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Beyond the Châteaux: New Escapes in France's Loire Valley

Rethinking what the region's travel should be has meant expanding the focus from fairy tale castle crawls to experiences anchored more firmly in nature, food and the arts.

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The Château de la Haute Borde guesthouse in the Loire Valley doubles as an artist residency. Like many attractions in the region, the chateau is reimagining what it has to offer. Joann Pai for The New York Times

By Lindsey Tramuta

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On my last prepandemic trip to the Loire Valley, in 2018, I found myself in a familiar place.

Ten years after my first road trip on the region's castle route, I was back at the 500-year-old [Château de Chambord](#), joining a small group of European and American tourists on a guided tour. Within seconds of convening in the inner courtyard, we were craning our necks to marvel at the structure's ornamental bell towers as our guide rattled off facts and dates about King Francis I and his former hunting lodge. When she ushered us up to the towers, chiding us for not listening, a feeling of déjà-vu washed over me.

This was my third visit to the Loire Valley from my home in Paris and the whole fairy tale experience felt tired. Little beyond a nearby converted hotel had changed. Not the exasperated guide

going through the motions, nor the throngs of tourists dropped off by the busload and herded through each room at a fast clip. The dumbfounding beauty stretching the length of the Loire River was the same too, which is ultimately what salvaged the trip.

A lack of change doesn't have to be a bad thing: the UNESCO Heritage-protected region, which drew in 9 million yearly visitors to its cultural sites and 1 million cyclists before the pandemic, has been beloved for decades for its castles and the rolling vineyards that produce what oenophiles consider France's most diverse selection of wine. But it has arguably leaned too heavily on that past, reliant on what appeared to be an endless stream of travelers interested only in château hopping and bicycling. With all of the Loire's dramatic landscapes and rising culinary stars, was this the best it could offer?



The Loire Valley is a UNESCO Heritage-protected region, and drew in 9 million yearly visitors to its cultural sites before the pandemic. Joann Pai for The New York Times



A view of the Loire River from the Fleur de Loire, a new five-star hotel from the double Michelin-starred chef Christophe Hay. Joann Pai for The New York Times

It's a question that local chefs, hoteliers, entrepreneurs and regional leaders were asking themselves even before the coronavirus hit, setting their sights on the area's reinvention. By the time I returned in October 2021 to meet some of them, the region's evolving identity was palpable.

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"Our cycle route and châteaux have always been popular but the fairy tale needed updating," said François Bonneau, president of the Centre-Val de Loire, the regional council overseeing the Loire Valley. "The French traveler has long associated it with field trips they took as school children, while the foreign traveler has a plethora of other destinations in the country to choose from. We

needed to better express the region's identity in its entirety.”

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The pandemic, he continued, only reinforced the need to promote the region differently as visits to the valley's major sites dropped by 43 percent in 2020 and 32 percent in 2021 — unsettling numbers for a region where tourism makes up 5 percent of the local GDP, or around 3.4 billion euros. Rethinking what Loire Valley travel should be for the future has meant shifting the focus from fairy tale castle crawls to experiences anchored more firmly in nature, food and the arts, all while continuing to celebrate the region's unique terroir.

That was evident from one of my first stops, at the 15th-century [Château de Rivau](#). Patricia Laigneau, a co-owner, has been actively working to attract a broader audience for the storybook castle and sought-after wedding venue through food, devoting the last few years to the produce grown and cooked on-site.

Her two organic kitchen gardens were half-moon-shaped and overflowing with forgotten or nearly extinct varieties of regional vegetables such as Berry sucrine, violet celery and more than 43 varieties of colorful gourds. It is considered an official conservatory for Loire Valley produce by the Pôle BioDom'Centre, a regional center for preserving local biodiversity.

The homegrown produce, in addition to a host of herbs and edible flowers, have been used for years in Rivau's no-frills café. But now they are the foundation of the menu at [Jardin Secret](#), Ms. Laigneau's new 20-seat fine dining restaurant set up beneath a glass canopy and surrounded by rose bushes. She brought on the chef [Nicolas Gaulandeau](#), native to the region, to highlight the local bounty through dishes ranging from squash served with pickles and smoked paprika to roasted rack of lamb with vegetables from the garden.

“Not only were our guests asking for something more, I saw the restaurant as an opportunity to show that the châteaux of the Loire can be champions of French gastronomy,” Ms. Laigneau said.

Celebrating the land and its food is central to other new properties in the region.

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The Loire Valley Lodges property was developed to offer guests a forest-bathing experience. Joann Pai for The New York Times



The tree houses at Loire Valley Lodges are spread out throughout the forest and each is decorated by a different artist. Joann Pai for The New York Times

In July 2020, Anne-Caroline Frey opened [Loire Valley Lodges](#) on 750 acres of private forestland in Touraine.

“Things have been very slow to change here so of course the idea seemed wild,” said the former art dealer. “But we were fully booked almost instantly.”

A believer in the therapeutic benefits of trees and an avid collector of modern art, Ms. Frey developed the property to offer guests a forest-bathing experience — or *shinrin-yoku*, a Japanese wellness ritual that involves spending time in nature as a means of slowing down and reducing stress. The 18 tree houses — [on stilts](#) — are spread out throughout the forest and each, decorated by a different artist, have floor-to-ceiling windows, a private deck with a Jacuzzi and with a noticeable absence of Wi-Fi, a stillness of their surroundings. As I perched with a book on my deck one afternoon, the only thing I heard was the faint sound of a pair of wild boars ruffling through fallen leaves.

A unique draw is the guided forest-bathing walk, led by a local nature specialist. Guests can also view outdoor sculptures and paintings that pop up throughout the property (helpful markers, I discovered, as I returned to my lodge in near-complete darkness after dinner); cycle the grounds or to the nearby village of Esvres; take a dip in the pool surrounded by larger-than-life art installations; have a bento-box picnic in solitude, or dine in the restaurant — if and when they’re ready to rejoin the company of others.

The treehouse concept isn’t the only departure from the sleep-in-a-castle tradition.





The Les Sources de Cheverny spa and hotel, which opened in September 2020, has two restaurants. Its owners were intent on turning the property into a culinary destination. Joann Pai for The New York Times

“There have always been a lot of B & Bs, but the limited hotel offerings has only added to the region’s old-fashioned image,” said Alice Tourbier, the co-owner of the [Les Sources de Cheverny](#) spa and hotel, which opened in September 2020.

The estate, which she owns with her husband, includes a restored 18th-century manor house as well as outbuildings spanning 110 acres of farmland, fields and vines. Some rooms are in stone houses surrounding an orchard, others are in a converted barn. Suites are available in a hamlet of wooden cabins overlooking a lake.

Ms. Tourbier, who also co-runs [Les Sources de Caudalie](#), a spa-hotel in the Bordeaux countryside, said she hoped to incite Loire Valley travelers to make more than a quick stopover. Traditionally, the instinct has been to race to see as many castles as possible, a narrow approach to travel I’ve been guilty of taking in the past.

“People will still want to see the castles and we’re close — 10 minutes by bike to the Château de Cheverny and 45 minutes from the Château de Chambord,” Ms. Tourbier said. “But those visits can be extended and paired with gastronomy and wellness, too.”



Le Favori won its first Michelin star in March for the chef Frédéric Calmels’s modern cooking. Joann Pai for The New York Times



Locally grown white asparagus, hemp seeds and butter whipped with green apple caramel, served at Le Favori. Joann Pai for The New York Times

Activities are plentiful, from yoga and horseback riding to kayaking and wine-infused spa treatments, but the Tourbiers were also intent on turning the property into a culinary destination. Les Sources de Cheverny has two restaurants: [L’Auberge](#), a country bistro serving hearty traditional dishes, and [Le Favori](#), the property’s fine dining restaurant, which won its first Michelin star in March for the chef Frédéric Calmels’s modern cooking.

For those looking for a more informal — yet unique — inn experience, the [Château de la Haute Borde](#) is a two-year-old small guesthouse that doubles as an artist residency.

As Céline Barrère, a co-founder and photographer, explains, she and the two other owners wanted to create a secluded, creative environment where artists and travelers could interact: Four out of the nine guest rooms are reserved for artists in residence, who stay anywhere from a week to a month.

Travel Trends That Will Define 2022

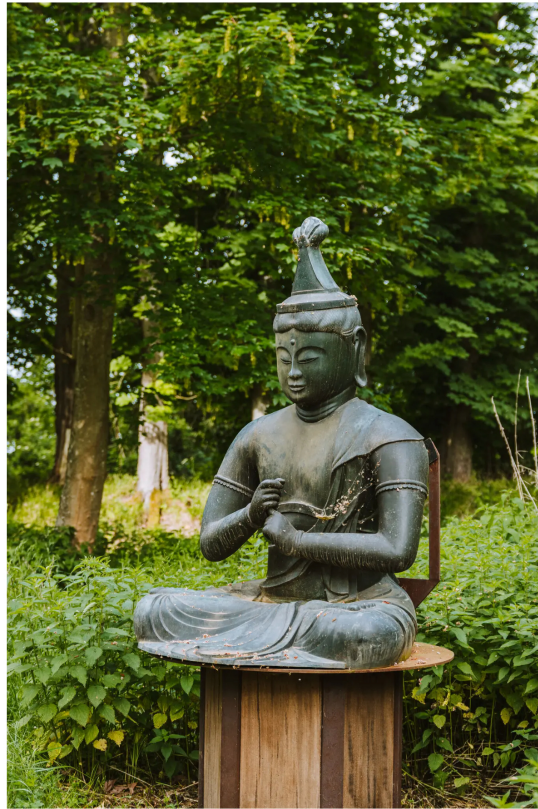
Looking ahead. As governments across the world loosen coronavirus restrictions, the travel industry hopes this will be the year that [travel comes roaring back](#). Here is what to expect:



“We see it as a retreat that brings together nature and contemporary art,” Ms. Barrère said.



Breakfast at Château de la Haute Borde. Joann Pai for The New York Times



Art is a key element of the experience at Château de la Haute Borde. Joann Pai for The New York Times

Visitors can explore the property's 27 acres covered in 100-year-old oak trees, linger in the heated pool, or take part in foraging workshops, but they will also share communal meals with in-residence artists and view works by Hiroshi Harada, Danh V6 and other artists. Conveniently, art lovers can seek out more in a five-minute drive down the road at the [Domaine de Chaumont-Sur-Loire](#), renowned for its garden festival and contemporary art

center.

But perhaps the grandest addition to the region is the one that locals have been awaiting most. [Fleur de Loire](#), a new five-star hotel from the double Michelin-starred chef Christophe Hay, opens in Blois in mid-June. Occupying a former hospice from the 17th century, the building overlooking the Loire River will house two restaurants, a pastry bar, shop, spa, and 44 rooms and suites. But for the chef, known for his revival of cooking with local river fish, the real ambition is going beyond culinary experiences and upscale lodging to preserve the region's greatest gift: its land.



Christophe Hay Joann Pai for The New York Times

“I want people to see how much we can grow ourselves here and how important that is to cooking and eating well,” said Mr. Hay, adding that his 2.5-acre kitchen garden using permaculture techniques, a system of self-sustaining agriculture, and sizable greenhouse will be open to the public. “That’s a big part of what makes the Loire Valley so special.”

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