



Fit for a king

Following the trail of four of the Loire Valley's best-loved châteaux, **Rachel Johnston** proves you don't need royal wealth to acquire their majestic attributes

You don't have to be a history fanatic or an expert on France to have some idea of what the term 'château' refers to. Some think of it as a grand country residence surrounded by sprawling vineyards à la Château La Siroque in *A Good Year*. To others, it conjures up images of fortified walls, turrets and a moat; although different from the English 'castle' (distinguishable in French as a *château fort*), the term's 18th-century origin is indeed the French word *chastel* and many châteaux do bear these striking features.

Whatever its definition, a château is a residence unquestionably fit for a king, and the Loire Valley is celebrated the world over for its concentration of these imposing structures – over 300 in total. Many were constructed or occupied by royal figures, as both symbols of their power and as appropriately lavish summer residences within striking distance of Paris.

Quincentennial celebration

It's been exactly 500 years since Francis I began his short but influential rule of France and this year sees the châteaux of the Loire – three of which were built by the monarch himself – lay out their best silverware for a dedicated celebration of his reign. There's been no better time to hop across the Channel and explore this iconic stretch of the country, spanning 280km from Sully-sur-Loire (Loiret) in the east as far as Chinon (Indre-et-Loire) in the west, with the romantic River Loire as an unfaltering backbone. Each château bursts with fascinating history and, with gentle landscapes, pretty towns and vineyards and a plethora of fine wines at every turn, it is easy to comprehend the area's appeal.

But architectural heritage is in fact just one facet of the Loire Valley; with three regional natural parks, nature plays an equal part and there are few better ways to appreciate it than in the saddle, following any stretch of the 800km of signposted cycle routes.

Gastronomes delight at the area's 20 Michelin-starred restaurants and there are eight *Plus Beaux Villages* to feast your eyes on too. But the Loire Valley isn't just a tourist destination – it's also a wonderful place to set up home.

"It's very 'weekendable', whether by ferry and road, by train or by using one of the many low-cost flights into the area," explains Rupert Seager of Agence Bourbon. "It represents an

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excellent compromise between better weather and distance to travel." There isn't an established expat community but many current residents see that as a bonus. Furthermore, with just 4.1% of the French population living here and a glut of verdant countryside, the Loire Valley has managed to

temper its annual tourist onslaught and remains delightfully unspoilt, with abundant space for all.

Reach for the sky

With Centre's regional average property price at €140,000 according to Notaires de France figures, it's well under the national average of €156,000 and a realistic area for househunting whatever your vision. But what if you have your sights set on living in truly grand style? If handing over a château entry fee just doesn't cut it, there are numerous opportunities to buy one of these most treasured of Loire commodities – and many are less expensive than you might expect.

Sarah Francis of Sifex is positive about the Loire's château market. "This year has shown more movement compared to previous years and there has been a return of clients looking for châteaux in the area. Prices have not moved and there is a good supply of nice properties with prices being negotiated, so it's a good time to buy."

With this in mind, I've taken inspiration from the architectural features and situations of the king's own three châteaux, plus another renowned for its gardens, and shortlisted five tempting examples on the market. All except one are for sale for under £1m and all are within striking distance of their famous public counterparts and the delights of the wider area. So whether it's turrets, tuffeau stone or sweeping parkland that feature on your list of ideal château criteria, these are sure to give you food for thought. ■

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Notable features: Tuffeau stone, spiral staircase, parkland, water

Sharing its name with a famous raspberry liqueur produced nearby, the town of Chambord in Loir-et-Cher, 15km east of Blois, is almost more synonymous with its château, the largest in the Loire Valley. The fact that this staggeringly vast, palatial structure was built by the king in 1519 simply as a weekend hunting lodge is just one of its jaw-dropping details. A UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1981 and surrounded by a moat and a 5,440-hectare *domaine*, it is constructed from the local tuffeau stone, a marine sedimentary rock that gives off a magical pearly iridescence in the sunlight and gives the castles of Disney films a run for their money. One of Chambord's architectural highlights is the spectacular double helix staircase at its heart, designed by Leonardo da Vinci supposedly to prevent the king's wife and mistress ever running into each other.

Chambord might be a hard act to follow when it comes to househunting but, ticking the boxes for all four of its notable features, this early 19th-century château (*pictured, below*) is an exciting opportunity at €950,000. It may not quite match Chambord's 440 rooms but with 900m² of living space, it's no modest retreat, and a period spiral staircase sweeps up from the entrance hall to five bedrooms. Built from solid tuffeau blocks, the stone is still in excellent condition despite its fragility and proneness to weathering. The property is surrounded by an enclosed four-hectare park which includes a section of river frontage and an island on which the famous French poet, Pierre de Ronsard, used to write many centuries ago – and, as Francis I was a keen patron of the arts and counted poetry among his passions, this is an appropriate extra piece of the kingly jigsaw puzzle.

The château is around 50km from its idol Chambord and just 20 minutes' drive from the TGV station at Vendôme, with regular trains to Paris. There is a good choice of local market towns and the nearby village offers all amenities. Some refreshing of the property is needed but the current owner has already completed an extensive renovation with new electrics, plumbing and heating.

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Le Château de Blois



Notable features: Tripartite form, internal courtyard, central town location

Capital of Loir-et-Cher and gateway to the old region of Sologne, Blois was built on a pair of steep hills and is a bustling maze of twisting medieval streets and animated squares with a population of around 50,000. The town has a growing reputation for its university and higher education, and numerous modern cultural events and activities ensure it hasn't remained stuck in the era of Francis I, despite being awash with history. The town's château was the first construction undertaken by the king and, in 1845, the first historical residence to be restored, acting as a model for the restoration of many others. One of its most unusual features is the juxtaposition of three contrasting architectural styles – set impressively around a cobbled courtyard are Gothic, Renaissance and Classical wings, the Renaissance wing named after Francis and bolstered by an open staircase affording views of the valley.

With many châteaux isolated from civilisation by their expanse of surrounding parkland, finding one situated in the centre of a village despite its 21 hectares is something of a rarity. But on the market for €996,000, this château (*pictured, below*) is situated west of Blois in a pretty village of 1,000 inhabitants. Elegant gates lead from the end of a tree-lined drive into an internal courtyard, with more than enough turning space for a horse-drawn carriage or three. Mirroring Blois' tripartite form, the property comprises three separate buildings: the main 17th/18th-century residence, a pavilion built in 1950 and a caretaker's house in need of restoration, each with an architecturally different facade. With its 25m swimming pool, adjacent tennis court and a total of 46 bedrooms, this property would make an ideal hotel.

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Le Château d'Amboise

Notable features: Elevated views, turrets, chapel

Poised on a spur of land high above the River Loire's serene waters with near-matchless panoramic views, this château is the quintessential kingly residence and was allegedly Francis' favourite – in fact, the king spent his childhood here when it belonged to his mother, Louise of Savoy. Flags fly proudly from its ramparts and sharply pointed, slate-clad turrets glint in the sun. The accompanying Chapel of St-Hubert is, much to many visitors' surprise, the final resting place of Leonardo da Vinci, who lived and worked at nearby Clos-Lucé. Like its counterpart in Blois 35km upriver, the château has an urban setting – but it appears to float above the roofs of Amboise rather than sit among them. It's quite a hike up from the pretty boutiques and delicatessens of pedestrianised Rue Nationale to reach this majestic vantage point, even with a *religieuse* from renowned pâtisserie Maison Bigot inside you.

Unlike the other three broadly set châteaux, Amboise has a tight, compact architectural form and two examples on the market caught my



eye when making comparisons. The first (pictured, above right), with an asking price of €950,000, shares Amboise's elevated setting and enjoys fabulous views of walled parkland from its balustraded terrace. Every imaginable kingly activity has been provided for here, too, from banqueting to billiards to taking a dip.

Alternatively, in the secluded countryside setting just north of Tours is this Renaissance-style example (pictured, inset) constructed in the 19th century. Its multiple pointed turrets certainly recall Amboise but perhaps its most interesting feature is its chapel (with or without the tomb of a famous Italian polymath). All the château's period features have been preserved and it is set in a charming 10-hectare park with mature trees, lawns and a sweeping driveway. The price is €1,300,000.

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Le Château de Villandry

Notable feature: Formal gardens

Nowhere is the Loire Valley's label as the 'Garden of France' more stunningly brought to life than at Villandry. Featured in programmes and countless books as a true icon of formal French horticulture and dubbed "one of the great gardens of the world" by Monty Don, the château's garden was created in 1906 by owner Joachim Carvallo. This may be relatively recent compared with the château's 16th-century origins, but it was nonetheless designed around the notion of how it probably looked in its Renaissance heyday.

There are no less than seven separate areas within the garden, each one telling a story and evoking a different mood: a classically inspired water garden with pond and a cloister of lime trees; an ornamental garden with planting corresponding to different kinds of love; a playful hornbeam maze. By far the largest of the areas is the *potager* or kitchen garden, stuffed with a staggering 80,000 vegetable plants every year that are, surprisingly, intended more as decoration to impress than as crops to be harvested. Everything at Villandry is tightly marshalled and regimented – box hedging is clipped to perfection and gravel paths are flawlessly raked – and the whole garden is best appreciated from one of



the château's towers, from which current owner Henri Carvallo can survey his estate with what must be immense satisfaction.

If it's the grandeur of a formal garden that's on your must-have list, try this 14-bedroom property in Loir-et-Cher on for size (pictured, above right and inset), listed as a *monument historique*. Blowing the £1m budget at €5,500,000 and admittedly a bit of a wildcard, it simply had to be included for its magnificent garden designed by André Le Nôtre, principal gardener to Louis XIV who was also responsible for the garden at the Palace of Versailles. The garden was realised in 1755 by Jean-Marie Morel and comprises immaculate ranks of box and yew trees plus a magnificent 80m stone *bassin* with fountains not unlike that in Villandry's water garden, as well as its own enclosed *potager* and orchard. The parkland is stippled with groups of oak and cedar trees and there are wonderful perspective views in all directions.

It's not only in its outside space that this château resembles Villandry; there are plenty of architectural similarities too, including the high slate roofs and elaborate dormer windows, and the accompanying pavilions recall the coach house in Villandry's grounds. You may need to enlist a hardy team of gardeners to help here, but boy would it be worth it. sifex.co.uk

Road test

One way of dipping your toe in the château-owning waters is to stay in one, allowing you the chance to test it out as a home environment as well as chat to the owner(s) about their experience. Fuelled by the tourist trade, many people have recognised the business potential of châteaux and have opened them as boutique hotels or *chambres d'hôtes*, or let them out in their entirety as a private venue for events and holidays. These will provide you both with sampling opportunities before you take the plunge, as well as excellent business inspiration if you need to recoup your outlay once you've done so.



Le Château de Détilly, Beaumont-en-Véron, Indre-et-Loire

British owners: David and Sandra Jones

Just 7km from Chinon, at the heart of the Loire-Anjou-Touraine regional park and walking distance from the River Loire, this gleaming, tuffeau stone château has been run as a wedding and event venue for several years and is also available for holiday rentals. The site was originally the location of a hunting lodge built by the Bishop of Tours in the 10th century and it comprises the main stately residence plus a chapel, a coach house and a monumental arched gate. Outwardly, the château is more Siroque-style country retreat than royal stronghold; its restoration has been extensive and sympathetic, begun by French businessman Alfred Sirven and completed by current owner David Jones, who is very clear on his advice to potential château buyers. "Never buy a wreck and hope to do it up as cheaply as you budget – it's far better to buy an acceptable place and add your own personal touches." As a result of this approach, David and Sandra have kept renovation heartache to a minimum without foregoing the ability of making it their own.

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Le Château de Perreux, Nazelles-Négron, Indre-et-Loire

French owners: Ludovic and Graziella Laurenty

If it's the boutique hotel idea you're keen on, look no further for inspiration than this example outside Amboise. Dating from 1701, the château features an ornate facade of blushing brick bookended by dual turrets and has the wow factor in spades. Each of the 11 bedrooms is different – some with parquet floors, four-poster beds and balconies but all retaining period features – and Graziella serves breakfasts and *table d'hôte* evening meals in the impressive dining room. Former two-Michelin-starred chef Ludovic has worked across France but it's only now that he and his wife can bring their work in hospitality into their own home environment. It's the peace and serenity of the château's surrounding park and woodland that first won them over, and which they have maximised upon from a business perspective. "Coming to the château has allowed us to set up a home-from-home based on relaxation as well as on quality," explains Graziella. "I myself have had the opportunity to work in some very nice hotels and have seen how stressed society is as a whole – so here we wanted to create an atmosphere of relaxation which can 'mute' everyday life."

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Other must-see châteaux in the Loire Valley

- Sully-sur-Loire
- Clos-Lucé
- Langeais
- Chaumont
- Azay-le-Rideau
- Chinon

Getting to the Loire Valley

By air: Airports at Tours, Nantes and Paris-Orly

By train: TGV Paris-Montparnasse to St-Pierre-des-Corps (Tours) (1 hour)

By car (from Paris): Orléans 133km, Blois 185km, Tours 240km