Surrounded by lush forests and vineyards, the pastoral villages of the Loire are a gentle counterpoint to the grandeur of the great châteaux.

I was standing in the middle of a tapestry forest in Sologne when the hounds burst out of the woods and into my reverie. The small clearing filled with their braying, the horses thundering after them, the sharp commands of their red-coated riders. If a stag had been through there the hounds knew more about it than I did. Then they were gone, disappearing down a narrow lane shrouded by ancient trees which muffled and soon swallowed their echo. I was alone again, but my forest tapestry had a new texture, rewoven with the age-old scene of the hunt.

The Loire Valley is rich with a natural sensuousness, a land without artifice. Willows dip into meandering streams, oaks arch cathedral-like across quiet roads, the fields are lush and green. Its royal châteaux and pastoral villages grace notes to its overwhelming natural beauty.

The region is a vast oval stitched across its width by France’s last untamed river, the Loire. To the northwest, as far as Chartres, are wheat fields and farms which have seen the armies of kings and emperors—and more recently of General Patton—marching toward Paris. To the east are secretive, majestic forests which long provided hunting grounds for France’s nobility; today the hunters and fishermen are joined by hikers and cyclists.

The Loire itself is only one of many rivers in the region, but like a charmed snake, it has a hypnotic appeal. It twists and winds, free of dams, contained between sandy banks which shelter dozens of species of wildlife (many of them protected). South of the river’s arc at Orleans, Sologne was once covered with wild marshes. Now it is known for its nature trails and wildlife, and for its many castles, most hidden deep in the forest. Farther south still is the Berry, celebrated for the magnificent Cathedral St-Etienne in its capital city, Bourges. The pastoral Berry is also the setting for the novels of George Sand and for Henri-Alain Fournier’s Le Grand Meaulnes, a classic tale of coming of age in rural France. To the west are the great châteaux and the vineyards for which the Loire Valley is renowned.
Orleans is a natural starting point for a tour of the Loire. A few minutes out of the city, tucked down a side road, lies Combleux, a bucolic settlement once home to bargemen who navigated the canal and the river edging the village. Today it is a quiet and comfortable suburb, bright with flowers. The bargemen's homes, like those of boatmen everywhere, open onto the water and what was once their livelihood. Time appears to stand still in Combleux, where there are no shops to keep hours by. People gather at the village restaurant, where on a fine summer day a variety of small fried fish, the local catch, grace the white-clothed terrace tables overlooking the junction of the canal and the river.

Just north of Combleux, the skyline disappears into the Forêt d'Orléans, France's largest national forest, which somehow manages to look tidy and wild at the same time, as if lightly groomed for a royal hunt. But it is to the south, in Sologne, that the forests become deeper, more mysterious. Within their white birch and oak recesses, mostly hidden from view, are scores of 19th-century châteaux.

"You have to be humble when you look at these trees, some of them hundreds of years old," says Roger Marois, longtime mayor of Souvigny-en-Sologne and the gregarious owner of the Auberge de la Croix Blanche, "think of what they've seen." Souvigny, at the edge of the forest, is an oasis of warm red brick and half-timbered houses, over-flowing gardens and a triangular village green with a quirky church. No architect would claim it, but God and man cannot help but be fond of its patchwork design and wooden beams, polished first by loving hands and later by time. A few years ago the citizens of Souvigny stripped the streets of the electric and telephone wires that jarred with their pristine surroundings.

A woman in black, her white apron tied at the back and her arms hugging a load of baguettes, neatly sidesteps a young boy on his way home, intent on his fishing rod. Fewer than 500 folk live in Souvigny, but its two restaurants are both known for their gastronomic fare. Not far away, in Lamotte-Beuvron, the tarte latin, France's favorite, thick apple pie, was born. The story goes that an apple pie slipped as it was pulled out of the oven, landing upside down. The two Tatin sisters who had made it served it anyway, crust on the bottom and apples on top, and a national dish was born.

Lovers of food and wine also head for Sancerre, east of Sologne. The landscape shifts here, grain fields begin to rise and fall and the view opens out. Hilltop Sancerre is a magnificent surprise—the jewel in a crown of vineyards heavy with grapes as the summer ripens. Close up, Sancerre is a nearly colorless but curiously compelling maze, giving out on one side to a panoramic view of the Loire Valley. Narrow, uneven back streets with solid three-story stone houses are home to several wine producers whose caves are the perfect place to sample the wonderful wines—white and red—for which the village is famous. They marry wonderfully with the creamy goat's cheese of nearby Chaumol.

Nothing could be more romantic than winding down into the Berry region and coming suddenly upon Apremont-sur-Allier. The gentle Allier River makes its appearance; soon it's bordered by toasted sandstone houses. Leggy flower varieties from a bygone era are planted in every available nook. A castle rises above the village of 87 residents, but it looks as if it was built by a lord who was more interested in the view than in self-defense. Over the centuries some of its towers have given way to homier quarters. Here I found myself yet again in a tableau vivant, this time walking down the path of a painting, the toasted sandstone houses and flowers of Apremont-sur-Allier.

Berry; top right, the 16th-century Château de Montrésor; on the left, River; bottom, getting ready for the this time walking down the path of an impressionist painting: a picture family debated the name of a mauve wild flower, while laughing children across the river played a slow-motion game of tag.

Apremont did not always look like a movie set; it has been there for an ongoing face lift since the 38-year-old Eugène Schneider, of the metal dynasty Le Creusot, lived in the little house as he could and set about restoring them to their original 18th-century design. Few villages can boast of such architectural harmony. The castle today is even more enhanced by the exuberant gardens created in recent years, and by the extensive park, open to visitors.

"She never slept," the guide said in awe-struck tones. I had no
century ago, and a handful of cluttered shops and galleries make pleasant ambling. The village twists and turns down a ravine; those willing to explore a bit on foot are rewarded with spectacular views.

One of the best views in the entire area is from the top of the dungeon tower in the secluded semi-ruins of Châteaubrun, a 15th-century castle about ten minutes from Gargilesse. “I’m not lord of the castle, I’m just its caretaker,” says proprietor Guy Baudet, flicking his Prince-Valiant hair out of his face. Not only does Baudet come from a long line of local potters, he is also an experimental musician and has an international reputation as a sculptor. His magical and humorous oversized garden creatures, as well as a three-ton oak dining table, add an irresistible theatrical dimension to Châteaubrun.

Out of Berry and into Touraine, a castle of a completely different ilk dominates Montresor. Still inhabited by the Polish family which has held it for two centuries, the stone fortress and its attendant medieval village bend around the narrow Indrois River, creating a kind of amphitheatre, softened by a swath of vegetable gardens. Their bounty colors the Saturday morning market in the old, open-air weaver’s hall.

Some of us buy the odd, occasional bric or brac at country markets, but near Tours I met a couple who live like a pair of peacocks in a world of bright plumage built from scraps of the past. The first thing that struck me about the Château de Montgouverne, where chambres d’hôte are available, was the picture-book prettiness of its exterior, the next was the comfortable antique decor inside. The owner Christine Desvignes discovered that she had found a hat-lover in me and eagerly produced the headgear that sometimes tops off her waist-length red hair—out of her cupboard tumbled some 50 antique hats.

Rochebaron held another surprise. It was once the chic 18th-century suburb of Tours, and some of its finest homes began as extensions of habitable caves. This stretch of the Loire, in fact, has hundreds of troglodyte homes—the houses start in caves and are built outwards—and even a unique troglodyte hotel, Les Hautes-Roches.

Less than an hour northwest, in the winsome valley of the Loir (a tributary of the larger Loire), dozens of troglodyte dwellings make treo a wanderer’s delight, with most of the village growing out of the sloping hillside’s caverns. Lavardin, one hill away, has a beautiful little wood-

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