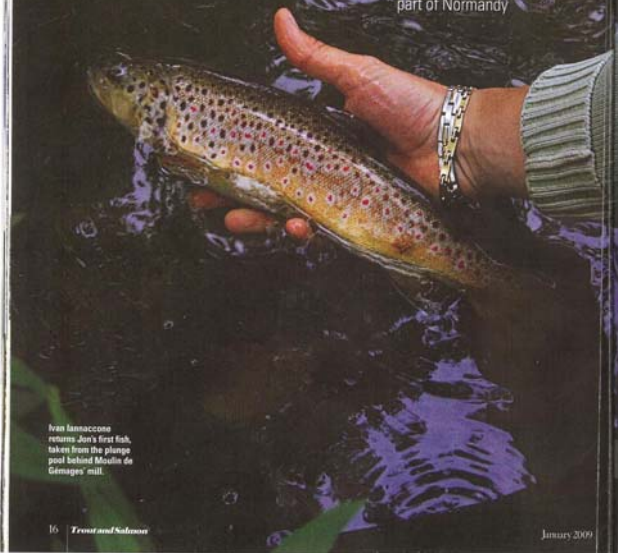
The Moulin de Gémages is an extraordinary spot. Little by little the fly-fishing *cognoscenti* of Paris are discovering its unique combination of fine fishing and luxurious facilities in the heart of the Perche countryside. And I won't forget the welcome we got from the Iannaccone family.

It was time to go. We said our goodbyes and took our photographs. We packed the car and gave Nicolas back his sheet of plywood. We had 350 miles to go with a busted sunshine roof and it was looking like rain. We took to the lanes and headed towards Orleans on the motorway to the south. It was noon on Saturday. We were threading through the houses of Authon-du Perche when Judi spotted a small garage with the workshop door open. I knocked and went in. A bloke in overalls was doing something oily at a workbench. I don't know the French for sunshine roof so I led him outside and showed him the problem. I pushed the button and it edged open a bit *moiré*. I pushed the other button and nothing happened. He prised the buttons out of the trim and pulled them apart. The plastic connectors were moulded so that they would only fit the one way round. He looked at the bits and then got out his penknife and carved a bit off one connector and then jammed it in the back of the other button. He pressed the button. And lo! –the thing began to move. It was grindy but it closed.

I blessed that man. I pressed notes into his hands. I would have kissed them had they not been quite so oily. I felt wonderful. Judi and Alice felt relieved. We all felt dry. We set off again, all smiles this time. Ten minutes later the heavens opened. It would rain for the next five hours. We didn't care. And now I know what they do with those penknives.

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Ivan Iannaccone returns Jon's first fish, taken from the plunge pool before Moulin de Gémeages mill.



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It was all sunshine and blue sky in Dover as we waited for the ferry and I reached for the button that opens the car's sunshade roof. Two voices cried in alarm: "Jon! What are you...?" "Dad, don't touch."

The sunshade roof has been a bit flaky since Judi opened it when the car was shored in sea. But you know how it is with blades and buttons and it was the sort of day that breathes optimism into a chap. And, as it happens, when I pushed the button the sunshade roof opened. Not much, admittedly, and it was a bit grimy, but it opened. I smiled smugly: they have so little faith in me.

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## IN PURSUIT OF A PERCHERON TROUT CONTINUED

**A pale fish taken from the millstream behind the mill.**

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**The fishing tackle shop at Moulin de Gémeages.**

**Ivan's fly box for the Huisne.**

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**Warning: accommodation at Moulin de Gémeages.**

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**Factfile**

The Moulin de Gémeages is a superb fly-only fishery, gill and chamber de hôtellerie run by the Iannaccone family in a restored water mill close to Brienne (20mi).

Visit [www.moulindegepages.com](http://www.moulindegepages.com) for details.

Tel: 0033 23 25 15 72 e-mail [annette.ann@wanadoo.fr](mailto:annette.ann@wanadoo.fr)

Glas and chambers de hôtellerie can be viewed and booked online at [www.glas-france.com](http://www.glas-france.com) The Moulin de Gémeages reference is 0102. Information on fishing in Normandy can be found by following the links at [www.normandy-tourism.org](http://www.normandy-tourism.org)