



Echoes of the Middle Ages surround **Mark Stratton** as he walks the trail that led a simple village girl to become France's national heroine

**A**s last autumn's leaf-fall crunched underfoot, Joan of Arc's presence was palpable amid the oak forest through which she had once ridden. It was February 1429. The 17-year-old was obeying voices from God telling her to travel from Lorraine to Chinon in the Loire Valley to convince France's disempowered king to take back his rightful crown from the English usurpers whom she would soon defeat in battle.

But her journey was fraught with danger. Perhaps the barking stags I now

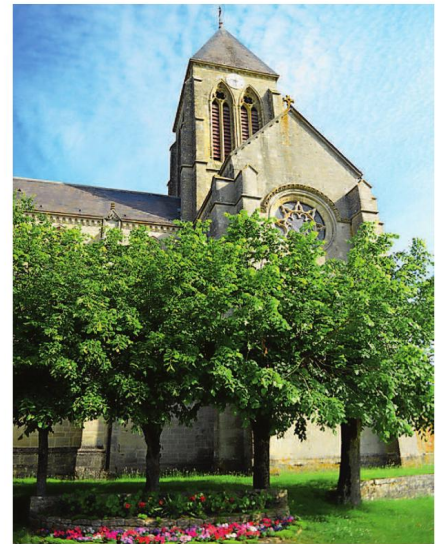
heard in this forest near Fronville sounded to her like the hunting dogs of English men-at-arms or the treacherous Burgundians? Maybe, we shared similar exultation upon leaving the forest's dark recesses to see the same marvellous church at Blécourt that exists today?

Even in the wildest realms of fantasy, Joan of Arc's story has always sounded far-fetched. Yet when I dipped into detailed transcripts from her 1430-31 trial for heresy and the hearing that posthumously quashed that earlier condemnation in 1456, her unflinching

resolve under inquisition leapt from the pages. So to better understand her meteoric young life, I decided to follow part of the route she rode toward Chinon.

Heavenly voices would not guide my crusade but instead the *Sentier Jeanne d'Arc*. This little-known footpath (the GR703) runs for 236 kilometres from Toul in Meurthe-et-Moselle to Bagneux-la-Fosse in Aube. It purportedly traces Joan's progress from her birthplace in Domrémy-la-Pucelle (*'pucelle'*, meaning maiden, was added in her honour) in the south-west of the historical Lorraine region.

# On the march with JOAN OF ARC



**MAIN PICTURE:** The statue of Joan of Arc in Vaucouleurs; **ABOVE:** The church at Blécourt

kingdom had no influence in Domrémy-la-Pucelle,” explained Roger. “She grew up amid much warfare, with the English and Burgundians hostile to the royal house.” It was amid this anarchy, says the historian Helen Castor, that a demoralised French monarchy was receptive to divine intervention.

Joan’s *Maison Natale* is a tall house with a sloping roof and four thick-walled rooms, suggesting that she was born into a humble yet comfortable lifestyle. “They had land and her father was an intermediate to the mayor,” Roger explained.

The house stands next to the Église Saint-Rémy, where, Joan testified at her trial: “When I was 13, I heard a voice from God and this voice came at noon, in my father’s garden towards the church.”

Local testimonies at the ‘rehabilitation trial’ in the 1450s described her as a pious girl who admonished the churchwarden if he was tardy in ringing for compline. Saint-Rémy contains an octagonal font where Joan was baptised, and Roger showed me a decorated marble box allegedly containing ashes from the stake in Rouen where she was burnt. “Very few people know this,” he whispered.

Before starting my walk, I drove the 20 kilometres in the other direction to Vaucouleurs, which in Joan’s days was one of only four cites north of the River Loire in royalist control. Barely 17, she travelled several times in 1428-29 to appeal to Vaucouleurs’ garrison commander, Robert de Baudricourt, for permission to visit Chinon. Little remains of the 11th-century fortress, except for ➤

I would hike for six days through magnificent wild forests, flower meadows and ripening hillsides of wheat, crossing the Haute-Marne countryside. Joan’s journey to Chinon took 11 days and if her advantage was travelling on horseback, mine was staying in comfortable *chambres d’hôtes* and enjoying local gastronomy, as opposed to spending nights in austere abbeys.

Arriving in Domrémy-la-Pucelle, I had a surprise even before strapping on my boots. I met Roger Melcion, guide at the village’s hilltop basilica, and asked if Joan had any descendants. “Yes,” he replied. “I’m a direct descendent of her brother. There are many of us here and we mark this with a carved sceptre on our doors.”

I uttered an apology for the killing of his ancestor by my kinsmen.

Work on the basilica began in 1881 at a location called Bois-Chenu, where Joan had experienced voices from God. Those voices manifested themselves as the Archangel Michael, Saint Catherine and Saint Margaret, all of whom are displayed resplendently in a dramatic gold-laced statue outside. The two-storey basilica was consecrated in 1926 following Joan’s beatification six years earlier. The interior displays 1920s portraits depicting her last years, from defeating the English at Orléans and witnessing the king’s coronation at Reims in 1429 to her martyrdom in 1431.

Joan was born in 1412. “The French

the Port de France archway and a 12th-century crypt where she knelt daily in prayer. It is worth asking at the tourist office for the key to the fortress's modern church to view a sublime triptych of art-nouveau stained glass chronicling Joan's life.

"There are lots of stories about her," laughed Nathalie Merlet, of the tourist office. "One says Joan's horse nibbled the lime tree outside the church – but it was winter and there were no leaves."

Less contentious is that after Baudricourt's eventual acquiescence, the persistent teenager left Vaucouleurs in February 1429, gifted with a horse and a sword, and a message for Charles. The road was dangerous, so she and her escort of six soldiers often travelled at night.

By contrast, I left my *chambre d'hôte* next morning from Domrémy-la-Pucelle in blazing sunshine for my planned 140-kilometre trek. The GR703 doesn't always follow the maid's exact hoofprints. She definitely departed



from Vaucouleurs, to the north, and I suspected the day's route was devised to include a shrine to her mother, Isabelle Romée, at Vouthon, which I encountered after one hour's walking. The statue, which features Isabelle and her daughter, was put up equidistantly between Vouthons Bas and Haut because the squabbling settlements each claimed to be Isabelle's birthplace.

Thereafter, the primal Forêt Domaine de Vau enveloped me en route to Gondrecourt-le-Château. The woodland paths were alive with harebells and lady orchids, so rare in Britain; multicoloured swallowtail butterflies rivalled the stained-glass vivacity of Vaucouleurs' church, while two feuding pine martens scarcely noticed me. It set the tone for a week celebrating nature. On other days, I would send startled hares racing across fields and see numerous foxes and deer. My 30-kilometre trek on the first day saw me following languid small rivers as



ABOVE: The village of Gondrecourt-le-Château beside the River Ornain; LEFT: The *Sentier Jeanne d'Arc*

I crossed from Vosges into the Haute-Marne *département* and traipsed into Cirfontaines-en-Ornois.

Recuperation came at La Ferme de François, a farmhouse B&B near Saudron, where the sumptuous house platter of charcuterie reflected the eclectic livestock of rare pigs, highland cattle and buffalo.

Joan would not have recognised the Mondrian-like qualities of the second day's easy 11 kilometres to Poissons, as modern agricultural fields formed horizontal bands of golden wheat, creating a sandwich with the blue sky and a distant filling of green forest.

### Knights' evidence

The future Maid of Orléans rode dressed as a man, with short hair, claiming her attire was God's will. At her trial, the English-backed inquisitors alluded to the inappropriateness of travelling to Chinon unchaperoned with male companions including the Knight, Bertrand de Poulegny. But he would testify that she remained chaste. "I was afire with her words because I considered her to have been sent from God. I never saw any evil in her. She was a saint."

Mounting evidence assured me that

I was hot on Joan's heels. A fountain in Poissons recalls where her party watered their horses; then 400 metres further up a steep wooded incline, they were allegedly attacked at an ancient spring by marauding Burgundians.

By my third morning, I had hiked into pretty Saint-Urbain-Maconcourt, nestled alongside the Canal Entre-Champagne-et-Bourgogne. An icon of Joan in armour outside the church denoted that she spent the night here on 23 February 1429.

An archway nearby marks the entrance to a now-ruined priory overlain by a château. It is private property, but the owner, Monsieur Jeudy, fortuitously popped out and explained how Charles the Bald founded the defunct Benedictine priory in the 9th century.

"Want to see where Joan slept?" he asked. I needed no second invitation. Just inside his courtyard is a row of outhouses with a small upstairs window. "Up there," he said with certainty.

After crossing the River Marne into Fronville, I followed the exact woodland trail that local history recalls Joan passing through 588 years ago on her way to Blécourt. From the swaying wheat fields, I saw the village's 13th-century Gothic



**ABOVE:** On the trail near Fronville; **LEFT:** A statue of Joan in her home village of Domrémy-la-Pucelle; **BELOW:** Long-distance walker Laura with her two travelling companions

church, shaped like a Latin cross. I filled my water-bottle from the fountain outside and entered. The churchwarden assured me Joan stopped to worship here. He gestured to a Romanesque-aged icon of Notre Dame. “She knelt there,” he said.

I metaphorically knelt before the altar of Monique Martin’s home-made pâté that evening, dining in the garden of her two-roomed guesthouse Le Grand Pré, near Bouzancourt. Her 70-year-old husband, Jean-Paul, had just returned from visiting their granddaughter in Shanghai. “So many millions of people there,” he sighed. “We have only 82.” “Forty-two, *mon cher*,” corrected Monique.

Next morning, amid the champagne vineyards of the curvaceous Barrois countryside, I met my first fellow hiker in four days. Free-spirited Frenchwoman Laura seemed imbued with Joan’s zeal, pursuing a four-month quest along the European E3 long-distance trail to the Czech Republic with her pet dog and a goat. “We’re quite slow because the goat (which was now munching its way through a farmer’s barley) doesn’t like the heat or cold,” she sighed. She was taking the goat to a friend, and upon bidding her *bon courage*, I departed, imagining a hircine shortage in the Czech Republic.

A little further, on a 400-metre-high wooded knoll, is a towering ‘Cross of Lorraine’, the twin-barred heraldic symbol adopted by Free France during World War II and associated with Charles de Gaulle. Colombey-les-Deux-Églises was the former President’s home from 1934 until his death here in 1970, but I arrived to find the community in shock.

At the cemetery, the cement was still fresh from repairs to his tomb, which had been vandalised two days before. “It’s a catastrophe,” said the ticket lady at his La Boisserie home. “Who could do such a thing?”

Fortunately, his charming château, set in 2.5 hectares of wooded gardens, remained unmolested and I enjoyed exploring the memorabilia: from a cigar box from Fidel Castro to a mosaic *coq* presented by the King of Afghanistan.

### Crashing boar

Beyond Maranville next morning, sunken forest greenways heralded the once-immense 20,000-hectare estate of Clairvaux Abbey, founded by Saint Bernard in 1114. I wondered if Joan felt safe within this ecclesiastical realm or would she have skipped the same heartbeats I did when two barrelling wild boar crashed through the forest, trailed by squealing piglets?

Somewhere in this forest, I crossed into the Aube *département*, to be stunned into Cistercian silence at the immensity of the abbey lying ahead. None the wiser, I thought its massive walls resembled a prison and on one of them, opposite my hotel, I found a plaque commemorating Joan’s second night spent at Clairvaux.

“It’s assumed she stayed here, but like everything surrounding Joan, nobody is totally certain,” said Isabelle Sorlié. “All over France, towns claim she passed through.” Isabelle’s tour around a monastery that prospered from the 12th to the late-18th centuries revealed magnificent architecture. A medieval hall, now restored, was set aside for the lay brothers, who helped the monks make Clairvaux the richest monastery in France through wine production and ironworking. The hall’s columns rise like stone palm trees rippling the ceiling into geometric folds to create a mesmerising symmetry.

Yet Clairvaux possesses a surprising duality, still functioning as a prison – and a maximum-security one at that. After French revolutionaries dissolved the abbey in 1789, Napoléon reassigned it to penal servitude. Naturally, the modern prison is out-of-bounds but I experience the wretched, cramped solitary confinement of 19th-century ‘hen-coop’ cells. “It’s ironic,” Isabelle mused. “The monks desired a regime of silence and isolation – exactly what the prisoners had forced upon them.”

I hiked one further morning for 18 kilometres through woodland to Cunfin, where I left the trail. My week was almost over, but Joan rode for eight further days towards Chinon to lift the English siege of Orléans and crown a monarch at Reims. ➤➤



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Desiring closure on this chapter of Joan's life, I drove to the Gothic cathedral in Reims. Outside, a bronze statue depicts Joan on horseback waving her righteous sword toward a dazzling facade crowded with angels, saints and kings.

Two-thirds of the way along the 138-metre-long transept is a carpeted stage where she stood alongside the king as he was crowned Charles VII on 17 July 1429, anointed by the sacred oil of Clovis. A beautiful statue by 19th-century sculptor Prosper d'Épinay fixes her face in tranquil ivory; her bronze armour inlaid with silver, her yellow tunic fashioned from Sienna marble.

Her fall began immediately thereafter; impatient to expel the English from French soil, she repeatedly attacked besieged cities, only to be captured at Compiègne in early 1430 and sold to the English by mercenary Burgundians. Her inquisition lasted a year before she was condemned, then burnt in Rouen on 30 May 1431, aged just 19. Yet the heroine saint's legend endures.

"In the firmament of history, Joan of Arc is a massive star," writes Helen Castor. To this new convert, she is an inspiring motivation for a richly beautiful hike in the lands that she saw through determined eyes. [👉](#)



ABOVE: Joan's statue outside Reims Cathedral

## Francofile

Follow in the path of France's national heroine

### GETTING THERE

**By rail:** Mark travelled from London to Paris with Voyages-sncf. Return tickets from £58. The TGV from Paris Est to Neufchâteau via Nancy costs from €40 one-way. From here it is a 15-minute taxi or bus ride to Domrémy-la-Pucelle.

The TGV from Reims to Paris costs from €13.50 one-way (tel: 0844 848 5848, voyages-sncf.com). See page 25 for other travel information.

Download route directions for the GR703 trail at [cirkwi.com](#)

### WHERE TO STAY

**Sur Les Pas de Jehanne**  
25 Rue Principale  
88630 Domrémy-la-Pucelle  
Tel: (Fr) 3 29 06 94 29  
[les-pas-de-jehanne.fr](#)  
B&B, doubles from €60.

### La Ferme de François

Le Val Louzet  
52230 Saudron  
Tel: (Fr) 3 25 04 69 28  
[lafermedefrancois.com](#)  
B&B, doubles from €62.

### Saint-Amand

1 Impasse de l'Auditoire



ABOVE: The Cistercian abbey of Clairvaux

52230 Poissons  
Tel: (Fr) 3 25 06 85 92  
[le-st-amand.com](#)  
B&B, doubles from €55.

### Le Grand Pré

4 Rue de l'Arboyon  
52110 Daillancourt  
Tel: (Fr) 3 25 02 80 15  
B&B, doubles from €45.

### La Grange du Relais

26 Route Nationale 19  
52330 Colombey-les-Deux-Églises  
Tel: (Fr) 3 25 02 03 89  
[lagrangedurelais.fr](#)  
Logis de France, doubles from €75, breakfast €7.90.

### Hôtel de l'Abbaye

19 Route de Dijon Clairvaux  
10310 Clairvaux  
Tel: (Fr) 3 25 27 80 12  
Doubles from €40, breakfast €7.50.

### Hôtel Azur

9 Rue des Écrevées  
51100 Reims  
Tel: (Fr) 3 26 47 43 39  
[hotel-azur-reims.com](#)  
Town centre B&B, doubles from €79.

### FOR AN APÉRO

**Café du Palais**  
12/14 Place Myron Herrick  
51100 Reims  
Tel: (Fr) 3 26 47 52 54  
[cafedupalais.fr](#)  
Sip the delicious house champagne while taking in the glamorous 1930s art-nouveau interior of this Reims institution.

### WHERE TO EAT

**La Ducasse**  
1 Place Jeanne d'Arc  
88630 Coussey  
Tel: (Fr) 3 55 21 40 03  
Convivial country eatery

-serving excellent quiche Lorraine.

### WHERE TO VISIT

**Maison Natale & Centre Visages de Jeanne**  
2 Rue de la Basilique  
88630 Domrémy-la-Pucelle  
Tel: (Fr) 3 29 06 95 86

### Mémorial Charles de Gaulle

52330 Colombey-les-Deux-Églises  
Tel: (Fr) 3 25 30 90 80  
[memorial-charlesdegaulle.fr](#)

### La Boiserie

1 Rue du Général de Gaulle  
52330 Colombey-les-Deux-Églises  
Tel: (Fr) 3 25 01 52 52  
[charles-de-gaulle.org](#)

### Abbaye de Clairvaux

Hostellerie des Dames  
10310 Clairvaux  
Tel: (Fr) 3 25 27 52 55  
[abbayedclairvaux.com](#)



**TOURIST INFORMATION:** Lorraine, [tourisme-lorraine.com](#); Champagne-Ardenne, [tourisme-champagne-ardenne.com](#); Haute-Marne, [www.tourisme-hautemarne.com](#); Aube, [aube-champagne.com](#); Domrémy-la-Pucelle, [domremy.fr](#); Vaucouleurs, [tourisme-vaucouleurs.fr](#); Reims, [reims-tourisme.com](#)



### WHAT TO READ

*Joan of Arc* by Helen Castor (Faber & Faber, £9.99) is a brilliant historical study.

### DIARY DATES

*L'Enquête Jeanne d'Arc - Spectacle Monumental*  
This 1hr 45min open-air production at the basilica in Domrémy-la-Pucelle involves 250 actors, as well as lighting effects and music. Held this year from 23 June to 8 July. Dates for 2018 tbc ([tourisme-ouest-vosges.fr](#)).

### Fêtes Johanniques

In Reims in June, parades, concerts and the creation of a medieval village all pay homage to Joan. Dates for 2018 tbc ([reims-fetes.com/fetes\\_johanniques.php](#)).