

# FRANCE

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Log off and recharge in the Loire Valley

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# BACK TO NATURE

Logging off from the modern world, **Kasia Dietz** recharges her batteries and reconnects with nature in the heart of the Loire Valley

**T**he Loire Valley is undoubtedly one of France's most bucolic landscapes, rich in both rural and urban settings. Surrounding the banks of the River Loire sit charming villages and towns worthy of a day trip or weekend sojourn. Among them are Orléans, Blois,

Amboise, Tours and Saumur, most a quick train ride or drive from Paris. The region is also well known for its historic châteaux, some of which are tucked within a town's walls or secluded upon a regal estate.

Having already toured several of these centuries-old castles, I decided to explore the more

pastoral side of the Loire where I could log off, recharge and reconnect with nature.

### **Straight to the source**

Set deep within the forests of Sologne in the Val de Loire, Les Sources de Cheverny unravels like a hamlet. Old farmhouses neighbour dramatic modern



**Above:** Les Sources de Cheverny is surrounded by forests

**Top right:** Château de Breuil

**Bottom right:** Relax at the spa



structures at the expert whim of architect Yves Collet. This passion project envisioned by Alice and Jérôme Tourbier came to life in 2019, 20 years after the opening of their first wellness hotel, Les Sources de Caudalie near Bordeaux.

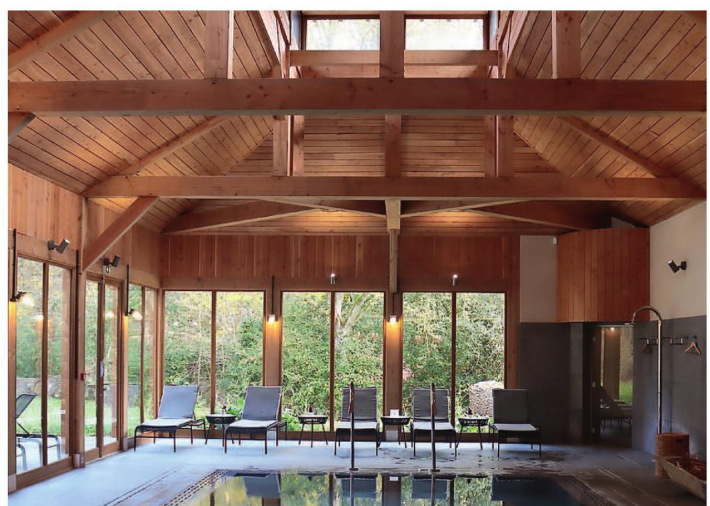
Arriving at this secluded property, all thoughts of city life dissolved as I settled into my cottage on the edge of the lake. Momentarily tempted by the lofted cabin 'Le Baron Perché' (The Baron in the Trees) named for the book by Italo Calvino, mostly for its panoramic views and private Nordic bath, I took pleasure in my spacious home that was full of wooden details and thoughtful artwork. I barely even noticed the television in the living room, choosing instead to sink beneath the bubbles of my porcelain bathtub.

In stark contrast to the farmhouses stood stately Château de Breuil, dating back to the 18th century. This was the Loire Valley after all, and family castles were in abundance. While the top floors boasted 13 rooms and suites, the ground floor promised hours of fun with a space offering

board games and a pool table, not to mention an imposing grand piano. Meanwhile antiques, brass chandeliers and leather-bound books signalled that I had momentarily escaped the present day. I passed rows of wellies that awaited inclement weather and headed straight for the spa, a reminder of the founders' dedication to well-being, and where a rustic mural painted by Claire Basler created visual poetry on the reception room walls.

The heated indoor pool reminded me of a mountain

chalet with its wooden beams and picture windows looking out onto a postcard-perfect landscape, while the steam room and sauna offered even more relaxation and treatment rooms promised deep-tissue massages, body wraps and invigorating scrubs. Even the Caudalie products made of grape seed extracts and known for their rejuvenating and antioxidant properties offered a panacea for the body and mind. Meanwhile, the outdoor pool and tennis court awaited warmer days. ▶





When not hopping on a bike to explore the landscape and stopping to visit the Château de Cheverny, just over 4km away, I feasted in style at the Auberge, one of the estate's two restaurants. Plates of seasonal produce including meats and poultry were cooked over an open fire, accompanied by a well-curated wine list. Chef Frédéric Calmel's gastronomic menu is served nearby at sleek restaurant Le Favori, a recent and well-received addition to Les Sources de Cheverny. On indulging in his four-course menu (there's also a six-course option and wine pairing) I quickly discovered Calmel's signature – the addition of unusual herbs and spices.

### Art imitates life

My next stop was Loire Valley Lodges, set in 750 acres of forest and as I drove along the wooded path towards the main farmhouse, I felt I was moving even deeper into nature. I immediately took note of the contemporary art sculptures dotting the landscape, knowing I was in for a well-curated surprise.

Before checking in to my lodge, I took a walk through the maze of wooded trails and found myself by a mesmerising

lake guarded by a large sculpture in the form of an ant. The afternoon ramble reminded me why there's nothing as energising as connecting with the natural world. I was pleased to discover that with no WiFi or television in the lodges, guests can enjoy a real digital detox and the only screen time involved would be spent at the windows appreciating the panoramic views of the forest.

Comfortably transported to my lodge via golf cart, I was eager to discover which artist had tagged my new home. Most of the 18 treehouse lodges are decorated by a different contemporary artist. Themes include the 1960s by the hotel's founder Anne Caroline Frey, a universe of graffiti art by JonOne and a tribute to singer Serge Gainsbourg.

My lodge was very pleasing to my minimalist taste, with a wood and leather décor scheme and artist Gilles Ballini's canvases subtly depicting naked women hung on the walls giving it its name, *Nude*. The 35m<sup>2</sup> living space included a plush bed, leather-bound butterfly chair and dining table for two, and the natural theme continued in the bathroom with stone sinks

**Above:**  
Dinner is served at Le Favori

**Main:**  
Enjoying the view at Loire Valley Lodges

**Top right:**  
Contemporary art sculptures dot the landscape

**Bottom right:**  
Each lodge is a luxurious refuge



set upon wooden cabinets. What makes each lodge the perfect luxurious refuge, including the one ground-floor lodge overlooking a lake, is the private 25m<sup>2</sup> terrace complete with a hot tub. Set against a jungle-like backdrop, this outdoor spa is appealing in any season and for an even deeper moment of zen, an essential oil massage can be booked incorporating essences and flowers from the surrounding forest. I was particularly intrigued by the Deep Bee massage using an ointment made from the hotel's ▶



### 3 LOIRE VALLEY CHÂTEAUX TO VISIT

With over 300 châteaux dotting the Loire Valley, there are plenty within easy reach of both Les Sources de Cheverny and Loire Valley Lodges, including some of the region's finest

#### CHÂTEAU DE CHAMBORD

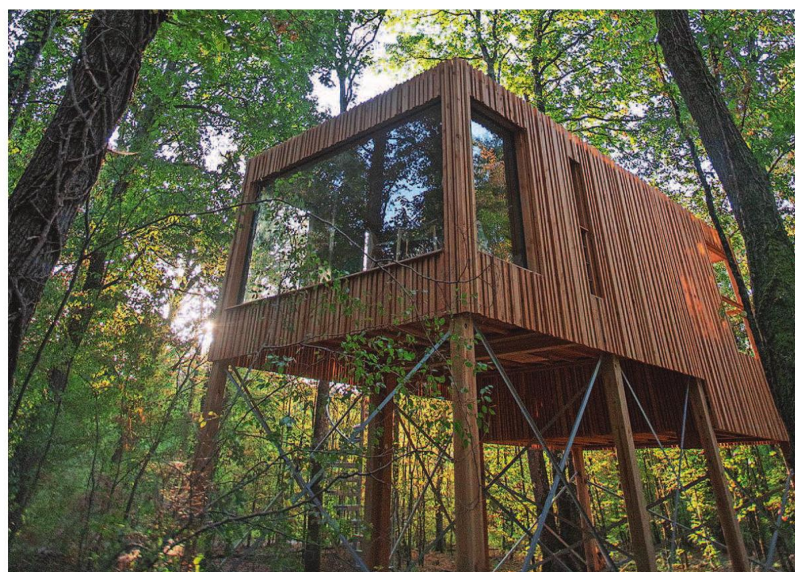
It was built for young King François I, but Leonardo da Vinci also played a role in this château by inspiring the impressive double helix staircase. The château's park is one of the largest enclosed parks in Europe, spanning 5,440 hectares and surrounded by 32km of walls.

#### CHÂTEAU DE CHENONCEAU

This 'floating' castle with a feminine twist was left to Henry II's mistress Diane de Poitiers, and was taken over by his widow Catherine de' Médici. It was Catherine who created the Corps de Logis, a two-storey galley upon a bridge that crosses the River Cher. Immaculately landscaped gardens Jardin de Diane de Poitiers and Jardin de Catherine de' Médici define romance.

#### CHÂTEAU DE CHEVERNY

A family castle for over six centuries, Château de Cheverny includes four enchanting gardens and an English-themed park in its grounds. What makes this château unique are its inhabitants. Over 100 Anglo-French dogs, a cross between English Foxhound and French Poitevins, live in the estate's kennels.



PHOTOS: KASIA DIETZ, LOIRE VALLEY LODGES



**Left:**  
A private terrace with hot tub

**Above:**  
Take a dip in the outdoor swimming pool

**Below:**  
The main farmhouse at Loire Valley Lodges

beeswax. Beneath sunny skies, the 20m-long outdoor swimming pool surrounded by sculptures proved to be the perfect relaxation spot.

When night falls, torches are provided to light the wooded path to gourmet restaurant Ardent, located in the farmhouse. Another thoughtful touch came in the form of a walkie-talkie, which I was given in case I took a wrong turn.

Chef Gaëtan Evrard is a rising star of the gastronomy scene and creates seasonal dishes inspired by the latest harvests gathered from the Loire Valley Lodges' vegetable garden,

complemented by ingredients from artisanal producers from the Centre-Val de Loire region. Enjoying dishes that incorporated edible flowers and berries freshly picked from the riverbank, I didn't need to be out in the forest to feel the connection with nature.

After I was lulled to sleep by the sound of silence, breakfast arrived via wicker basket, picnic style. The freshly baked pastries and homemade marmalades were just too tempting to resist, and while sipping my morning coffee I exhaled deeply, reflecting on how happily disconnected I felt. 🍀



## Factfile

### Loire Valley Lodges

Tel: (FR) 2 47 38 85 88

[loirevalleylodges.com](http://loirevalleylodges.com)

For the full sensory immersion experience, guests can also enjoy guided relaxations with a sophrologist, forest baths and 'lyrical hikes'. Take a stroll on the specially created Art Path to see the sculptures in the grounds, and borrow a bike to explore the forest or cycle to the nearby village of Esvres. Lodges from €410 per night.

### Les Sources de Cheverny

Tel: (FR) 2 54 44 20 20

[sources-cheverny.com](http://sources-cheverny.com)

Nestled in lush green surroundings between Chambord and Chenonceau, Les Sources de Cheverny's mantra is reduce, recycle and reuse. The estate's own filtered mineral water is provided in glass bottles in the bedrooms, bathroom toiletries come in fully recyclable packaging and bikes are available as an environmentally friendly mode of transport. Rooms from €180 per night.

