



Visionaries of Kings and

2019 sees the Loire Valley celebrating 500 years since the birth of the Renaissance. **Rosalind Ormiston** visits some of the glorious châteaux that have stood for half a millennium

In 2019 the Loire Valley is marking the 500th anniversary of two remarkable events in French history: the beginning of the Renaissance in France, kick-started in 1519 by François I (1494-1547), its ambitious young king at the time; and in the same year the death in Amboise of the gifted artist, architect, designer, and polymath Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), friend and advisor to the king.

Leonardo da Vinci was invited to live in France soon after François I became king. In September 1515 French troops were victorious against Pope Leo X's army in the Battle of Marignano (now Melegnano) near Milan, and private meetings between the pope and François I were held. Da Vinci, unfulfilled as artist-in-residence at the Vatican, may have met the king at this time. He was invited to accompany the king back to France in 1516 and arrived in Amboise with his

servants and his notebooks, as well as three paintings that meant much to him, the *Mona Lisa*, *St John the Baptist*, and *Virgin and Child with St Anne* (all now in the Louvre, Paris). Here he would live comfortably, as a guest of the king for the remainder of his life, in the intimate Château du Clos-Lucé owned by the royal family, just a few hundred metres from the royal palace of Château d'Amboise. The king was a frequent visitor to his home. Today one can visit the house, which has been furnished to reflect the period of da Vinci's residence with his workshops and laboratories, private rooms, kitchens (now displaying working models of da Vinci's many projects), and the bedroom where he died (not in the king's arms as 19th-century histories told). The serene gardens have full-size working replicas of many of Leonardo's impressive inventions, including his military tank, bridge crossings, flying machines and

ABOVE: The formal gardens of the Château de Chambord were reinstated in 2017 and complement the huge royal hunting forest
RIGHT: The Château d'Amboise towers above the town and the River Loire

The châteaux of Amboise, Chambord, Chenonceau, Blois, Chaumont-sur-Loire, and Azay-le-Rideau are just a few of the outstanding examples of the Renaissance in France. Built between 1526 and 1547, Château de Chambord is a masterpiece of design, possibly informed by the architectural drawings of Leonardo himself. Da Vinci died in May 1519, four months before the château's foundations were laid, so his input is difficult to ascertain. However, François I and da Vinci had been working on a plan for an ideal city based on a Roman idea, at Romorantin, around 80 kilometres from Amboise, which da Vinci may have visited. Designs for this royal palace reveal François I's desire to place the Loire Valley at the very heart of his burgeoning French Renaissance.

Grand designs

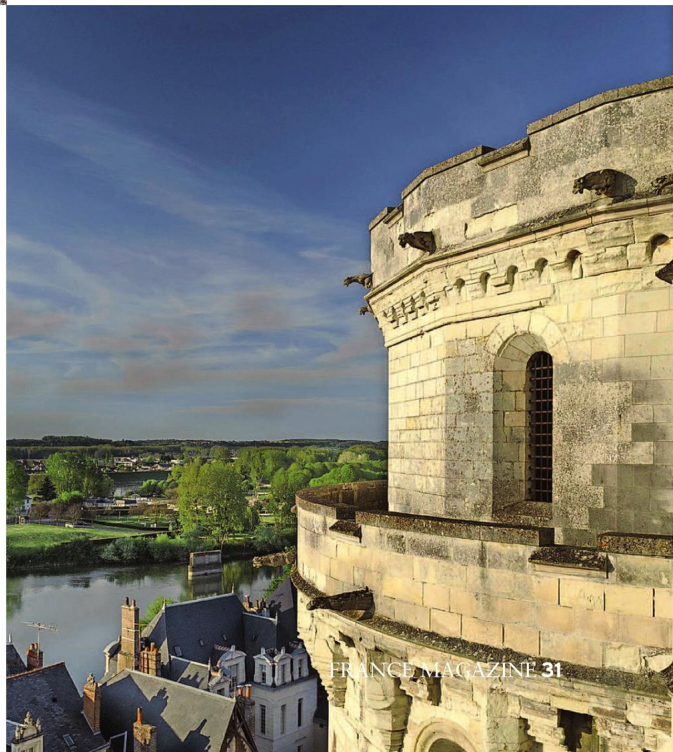
Château de Chambord is a vast edifice -156 metres long, 170 metres wide and 56 metres high, with terraces at 24 metres high. Its powerful presence is due to the architectural design, which follows classical ideals of symmetry, proportion and harmony to create a strong yet beautiful building. This can be seen in Chambord's square ground-plan, and visibly in the four huge round towers, one at each corner of the main building. Decorative Roman elements of loggias, pilasters, columns and arches reveal its Italian influence. Chambord was created from its foundations by the will of the king, aged twenty-five. The site was on heavy marshland, far from ideal for such an extravagant plan. Oak trees were felled and pile-driven deep into the water, for a platform on which to raise the castle, taking five years to complete. Work was interrupted in 1524, due to the king preparing for war in Italy against Charles V the Holy Roman Emperor, but resumed in 1526. It would take until 1545, just two years before the king's death, to finally complete the Royal Wing. François I took a personal interest in the design, requiring that the base of the castle walls be kept bare of ornamentation to draw attention to the ➡➡



Archimedes screw. There is an exhibition centre too.

The power of history

François I's bold plan was to build stupendous palaces in which to stay with an entourage of friends, courtiers and staff – Château de Chambord has a staggering 426 rooms – each preferably surrounded by large forests in which he could engage his passion for the hunt. His decision to build in a new architectural style was informed by time spent in Italy where a revival of interest in classical antiquity was taking place, reflected in the style of new palaces and civic buildings. Building in the style of Roman antiquity symbolically denoted a powerful heritage. France had been a major part of the Roman Empire for five centuries from 52BC and now François I employed skilled artisans, including Italians, to design, build and realise his Renaissance dream.





delicate sculptural decoration of the upper floors and spires. Each of its 426 rooms is furnished to reflect the period, many with original pieces, sumptuously arranged, as though the king's retinue were still resident. It is a joy to visit.

The king's court entourage numbered some 1,000 in residence, with double that in attendance on any given day. François I was a keen patron of the arts, who enjoyed music, literature and dancing, while jousting, falconry and archery were also among his interests. These pastimes he pursued enthusiastically in his Renaissance palaces. His passion for hunting was realised at Chambord in the surrounding forest of 4,500-hectares, the largest closed park in Europe, as big as the city of Paris, with enclosing walls 32-kilometres in length. Surprisingly perhaps, François I only resided for around seven days a year at Chambord. This was actually not unusual, the court moved from one palatial residence to another, staying only for short periods.

The touch of genius

Although Leonardo da Vinci only had the three last years of his life at Amboise, in those years he and François I spent time together. His notebooks from this period are full of architectural drawings. It is possible he was responsible for the design of the double helix staircase at Chambord, created after his death. Drawings by Leonardo show similar design features. The double-spiral gives the impression of a single



structure. Central to the chateau's interior, this is one of its highlights for visitors; the puzzle is that while climbing the stairs one can see those on the opposite staircase through openings in its circular form. It is impressive, beautiful to look at, and is supremely functional, the ingredients of a perfect design.

A monumental spiral exterior staircase at Château de Blois was part of the king's slightly earlier first architectural project, which included the construction of a new wing in the Renaissance style. The results lead to his plan to build a chateau at Chambord. The royal chateau at Blois is an impressive vision of wealth and power, situated high above the town and the River Loire. Stepping through its entrance one can see four centuries of architectural design, from the 13th to 17th centuries, in the façades of the four monumental buildings surrounding its central courtyard. In the north-western wing, Italianate loggias, arches, columns and an exterior 'corkscrew' staircase endorse its Renaissance history during the reign of François I. Immense sums of money were poured into this project between 1515 and 1518. The resulting work, completed around 1520, is seen as a key milestone in French architecture. Visitors today climb up through the pretty town of Blois to enter the portals of a majestic palace, furnished from the Renaissance period. A 'Histopad' can be borrowed – it's a tablet, which, when placed on a QR code reader in various rooms, brings a 'virtual reality' room to life on screen in 3D, reconstructed as it was, complete with tapestries, furniture, rugs, art, decorative pieces and music. It is an extraordinary experience, with commentary available in eight languages, and one not to miss when visiting.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Sunset over the grounds of the Château d'Amboise; Château du Clos Lucé was once home to Leonardo da Vinci and his inventions; The jewel-box like Renaissance marvel of the moated Château at Azay-le-Rideau; Marble bust of Leonardo da Vinci near his burial place in the chapel of Saint-Hubert; A recreation of one of Leonardo's studies at Clos Lucé;



Château de Chambord is a masterpiece of design, possibly informed by the architectural drawings of Leonardo himself

François I lived here after his marriage in 1514 to Claude, Duchess of Brittany, the daughter of King Louis XII. It was Queen Claude's childhood home, and their seven children would live here too. She died here, on 20 July 1524, aged 24.

Valley of marvels

The influence of the Renaissance style was carried through in many châteaux in the Loire Valley region not owned by royalty but visited by them. One of the most breathtaking must be the magnificent Château de Chenonceau built in the middle of the Cher river by Thomas Bohier, the king's Lieutenant general and his wife Katherine Briçonnet, to emphasise their social standing. They demolished a fortified castle and mill on the site, left the keep and redesigned it in the Renaissance style. The château, square in design and built on the fortified piers of the old mill from freestone from the nearby quarry of Bourré, reflects brilliantly on the surrounding waters. In 1535 Chenonceau was seized by François I due to Bohier's unpaid debts to the crown. In 1547 Diane de Poitiers the new owner, added a 60-metre arched bridge over the river. A gallery, informed by the Ponte Vecchio in Florence, was later added by Catherine de' Medici, when she acquired the château by force from de Poitiers in 1559; de' Medici also added exquisite formal gardens in the Renaissance style.

The stunningly beautiful gardens at Château de Chaumont-sur-Loire attract visitors as much as the palace itself and should not be missed. The château grounds contain the Centre for Arts and Nature, holding annual shows, much like the Chelsea Flower Show, London, but on a larger scale. Its International Garden Show is a highlight of the world horticultural calendar. A gardener's delight, every vista is greenery, colour and light. All the plants and trees are named. A full day could be spent here easily, such is the ambience (and the excellent restaurant, and self-service food options) in its grounds.

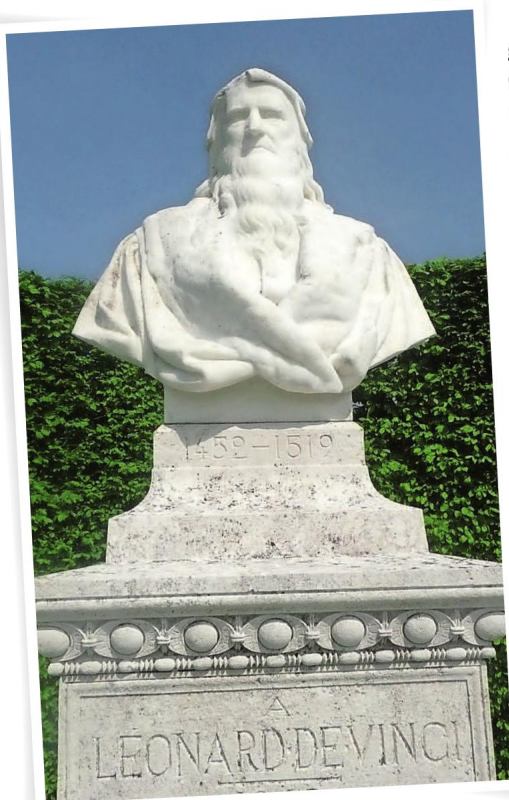
The château, scenically seated high above the River Loire, was built on the site of a castle burned and destroyed by Louis XI. The current château was started in the fifteenth century. Home to Catherine de' Medici, she preferred Château de Chenonceau and offered it in exchange to her rival Diane de Poitiers.

From a vast palatial residence to the smaller Château d'Azay-Le-Rideau, this gem of the Loire Valley proves that size wasn't everything in the Renaissance. It was built on an island in the Indre river in the early 16th century by wealthy financier Gilles Berthelot, to celebrate his fortune. The splendid beauty of the site led François I to describe it as 'a pleasant place to stay'. An avenue through the town of Azay-le-Rideau leads to a semi-circular courtyard, opening on to a walkway encircling the château. The first sight of the château itself is magnificent, its white-stone façades reflected in the water surrounding it. The staircase is one of the most famous examples of French Renaissance architecture and sculptural embellishment and the interior remains finely decorated and furnished. Not to be missed are the woven-rush wall coverings, a fashionable way to control room temperature at the time: warm in winter, cool in summer.

Home to a king and a polymath

And finally to what will be the epicentre of 2019's Renaissance celebrations; the royal Château d'Amboise. The vast, palatial residence of François I stands proud - a powerful, yet serenely beautiful building set above, but at the heart of the pretty town of Amboise on the banks of the Loire river. Here the king extended the original castle, a favoured royal residence, to reflect the new era of his reign. The palatial exterior is echoed by the superb interior decoration, paintings and furnishings, all revealing this era of wealth and Renaissance creativity in France.

During 2019, many visitors are expected to want to travel to Amboise to visit Château de Clos Lucé. It was purchased by the French king Charles VIII in 1490 for 3,500 gold crowns, a princely sum. Some thirty ➡



PHOTOGRAPHS: CHÂTEAU DU CLOS LUCÉ / LÉONARDO DE SERRES / FSL; LÉONARDO DE SERRES; M. METAY; LÉONARDO DE SERRES / OMN



years after that it witnessed the death within its walls of one of history's most eminent artists, Leonardo da Vinci. The artist found tranquillity and happiness here for the last three years of his life, as an honoured guest of François I who supplied a generous pension to the man he revered. During his time at Cloux, as it was then known, da Vinci organized feasts for the king's court; balls, banquets and masquerades with complex stage sets and scenery designs, extravagant costumes and even wild animal robots – a roaring lion was hugely effective – to thank the king for his good deeds. In this special year for the Loire Valley, Leonardo da Vinci and King François I will both be remembered and celebrated, placed rightly at the heart of 500 years of the Renaissance in France. 🍷



A Toue - a traditional flat-bottomed boat - on the River Loire at Blois

Francofile *Celebrate the Renaissance in the valley of the Kings of France*

GETTING THERE

By rail: Rosalind travelled London to Paris by Eurostar (eurostar.com), return fares from £58; By air: Tours Val-de-Loire airport is 25km from Amboise. Ryanair (ryanair.com) flights from London Stansted to Tours start at €10 one-way.

GETTING AROUND

Rosalind toured the Loire Valley region for six days with Val de Loire Travel, small-group & private tours company (valde Loire-travel.com) By bicycle is also a popular and straightforward way to visit the major châteaux. The Loire à Velo signposted cycling route is 900km winding through the Loire Valley (loirebybike.co.uk)

WHERE TO STAY

Rosalind stayed at: **Hôtel Le Grand Monarque**
3 Place de la République
37190 Azay-le-Rideau
Tel: (Fr) 2 47 45 40 08
legrandmonarque.com

Room prices start at €70 a night for a single. Buffet breakfast €13
A charming 18th-century coaching inn with exposed beams and white stonework, situated in the middle of the town and just 150m from the château and grounds.

Hôtel Mercure Blois Centre

28 Quai Saint-Jean
41000 Blois
Tel: (Fr) 2 54 56 66 66
accorhotels.com/gb
Room prices start at €95 a night for a double. Centrally located and close to the Loire river, this smart, contemporary mid-range hotel has a bar and restaurant, plus an indoor swimming pool and fitness centre.

Château de La Bourdaisière

25 Rue de la Bourdaisière
37270 Montlouis-sur-Loire
Tel: (Fr) 2 47 45 16 31

labourdaisiere.com
Room prices start at €110 a night for a double. The hotel is open from 15 March to 15 November, and from 26 December to 4 January. This opulent château-hotel is a historic monument dating from the 19th century, but a castle was on the site from the 14th century. The parkland and grounds of around 135 acres include the Conservatoire National de la Tomate, a contemporary dahlia garden and a microfarm. The hotel has several dining options, a salon de thé and a bar.

Le Grand Hotel

9 Place du Général Leclerc
37000 Tours
Tel: (Fr) 2 47 05 35 31
legrandhoteltours.com
Room prices start at €69 a night for a double. Built in 1927, this recently renovated hotel is located at the heart of Tours, close

to the train station. The hotel has its own bar, but is convenient for the best of Tours' cafés and restaurants.

WHERE TO EAT

La Creusille

3 Quai Henri Chavigny
41000 Blois
lacreusille.com/
Riverside restaurant emphasising local specialities. Menus from €27, mains from €18

Orangerie of the Château de Chenonceau
1 Château de Chenonceau
37150 Chenonceau
chenonceau.com
Fine dining restaurant in the grounds of the château, Chef Christophe Canati is passionate about celebrating regional produce. Mains from €20

Auberge du Prieuré

2 Rue du Clos Lucé
37400 Amboise



sieursausin-cuisinehistorique.fr/
Central restaurant with period styling and dishes based on renaissance recipes. Mains from €20

WHERE TO VISIT

To celebrate the 500th anniversary in 2019, the Loire Valley region has organised a cultural programme of events including music festivals, light and sound shows in cities and châteaux, exhibitions, travelling digital shows, contemporary art and artistic creations, an international architecture competition, guided tours, banquets, conferences and lectures. To find complete programmes, visit: [Loire Valley tourist board](http://LoireValley-tourist-board) loirevalley-france.co.uk

USEFUL WEBSITES: chenonceau.com/en/; chateaublois.fr; chambord.org; domaine-chaumont.fr/en/; azay-le-rideau.fr; chateau-amboise.com/n/en/; vinci-closluce.com **Départements:** Indre-et-Loire (37); Loir-et-Cher (41)

PHOTOGRAPH: LAURENT ALVAREZ