

THE VITA U

# Historic authenticity, unbelievably attractive

By Gery de Pierpont

## Michael Crichton’s wonderful intuition

Sometimes I get the feeling that I belong to a **dying species** “of people who love old things just because they are old” as I am always emphasizing the need to preserve period features in old buildings. Some of my friends and tourism business professionals think I am even lapsing into a kind of **heritage fundamentalism** completely out of step with present day socio-economic realities.



Castelnaud-la-Chapelle – Dordogne, France © @lain, plus très présent

However, I am becoming more and more convinced that locations which continue to maintain their links with the past will become not only increasingly rare but also more and more keenly sought in the years to come. I feel the owners who have made a conscious decision to **focus on the historic authenticity** of their “cultural heritage” will continue to welcome cultural enthusiasts even in times of economic crisis, given their inimitable atmosphere and the **unique** character of the accommodation they provide.

Significant finesse and skill is required to integrate modern facilities into an age-old building without altering their very nature. The process is irreversible and often involves a considerable outlay. However, it is precisely the conservation of interior layouts and original features and treating the original floors, walls, ceilings, windows and other period framework with the respect they deserve, that makes it possible for the guests of such heritage sites to “**live in history**”. It’s a case of piquing their curiosity and providing them with a welcome source of relaxation at a time when everything seems to be a frantic state of flux.

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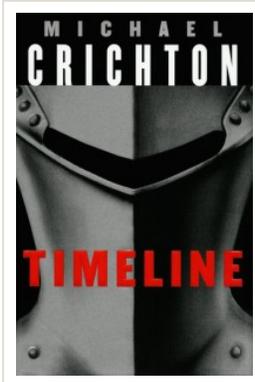
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## Historic authenticity as an antidote to fatigue



Well, I found this not really mainstream intuition, described in the heart of a great “historical science fiction” novel, written in 1999 by the famous American author, screenwriter and producer Michael Crichton: “Timeline”. The author of *Jurassic Park*, *The Lost World*, *Sphere*, *State of Fear*, *Disclosure* or *Congo* makes a physics genius, a brilliant entrepreneur who is as cynical as they come, a dedicated spokesman for the **promotion of authentic historical remains as a tourist attraction**:

“Today, everybody expects to be entertained, and they expect to be entertained all the time. Business meetings must be snappy, with bullet lists and animated graphics, so executives aren’t bored. Malls and stores must be engaging, so they amuse as well as sell us.

Politicians must have pleasing video personalities and tell us only what we want to hear. Schools must be careful not to bore young minds that expect the speed and complexity of television. Students must be amused – everyone must be amused, or they will switch: switch brands, switch channels, switch parties, switch loyalties. This is the intellectual reality of Western society at the end of the century.

**“In other centuries, human beings wanted to be saved, or improved, or freed, or educated. But in our century, they want to be entertained.** The great fear is not of disease or death, but of boredom. A sense of time on our hands, a sense of nothing to do. A sense that we are not amused.

“But where will this mania for entertainment end? What will people do when they get tired of television? When they get tired of movies? We already know the answer – they go into participatory activities: sports, theme parks, amusement rides, roller coasters. Structured fun, planned thrills. And what will they do when they tire of theme parks and planned thrills? Sooner or later, the artifice becomes too noticeable. They begin to realize that an amusement park is really a kind of jail, in which you pay to be an inmate.

“This artifice will drive them to **seek authenticity. Authenticity will be the buzzword of the twenty-first century.**



Medieval city of Issigeac (Aquitaine – France) © Paysbergerac

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“And what is authentic? Anything that is not devised and structured to make a profit. Anything that is not controlled by corporations. Anything that exists for its own sake, that assumes its own shape. But of course, nothing in the modern world is allowed to assume its own shape. The modern world is the corporate equivalent of a formal garden, where everything is planted and arranged for effect. Where nothing is untouched, where nothing is authentic.

“Where, then, will people turn for the **rare and desirable experience of authenticity**? They will **turn to the past**. The past is unarguably authentic. The past is a world that already existed before Disney and Murdoch and Nissan and Sony and IBM and all the other shapers of the present day. The past was here before they were. The past rose and fell without their intrusion and moulding and selling. The past is real. It’s authentic. And this will **make the past unbelievably attractive**. That’s why I say that the future is the past. **The past is the only real alternative...**”

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“Timeline” – the movie © Paramount – Dir. Richard Donner

### Investing in the past

“[...] What will people do? They are already doing it. The fastest-growing segment of travel today is **cultural tourism**. People who **want to visit not other places, but other times**. People who want to **immerse themselves** in medieval walled cities, in vast Buddhist temples, Mayan pyramid cities, Egyptian necropolises. People who want to walk and **be in the world of the past**. The vanished world. And **they don’t want it to be fake**. They don’t want it to be made pretty, or cleaned up. They want it to be **authentic**.

“[...] **History is the most powerful intellectual tool society possesses**. Let us be clear. History is not a dispassionate record of dead events. Nor is it a playground for scholars to indulge their trivial disputes. The purpose of history is to explain the present – to say why the world around us is the way it is. History tells us what is important in our world, and how it came to be. It tells us why the things we value are the things we should value. And it tells us what is to be ignored, or discarded. That is true power – **profound power**. The power to define a whole society. **The future lies in the past.**”

“Timeline”, by Michael Crichton (1999)

(extracts from chapters 01:13:52 et 00:01:44)





*Despite some nice reconstructions and bravery scenes, the "Timeline" movie (directed by Richard Donner) doesn't have the depth of the novel it is based on, unfortunately*

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### Where historical fiction proves to be an effective passport to the past

There's no getting away from it – I was captivated by reading "Timeline" of course. Historical novels have an extremely potent evocative appeal. If they are written round solid historical facts and if the story makes use of reputable research, they can even constitute excellent "passports" to the past. Even more so if the plot is woven like a thriller and the author's skill keeps the reader hooked from beginning to end ...

This is the case of Michael Crichton's great novel which presents a very realistic vision of the Middle Ages, far removed from the run-of-the-mill adventures of traditional chivalry. Even the "scientific" introduction, which describes how an American company carries out secret tests on a space-time machine prototype (backed up by the latest discoveries in quantum physics), is astonishingly precise...

**The action takes place in the Dordogne** (Aquitaine, France) in 1357, in the initial decades of the 100 Years War. Two castles, Castelgard and La Roque, are occupied by an English lord. Three archaeologists with a mission are parachuted 650 years back into this environment and set about searching for their professor, who is imprisoned in history, while an army of French soldiers comes over the horizon ...



Dordogne river © Nouhailer

This is a fascinating novel to be (re)discovered, especially if you plan a trip to South West France.

**And you**, do you also have great admiration for authentic historical vestiges? Do share your thoughts with us in the space below.

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**Yann**

09-09-2017



Oui, je suis quelqu'un de très passionné par l'histoire et notre passé, je préfère les anciennes époques au moderne, lorsque je me promène dehors au 21eme siècle, dans mon esprit j'ai l'impression de me sentir être quelqu'un qui appartient plus au passé qu'au présent, je ressens tous les jours et toutes les nuit la sensation d'être autre part que l'époque ou je vis, le passé est merveilleux plus que le présent

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