



## Chitenay

Chitenay, and several other nearby villages, are ideally placed to explore the many differing faces of the Loire valley between Orléans and Tours. The Loire itself is an anorexic disappointment but both Nature and man combine, in many other ways, to more than compensate for the river's scenic shortcomings.

The Loire châteaux are a mixed bag: some opulent, some down-at-heel; some vast, some surprisingly small. All were built during centuries when the French royals and aristocrats misbehaved and murdered; their châteaux, where they acted like Gods on extravagant ego trips, were the outward material evidence of excessively pampered lives. Today's tabloids and *paparazzi* would have fed like vultures on the aristocratic adulterers of medieval times.

### Day one

Chitenay is on the western edge of La Sologne – an extensive flat terrain of silver birches, oaks, beech, chestnuts and pine, *étangs* (pools), streams, sandy soil, heather and broom. The area is a wildlife paradise, renowned for fish, wildfowl, game, asparagus, fungi, strawberries, *pâtés* and *tarte Tatin* (upside down tart of caramelised apples and pastry).

To savour this self-effacing *pays*, largely ignored by tourists, head east from Chitenay to Fontaines-en-Sologne. Here, detour briefly south-east on the D120 towards Courmemin, to the Ferme de Jaugency, where you can buy *fumé d'agneau* and *plats cuisinés conservés*. From Fontaines drive north-east towards Bauzy, being sure to use the loop marked in green on Michelin maps, shortly after La Ravinière. The lane winds past *étangs*, through mixed woods and alongside fields of asparagus and strawberries. Irises and wildlife abound.

At Bauzy detour north-west for a peep at the château at Veillenne, an eye-pleasing structure built with the small red bricks which suit the unassuming Sologne architectural styles so satisfyingly.

South-east now to Vernou-en-Sologne, typical of many villages which make the most of a community *étang*; theirs is at the northern entrance. To the south-west, at La Borde, beside the D63, is a vista which I rate Sologne's best. Man and Nature create perfection: relish the water, trees, elegant, understated château and the inquisitive swallows.

Continue south to Romorantin-Lanthenay. Stand on the bridge across the Sauldre: admire the mix of both natural and man's handiwork; then visit the Musée de Sologne (three linked buildings – two mills and a 12th-century tower); and finish with a walk through the narrow streets upstream on the right bank past ancient *Solognote* houses.

Next west past the Etangs de Batarde and de Paris (often covered with water

lilies in summer) to Lassay-sur-Croisne. Admire the *église* with its slender spire, fine rose window and 16th-century fresco (key from M. Martin at his home near the telephone kiosk). Then on to one of the fresco subjects: the 15th-century Château du Moulin. Access is by a woodland lane (watch the sleeping policemen). The site of the red-brick and stone château, with cone-hatted towers and moat, is idyllic.

Finish your day with an essential must – a visit to Owen Watson, one of the best potters in France. An Englishman in his late-seventies, Owen has been making wonderful pots at his isolated cottage/showroom near Mesland for 37 years. His range of creations is wide: jugs, bowls and vases on one hand; on the other fountains, obelisks, bird baths and lanterns for the garden. I implore you: don't miss this lovely man and his remarkable pottery. His home, Les Fraisières, is half-a-km south of Mesland, alongside the D65; signposted from Mesland (open 2-7 pm). (Also refer to the Pouilly-sur-Loire chapter.)

### Day two

There are at least a dozen châteaux, of varying sizes and types, within three to twenty miles of Chitenay. According to Michelin the big six are the Premier League Blois, Chambord and Chenonceaux; and the First Division Amboise, Chaumont-sur-Loire and Cheverny. I've seen them all over the years. As time is limited I would plump for Amboise and Chambord as absolutely essential visits.

First let me lead you to two quite different pleasures: the Festival International des Jardins, nine-years-old in 2000, laid out in the large wooded parkland of the Chaumont château, and Amboise's captivating Pâtisserie Bigot, 87-years-old in 2000 and a family enterprise *par excellence*.

The annual gardens festival is open from mid June to mid October. Set in 7½ acres the show consists of some 30 separate gardens, each one 250 square metres large. The theme in 1997 was "water" and this was continued, with different designs and emphasis, in 1998; in 1999 *le potager* (vegetable garden). Rarely will you see such innovative garden ideas and such remarkable horticultural design from around the world; some are weird, some brilliant, all are challenging concepts. Of the 30 gardens I saw on my 1998 visit "From sky to earth", from Japan, was the clear winner; if I could, I would have taken the stunner back home with me. (Details from 2 54 20 99 22.)

The Pâtisserie Bigot and its *salon de thé*, in Amboise's place du Château, is a treat for all the senses. *Pâtisseries*, chocolates, sorbets, ice creams and fruit purées; feast your eyes on the tempting confections, all of which are made on site; better still, tuck in. Meet and talk with the English-speaking Christiane and her mother Renée, two delightful ladies and both proudly perpetuating their family's exceptional *métier*.

Only a fraction remains of the original, once regal, 15th-century Amboise château, a mixture of Gothic and Renaissance perched high on a rock face above the town and Loire. Two spiral towers remain, remarkable structures which allowed horsemen to ride up from ground level to the château heights – medieval easy access, multi-storey car park entrances.

Don't leave Amboise without a visit to the nearby red-brick Clos-Lucé manor house where, from 1516 to 1519, Leonardo da Vinci lived the final three years of his life. IBM have done a terrific job in reconstructing models of some of the machines created by Leonardo.

Now a flamboyant finale: Chambord, built by François I in the 16th century, out-disneys Disneyland when seen from afar, especially at dusk; the roof outline of towers, turrets, spires and chimneys is like a step-into-the-future space station. Grandiose, imperious and *incroyable* are three apt adjectives; so is "over-the-top". Especially remarkable are the roof terrace, Renaissance decoration and double spiral staircase.

### Before heading home

Surrounding Chitenay are the vineyards of Cheverny, Cour-Cheverny and Touraine; red, *rosé*, white, sweet and sparkling wines abound. Before you leave ask English-speaking Gilles Martinet, the owner of the Auberge du Centre, for advice on who makes the best wines to suit your needs. One super feature of Gilles' wine list is the chance to try three glasses of different wines, either from Cheverny or Touraine, during a meal (cost 45 or 55 francs for the three).

### Where to eat and stay

**Auberge du Centre**, 41120 Chitenay. Tel: 02 54 70 42 11. Fax: 02 54 70 35 03. Cooking 2. A pretty-as-a-picture dining room and colour coordinated bedrooms give this otherwise modest *logis* a welcome freshness. So does the so conscientious and personable Gilles Martinet, the English-speaking *chef/patron*. Copious classical cooking with some regional treats: *filet de sandre an beurre blanc*, *andouillette de Vouvray an chenin* and *délice de Solognot* (honey cake) are typical local fare. Great value-for-money wine list. Gardens. Terrace. Parking. Menus: 110/120/150/200/380. Rooms (25): 345-430. Closed: second half February. Sun evg and Mon (not high season). Cards: AE, MC, Visa.

Of other alternatives two hotels and one restaurant are strongly recommended (further details of these and others can be found in *French Leave Finesse*).

**de l'Ecole**, Pontlevoy: described by a reader as "one of the very best with everything close to perfection."

**Domaine des Hauts de Loire**, Onzain: on a recent visit I found the hotel as delectable as ever; and Alain Bonnigal remains a consummate hotelier.

**Poste**, Molineuf. Restaurant is a super RQP.

**Guides Michelin green:** Châteaux of the Loire (English: £8.99).