



Sumptuous Châteaux of the Loire

Photographs by Jean-Baptiste Leroux
Texts by Catherine Grive

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A study of the most prestigious of France's historic châteaux



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Photographs by Jean-Baptiste Leroux

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*| Cover - Amboise was the first château to introduce the Italian style to the Loire Valley.
A collection of flamboyant keeps, turrets and rooftops stand guard over the Loire flowing below.*

*| Preceding double page – Surrounded by woodland,
Chambord stands alone, a mirage-like monument to glorious excess.*





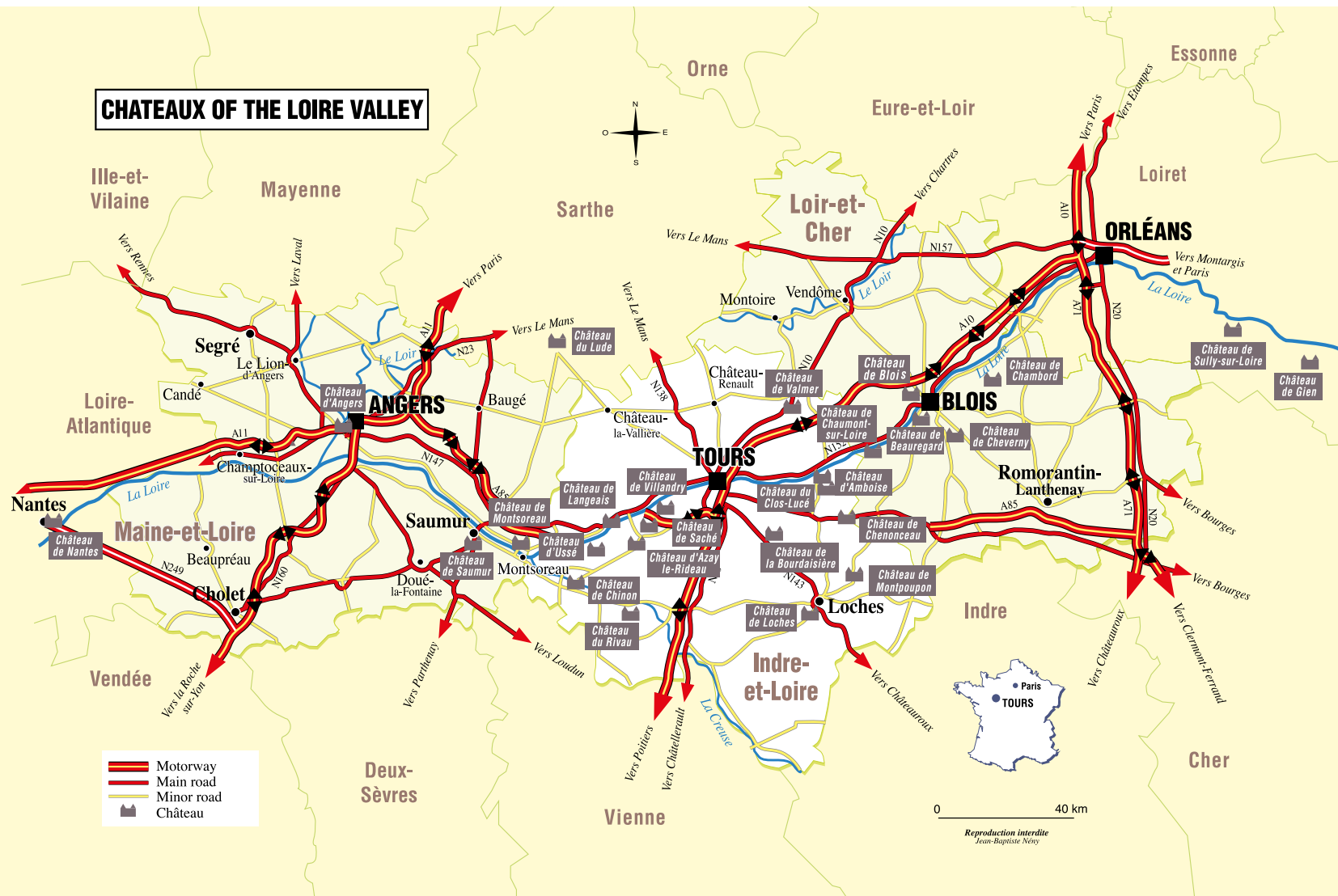
Foreword

Iconic postcard images of France photographed and depicted hundreds of times – the châteaux of the Loire still have the power to surprise when they first come into view at the end of an avenue or around the curve of a hill.

On first sight, the châteaux appear very different – a palace looming surreally out of the mist across a lake, a crenellated keep emerging from fog, impressive ruins now overgrown, or stately home still lived in by a noble family. But they all have one fact in common: each harbours a secret. The key is to find that secret, to dip into the history lessons of childhood, to imagine dining on haunch of roe deer with François I, to follow in the inspired footsteps of Joan of Arc, or to listen like Flaubert, for the “laughter of pages and rustle of dresses”. Browse the pages of the most beautiful Châteaux of the Loire to admire the art of their setting and their timelessness, and, perhaps, to get to the bottom of their secret.

“ Along curving slopes and noble valleys, the châteaux are stationed like wayside altars, and in the morning’s and the evening’s majesty, the Loire and her vassals make their way through these valleys.”
(Charles Péguy)

CHATEAUX OF THE LOIRE VALLEY



- Motorway
- Main road
- Minor road
- Château

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*Next page – Standing on the site where a hunt once met,
the château is one of the very first along the Loire, both in terms
of its construction date and its geographical location.
It was built before the Italian style began to exert its influence.*

45500 Gien
02 38 67 69 69

Château de Gien

Fortress of pleasure

The Loire is by turns sluggish and strong, grey and golden, clear and hazy, as it flows below the massive walls of this historic, stark fortress. Louis XI inherited Gien from Charles IV, known as Charles du Maine, and gifted it to his daughter, Anne de Beaujeu, who was impetuous and an art-lover like her father. *Madame la Grande*, as Anne was known, wanted to live comfortably. She opened up the château by creating huge windows, letting the light of the Renaissance flood in and thereby revealing its palatial magnificence. Only the square tower, the Tour Charlemagne, was retained.

Initially wood-fired and glazed, the decorative, lozenge-shaped red and black bricks are a distinctive feature of Gien. On the interior façade, the brickwork forms curious motifs including lozenges, a five-pointed star, Solomon's seal and even a hopscotch grid made up of framed squares joined by a cross and possibly linked to medieval freemasonry.

In this region rich in game, hunting parties were a passion that shaped life. The design of the residence around a square, its many windows, large, open courtyard and vast public rooms ensured that it could accommodate sumptuous celebrations and feasts and receive the most distinguished guests. Joan of Arc met with Charles VII here in 1429. François I signed the act here conferring the regency on Louise de Savoie in 1523. Henri II stayed here, as did Catherine de Medicis and Charles IX. Louis XIV and his mother, Anne of Austria, sought refuge here during the Fronde, or civil war.

The château did not suffer much damage during the Revolution and was spared during German bombardments, which destroyed a good part of the town during the Second World War.

The château de Gien stands proudly and peacefully with the town spread at its feet. In a fitting tribute to its history, it houses a renowned international museum of hunting.





! Preceding page – Encircled by moats and surrounded by extensive grounds, the château was built at the end of the fourteenth century on a site overlooking one of the few ports along the Loire, connecting the north of the river with the regions of Sologne and Le Berry. Every June, it hosts an international festival of classical music.

Château de Sully-sur-Loire

Stark grandeur

The keep, rampart walk and magnificent chestnut timbering are echoes of the Hundred Years War, when the château was in the hands of La Trémoille, who held Joan of Arc prisoner following the king's coronation and the defeat at La Charité-sur-Loire. She managed to escape to continue her passionate crusade, waging war on the Burgundians.

In 1620, Sully, a leading figure and minister to Henri IV, acquired the château. A Protestant and a man of integrity and self-discipline, Sully invested time and great wealth in refurbishing the château to his tastes. He had the levees strengthened as protection against frequent and disastrous flooding by the Loire, created the covered galleries and oversaw the humanising of the property through the construction of a 'small château' within the confines of the keep.

71360 Sully
www.chateaudesully.com
03 85 82 09 86

The former was designed for more private, intimate use, marking a clear distinction from public life as lived in the palatial courtyards. On the first floor, a curious iron door concealed in the panelling of the Great Hall leads to a room where the drawbridge could be operated, and which served as the minister's treasury.

Having fallen out with Catherine de Medicis following his criticism of her extravagance, Sully withdrew to his estates to write his famous memoirs, which he had printed at the château. He shut himself away in his lowering fortress, which, unlike other châteaux of the Loire, was never influenced by the delicate lines of the Renaissance style from Italy. At mealtimes, he and his wife sat in state at either end of the table, while guests were made to sit on stools. It was a gloomy residence, which nonetheless had its fair share of illustrious occupants. Louis XIV and Anne of Austria, accompanied by Mazarin, took refuge here during the Fronde. Voltaire made the château his home after the Regent exiled him for disparaging remarks about his morals. Voltaire was to return later, having made the acquaintance of Mademoiselle de Livry, who staged plays for the writer here.

For three centuries up to 1962, the château remained in the family of the original Duke de Sully. Emerging, half in light and half in shadow, from the rising mists of the Sange, this place has an unmistakeable sense of the weight of time.

Members of the court enjoyed climbing up to the terrace to watch the hunt depart.

Next page - Chambord has inspired poets. Chateaubriand compared it to “a woman with her hair seemingly uplifted by the wind”, to evoke the contrast between the serenity of the façades and the halo of turrets etched against endless skies.

Chambord

“One huge folly”

François I was a man in love. To be closer to his mistress, the Countess de Thoury, who lived not far from here, he built a château with what is now an iconic outline. He was a proud man too. In Chambord, he wanted to display all his majesty and power to the eyes of Europe. It was designed to dazzle, not to be lived in. François I stayed here no more than forty-two days, in order to oversee the building work, in his entire thirty-two year reign. In total, Chambord has been occupied for only about twenty years of the last five centuries.

Construction began on Chambord in 1519. The building site of this “huge folly”, in the words of nineteenth-century French architect, Viollet-le-Duc, was one of the biggest of the Renaissance period, already prefiguring Versailles. Almost two thousand labourers worked on the site. Life was harsh, particularly as the château is built on marshland into which the carpenters had to sink oak pilings up to depths of twelve metres.









! Preceding page - The château contains no fewer than 426 rooms, although a 1685 inventory recorded only 30 chairs, 13 tables and... 4 chamber pots!

! The second floor is remarkable for its coffered barrel vaulting depicting royal symbols. The salamander, emblem of François I, appears on two hundred of them. In the background is the famous double spiral staircase.

Although it was never intended for defensive purposes, Chambord is modelled on the fortified châteaux of the Middle Ages. Its high façade is made up of four towers surrounding a keep. There is nothing medieval about the interior however. It is built around a superb double spiral staircase, which has echoes of Leonardo da Vinci's style. Four corridors from the 'four quarters of the globe' lead to the staircase.

With its 156-metre long façade, 426 rooms, 77 staircases, 282 chimneys and 365 windows, the château resembles the fantastical edifices found in fairytales. Comfort, it must be said, was sacrificed to magnificence.

The name of the architect remains something of a mystery. The influence of Leonardo da Vinci, who worked at this time as a court architect, is evident, although he died several months before building work started. The real designer was, however, surely François I himself. One tower, instead of being crowned with a cross, bears a fleur-de-lis. Monograms on the staircase at terrace level are carved upside down, so that God can see from above the power of the king. The chapel and apartments are housed in the west wing and, by placing himself in the direction of Jerusalem, the king demonstrated that he was the guardian of spiritual power in the kingdom.

| Interior of the imposing dome,
a light-filled architectural marvel.

| Next page – A technical and artistic miracle,
this 'château of châteaux' is a temple dedicated
to pleasure, as well as to glorious solitude.

41250 Chambord
www.chambord.org
02 54 50 50 40 ou 02 54 50 50 41

In 1539, François I received Charles V (Carlos I of Spain) here as his guest. Against this opulent, festive backdrop, François set out to demonstrate his power. The next three days saw a succession of hunting and feasting. Later, Louis XVI visited for the hunting and attended the premieres of Molière's *Monsieur de Pourceaugnac* and *The Would-Be Gentleman* at the château. Chambord's glory days did not last long, however, and the deer and wild boar were left to reign over this silent, densely forested kingdom.

The estate was bought by the nation for eleven million gold francs from the Bourbon-Parme family in 1932. It was a timely purchase. No private fortune in the world was enough to maintain Chambord. Since then, successive French presidents have invited distinguished guests here to attend presidential hunting parties. As in the time of the monarchy, these visits have been brief, but surely memorable.

Chambord is a world apart. The best time to visit is in winter when the château, surrounded by mists, draws an aura of romantic melancholy from the magnificent trees and still waters out of which it arose. This is the moment to lose oneself in the immense rooms, to play hide and seek on the famous staircase, and to wait on the terraces for a ray of sunshine to break through the clouds.





! Above the entrance to the château is a statue of Charles d'Orléans. After the Revolution, the building was in such a poor state that demolition was even considered. Its conversion into barracks in 1788 saved it from this fate.

Château de Blois

A château-museum

In its earliest history, Blois was a château of sorrows and a refuge for those in suffering. When Louis d'Orléans was murdered on the orders of Jean sans Peur (John The Fearless), his widow, Valentine Visconti, fled here to hide. She died the next year after ordering the following to be carved on the walls of the château: *Rien ne m'est plus, plus ne m'est rien* (Nothing is anything to me, all is nothing to me).

Charles, son of Louis d'Orléans, came to Blois to live in 1440. He was a broken man having been twice widowed and imprisoned for twenty-five years in the freezing Tower of London. He used to walk beneath the arches of the gallery at Blois, composing ballads to escape from his suffering.

Finally, on a day in 1462, happiness returned to the château. At almost seventy years of age, Charles joyfully learned that he had a son, the future Louis XII. The medieval château became the royal residence and each of the Valois was to leave his mark on it in successive architectural improvements.







! Preceding page – The town of Blois, imbued with the gentle atmosphere of the Loire, is watched over by its château. The latter developed around an easily defended rocky outcrop, which, from earliest times, proved a favourable site for establishing a local and even regional power base.

At the beginning of the 1500s, Louis XII, together with his wife Anne de Bretagne, set about rebuilding the château in late Gothic style. Later, their daughter, Claude de France, who was the wife of François I, refurnished the château and set up court here. No queen or princess loved Blois as she did. It was the home where she took her first steps and where she first fell in love. To please her, François I began building a new Renaissance-style wing in white stone, in contrast to the buildings of his predecessors. Nothing was too beautiful or too sumptuous for housing his ever-growing retinue of courtiers and for accommodating the prestigious library of books he had started to collect. Worn out by seven successive pregnancies, Claude died at the château in 1542, aged twenty-five. The king then abandoned Blois in favour of Fontainebleau.

The château was, however, to remain the main residence of François I's successors. It was to Blois, that Henri III summoned the Estates General in 1576. And it was in his bedchamber on the second floor that, on 23 December 1588 at 8 o'clock in the morning, he had his enemy, the Duke de Guise, murdered. Henri then descended the two floors to where his mother, Catherine de Medicis, lived to give her the news in person.

| Dating from the Middle Ages and symbolising the Virgin Mary, the fleur-de-lis became the emblem of the monarchy.

| Next page - The poison room, belonging to Catherine de Medicis, features 230 carved panels and has retained all its romantic power.

23, place du Château - 41006 Blois
www.chateaudeblois.fr
02.54.90.41.41

Following the murder, the monarchy once more abandoned the château. Only Louis XIII used it when attempting to poison the queen mother, Marie de Medicis. Despite being rather plump, she managed to escape from the château down a rope ladder.

Such minor and major dramas have always been played out at Blois, which today bears the marks of the architectural visions – Gothic, classical and Italianate – of its successive occupants. The entrance is via the Louis XII wing, notable for its courses of red bricks tied with white stones.

The Queen's Bedchamber, formerly a gallery of the apartments of François I, became the royal bedroom of Catherine de Medicis, who died there on 5th January 1589. In her side room, or *studiolo*, four wooden panels conceal cupboards opened by working a pedal hidden in the skirting board, and it was here that the queen kept her poisons. It would seem one gets the legends one deserves.









! Preceding page – Cheverny was built in a uniform classical style. A tour of the château reveals a dazzling interior decorated with sumptuous sculptures, gilding, furniture and paintings.

! Hunting with hounds still has a passionate following in the beautiful countryside around the château.

Château de Cheverny

A family château

Blois and Chambord were royal residences: Cheverny, in contrast, has always been in private hands. Apart from during the turbulent period of the Revolution, the château has belonged to the same family. Today's owner, the Marquis de Vibraye, is the descendant of Henri Hurault, Count de Cheverny and Lieutenant General of the King's Armies, who purchased the land around 1510.

The architecture of Cheverny, like its history, is orderly. The main sections of the house are laid out symmetrically, as are the windows, separated from top to bottom by a line of arched pediments, and the oval niches housing busts of Roman emperors. The château's uniformity, verging on rigidity, fortunately still leaves room for contrast. Domes and campaniles feature side by side on the elaborate roofs. The façade is built from Bourré stone, which has the particular characteristic of whitening as it ages. The Duchess de Montpensier, *La Grande Demoiselle*, was a regular guest here of Elisabeth, daughter of Henri Hurault, who organised lavish feasts. The Duchess referred to the château as "the enchanted palace".

The main avenue, seen here looking towards the château, is almost six kilometres long. The grounds extend to virtually 100 hectares and have been redesigned as a garden in the French style.

41700 Cheverny
www.chateau-cheverny.fr
02 54 79 96 29

It might appear as if nothing had ever disturbed the peace of this beautiful residence. One morning, however, the château was the scene of a dramatic event. At five o'clock, Henri Hurault, who had heard whispers of his wife's infidelity, suddenly burst into her room. He surprised a page who fled by climbing out of a window. Henri held a goblet in one hand and a pistol in the other and demanded that his wife choose. An hour later she died, having chosen the poison.

In 1914, the family opened the château to the public. A classical-style stone staircase, decorated with sculptures on a rustic theme combined with motifs of war and symbols of the arts, leads to the apartments. The staircase is the work of an unknown artist clearly of some repute at the time, who has left only his initials and a date – FL 1634 – at its foot.

On the first floor, an armoury leads to the King's Bedchamber, the most richly decorated room containing five tapestries depicting the trials of Ulysses.

The Cheverny pack of hounds is world famous. The outbuildings contain a vast room housing 2 000 sets of deer antlers, and the kennels accommodate fifty hounds.

Another way of approaching the château's history is provided by Tintin's creator, Hergé. Cheverny was the inspiration for his château of Moulinsart, which first appeared in *The Secret of the Unicorn*. Professor Calculus bought the château with the money made from selling the patent for his famous shark-shaped submarine.

