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Bonjour to all things literary

TEN steps, two more - right, nearly there. I caught my mother's hand as she lurched perilously on the tiny landing of Le Gros Horloge's viewing platform.

Scrambling for ways to keep my frail mother upright, giving her a boost up narrow dungeon-like spiral staircases, and hefting her along the oh-so-quiet (but not exactly invalid-friendly) cobbled streets of Rouen was not quite how I had pictured our 'grand tour' of the mediaeval Normandy town.

Just days after we planned our mother-daughter double birthday celebration in this historic town, a convenient 90 minutes away from mother's home in Paris, she had slipped breaking her tibia at an impossibly awkward angle, leaving her housebound for two months.

Barely recovered and still unsteady on her feet she had vowed to honour our engagement with a non-negotiable, "I'll manage!".

So there we were at the top of one of France's most iconic and wonky clock towers after a slog down the paved thoroughfare dodging loose and lopsided stones and spying invisible dips in the road.

I was already yearning for the blissful peace - and level surface - of the first class carriage on the Eurostar which had ferried me down to Paris the previous evening.

I had not had a care in the world then, snacking away on a gourmet cheese plate, sipping on unlimited cups of tea served by kind staff and working my way through the stacks of fashion glossies at the disposal of travellers.

But back to Le Gros Horloge. The pride of the people of Rouen and a marvel of engineering and artistry, the gilded astronomic clock lays on a Renaissance arch spanning the busy rue du Gros-Horloge.

It is flanked by a 14th century Gothic belfry which houses the bells and the complex mechanism behind the clock's movement. At the very top, visitors get to take in the stunning views of the imposing cathedral, market place and flurry of steeples and spires peeking out from the rows of colourful colombages (timbered) houses. It is not for nothing that Rouen has been hailed 'the town of a hundred bell towers'.

Exhausted from our exertions we made for our abode for the night, the Best Western Hotel Litteraire Gustave Flaubert, Rouen's hottest ticket and a crucial stopover for any tourists fancying themselves on a grand literary/cultural/historical tour of the town.

Ensnared under an archway just a few yards from the Place du Vieux Marché, it is easy to miss... which we did and had to double back.

For a long time just another cog in the hotel chain, it was recently transformed into a sort of shrine to the Rouen-born novelist, who remains to this

Brimming with style and history, Rouen is most famous as the place where Joan of Arc was burnt at the stake, but MARION SAUVEBOIS discovers plenty to amuse literature fans — and cake lovers — as well



● A street in Rouen; right, Le Gros Horloge; far right, the stylish Best Western Hotel Litteraire Gustave Flaubert

day the town's most famous son.

First editions of Flaubert's novels carefully preserved under glass cases welcome guests at the entrance, as do large black and white portraits of the author and his famous literary peers including Maupassant and George Sand.

Seamlessly blending boudoir style and subdued tones reminiscent of his work's nostalgia with distinctly modern touches, each element of the décor is carefully thought through.

Every nook and cranny is dedicated to either a character, or period of his life. On the ground-floor a stuffed parrot, representing Loulou, the bird featured in Un Coeur Simple hangs solemnly in a cage above a contemporary reinvention of Flaubert's study at the far end of the dining room. All around bookcases proffer his complete works in paperback for guests.

Upstairs, each floor (the two that are currently completed) celebrates a place close to Flaubert and particular novel. We were on the first floor, devoted to Paris and L'Education sentimentale. The second is dedicated to Normandy and Madame Bovary. Like

every room, ours was named after one of the novel's characters, in our case Louise, and a quote plucked from the pages was neatly etched on the bed's canvas headboard. A watercolour inspired by the book took pride of place by the door accompanied by a helpful reminder of the plot.

After a drink of cider downstairs in the snug Madame Bovary boudoir, with its floral wallpaper, matching love seat and scarlet draperies, we continued the literary theme by heading for a birthday meal of steak tartare at The Maupassant.

Thankfully, we managed to avoid any major falls in the two-minute walk.

The next day the grand tour was due to begin in earnest and, my mother's leg permitting, we were ready to hit every spot our guidebook cared to mention.

It was a nice idea in theory, soon scuppered by a combination of precarious wobbling, an irresistible shoe sale and an indulgent tea break.

By the end of the day we had clocked up a grand total of one museum (two if you count a rush job at the



Cathedral Notre-Dame, where Richard the Lionheart's heart is buried). The lack of signage and Latin engravings on every tomb around the church made it difficult to establish which one was indeed Richard's. We spotted the word 'leonis' on one of them and left fairly confident we had found it.

Next on the list was the Historial Jeanne d'Arc in the Archbishop's palace next to the cathedral. The close concentration of tourist spots was a blessing and made up for the pesky cobbles along the way.

Among its growing list of claims to fame, if the abundance of streets, squares, schools, cafes and estate agents boasting her name are not a big giveaway already, Rouen has gone down in history as the place where Joan of Arc was burned at the stake for witchcraft only to be retrieved posthumously and found



innocent.

In the palace, we picked our way slowly but surely from the vaulted crypt to the upper floor.

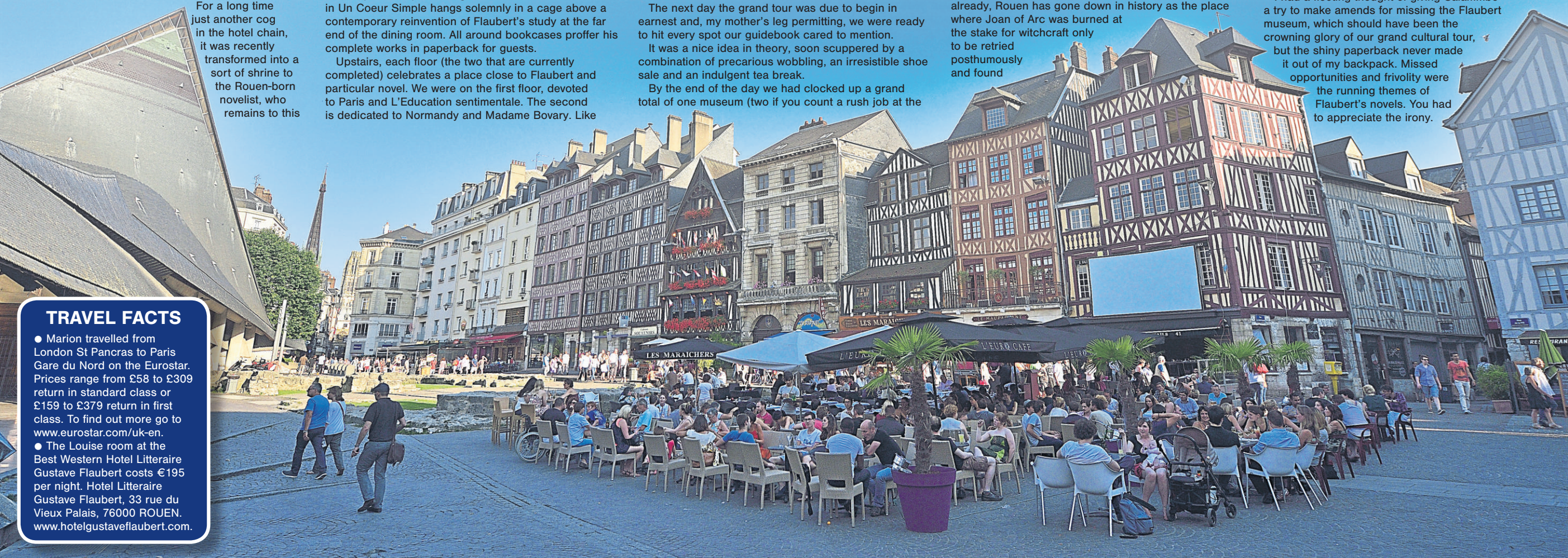
In each room impressively produced films were projected onto the walls re-enacting Joan's 'rehabilitation' trial through the testimonies of key witnesses and retracing her bewildering journey from peasant's daughter to army leader who went on to defeat the English invader and Bourguignons only to be captured and sentenced to death for heresy.

The use of interactive displays and old Hollywood movie clips to piece together her ascension to one of France's most treasured national heroes brought a new dimension to the story of the maid of Orleans.

We had intended to visit the Flaubert museum 10 minutes away but we were lured into Rouen's famous tea rooms Dame Cakes by the promise of rhubarb meringue pie and proceeded to spend the next 75 minutes sampling the shop's delights before ordering a selection of its famous mini cakes for the road.

Running out of time, we hurried as best we could to the station — playing an already unsteady woman full of cake is not the easiest way to get her to pick up the pace — to catch our train back to Paris's Gare Saint-Lazare. Later I hopped on the Eurostar back to London.

I had a fleeting thought of giving Salammbô a try to make amends for missing the Flaubert museum, which should have been the crowning glory of our grand cultural tour, but the shiny paperback never made it out of my backpack. Missed opportunities and frivolity were the running themes of Flaubert's novels. You had to appreciate the irony.



TRAVEL FACTS

- Marion travelled from London St Pancras to Paris Gare du Nord on the Eurostar. Prices range from £58 to £309 return in standard class or £159 to £379 return in first class. To find out more go to www.eurostar.com/uk-en.
- The Louise room at the Best Western Hotel Litteraire Gustave Flaubert costs €195 per night. Hotel Litteraire Gustave Flaubert, 33 rue du Vieux Palais, 76000 ROUEN. www.hotelgustaveflaubert.com.

TRAVEL TAKE-OFF

Last-minute availability

BARBADOS: Virgin Holidays (www.virginholidays.co.uk; 0344 557 3870) offers seven nights Savannah Beach (all-inclusive) from £909pp (two sharing) - saving up to £570pp (39%). Includes transfers and flights from Gatwick on April 13.

MEDITERRANEAN: Cruise Nation (www.cruisenation.com; 0800 408 0759) offers a full-board 12-night Med School Holidays cruise on the Carnival Vista calling at Barcelona, Marseille, Livorno, Civitavecchia, Naples, Dubrovnik, Corfu, Messina, Cagliari, and Barcelona with two FREE nights in Barcelona on a room-only basis from £899pp - saving from £500pp (36%). Includes flights from London Gatwick departing on August 4. Book by February 29.

CHAMONIX: Iglu Ski (www.igluski.com; 020 3696 9452) offers a four nights at the Club Hotel Vert (B&B) from £505pp (two sharing). Includes transfers and flights from Gatwick on March 17.

MIAMI: Signature from Thomas Cook (www.thomascook.com; 0844 412 5970) offers seven nights at the five-star Miami Beach Resort & Spa (room only) from £885pp (two sharing). Includes flights from Manchester on April 17.

MOROCCO: On The Beach (www.onthebeach.co.uk; 871 474 3000) offers seven nights at the four-star Mogador Al Madina Hotel (half board) in Agadir from £330pp (two sharing). Includes flights from Manchester on February 23.

ALICANTE: Jet2holidays (www.jet2holidays.com; 0800 408 5594) offers three nights at the three-star Best Western Hotel Alhambra (room only) from £169pp (two sharing). Includes fights from East Midlands on February 22.

ICELAND & THE NORTHERN LIGHTS CRUISE: Travel One (www.travelone.co.uk; 020 7929 7773) offers eleven nights aboard the adult-only Magellan (full board) from £879pp (two sharing)-saving up to £2,369 (63%). Departs London Tilbury on March 1.

PRAGUE: Lowcostholidays.com (0800 1116292) offers two nights at the four-star Moods Boutique Hotel (B&B) from £111pp (two sharing). Includes flights from Manchester on March 9.

PARIS: Opodo (0871 277 0090; Opodo.co.uk) offers five nights at the Timhotel Bd Berthier Paris XVII from £211pp (two sharing). Includes flights from Bristol on April 15.

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