

JULY 2018
Issue N° 294

PARIS MONTHLY CITYGUIDE

where

A View from the Top
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French Castles

Courtly Castles

By Patricia Valicenti

The castles of France have been homes to kings, queens as well as a famous inventor, provided backdrops for a host of intrigues and today the public can discover some of this exceptional heritage.

Versailles would become the seat of the French court and the government of France under Louis XIV and is today a UNESCO World Heritage site with its 2,900 rooms, 1,944 windows covering 110,000 square metres and stunning grounds. The castle also served as a home to among others, Louis XV who made his own hot chocolate and marzipan in his private kitchen and Marie-Antoinette who enjoyed playing her harp, revived the glamorous balls, hosted a host of parties and had a back to nature retreat built on the grounds, the Queen's Hamlet, and in May the Queen's House in the hamlet in the Trianon Gardens on the edge of the Grand Lac, re-opened to the public after an extensive restoration made possible through the patronage of the house of Dior. For the first time in 200 years visitors can discover during a guided visit the refined décor inside the home which contrasts with its pastoral exterior. The charming home sits in the heart of the bucolic hamlet that was built for Marie-Antoinette by Richard Mique between 1763 and 1787 and would become a favoured destination of the queen.

Elegant evenings are to be had at Versailles as well with a serenade in

the Hall of Mirrors and a stunning sound and light show on the grounds in the glorious gardens and copies all capped off with fireworks. The special evenings are on every Saturday through to September 15th with the Séérnade Royale being held at 20 minute intervals from 6.30pm to



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Queen's escape: The spectacular sound and light show in the gardens of Versailles with fireworks (top), and a view onto the gallery and the Eiffel Tower as seen from the Queen's House at Versailles (This page: An aerial view of the Royal Chateau of Blois (bottom) and the sound and light show at the Royal Chateau of Blois)

7:50pm during which you can stroll through the royal apartments and the Hall of Mirrors accompanied by musicians of the Folie Françoise baroque ensemble and dancers of the Compagnie de Danse l'Éventail. The experience is similar to the great balls held back in the 17th century for which the public was in attendance as the audience. The fabulous fire of sound and light kicks off in the gardens at 8:30pm topped off with a fireworks display at 10:30pm.

Located in one of the largest forests in the Paris region, is the Domain of Chantilly, home to the private apartments of the Duke and Duchess d'Aumale, the second largest collection of old paintings in France, the largest horse stables in Europe, which house the Museum of the Horse, and one of the most prestigious libraries in the world whose collection includes the celebrated Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry, regarded as the most important illuminated French Gothic manuscript of the 14th century.

A visit to the domain provides a glimpse into the gracious lifestyle of the 19th century, but offers a look into the 17th and 18th centuries as well. The castle's apartments are a reflection of the French decorative arts of the 17th to the 19th centuries and are located in the oldest part of the castle, known as the little castle that was built in the Renaissance by Jean Bullant for Anne de Montmorency, a Constable of France in the 16th century and who had commissioned the construction of the castle. Among the most amusing rooms inside is the Grande Singerie decorated

with whimsical, rich illustrations of, notably, monkeys. The décor reflects the 18th century taste for the exotic, fashionable during the Regency and at the beginning of the reign of Louis XV.

Currently an exhibition, on show through to October 14th, focusing in on paintings of horse races is being held in the domain's Salle du Jeu de Paume exhibition space. The show entitled Peindre les Courses (Painting the Races) is articulated around three major artists, George Stubbs, Théodore Géricault and Edgar Degas and brings together some 70 paintings, drawings, sculptures, photographs and films.

Meanwhile, a bevy of castles stud the Loire Valley just two hours south of Paris. One of the region's most celebrated residents was Leonardo da Vinci who lived in, invented in and died in the Château de Clos Lucé in Amboise. The privately owned historical monument has been opened to the public by the Saint Bris family since 1954 and in 2016 it celebrated the completion of its renovation and restoration work. Among the marvels that the visitors can discover are the workshops of the great inventor and designer Leonardo, who came to France at the age of 64 upon the invitation of King Francis I. He sojourned in Clos Lucé from 1516 to 1519 when he died, and the castle has been, and is, celebrating the 500th anniversary of his stay from 2016 through to 2019 with special events and programmes. This year's event at the castle is entitled Dreams of Flying and is devoted to Leonardo da Vinci and his conception of flying as well as his influence on human flight.



Photo by G. BARRON / GETTY IMAGES

www.versailles.fr



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Clockwise from top: Aerial view of Chambord and its grounds, an aerial view of the castle of Prie in Burgundy, and Leonardo da Vinci's bedroom at the Clos Lucé

Just 35 minutes from the Clos Lucé one finds the royal castle of Blois sitting on the Loire River and which has played host to myriad illustrious visitors including seven kings and 10 queens of France, among them Louis XII, Henry IV and Francis I as well as both Catherine and Marie de' Medici, queen consorts to respectively Henry II and Henry IV. The historic monument is a unique example of French architectural styles from the 13th to the 17th centuries and its four facades each date from different eras. The castle is putting on a new sound and light show in its courtyard recounting the thousand-year history of the Château de Blois and the show is held every night (except July 13th) at 10:30pm. While at the castle you can also take in an escape game revolving around the most celebrated historic event that took place there, the assassination of the Duke of Guise in December of 1588. The mystery-filled game for 10 to 12 players is on from July 7th on Thursdays, Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays.

CHATEAU OF BLOIS

6 Place du Château, 41000 Blois, 02 54 90 33 32

CHATEAU OF CLOS LUCÉ

2 rue du Clos Lucé, 37400 Amboise, 02 47 57 00 73

CHATEAU AND DOMAIN OF CHANTILLY

Rue du Comptable, 60500 Chantilly, 03 44 27 31 80

CHATEAU OF VERSAILLES

Avenue Rockefeller, Versailles 78000, 01 30 83 78 00

A CASTLE LIFESTYLE

The Château de Prie in the scenic countryside of Burgundy has been home to nine generations of the Bourg de Sozas family who opens up the superb property for guided visits. The Château de Prie is an imposing residence that belonged to a Polish queen in the 17th century and sits on a large walled estate and is listed as a historic monument. The chateau's elegant grounds include 19th century stables, stands of plane trees and a brook whose island can be reached by two 19th century bridges. The guided tour, which must be reserved in advance, includes a visit to the King's Chamber, the master bedrooms and the Grand Salon, the master bedrooms and the dining room and is conducted by the Marquis or the Marquise du Bourg de Sozas. Visitors can also stay in guest rooms or suites inside the castle or in one of two cottages on the estate's grounds.

THE CHATEAU DE PRIE
Domaine de Prie, 58160 La Ferrière,
03 86 58 42 64



Photo © Stéphane Hooghe - Photo B. Lacombe - Getty Images / The castle of Prie in Burgundy