



Crème de
la crème



Giving its name to everything from lace to whipped cream, the charming Château de Chantilly has seen many changes over the years.

Alison Brown takes a tour

While touring the Château de Chantilly during an official State visit in 1968, US President Richard Nixon exclaimed; “Why have they taken me to Versailles seven times and never here?” Although located just 30 minutes north of Paris, the Château de Chantilly is often overlooked in favour of Louis XIV’s gilded palace to the west of the capital. And while it may not have the dramatic past or opulence of Versailles, Chantilly has seen its fair share of history and boasts some wonderful attractions, including one of the finest collections of paintings in France.

Even if you haven’t been there, you’ve probably seen Chantilly’s magnificent silhouette and landscaped gardens before, as the château has appeared in a surprising number of films over the years, including *A View to a Kill* and Sophia Coppola’s *Marie Antoinette*. It’s also a familiar name. In addition to the eponymous château, the town of Chantilly is famous for its lace (of rock ‘n’ roll fame), horse-racing and whipped cream.

Surrounded by the sprawling Forêt de Chantilly in Picardy, the château’s vast hunting grounds and proximity to Paris made it the ideal location for noble families throughout history. It was originally home to the Montmorency family, who built the first mansion here in the 16th century. Today a striking statue of ▶





OPENING PAGE:
The château
and gardens
PREVIOUS
PAGE: The
Chambre
Duchesse
CLOCKWISE
FROM ABOVE:
The Galerie de
Peintures; The
hameau in
the château
grounds; The
Grand Staircase

the High Constable Anne de Montmorency on horseback, stands facing the entrance to the château. Anne (oddly named after his godmother Anne de Bretagne) probably wouldn't recognise the building in front of him, as the original château that he commissioned was demolished during the French Revolution.

When the château passed to the Bourbon-Condé family in the 17th century, the French landed gentry was at the height of its power and extravagance. The Grand Condé, Louis de Bourbon, inherited Chantilly through his mother Charlotte Marguerite de Montmorency. A cousin of King Louis XIV, he went about transforming the family home into a regal residence. He employed André Le Nôtre, a renowned landscape architect and the soon-to-be gardener at Versailles, to give Chantilly its Grand Canal and *parterres*.

Wandering through the extensive grounds, it's easy to imagine the kind of decadent revelries that took place here. The Grand Condé regularly hosted

elaborate banquets and balls, usually followed by extravagant firework displays. His regular guests included the leading literary figures of the day, such as La Fontaine and Molière. In fact, Molière's play *Les Précieuses Ridicules* was first performed for the Le Grand Condé and his guests at the château.

One of the Condé's greatest banquets would

ultimately lead to the tragic death of his chef, François Vatel. An extreme perfectionist, Vatel is often credited with inventing *crème Chantilly* for a banquet in honour of Louis XIV. During the preparations for the same banquet, Vatel became hysterical

Vatel became hysterical when the fish didn't arrive... he ran himself through with his own sword

when the fish did not arrive on time. Unable to live with the shame, he locked himself in his room and ran himself through with his own sword. According to some versions of the story, his body was discovered when a kitchen worker came to tell him that the fish had been delivered.

Another of the château's legendary residents was Louis-Henri, the seventh Prince of Bourbon-Condé, who commissioned the Grandes Écuries (the Great

Be king of the castle

If you'd like to see more châteaux without straying too far from Paris, here are some excellent options just an easy day trip from the capital

CHÂTEAU DE VERSAILLES

The legendary residence of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, Versailles remains one of the most popular tourist attractions in France. Few places on earth can compete with this extraordinary château.

GETTING THERE: Take the RER C commuter train from Paris to the Versailles-Rive-Gauche station, a five-minute walk from the château.
78000 Versailles
Tel: (Fr) 1 30 83 78 00
www.chateauversailles.fr



CHÂTEAU DE VAUX-LE-VICOMTE

Built in the 17th century for Nicolas Fouquet, Louis XIV's Finance Minister, this beautiful Baroque château lies just 55 kilometres south of Paris.

GETTING THERE: Trains from Paris' Gare de Lyon reach the village of Melun in 25 minutes. The château is a short distance from the train station.
77950 Maincy
Tel: (Fr) 1 64 14 41 90
www.vaux-le-vicomte.com

Compiègne takes 45 minutes, with the château a further 20 minutes away.

60350 Pierrefonds
Tel: (Fr) 3 44 42 72 72
www.pierrefonds.monuments-nationaux.fr

CHÂTEAU DE MALMAISON

Located 12 kilometres from Paris, this country estate was home to Napoléon and Joséphine and was the seat of the French government for two years. The Empress commissioned its beautiful rose garden.

GETTING THERE: Malmaison is a 20-minute bus ride from La Défense.
92500 Rueil-Malmaison
Tel: (Fr) 1 41 29 05 55
www.chateau-malmaison.fr

CHÂTEAU DE COMPIÈGNE

Located in Picardy's Forêt de Compiègne, this neoclassical residence was originally built for Louis XV but later remodelled by Napoléon. Today the château houses the Musée de la Voiture and the Musée du Second Empire.

GETTING THERE: Trains from Paris' Gare du Nord reach Compiègne in 45 minutes.
60200 Compiègne
Tel: (Fr) 3 44 38 47 02
www.musee-chateau-compiegne.fr

CHÂTEAU DE FONTAINEBLEAU

Set into the greenery of Fontainebleau's 25,000-hectare forest, the elegance of this former royal dwelling is matched only by its picturesque setting. The building and its sprawling gardens are Unesco-listed and offer visitors a glimpse into life at court outside the capital.

GETTING THERE: The journey from Paris' Gare de Lyon to Fontainebleau-Avon station takes 40 minutes. The château is five minutes away.
77300 Fontainebleau
Tel: (Fr) 1 60 71 50 70
www.musee-chateau-fontainebleau.fr

CHÂTEAU DE PIERREFONDS

This impressive castle (*pictured above*) belies the fact that the rebuilding of the main structure in the 19th century is in fact an embellishment of the 12th-century foundations. The classic castle has proved a hit with visitors as well as on the big screen and also appeared most recently in the BBC series *Merlin*.

GETTING THERE: The train journey from Paris' Gare du Nord to

Stables) in the 18th century, supposedly because he believed that he would be reincarnated as a horse and wanted sophisticated stables where he could spend his equestrian life in the lavish comfort to which he had become accustomed. Local historians think it's more probable that he had the stables built to show off his power. And they certainly do that.

World-class racing

Looking up at this imposing edifice, one could easily mistake it for a château. Built in neoclassical style, the façade is adorned with detailed carvings of horses' heads and hunting hounds. Today the building is home to the Musée Vivant du Cheval and stands alongside Chantilly's world-class racing track where the famous Prix du Diane is held annually.

Work on the château continued with each successive generation. In 1774, Louis-Joseph, the eighth Prince of Condé added the *hameau*, or hamlet, which provided the inspiration for Marie Antoinette's Hameau de la Reine at Versailles. This charming architectural folly is one of the highlights of Chantilly. Set among weeping willows on the banks of the canal, the *hameau* consists of rustic cottages and mill house.

In recent years, the mill house was converted into a tearoom and restaurant, where the resident chef, Jean-Michel Duda, serves up a variety of treats with ▶



ABOVE: Statue of Duc d'Aumale in front of the Grandes Écuries

generous helpings of *crème Chantilly*. It's the perfect spot to take a break from touring and let the history of the location sink in. Built as a play thing for the château's residents, the *hameau* demonstrates the extent of the era's unbridled extravagance.

After the storming of the Bastille in 1789, Louis-Joseph fled the country leaving his estate to fall into the hands of the revolutionaries who destroyed large parts of the main building. The château wouldn't be fully restored to its former glory until the 19th century, when it passed to the nephew of the last Condé Prince in 1830. Prince Henri, Duc d'Aumale was the youngest son of King Louis-Philippe. An

Orleanist, the Duc believed in a constitutional monarchy and greater power for the people. His father, who reigned during the July Monarchy, had declared himself the *Roi des Français* and not the *Roi de France*.

After the Revolution of 1848, the Duc was forced into exile in England, where he settled in Twickenham until 1870. An avid art collector, he spent this time building up an extensive collection, which he brought with him to Chantilly on his return. A widower who had lost both his sons, the Duc devoted himself to restoring Chantilly. He employed the architect Honoré Daumet to rebuild the main section, which had been destroyed in the Revolution. In 1884, he donated his entire estate to the Institut de France, on the condition that it would be opened to the public after his death.

Treasury of art

The collection of paintings he amassed is the second largest in France after the Louvre and includes some of the world's finest artworks. Strolling through the grand galleries of the château's Musée Condé, you'll see the works of Raphaël and Delacroix.

The Duc was also a bibliophile and his collection of books has given the château a library second only to the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. Here you can find everything from a Gutenberg Bible to manuscripts dating from the 6th century, including those of the Montmorency and Bourbon-Condé families. The collection also includes the precious manuscript, *Les Très Riches Heures Du Duc de Berry*.

The people of Chantilly still speak very highly of the Duc d'Aumale and his countless contributions to the town. In addition to donating his estate to the public, the Duc was known for his charity throughout his lifetime. In 1899, the townspeople erected a statue in his honour next to the Grandes Écuries. Pictured on his horse, with his back to the château, the Duc appears to be looking out towards the people of Chantilly. 🇫🇷

FRANCOFILE

Discover the delights of Chantilly for yourself

Château de Chantilly

60500 Chantilly

Tel: (Fr) 3 44

27 31 80

www.chateaudede
chantilly.com

GETTING THERE

By road: Alison travelled with SeaFrance to Calais. Chantilly is just under three hours from the ferry port.

By rail: Chantilly is a 30-

minute train ride from the Gare du Nord in Paris.

WHERE TO STAY

La Ferme de la Canardière

20 Rue du Viaduc
60500 Chantilly

Tel: (Fr) 3 44 62 00 96

www.fermecanardiere.com

This elegant B&B captures all the charm of Chantilly, with French country decor and

horse motifs. The exceptional breakfast includes homemade *madeleines* warm from the oven, fresh fruit, various pastries and freshly squeezed orange juice. Doubles from €150, breakfast €25.

WHERE TO EAT

Le Boudoir

100 Rue Connétable
60500 Chantilly

Tel: (Fr) 3 44 55 44 49

Just a stone's throw from the château, Le Boudoir's tea room and restaurant is the perfect place to enjoy a leisurely lunch or afternoon tea.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Chantilly Tourist Office

60 Avenue du Maréchal Joffre
60500 Chantilly

Tel: (Fr) 3 44 67 37 37

www.chantilly-tourisme.com