

The wonders of the labyrinth

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After years of anticipation, I was finally walking the indoor labyrinth of Chartres Cathedral in France, in the footsteps of eight centuries of pilgrims and seekers.

In dim light, I joined dozens of others on this medieval path of 11 concentric circles, which graces the floor of France's most famous Gothic cathedral.

Some people carried small candles as they walked. I focused on looking ahead and at my feet, trying not to stray beyond the lines that marked my curving row. The labyrinth's oval pattern, inlaid on the cathedral's original limestone paving stones, spans almost 13 metres.

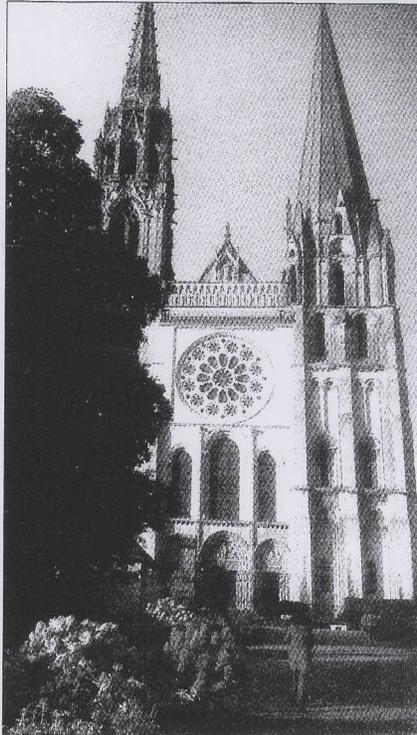
We all wore our coats – it was uncharacteristically cold outside (only 10 degrees C) on this summer day, and it seemed barely warmer inside. One walker in bare feet, perhaps warmed by an inner light, seemed oblivious to the cathedral's nippy air.

I tried to summon a

meditative state while others walking in front of me stopped for several seconds, preventing the forward movement of those behind. Then they would start to walk again. This continued for the entire length of the labyrinth. It took about an hour to pass through, into the centre and back out. I struggled to overcome irritation at the ongoing interruptions. Was I too impatient to find spiritual bliss?

The cathedral's labyrinth, once walked by Christian pilgrims, as a symbolic pathway to Jerusalem, has become the inspiration for today's non-denominational labyrinths, created and used as a path to inner peace, greater clarity and divine connection. Many modern ones, built around the world, use the Chartres design as their archetypal pattern; one local example is the outdoor labyrinth at St. Hilda's Anglican Church in Sechelt.

Almost seven years before walking the Chartres labyrinth, my husband Frank and I were married in Roberts Creek in a back-



HEATHER CONN PHOTO

The indoor labyrinth of Chartres Cathedral in France, in the footsteps of eight centuries of pilgrims and seekers.

yard labyrinth built by a friend, one that shares the Chartres design. We used the same pattern as our wedding motif.

Considered one of the world's best-preserved medieval cathedrals, Chartres retains almost all of its original stained-glass windows. They are visually stunning, particularly the 12-metre-wide west rose window, a radiant holy eye above the cathedral entrance. At night, as part of the visual arts program *Chartres en lumieres* (in the light), the window glows in ever-changing drama, part of kaleidoscopic moving images projected onto the front of the cathedral.

Beyond their sacred imagery, some of the cathedral's side windows reflect shrewd medieval marketing. Our acerbic British tour guide Malcolm Miller, an 80-year-old Chartres scholar and author who has been hosting the tour for

56 years, pointed out the depictions of local tradespeople, such as shoemakers, who paid to have their likenesses portrayed in stained glass. What better way to advertise your services in a town devoted to pilgrimages, where the purchase or repair of shoes was high priority?

Chartres and its cathedral remain prime destinations along the 1,000-km Chemin de Paris pilgrimage route, which has run southward, for centuries, from Paris to St. Jean Pied de Port. Frank and I were stopping here several days before beginning another ancient pilgrimage route, the 800-km Camino Frances, which starts in St. Jean and continues to Santiago, Spain.

The charming medieval town of Chartres (pop. 40,000), with cobblestone streets, river canals and arched stone bridges, is only 80 km southwest of Paris, accessible by train.