

The Playful Adventure Of Castle Hopping in the Beautiful Loire Valley in France

France's Loire Valley has the grandest selection of 15th and sixteenth century castles. With fifty to sixty "must see" castles sprinkled on both sides of a 100-mile stretch of the Loire River, the first-time tourist can feel overwhelmed. Below are 5 of the best-known castles.

Chateau Clos Luce

Not more than a half mile from Amboise is Chateau Le Clos Luce, a chateau built and designed 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 foresight and amazing mental powers 500 years earlier.

Chateau Chenonceau

Chenonceau Chateau stuns you with its two-story, 260-foot Great Gallery spanning across the River Cher. Originally "acquired" by King Francois I, it then passed to his successor, Henri II, who gave it to Diane de Poitiers his mistress. Diane extended the chateau and built a bridge across the river.

When Henri II died, Catherine de Medici, his wife, 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 completely in black and white.

History leaps out as you tour the rooms and the gardens. In WWI the Great Gallery was converted to a hospital. In world war II the chateau marked the boundary between Nazi-occupied and free France and became the location for prisoner exchanges. Today the gardens and the chateau are maintained as if they were at their height under Catherine de Medici.

Chateau Chaumont-sur-Loire

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

Chateau Chambord

King Francois I was not content with just the castles at Chenonceau and Amboise. He acquired over 10,000 acres of hunting land 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 sixteenth 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 great Italian, Leonardo da Vinci. It has double spirals which enable two parties of people to climb and descend simultaneously without crossing paths. Chambord will reward any visit with its grandeur and extravagance.

Chateau Amboise

Amboise's narrowed cobbled streets wind at the base of the large. Although only 25% of the original chateau survives, the fortress walls with flying banners look down on the village and neighboring river. It was here that King Francois I hit his head on a low arch, fatally wounding him.

Whilst chateau hopping remember to take the time to visit some local wine cellars, for "degustation" or tasting. Take the time to relax and enjoy your vacation.

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About the Author

Corina Clemence runs a luxury castle near Blois, for up to 15 people perfect for visiting vineyards, castles and relaxing with family and friends. <http://www.loirechateau.com> Rent castle France. Rent french castle Loire Valley.