

VIVE LA FRANCE



top The classic Chateau Chenonceau with its incredible topiary garden, blends into the Loire Valley landscape. photo by Maurice Subervie, Atout France

Loire Valley

LAND OF CHATEAUX AND OUTSTANDING BEAUTY

story Laurie Wallace-Lynch

Located about a two hour drive south of Paris, the Loire Valley is a lushly forested area where the French aristocracy chose to build their “getaway” châteaux and fairy tale castles. As Robin Leach used to say, this is “the lifestyle of the rich and famous.”

Spread over 280 kilometres, the Loire Valley Region is classified as UNESCO World Heritage area and therefore protected for generations to come. Many of the châteaux are still owned by descendants of the original family or are family owned, with a portion of the châteaux open to the public for daily tours.

During a five-day driving tour castle hopping through the Loire Valley, you truly get a feel for what life was like during the Renaissance period where nobles and countrymen owned these great houses and hunted for sport.

Montpoupon is a fortified castle which dates back to the middle ages and was transformed during the Renaissance. The same family has lived in a portion of the home since 1857. Today visitors can tour many of the fully furnished rooms on a self-guided tour. There’s also an extensive hunting museum where you can learn about the history of hunting and horseback riding, spread throughout 30 rooms in the outbuildings. The annual hunt is a hugely popular spectacle drawing throngs of equestrian riders and visitors.

A hot air balloon ride is a great way to get a bird’s eye view of *Chateau de of Chenonceau*, but touring the castle is equally as exciting. Built in the 16th century on the River Cher, Thomas Bohier and his wife Katherine Briconnet demolished a fortified castle and mill but kept the Marques tower and restored it in Renaissance style. A moat leads to the châteaux



above The city of Chartres, 96km south of Paris is the capital of the Loire region and is well known for its cathedral and architecture dating back to the middle ages. photo by Christophe Mouton, Atout France



above Light and sound show at Orleans Cathedral built in 1928. photo by Christophe Mouton, Atout France.

his wife removed Diane from the castle and added a second floor art gallery. When Louise of Lorraine, wife of King Henry III passed away, her death marked the end of royalty living in the castle.

While exploring castles is a favourite past time in the picturesque valley, there are also cycling trails, wine tours—you can visit the caves of Mommousseau to try some delicious sparkling wine and then take a boat ride on the Loire in Meung-sur-Loire with *Coeur de Loire*. To cap the day off, enjoy a gourmet dinner and overnight stay at *Auberge du Bon Labeur* in Chenonceaux or the charming Le Clos des Ormeaux in Vineuil, close to Blois. Then head into Blois to enjoy a sound and light show on the walls of the Royal Castle of Blois.

The *Castle of Cheverny* is one of the grandest châteaux in the Loire Valley. Built in 1634, the majestic castle has been in the same family for over 600 years and family members still reside in part of the castle, according to PR Manager Chantal Guillot. Cheverny sits on 250 hectares of forest making it ideal for stag hunting. “We keep over 100 hounds on the property,” adds Chantal. “Once a day at 11:30 a.m. the hounds are fed and visitors can watch the spectacle of this feeding frenzy!”

While we were there in June, there was a giant Lego exhibit showcasing animal creations made of *Lego* depicting famous children’s stories.

The *Castle of Chambord* is another magnificent, awe-inspiring castle that is so large you have to stand about a quarter kilometre away to capture the entire castle in a photo.

“Ever since its creation by King Francois I at the dawn of the French Renaissance, Chambord has been a source of never-ending surprises for visitors,” states the brochure. “A palace erected for the pleasure and glory of the king, Chambord is above all a work of genius, radically unique, belonging in its essence to the heritage of mankind.”

A few of those unique features include a double-helix staircase, vaulted rooms, the roof top spiral and terraces which offer a panoramic view of the grounds. Louis XIV completed Chambord while respecting the original architecture. In 1930, the French republic acquired the castle and the 13,450 acre walled estate—the largest wall-enclosed park in Europe.

Châteaux de Meung is referred to as “The Big Surprise in the Loire Valley”. Somewhat

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10 things to do in Paris



foreboding from the outside with Medieval and classic facades, the castle has hosted prominent figures in French history such as King Louis XI, the legendary Joan of Arc, along with poet Francois Villon, who was kept a prisoner in the castle's dungeon.

While visiting the historic city of Orleans, Yves l'Homer, a guide with *Orleans Val de Loire Tourisme* took us on a wonderful walking tour with a stop at the Orleans Cathedral.

Château de Châteaudun overlooks the Loir River (no e in Loire in this case) and was built between the 12th and 16th centuries. In the nearby village of Bonneval, you can tour this Venice-style town by electric motor boat.

The historic city of Chartre is well worth a visit, especially to take in the spectacular luminary show which happens nightly. After a delicious three-course meal at *Chez Dionysos*, we hopped aboard a small tram with our city guide and toured the various luminary exhibits. The grand finale was the sound and light show against the walls of the magnificent *Chartre Cathedral*. Then a quick walk back to our gorgeous B&B, *Maison Ailleurs*, a historic mansion offering luxurious, apartment-side accommodations complete with a delicious French style breakfast prepared by the delightful host Valerie Genique.

One important side note here; we were delightfully surprised by how warm and friendly people were throughout this region as well as in Paris. One woman gave us her map when we couldn't find our way, another woman jumped in her car and asked us to follow her to our destination, and in Paris, as I was struggling to carry my fully loaded suitcase up the steep steps of the Metro station, a young man stopped and offered to carry it up the steps for me!

Enroute to Paris we toured *Château d'Anet*, near Dreux. The impressive chateau was built between 1547 and 1552 for Diane de Poitiers, the mistress of Henry II. Visitors can tour the elegantly furnished chateau and even read a love letter apparently penned by the King to the beautiful Diane.

Next year (2019) marks the 500th Anniversary of the Renaissance, an event not to be missed in the Loire Valley Region. The year 1519 was of great significance to the region's history with the death of Leonardo da Vinci at the *Chateau of Clos-Luce* in Ambois, so the region is considered the birthplace of the Renaissance in France.

Re-live the Renaissance during a bucket-list castle hopping trip to Loire Valley. 🇫🇷

Paris is stunningly beautiful any time of the year. Just walking around the city or people watching from a café can be enough to get a taste of the city of light, but if you want to explore further, here are some suggestions.

1. Climb to the top of the Arc de Triomphe

To get your heart pumping, ascend the steps of the Arc de Triomphe (or, just take the elevator) and take in 360-degree views of Paris including the stunning Champs-Elysees.

2. Smile back at Mona Lisa at The Louvre

Set aside at least a half day exploring the many amazing works of art at The Louvre Museum and of course, join the lineup and smile back at the Mona Lisa.

3. Take a cruise on the Seine

Enjoy a relaxing cruise on the Seine to enjoy its beautifully decorated and world famous bridges and get a different view of Notre Dame and the Eiffel Tower.

4. Explore Neighbourhoods and gardens on Foot

Guided daily walking tours are available to explore the Medieval Latin Quarter, and the Village of Montmartre. Themed tours include Hemingway's Paris, or Food and Chocolate Tasting Tours. Or just explore on your own and find hidden gems. For lunch grab a baguette from a patisserie, some yummy French cheese and perhaps a bottle of wine and picnic in a park! If you have children in tow, a visit to the city's oldest carousel (1879) in Luxembourg Gardens is a must. Part of its charm is the ring game where children are given sticks to try spearing tin rings as they go around. Also, at Luxembourg Gardens children are able to play with beautiful toy sailboats in the Grand Bassin duck pond.

5. Be impressed by the Impressionists at Musee D'Orsay

Situated in a beautiful historic train sta-

tion, the museum is renowned for featuring the numerous famous works of Impressionist artists including Monet, Degas, Van Gogh, Cezanne, Gauguin and Seurat.

6. Go window shopping on the Champs-Elysées or the luxurious Galeries Lafayette

From fast fashion and street style to haute couture, window shop or splurge as you channel your inner French vibe at the most beautiful luxury shops known to man (and woman).

7. Visit Versailles

Hop on the Paris Metro and head to the Chateau de Versailles where you can tour the incredible palace and its beautiful royal gardens.

8. Visit Monet's garden in Giverny

Hop aboard a comfy Paris CityVISION tour coach and enjoy a guided tour of Giverny, Monet's home, art studio and gardens. An audio-guided tour offers information on popular sites such as Monet's famous Japanese water-lily garden.

9. See 'The City of Lights' by Night

Walk by the Eiffel Tower to see it illuminated at night, take in a show at Moulin Rouge or the Opera, take an evening dinner cruise, or do as the French do, dine late and laugh often, then stroll the streets of Paris arm-in-arm in this city of romance.

10. Buy the Paris Museum Pass

This pass gives you admission to dozens of museums and sites including The Louvre and admission to the Arc de Triomphe. www.parisinfo.com, www.atout-france.fr