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LUXURY TRAVEL

# Fine wines and even finer hotels in the Loire Valley

Château Chambord has restyled its gardens and opened a chic new hotel. It is ridiculous, but rather magnificent

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A room at the Relais de Chambord  
ANNE EMMANUELLE THION

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If there's one word to describe the royal château of Chambord in the Loire Valley, two hours by TGV from Paris, it might just be "ridiculous". The deer park surrounding the estate, with cantering stags and snuffling boar, is as big as Paris; it is also the largest walled space in Europe, maybe the world. At the centre of this regal park is the huge, white, crazily skylined castle — a 16th-century architectural tribute to the testosterone levels of its young creator, King Francis I. It has 440 rooms, 84 staircases, uncountable corridors and 282 fireplaces.

And now there are a couple more superlatives to add to Chambord's list of marvels, starting with a first-class, ultra-luxe hotel, the Relais de Chambord, which opened last month. Sleek, chic and not exactly meek, it has decorous and sensuous suites with a faintly modernist ambience — to sweetly counterpoint the views of the beautifully baroque château. Other rooms open on to the languid River Crosson, or the endless green of the forest.

Inside, expect soaring sash windows, marble baths and purple chairs like rounded Henry Moore sculptures, juxtaposed with integral wood-burning stoves and piles of chopped timber hidden behind gleaming glass: despite its elegant modernity, the hotel cleverly reminds you that this is still deep rural France — with peasants and forests and hunters 200m from your slumberings — even as it is royal France. You may see wild boar wandering across the sward through those floor-to-ceiling windows as you sip local whites such as Pouilly-Fumé and Menetou-Salon.



Beyond the bedrooms (if you can struggle from the encompassingly sumptuous beds, and the oddly soothing views of fleches, crockets and turrets) you'll find a wellness room, a billiard salon, oodles of discreet, sun-trapping courtyards for aperitifs and — *naturellement* — a stylish restaurant, Le Grand Saint Michel, lit with lacings of sinuous white light and directly facing the mighty castle, mano a mano. I think the castle wins, but the Relais de Chambord's cheeseboard makes the new hotel a worthy silver medal-winner.

The second of Chambord's innovations comes with another princely price tag: \$20 million (£14.3 million). That's what an American benefactor has spent on recreating its formal garden (reputedly in return for rights to hunt game in the park). In doing so they have added a lustrous pearl to a necklace of fascinating gardens that stretch all the way to the Loire, through ancient Anjou. And it's this garden route that I intend to follow, in fittingly sybaritic style.



My guide, Marianne, takes me to the roof of the château, where the white chimneys rise like huge ivory chess pieces. As we gaze down at the diagonals of box and topiary, and the avenues of Japanese trees — just round the corner from the new hotel — she explains the problems that the restorers faced when rebuilding Chambord's *jardin*.

"Chambord is sited on a swamp — that's why so many of the original workmen died from malaria," she says. "It's basically an impossible place to build or grow, and Chambord's first gardens only lasted 20 years. We had to go to libraries in Blois and Paris to see how they looked."

The result is spectacular: Château Chambord is like a coke dealer's palace designed by a drunken god-king, with its double helix staircase inspired by Leonardo da Vinci. And now it is complemented by clipped, gleaming, very Cartesian lawns. It is mightily ridiculous, but it is also *magnifique*.

In keeping with the grandiosity — and absurdity — my first night's sleep is in a cave, a few miles downstream from Tours. But this isn't any old cave, this is Les Hautes Roches hotel, built into the riverside cliffs, and it comes with cocktail terraces, a view of the languid Loire, sparkling bidets in the bathrooms and, in the main hotel, a Michelin-starred restaurant that serves a tranche of gorgeous turbot in that classic French way: with crunchy boiled veg and unctuous hollandaise. Delicious.

Well fed and well happy, I retire to my plush little cavern with a bottle of the local and rather pleasant Chambord white — Cheverny — and a collection of Louis Aragon's poems, including my favourite, *Les Lilas et Les Roses*. It is about the horrors of the First World War; it is also an elegy for the beauty of this flat, dozing, winsome riverine land. It concludes with the refrain, "*Couleur de l'incendie au loin roses d'Anjou*," which roughly means: the colour of fire, in the far roses of Anjou.

When he wasn't writing about the horrors of war Aragon was famous for more surrealist verses. And I can't help wondering what he would make of my next destination: the garden festival of Chaumont. Here, every summer, a score or more international garden designers and landscape architects are invited to turn 30 square metres of Château Chaumont's lawns, woods and meadows into diversely conceptual, dada-esque mini-gardens. They employ sculpture, glass, mirrors, sounds, herbs, knickers, pools, car engines, shrubs, uranium, streams, tulips, disco lights, roses, walkways and suspended hairdryers.

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you're in the right mood (and if the weather is kind). Go on a sweet, warm, moonlit evening in high summer, when the nooks, espaliers and Andy Goldsworthy sculptures are magically illuminated with twines of sparkling LEDs, then it is truly divine (there's a decent restaurant too).

Back in the car, I decide I've got time — in between châteaux — for an unexpected sidestep: Amboise. This is a cute, quaint, touristy Loire-side town famous for two

things: quite nice biscuits and Leonardo. The great Renaissance polymath is buried here, in a gothic chapel next to the battered castle. However, the most resonant and moving place is his final home, a half-timbered manor house gifted to him by Francis I.

Climb the rickety wooden stairs, along with all the Japanese tourists, and you can visit the bedroom where Leonardo died, apparently in tears because he hadn't fulfilled the artistic talents given him by God. You can also stare through Leonardo's favourite leaded window, with the view over his beloved garden. It is palmy, verdant and vividly Italian.

From Amboise I trundle down the riverside to, yes, another château. But this isn't any château. If you've seen a picture of a French castle somehow floating on a river the chances are you were looking at Chenonceau. In 1577 its owner, Catherine de Medici, decided to complete the building by extending it across the River Cher (a little tributary of the Loire). And so the building vaults across the waters like a prancing unicorn escaping a fairytale huntsman. Quixotic.

In the gardens, everything returns to French formality. Even the herb and kitchen gardens — which supply the excellent restaurant (try the stunning puds) — are sliced and diced into diagonals and polygons: Napoleonic regiments of lettuce face ordered phalanxes of apple trees. It's all rather pretty, but maybe unnervingly perfect.

Luckily, my next bedroom is designed to soothe any anxieties. I'm sleeping on a houseboat, on the Loire, in the Anjou Natural Park. The smiling owner, Selma, greets me with very sensible instructions ("if you smoke, everything might burn down!"), then leaves me with a nice basket of supper, a great bottle of Valmer white and a glorious view of the watery sunset. Kingfishers swoop. Herons soar. A beaver swims for the shore, making a determined and glittering wake, a vee of blinding light over which dragonflies hover. I climb into my cosy bunk bed and I am lulled into a delicious coma by the gentle sway of the backwaters.

Morning dawns equally sweet. I've got two more gardens to visit, and they couldn't be more different. The first, Château du Rivau, is a romantic fantasy of English disorder and Italian grace with a dash of eclectic modernism. Expect ironic gnomes, hidden music, erotic sculptures, glorious flowerbeds, child-friendly tree houses and excellent, fluffy quiche in the alfresco brasserie. And don't forget to buy some of the veggie soup as a souvenir: it's all organic, and all the ingredients are picked within 10m of the till.



A courtyard at the Relais de Chambord  
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The second garden, Villandry, is one of the most famous in France. A Spanish scientist bought the house in 1906 and restored the gardens using his American wife's millions, creating a rhapsody of symmetry. There are 1,004 lime trees, 83km of box, a zillion nodding tulips in the "love garden", every herb imaginable, sculpted shrubs, swanned lakelets, crystal cascades, wooden loveseats adorned with glowing roses and a maze where you can't go wrong because it is designed to lead you to the beauty of God at the centre.

How do you top all that? With my last stop, and my last and most historic bed: Fontevraud Abbey. Here you'll find another neat formal garden and also an exceptional restaurant, run by a Michelin-starred, Bocuse-medalled chef who appears to be about 14 years old (try his coffee crisps with foie gras and mushrooms). Moreover, and more importantly, if you book into the Abbey hotel you get to sleep — poignantly — in subtly luxurious rooms that were once cells for lepers, then for Victorian prisoners, then for Resistance fighters held by the Nazis.

The best thing about Fontevraud is revealed once the day-trippers depart: if you are a hotel guest you are given right to roam at will and can wander through crypts and transepts, into medieval attics and ancient kitchens.

And so, after my dinner, slightly tipsy on fine Saumur wine, I steal through the dark, deserted cloisters. I trip over cobbles, pass nocturnal doves and finally find myself in the high, vaulted nave of the great and empty abbey. This mighty and echoing edifice is where the Angevin kings of England are interred; their painted effigies are suspended above their medieval bones.

It is nearly midnight; I am alone. A silver light shines through the gothic windows on to the faces of Eleanor of Aquitaine and Richard the Lionheart. It's just me, the moon and the Plantagenets. And as I look at their graves I can see exactly why they chose to lie here, for ever, in the sweet and watered back garden of France, this land of grand rivers and vast forests, where châteaux and poetry and art and legends flourish in the driving rain and burning sun, along with the cherry and the lilac and the roses of Anjou.

#### Need to know

Sean Thomas was a guest of Atout France ([uk.france.fr](http://uk.france.fr)). Relais de Chambord has B&B doubles from about £315 ([slh.com](http://slh.com)); Les Hautes Roches has B&B doubles from about £200 ([relaischateaux.com](http://relaischateaux.com)); La Batelière sur Loire has treehouses and boats from £150 a night ([labatelieresurloire.fr](http://labatelieresurloire.fr)); the Fontevraud Abbey has B&B doubles from £140 ([fontevraud.fr](http://fontevraud.fr))

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