

Colorful carousel at Honfleur's old port.

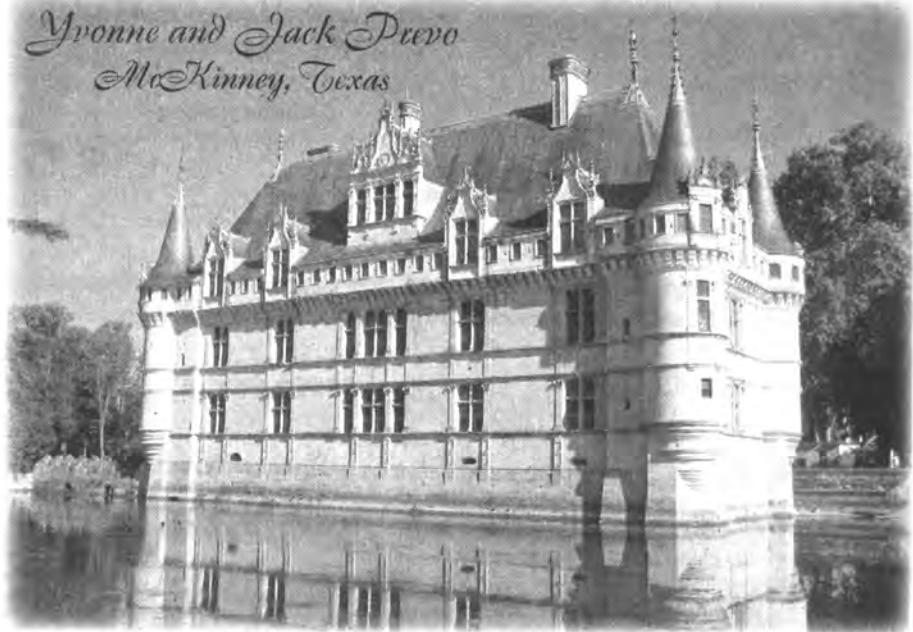
## *An intimate look at Normandy and the Loire Valley*

**W**e were inspired by Beth Habian's article in the September '09 issue about her trip to the Dordogne region of France — so much so that we immediately contacted George Nevin, the owner/operator of Intimate France (Oakland, CA; 800/676-1247, [www.intimatefrance.com](http://www.intimatefrance.com)), to ask about his 2010 tour of Normandy and the Loire Valley. We were pleased with his prompt and informative responses to our inquiries, so we booked the 12-day tour departing Sept. 12.

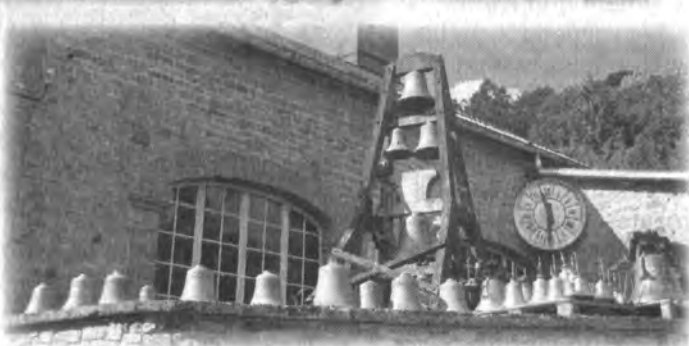
An added incentive to book sooner than later was a \$100 discount (each) if we submitted our deposit before Dec. 31, 2009.

The tour included visits to Monet's gardens at Giverny, the D-Day beaches, Belle Époque

*Yvonne and Jack Prevo  
McKinney, Texas*



Château d'Azay-le-Rideau, surrounded by water.



**Clockwise from top left: The monument at the American Cemetery at Omaha Beach; reception table at *Auberge du XIIIe Siècle*; Fonderie de Cloches in Villedieu-les-Poêles, and sculptural detail on Chartres Cathedral.**

resorts, Mont-Saint-Michel, the cathedral at Chartres and many other fascinating sights. While in the Loire Valley, we toured castles, châteaux, gardens and beautiful scenic villages.

### Superb dining

The tour began in Paris at the Charles de Gaulle (CDG) airport **Novotel** with a meet-and-greet session with our fellow travelers. During our tour, eight passengers would share a comfortable nine-passenger van, with George as our driver. He also served as our guide and, since he speaks fluent French, our interpreter.

Additionally, George is a gourmand who enjoys sharing his knowledge. As a result, all the meals we had together as a group were varied and delicious.

The restaurants were personally selected by George for their high quality and ambiance and the beautiful

presentation of the food. One included lunch was at the Michelin-starred *Auberge du XIIIe Siècle* in

Saché — a memorable experience. (We will never forget the hand-peeled and -seeded cherry tomatoes!)

## Intimate France Tours

### TOUR LINEUP FOR 2011

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- Dordogne • May 15-27 • *cave art, lovely stone villages, markets*
- BENELUX • Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg • Sept. 4-16 •  
*Amsterdam, Bruges, Delft, the art of Van Gogh & Rembrandt*
- Champagne & Lorraine, France • Sept. 18-30 • *Reims, Verdun, art deco Nancy, fine Champagnes*

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While on the subject of food, two of our lunches were picnics in lovely settings, as we were blessed with gorgeous weather on this trip.

George has a delightful sense of humor, and he is a gracious host and a gentleman.

The hotels all were three-star, and each was unique. All were well located and had a high charm factor and/or could boast a dining room that was a destination in itself.

We spent three nights in Honfleur, two nights in Bayeux, two nights in Mont-Saint-Michel, four nights in Amboise and the last night at a former hunting lodge in the CDG airport area.



The charming village of Amboise.

### Inspiring sights

Omaha Beach and the American Cemetery, where 9,387 soldiers rest, were beautiful and peaceful, belying the events that took place in that area. Shortly after we arrived at the cemetery,

“The Star-Spangled Banner” and “Taps” were played, which was very moving.

By coincidence, as we were leaving the hotel dining room that evening, a local couple stopped us and, after visiting with us in English for a few minutes, the

gentleman declared that they would never forget and would always be grateful for what America had done for France during WWII. We were very touched.

An excursion that was a little out of the ordinary was a visit to a foundry, in Villedieu-les-Poêles, that makes bells for churches, public buildings and ships and has done so since 1865. The foundry guide took us through the whole process of church bell making, from designing to casting, firing and tuning, and it was fascinating. Who knew that all church bells are named and christened before they are rung?

We also enjoyed seeing Clos Lucé in Amboise, the last home of Leonardo da Vinci. The lower level of this beautiful old château holds models of many of this remarkable genius’ inventions, such as a parachute, a flying machine, a helicopter and an armored tank.

Monet’s gardens and the gardens at Château Chenonceau were especially beautiful. Even though it was a bit late in the season, they were so

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extensively planted that there were still many varieties of flowers in bloom. The hydrangeas and dahlias were spectacular. Every room open to the public at Chenonceau had gorgeous arrangements of fresh fruit and flowers taken from the gardens.

Window boxes all over Normandy were still dripping with geraniums and petunias, as were the baskets on the streetlights and the planted boxes on fences and bridges. There



was always something to bring on the "oohs" and "ahhs."

We could go on and on, but I suggest you take a look at George's website for more details on the itineraries he offers.

Although the Normandy/Loire Valley tour is not offered in 2011, four others are, including one to Spain and one to the Benelux countries. Their descriptions, and the advantages of traveling with this company — with which we agree wholeheartedly — are described there in detail.

All breakfasts, three lunches, six dinners and all admission fees were included in the cost of \$3,795 per person. Airfare was extra.

We will definitely travel with Intimate France again. *ITN*

## Peter Paul Rubens

In 1610, artist Peter Paul Rubens rebuilt to his own design a residence in Antwerp, Belgium. Now a museum, Rubenshuis (*Wapper 9-11, Antwerp; phone +32 3 201 15 55, www.rubenshuis.be*) will host "Palazzo Rubens — The Master as an Architect," an exhibit on his architectural accomplishments, Sept. 10-Dec. 11, 2011.

Among some 50 items will be architectural prints and writings and works by Michelangelo, Guilio Romano, Van Dyck and Jordaens. €8-€10 (\$11-\$14); free on last Wednesday of the month.

## Antwerp history museum

In the Eilandje district of Antwerp, Belgium, Museum Aan de Stroom (MAS), or Museum on the River (*Hanzestedenplaats 1, Antwerp; phone +32 3 338 44 34, www.mas.be*), will open May 17.

The new home for the collections of the Ethnographic Museum, the National Shipping Museum and the Folklore Museum, it will have exhibits showcasing the port city's relationship throughout history to the rest of the world. (An information point is currently open.)

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