

The Playful Past-Time of Chateaux Hopping

The Loire Valley has France's grandest assemblage of 15th and 16th century chateaux. With 50 to 60 "must see" chateaux scattered on both sides of a 100-mile stretch of the Loire River, the first-time visitor can feel overwhelmed. Below are five of the best-known chateaux.

Chenonceau

Chenonceau Chateau stuns you with its two-story, 260-foot Great Gallery arching over the River Cher. Originally "acquired" by king Francois I, it passed to his successor, Henri II, who gifted it in 1547 to his mistress, Diane de Poitiers. Diane expanded the chateau and built a bridge over the river.

When Henri II died, his wife, Catherine de Medici, took revenge on her rival by forcing Diane to exchange Chateau Chenonceau for nearby Chateau Chaumont. Catherine then commissioned the construction of the bridge gallery. Incredibly extravagant galas were held here until Catherine's son, Henry III, was assassinated. His wife, Louise de Savoie, placed the castle in mourning, furnishing it entirely in black and white.

The history leaps out as you tour the rooms and the gardens. In WW I the Great Gallery was converted to a hospital. In WW II the chateau marked the boundary between free and Nazi-occupied France and became the site of prisoner exchanges. Today the chateau and grounds are maintained as if they were at their height under Catherine de Medici.

Chaumont-sur-Loire

Constructed in the 15th century by Lord Amboise on the site of a 10th century feudal fortress, Chaumont commands beautiful views of the Loire River Valley. It was later the home of both Catherine de Medici and Diane de Poitiers of Chenonceau fame. Enjoy this chateau for its drawbridge, fortress feeling, tapestry, furnishings, and incredible vistas.

Chambord

King Francois I was not content with just the chateaux at Amboise and Chenonceau. He acquired over 10,000 acres of hunting grounds and decided to build the world's most magnificent "hunting lodge." Chambord was built over many decades by Francois and his successors, Henri II and Charles IX in the 16th century.

Fully restored now, Chambord stands as the most extravagant of all the Loire chateaux --500 feet wide with 440 rooms and 365 fireplaces. The central grand staircase was purportedly designed by the Italian great, Leonardo da Vinci. It has double spirals which enable two parties of people to ascend and descend simultaneously without crossing paths. Chambord rewarded our visit with its grandeur and extravagance.

Chateau Amboise

Amboise's narrowed cobbled streets wind at the base of huge Chateau Amboise. Although only 25% of the original chateau survives, the fortress walls with flying banners looks down on the village and neighboring river. It was here that King Francois I hit his head on a low arch, bringing an early end to his life.

Chateau Clos Luce

Not more than a half mile from the village center is Chateau Le Clos Luce, a mansion designed and built by Leonardo da Vinci. He lived the last three years of his life here under Francois I's sponsorship. The rooms are filled with 40 models of Leonardo's inventions so you can marvel at his mental powers and foresight 500 years earlier.

Whilst chateau hopping remember to take the time to happen upon some local wine cellars, for tasting or "degustation."

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About the Author

Corina Clemence runs Chateau du Guerinet, near Blois a luxury chateau for up to 15 people set in the middle of a 4000 acre forest perfect for visiting

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