

Flying saucers sought no more

IN AN amusing display of scepticism about the existence of extra-terrestrial life, the Mitterrand government has decided to close a unique research establishment set up six years ago to investigate unidentified flying objects.

But it has encountered unexpectedly stiff opposition from some scientists shocked that the Socialists do not believe in flying saucers.

One scientific writer, Jean-Francois Boedec, said the research centre, the Groupe d'Etudes des Phénomènes Spatiaux, had paid the price of being too closely associated with the former president, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, who set it up in 1977.

The government denies the closure has been motivated out of political spite. It says the idea was an expensive folly.

It now emerges that Giscard, who had an almost schoolboy passion for UFOs, was persuaded to open the centre on the advice of a scientist friend who ran it for a year, then

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resigned to sail round the world in a yacht.

Since then the centre has been sifting through dozens of reports of UFOs sent in every year by the public. It distributed instruction manuals to 15,000 police stations on what to look for and what questions to ask eyewitnesses. As an added inducement, each station was given sophisticated photographic equipment to record any strange light in the sky and help identify its probable source.

The centre's most noteworthy success was in exposing two hoaxes who claimed, amid a blaze of publicity in 1979, that they had been "kidnapped" and held for several days in a spaceship. The exposure took two years.

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