



Château Chaumont



Château de Chenonceau



Château Azay le Rideau

## POMP, GRANDEUR & CASTLES GALORE: FRANCE'S LOIRE valley of a thousand chateaux!

**T**HE LOIRE VALLEY, TWO HOURS SOUTHWEST OF Paris, offers France's greatest array of château-thrills. Wander through sumptuous interiors, cared for by noble families who've lived there for centuries. Hear packs of purpose-bred hounds yelping as they await their next chance to hunt. Imagine you're the King's mistress, standing on a rooftop the size of Notre-Dame amid countless chimneys, watching proudly as your men flush the deer out of the woods, and your Louis or Henry or Charles proceeds to shoot them.

This famous valley is carpeted with fertile fields, crisscrossed by rivers, and studded with hundreds of châteaux in all shapes and sizes. Medieval castles are here, because the Loire was strategically important throughout the **Hundred Years' War** (when France battled England in the 14th and 15th centuries). Then, during the **Renaissance**, fortified castles were replaced by pleasure palaces as the Loire became fashionable among rich Parisians.

While less than a thousand, there seem to be countless châteaux to choose from. Two, possibly three (if you're a big person), is the recommended daily dosage. So, over the three full days we have here on our **Mad Midlife Adventure**, we'll take a leisurely look around five of the most interesting:

**Château Chaumont** – with its sumptuous interiors and artistic gardens, set in green and golden landscapes.

**Château du Clos Lucé** – Leonardo da Vinci lived here for the last three years of his life, devoting his time to perfecting his inventions and organising sumptuous festivities for the Court.

**Château de Villandry** – one of the most photographed gardens in Europe ... six gardens, in fact, featuring an artistic maze of decorative box-hedges.

**Château Azay le Rideau** – an architectural jewel and World Heritage Site, set in romantic gardens and standing on an island in the Indre River.

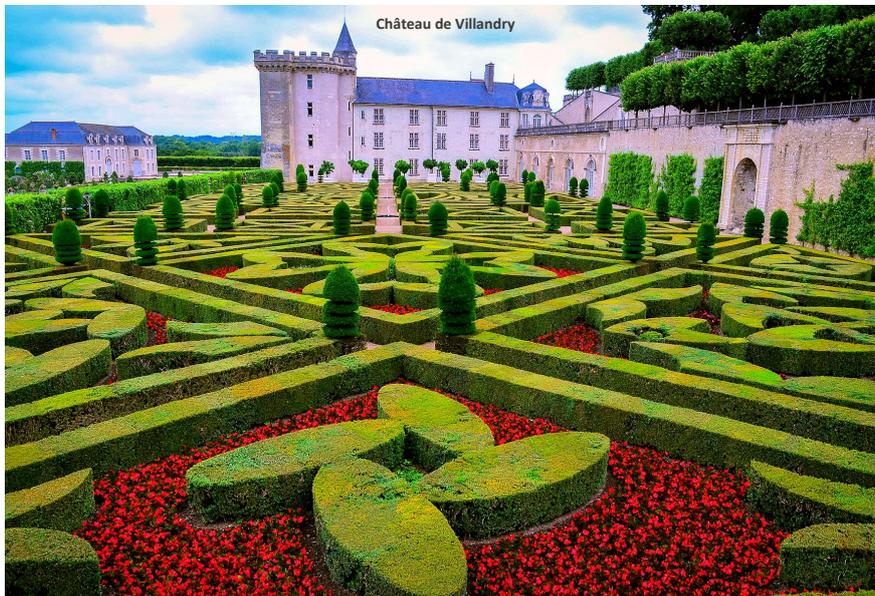
**Château de Chenonceau** – the toast of the Loire, is a 15th-century Renaissance palace arching over the Cher River. One look and you know it was designed by women:

Diane de Poitiers added the delightful arched bridge across the river. Mistress of Henry II, Diane enjoyed her lovely retreat until Henry died (pierced in a jousting tournament) and his vengeful wife, Catherine de' Medici, unceremoniously kicked her out.

Catherine added a three-story structure atop Diane's bridge, giving the château its unique river bridge charm – a place to see and be seen.

Much later, in the 20th century, Chenonceau marked the border between free and Nazi France in World War II. Dramatic prisoner swaps took place here. And now in the 21st century, it is a delight to explore.

*No doubt about it – when it comes to pomp and ceremony, grandeur and castle fun, France's Loire Valley steals the show!*



Château de Villandry