



# HOME FROM HOME

For **Virginie Paradis**, nothing could take the shine off Chartres and she encourages others to discover everything the Eure-et-Loir town has to offer

It has been less than a year since I moved to the beautiful town of Chartres in the Eure-et-Loir *département*, around 90km south-west of Paris. Needless to say, the Covid situation hasn't been ideal for getting to know my new home. No restaurants, cafés, bars, yoga

studio, swimming pool, social activities – in short, not a lot of anything. Yet this whimsical little town of 40,000 inhabitants still managed to make me feel very welcome, and even more so in the circumstances.

Firstly, no lockdown situation will manage to take away its

fairy-tale beauty: medieval architecture full of history and mystery; the narrow and curved cobblestone streets; the charming secret passageways dotted throughout the town; the picturesque wood and stone bridges crossing the River Eure. The boutique shops filled with





pretty *pâtisseries*, delicious cheeses and fresh bread, their tempting smells wafting under my nose.

And then of course there's the famous Chartres Cathedral. Instantly recognisable, in 1979 it became a designated Unesco World Heritage Site, and is nicknamed '*la Bible de Verre*' because it features 176 stained-glass windows dating from the 13th century.

### Firm friends

On top of these daily gifts of beauty, Chartres also presented me with friends as soon as I arrived. In fact I met my now-friend Michael Brooks the very weekend I signed the contract for my apartment. We went for a glass of champagne at the Café Serpente (before the lockdown) opposite the cathedral, and that's when I found out he had moved from Seattle to Chartres in 2017 and had bought a 13th-century building just around the corner. And even though I was born and raised in France, like him I also lived in Seattle before moving to France in 2017. Uncanny. As a newcomer I was interested to know what Michael appreciated most about Chartres and I was very encouraged by his experience of life in what was now my new home.

"The cathedral's labyrinth, a circular pattern in stone on the floor of the nave, has an amazing energy," he says. "Walking the labyrinth for the first time in 2002 was a life-changing experience for me and just afterwards I left my corporate job and launched a travel company. People come from all over the world to experience the labyrinth and I think that is part of the reason it can be so powerful.

"Chartres became a destination for pilgrims and travellers and is a stop on the Santiago de Compostela route. People bring their hopes, their passions, their deepest dreams and their most authentic selves here. It's been that way for centuries and that energy makes the space unique today. I feel particularly fortunate and grateful to live a short walk from the cathedral."

### Making connections

The closed international borders at the time meant I was temporarily unable to host my French immersion courses here in France which was frustrating for so many different reasons, one of them being that I wanted to share the magic of Chartres with others. However, I found a way ▶

#### Above:

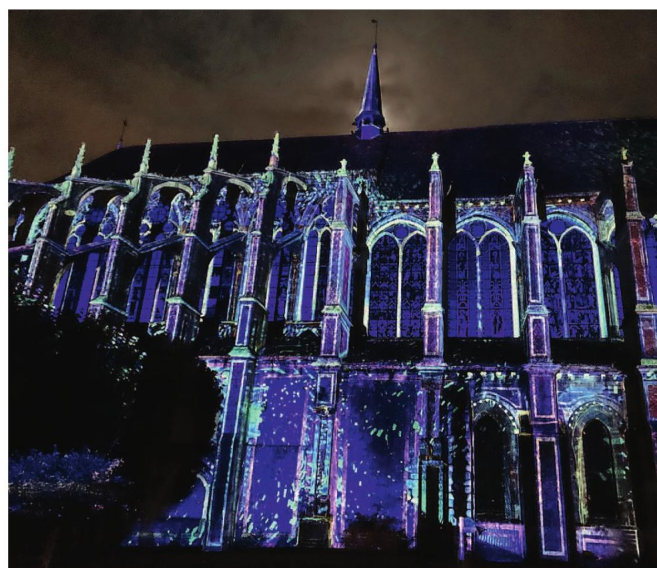
The cathedral is famous for its stained-glass windows

#### Right:

Virginie enjoys walking in the Jardin d'Horticulture

#### Far right:

Chartres en Lumières illuminates the cathedral





around it by offering live online weekend immersion experiences with me and talented local creatives and entrepreneurs, teaching students all about the local history, gastronomy, architecture and art.

One of them was Élodie Vally, who at the age of 38 manages what is considered to be France's oldest stained-glass company, La Maison Lorin, established in 1863 in the quaint Basse Ville quarter along the River Eure.

"The city of Chartres has always been in me. I was born here and I never left," she says. "Very quickly I became passionate about the art of stained glass, of which Chartres is the capital. La Maison Lorin is the only glass painting company listed under France's *Monuments Historiques* and its soul has lived in me ever since I passed its magnificent wooden gate more than 17 years ago. Its walls keep a part of the city's history.

"They also keep a part of my story. My children's laughter, my former bosses' words of wisdom, the joy shared with my team members, but also the tears caused by difficult moments as well as passing torments. It is my home, a part of my being."

## Seeing the light

Located in a stunning Renaissance building in the heart of the historical centre is bookshop L'Esperluète where Olivier L'Hostis is the manager. Equally passionate about his home town, he shared a fascinating insight.

"There's a street which you are bound to walk down on your way from the train station towards the cathedral, and it has many stories to tell. The *préfecture* building on Rue Collin d'Harleville is where the first act of the French Resistance by Jean Moulin took

**Top:**  
The charming streets are lined with pretty buildings

**Below:**  
Virginie Paradis

place in 1940, while at the other end is the *hôtel particulier* of the man who inspired the character of Harpagon in Molière's *L'Avare*. In the middle of this same street Robert Capa took one of his most famous photographs, *La Tondue de Chartres*, of French women who had been romantically involved with German soldiers during the Nazi occupation and had their heads shaved as a punishment."

She also shared a top tip on where to eat while you're in town – head to Crêperie Au Bon Coin on Place Jean Moulin owned by German-born Gerd for crêpes and cakes.

For Olivier Brelot, who moved from Alsace in 1993 and owns restaurant L'Estocade where diners can eat with a view of the river, bridge and cathedral, it's the spectacular Chartres en Lumières event that he loves most. "Colourful

light displays are projected onto buildings including the cathedral and it really puts our local architecture under the spotlight. It is recognised as the greatest enhancement of cultural heritage in the world and the ideal way to appreciate it is on an evening stroll through the historical neighbourhoods."

Unlike my four friends mentioned above who have lived here for much longer than I have, I am just at the beginning of my Chartres experience. I still have so much to learn, to explore, so many wonderful connections to make, so many friends to meet, projects to create. In just a few short months and in the midst of heavy Covid times, Chartres has proven to be more than promising. Here's to the future and exciting times ahead. 💙

Virginie's fall 2021 and spring 2022 immersion courses are now open – visit [frenchtruly.com](https://frenchtruly.com)

