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LOIRE VALLEY



Chasing castles

CHARUKESI RAMADURAI journeys through Loire Valley, France's wine country, known for its sprawling, extravagant chateaux that hark back to the time of Renaissance grandeur

At first glance, chateau Chambord seems like a mishmash of towers, turrets and chimneys. From up close, the impression remains unchanged.

Travel writers have often referred to Chambord as a castle straight out of a fairytale. Me, I think of it as some kind of medieval Disneyland. Except, one designed by the latter's young visitors (hey, let's throw in one more chimney here, it's so much fun), rather than by an architect with a sense of moderation. This is not to say that I do not like it; I marvel at its size and scale, and the opulence carelessly scattered across every room.

Home to royalty

In the Loire Valley region in the west of France, vestiges of the country's royal past take the form of a 100-odd stately chateaux. In all this, Chambord easily stands out as one of the grandest. Looking at it, it is tough to believe that it started life as a humble hunting lodge of King Francois I. "Humble" may be misstating the facts a bit, for a mansion with 440 rooms — of which only 80 are open to the public, but believe me, even that is far too much to explore — and 85 staircases, all roofed by over 300 quirky shaped chimneys.

The fact is that the king, who believed himself rivalled in greatness only by God, wanted his hunting lodge to showcase his power. And every element in the chateau works to that end: from the two massive spiral staircases in the middle of the central hall, to the fading tapestries hung on the walls, and the sprawling park that encircles the mansion. Sadly, the high ceilings and

draughty rooms made the chateau mostly inhabitable, and the king spent only a total of 42 days here over the years. All this trouble, all this expense, for a stay of six weeks — but then, each visit was a regal jamboree, with 12,000 horses accompanying the king to transport his entourage and luggage.

The design of this Renaissance-style building is often wrongly attributed to Leonardo da Vinci. On the same king's invitation, Da Vinci did spend the last years of his life (1516-1519) in Amboise in the Loire Valley. But construction of this chateau began only around the time of his death, ruling out Da Vinci's hand in it. Till today, the architect's identity remains unknown.

I climb up this very staircase and walk through room after room of unbridled splendour: a royal bedchamber here, a library there, an ornate chandelier on a ceiling, a gilded fireplace in a corner. My most pleasant experience here is the time spent on the terrace, taking in the splendid views. I can see for miles all around me: the moat around the chateau, the roads leading up to it laid out in a neat pattern, and the lush woods that are still home to hundreds of deer and boars.

Chateau Chambord has recently entered into an agreement with Udaipur City Palace to link their rich heritage and share knowledge on conservation.

If you can judge a region on pure grandeur of its buildings, then Loire Valley proves itself second to none. France's longest river, Loire, makes the entire area fertile and prosperous. During the tiresome Hundred Years' War (between France and England in the 14th and 15th centuries), the Loire Valley played a role of strategic importance. Add to it the region's proximity to Paris. Therein lies the



Travel Tips

TO GET THERE:

Fly to Paris and take the train (<http://www.raileurope.co.in>) to the city of tours, an ideal base to explore Loire Valley.

For more information on Loire Valley, and to plan your trip, visit <http://in.rendezvousen-france.com>

reason for all the castles here, which were later converted into pleasure palaces by the rich and famous.

Of past glories

Loire Valley is also home to chateau De Chenonceau, just by River Cher, and also counted among the most magnificent and picturesque in France. What makes this 16th century castle extraordinary is that it was managed and protected by a series of shrewd and capable women. And dating back to an even earlier era is Chinon, the castle where a young Joan of Arc spent some time. Unlike most of the others, which were royal residences or mere status symbols, Chinon was meant to be a stronghold.

But Loire Valley is not just about displays of pomp and power in the form of grand chateaux. On my drive through the region, I pass one picture postcard village after the other. Sprawling vineyards are just beginning to sprout leaves and fields of canola flowers keep me company throughout.

My time in Loire Valley area ends with another chateau experience at the Domaine de la Tortiniere. This time, I am staying at this 19th century chateau converted into a luxury hotel. After a long day crammed with French cooking lessons and wine tasting sessions between all the chateau-chasing, I am glad to put my feet up at this charming castle tucked away in a quiet country lane. It has all the classic trappings of the chateaux from this region — sweeping driveway, pointy turrets and rolling parklands included — but the décor in the rooms borders on the comfortably modern.

The entire valley has been designated a world heritage site by UNESCO, which describes it as an "outstanding cultural landscape." Not surprising, I think, given its natural abundance and manmade treasures.

