

Hot spots and places to visit in and around Fontevraud

There are so many places to recommend that you visit during your stay at Chez Teresa that you are spoilt for choice. However, we have some personal favourites that we would like to share with you.

Historic

Fontevraud Abbaye Royale



Obviously location number one is the Abbey at Fontevraud, which if you are staying with us at Chez Teresa, is probably the reason why you are thinking about staying with us or have decided to visit.

This magnificent abbey is the only one of its kind in the world. Of striking architecture and scale, its creamy walls, steely grey turrets and flourishing spires are quite simply breathtaking to look at.

Of particular and unique interest are the Romanesque kitchens where it is not difficult to imagine a roasting spit and the hustle and bustle of a mediaeval kitchen. Now an arts centre where music is programmed along with multi-media and other visual exhibitions, Fontevraud Abbey was once not only a place of religious sanctuary, pilgrimage and sanctuary founded by Robert d'Abrissel in the 12th century for both nuns and monks, but also a harsh penitentiary for 200 years established by none other than Napoleon Bonaparte and reputedly *the* harshest prison in the whole of France. It was also for many years a place of education whereby the nuns taught many pupils including the daughters of Louis XV.. The links between England and France are strong in so far as the Plantagenets ruled both France and England.

Henry II is buried in the abbey and his highly painted effigy adorns the main precept along with his wife Eleanor of Aquitaine. Eleanor, one of the most dynamic and feisty Queens to reign in France, ended her days as a nun within the walls of Fontevraud. There is a small garden that Eleanor is said to have planted and tended and where she walked and reflected during those last years. In it grow special plants, aromatics and fruits, including plum trees. It is said that Eleanor's spirit is often to be felt here.

Châteaux to visit

Of the many châteaux in the area our personal favourites are Villandry, near Tours with its remarkable patchwork of gardens and Montsoreau, which is only a few kilometres from Chez Teresa, which is also definitely worth a visit. Montreuil Bellay and Le Château de Chambord are also wonderful to visit and also Chateau du Clos Luce in Amboise which is dedicated to Leonardo da Vinci.

This is where Leonardo ended his days and where there is now the most magical of gardens offers the visitor a glimpse into the mechanical and musical genius of this Renaissance phenomenon.

Without giving too much away here are some impressions that we have formed.

Montsoreau

As the visitor enters the chateau via the dungeons from what must have been originally the place where boats and barges were boarded, the visitor is treated to a multi-media experience of light, shadow and aural projection with facsimiles of boats and information about the pre-historic Loire up until the 19th century.

On the first floor there is also a gallery with an imaginative light show projected onto plain white mannequins, which then take on a life of their own, delineating character, movement and dance. This is evocative of the days when walking and dancing in the gallery formed a key part of entertainments at the Château and there is special reference to characters such as the infamous La Dame de Montsoreau immortalised in the writings of Alexander Dumas.

In a very tangible sense this chateau pays homage to the history of the Loire, encompassing a number of themes including the nautical, trade and social life of this amazing river-scape. If you want to see a rich and sumptuous display of historic tapestries, paintings, furniture and artworks then this is not the chateau for you to visit and you will be better visiting more opulent palaces such as Chambord. If however, you want a few hours exploring a château of clean lines and large spaces with a magnificent view of the Loire River from the roof terrace then Montsoreau is definitely the place to visit. An additional bonus is the fact that there is the opportunity to taste local wines on the ground terrace.

Villandry

Villandry is a personal favourite of ours as this a beautiful and majestic château with particularly gorgeous gardens. It is not quite on the scale of Versailles, but is still very grand. We recently had the most lovely afternoon there starting with a simple picnic - by the Loire river - of bread, cheese and fruits followed by a walk round the grand house. There is a rather sombre collection of paintings by Goya in the château, some of them thoroughly bizarre and disturbing. One small dark painting depicts a man's head with a baby's body in a dress! One of the most amazing sights however, is the most spectacular and unexpected Moorish ceiling that was saved from destruction and brought back from Spain.

We then spent time in the exquisitely beautiful gardens, which spread out over 10 acres. These gardens are like a huge patchwork quilt, very formally planted with colour themes dedicated to the differing concepts of love - from passionate reds to platonic whites and paler hues, using both vegetables and flowers to express the themes. There are wonderfully aromatic herb gardens and one garden dedicated to the theme of music depicting the lyre and 'musical candelabra'. It was a really sunny and not too hot afternoon and so nice to have some time out from the Salon.

The estate is still owned by the Carvalho family who originally bought the chateau as a virtual derelict in 1906. Actually the Carvalho family seem as if they gave back quite a lot to both the local and wider communities over the years and Joachim Carvalho who bought the Chateau founded the "Demeure Historique", which was the first association for people owning châteaux of historical value. He was a pioneer in

the opening of this kind of historic buildings to the public. It seems to me that he might possibly be the founder of cultural tourism....

At least two of the sons were heroes of France, though sadly executed by the Gestapo for their valiant efforts during World War II. Other family members were pioneers on the medical, scientific and photographic fronts, and achieved many good things in their lives and do not seem to have wasted their time on frivolities as other aristocrats are often accused of doing.

If you are staying with us for a week or two then do consider a visit to Paris. We are two and half-hours away from the city, and would strongly recommend a trip to Versailles and in particular Le Petit Trianon where Marie Antoinette created her Queen's Hamlet as it is a magical place.

Bars and Restaurants in the locale

Yes of course we hope that you will have a meal or two with us during your stay; but equally there are many places to recommend that you visit and sample the fine cuisine. In Fontevraud itself we recommend La Delice as somewhere you can enjoy authentic and delicious French cooking at an affordable price. Lydie and Lauren who run the place are delightful hosts. So too La Croix Blanche offers an excellent menu both set and al a carte. We have heard that La Licorn, which has a famous gourmet chef, and the restaurant at the Abbey itself, are absolutely superb, but as yet we have not had a chance to visit them ourselves though many of our guests have praised them.

Shops

Fontevraud is great in so far as we have most things on our doorstep including two excellent Boulangeries, a Chacuterie and general store 'La Quatre Saisons' and a fabulous gift shop and vinery. We even have a place that makes and restores lutes and harps and next door to us is an inspired jeweller who makes her bijou from precious and unusual stones and materials.

Markets

Throughout 'the season', which arguable starts in April and runs through until October, there is a brilliant flea market in Montserou every 2nd Sunday of the month. We recently picked up a large ancient chest for 120 euros, which we felt, was a bargain.

Saumur Market

This is a green and fertile valley where vines grow plentifully and the soil produces wonderfully tasty fruits and vegetables that can be bought fresh and relatively cheaply from the local farmer's markets and every Saturday rain or shine, Saumur has its market on a Saturday morning. These traders have a great gift in presenting their stalls like works of art and they sell with a smile, a flourish and with knowledge. The region is famous for its delicious leeks (poireaux), apples (pommes) and mushrooms (champignons). The small holders and farmers who trade here are generous spirits who think nothing of 'throwing in' a free bunch of 'fleurs ou herbes' with your purchase. They will cheerfully tell you that this is a 'cadeau' or 'gratuit'....

There are other fabulous markets in Thouars and Chinon and in Montsoreau – the latter on a Sunday morning - to mention just a few in the region.

Musée de Blindés

Saumur also boasts a Museum dedicated to tanks of all things. However, you view such things the tanks on display are miracles of engineering and technical design. There are over 200 exhibits from virtually every country that you can think of from the First World War up to the present day. The collection is remarkably well preserved and many of them in working order.

Other museums worth visiting are Le Musée du Moteur and there are caves, a restaurant and a museum dedicated to the theme of mushrooms.

There is also the famous École Nationale d'Équitation et Cadre Noir in Saumur.

Fêtes

The French are famous for their fêtes and throughout the year there seems to be one for absolutely every conceivable subject - from fruits such as strawberries - to wines - to 'musique'. Fontevraud hosts a bi-annual fête in May dedicated each year to a different epoch in France's rich history. Montreuil Bellay has a very successful Christmas Market with Christmas activities.

The Loire River

Forests skirt Fontevraud and at the back of Chez Teresa is a large one on a hillside where a gleaming white Jesus looks down across the village. Of course the river brings its own life of fishing (pike is the local speciality dish) and during summer a wealth of water sports is on offer including Kayaking, water-ski-ing, river trips on giant skiffs and some swimming in the many ponds; although caution is advised in the wide expanse of the river due to the sinking sands.

Salon de Thés, Bars and Cafes/Tabacs

There are a wealth of these, and particular favourites of ours are the bars; The Butterfly, and St. Cloud in Saumur where you can get a light bite of something to eat, a glass or two of good vino and very good coffee. Our favourite Salon de Thé/Vente de Thé is l'Heure Exquise (near the post office – architecturally worth a look at in itself) and *the* place to drink delicious hot chocolate is La Duchesse Anne which also sells sublime hand-made chocolates.

The above is of course only a very small selection of the vibrant array of cultural and commercial delights on offer in our area from troglodyte villages to wonderful shops.