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Ghost-hunters of France

When you think of ghosts, you think of...the UK. But some intrepid ghost-hunters say France does have its share of spirits. Find out about some looks at haunted France and a soon-to-launch ghost tour of one haunted abbey in Normandy. Plus Expatica Contributing Editor Clair Whitmer asks: why is England more haunted than France anyway?

France has surely got the setting for spooks and spectres, yet the Hexagon seems remarkably lacking in things that go bump in the night, at least compared to the UK, where the ghost business is very big business.



Entrepreneurial psychic Erick Fearson (Copyright: Maison Hantée.com)

But, as of next month in one abbey in Normandy, some French ghosts are finally getting their share of the spotlight thanks to Erick Fearson, an entrepreneurial psychic, former professional magician, and one of the two men behind the website [Maison-Hantée](#) (with editor Olivier Valentin).

Fearson will launch his tour of the haunted [Abbey of Mortemer](#) in June. Using the guise of a police investigation, Fearson will provide a tour of the abbeys—without a guarantee of an appearance of its famous Lady in White or murdered monks— plus a *café-dégustation* during which visitors can chat with him about his psychic experiences and knowledge of the supernatural in general and France's ghosts in particular.



The allegedly haunted Abbaye de Mortemer

For the time being, the tour will be offered in French only but Fearson hopes to add English-language versions some time soon, perhaps as early as this summer. And if he finds a receptive audience for his ghost tours, Fearson (the son of a 'pendulist' and the offspring of a family of card-readers and healers) would like to branch out from

Normandy—which he claims is the most haunted region of France thanks to all the invasions—to the castles of the Loire or Brittany, where the Celtic culture has kept alive many ghostly and supernatural legends.

But Fearson will have to avoid some of the clichés of 'ghost-tourism'

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to attract French tourists. While English-speaking tourists might happily take a ghost-tour in France on a lark, the locals have a very different attitude.

Ghosts: a taboo topic

This is because, Fearson explains, the French have a strong "attraction-repulsion" to the subject of the supernatural, an attitude that says a lot about the cultural differences between France and Anglo-Saxon countries.

In English-speaking countries, including the US and Australia, ghost tours and haunted hotels are a recognized if not a predominant sector of the tourist industry. This is not true in France although Fearson—who has collected stories and eyewitness reports about more than 300 haunted sites in France over the past 25 years—would say there is just as much paranormal activity here as anywhere else.

"The question I ask myself why are most French people can't talk about this with more detachment? And I always come back to the same answer: we are a Cartesian country, a country of the rational... We think that it can't exist because there is no proof," said Fearson. "To believe in something unproven means we're naïve or psychologically fragile."

But Fearson says that the French may observe this "taboo" publicly, but not necessarily in private. In fact, one could say that the French take the topic of the occult and, more generally, death and life-after-death more seriously than Anglo-Saxons, who might talk about such things with a degree of detachment, even humour.

If a tourist takes a ghost tour in London, they don't necessarily they expect to see a ghost or even believe in them. It's just for fun.

Fearson's ghost-tour, on the other hand, with its coffee-break chat with an expert, takes a distinctly intellectual approach, one calculated to make it more palatable to the French.



A ghostly view of Normandy's Château de Carrouge (Copyright: Simon Marsden)

He says a lot of his potential clients are actually scared of visiting an allegedly haunted place. "If you buy a ticket for a ghost tour in France, it implies that you believe in ghosts... There is a real fear that is quite tangible," said Fearson, adding that at least one nervous potential ticket-buyer already backed out for exactly this reason.

Some ghost-hunters, even a well-known British ghost-hunter and photographer of haunted places, argue that this partly is a good thing.

"There is more respect. Both for the dead and their families," said



For more information on Fearson's Mysterious Normandy

To reserve a 'haunted' tour of the Abbey of Mortemer (in French only), contact:

Lisieux Voyages
67 rue de Paris , 14100
Lisieux
lisieux-voyages@tele2.fr

Tel: 02.31.31.00.30

[Simon Marsden, well-known photographer of Europe's haunted places](#) and author of 'La France Hantée', released last October.

A ghost-hunter's experience

The book is modeled after his similar books on Ireland and England and is actually more of a highly stylised art book than a tour guide. Out of a list of 250 possible sites, he narrowed it down to 70 for the book. While a true-believer himself, Marsden hunts his ghosts with a camera that captures not the images of the phantoms but the ghostly aura of castles, churches, cemeteries and other allegedly haunted places.

Marsden dislikes the sensationalism of some aspects of the UK's ghost business, in particular the popular TV show 'Most Haunted', which he feels makes it harder for serious paranormal investigators to be taken seriously. In France, people are more sceptical but in a way take the topic more seriously, at least in terms of how the dead—cemeteries and their tombs and gravestones—are treated.

"It's a recognition that [a tomb] is something beautiful and artistic," said Marsden. "It's also a different approach to tourism. They don't want loads of people climbing all over the castles."

While confirming that the French were much more reluctant to relate ghost stories than people he encountered in the UK, Marsden says his artistic approach, his backing by a major publishing house and the fact that he's an "eccentric Englishman", eventually allowed some of them to open up.

He tells a story about one woman who lives in the Château de Lanquais, in the Dordogne, where Galliot de la Tour is said to have poisoned his entire family, throwing the bodies into the dungeon. Marsden asked her if she'd ever experienced anything strange in the castle.

"The woman looked at me as if I was one of the first people to ever ask her the question. And she said 'Sometimes when I'm here alone in one of the room I feel something like a hand touch my cheek'. But then she asked me, 'Are you going to write this? They'll all think I'm mad.'"

Marsden also met caretakers at other sites where the tour guides were nearly "aggressive" in discounting any stories of hauntings or occult legends. "Disbelievers can be as fierce as believers," said Marsden.

But he agrees with Fearson—with whom he collaborated on the early research for his book—that, for those with an open mind on the

For more information on supernatural France

Don't miss Simon Marsden's spooky but lovely coffee-table book of black-and-white photographs, 'La France hantée: Voyage d'un chasseur de fantômes' (Flammarion; EUR 40). It's also available in English as 'Ghosthunter: A journey through haunted France'.

A more historical approach is 'Hauts lieux, croyances and légendes de la France mystérieuse' by Claude Arz (Sélection du Reader's Digest; EUR 34.95; in French only)

The most comprehensive, but hardest to find, guide of occult legends in France is 'Guide de la France Mystérieuse' by René Alleau (Les Guides Noirs Tchou; in French only).

subject, France is just as haunted as England. "There are just as many ghosts in France, but they are slower to reveal them and talk about it," said Marsden, who adds that his book on haunted France sold quite well...even in France.

Marsden also explains that many French were horrified by the Da Vinci Code phenomena, which they think distorted or trivialized France's history, but that some were also intrigued by the sheer strength of the interest.

The inkling that the more esoteric elements of French history, such as the Templar Knights, or the sheer human interest of a ghost story, might attract yet more tourists is perhaps starting to sink in.

Soul-less France?

Many historic tourist attractions in France, explained Marsden, tend to be "soul-less" partly because the furniture and trappings were destroyed during the Revolution.

But it's also because of the dryness of logical, scientific descriptions of places that were, after all, the site of incredible violence, human passion and despair, and, in the end, many haunting stories of individual tragedy, regardless of whether or not the visitor believes in ghosts.

"These places are haunted by the absence of things. It's as if [the French] are not allowed to use their imaginations," said Marsden.

A sensitive tourist could say a ghost-tour, like what Fearson will launch next month in Normandy, pays homage to these human stories, rather than merely exploits them.

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