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Chenonceau: The castle of the ladies

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It's a testament to girl power five hundred years in the making. It's the second most visited chateau in France (after Versailles) with about one million visitors representing 150 nationalities each year. It lies in a region listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Chenonceau, the French renaissance masterpiece known as the "castle of the ladies," is located about 20 miles east of Tours in the Loire Valley.

Built on top of an old water mill on the river Cher, the stone fortress tells the story of France through timeless themes of love, jealousy, war and new ideas. Its “modern” history dates back to 1535, when King Henry II gave the estate, not to the Queen, but to his mistress, Diane de Poitiers. De Poitiers expanded the residence, adding a bridge across the river and creating gardens on the grounds.

When the king died in 1559, his widow Catherine de Medici forced Diane out of the castle and added the now iconic gallery on top of the bridge and also expanded the gardens. After Catherine’s death, the castle went to her daughter-in-law, Louise of Lorraine, and following the assassination of Louise’s husband, King Henry III, she was said to aimlessly roam the chateau’s corridors and became known as the white queen. (In those days, white was the color of mourning.)

In 1733, the estate was sold to a wealthy farmer named Claude Dupin. It was his wife, Louise Dupin, who transformed the castle into a center for learning. She attracted some of the greatest scholars and philosophers of the day to her literary salon, including Voltaire and Rousseau. Her cleverness also saved Chenonceau during the French Revolution – in addition to appreciating her relationship with the Enlightenment crowd, she convinced revolutionaries that her bridge was the only way to cross the river for miles.



Exhibit at Chenonceau commemorating their history as a military hospital during World War I

Chenonceau also contributed to the French history of World War I and II. In 1913, the chateau was acquired by Henri Menier of the Menier Chocolate Company. During World War I, his brother, Gaston Menier, did his part for the war effort by setting up a temporary military hospital at the castle and covering all of the expenses himself. 120 beds were installed in the gallery above the river and on the ground floor a highly efficient operating room was equipped with one of the first x-ray machines.

During World War II it was situated on the Demarcation line and the galleries spanning the river allowed many people to cross into the free zone with the Menier family helping

to smuggle out people fleeing Nazi tyranny. It became a tourist attraction in 1952 and is still owned by the Menier family today. Chenonceau has welcomed its fair share of famous visitors including President Harry Truman, Prince Charles and Princess Diana.

The chateau is located about 20 miles east of Tours and is among the most accessible in the Loire Valley as the town's train station lies across the tracks from the gate house where one can purchase tickets. (The train to Chenonceau is clearly marked at the Tours train station and counter agents speak English if help is needed.) Past the gift shop featuring the obligatory trinkets for sale, I walk down a tree lined path with the chateau directly in front of me. I've heard people describe it as if you're walking into Disney World and now I understand what they mean – it does remind me of seeing the magic kingdom castle for the first time.

The chateau is an example of 16th and 17th century Renaissance style with tapestries lining the walls illustrating daily life from that time period. One of my favorite places was the chapel and as I pass the strong oak door I enter a small room filled with stained glass windows (unfortunately the original windows were destroyed during World War II but they were replaced in the 1950s). The chapel was saved during the French Revolution again due to the cleverness of Madame Dupin, who had the idea to turn it into a wood store, thereby camouflaging its religious nature.

The kitchens feature high ceilings and a plethora of copper cookware hanging leisurely about and I stop to imagine the hustle and bustle that must have taken place during a royal feast. Don't miss the opening to the small landing platform off the kitchen – that is where supplies would enter the building from boats making their deliveries via the river below.



One of Chenonceau's gardens

The long gallery spans about 200 feet across the river and I look at a historic photo of when it was a hospital during World War I, with soldiers lying in beds neatly spaced along the slate floor. Have I mentioned the gardens? I step out onto the balcony at the front of the chateau where I get a bird's eye view of the perfect landscaping. As I am

looking from the balcony, Diane's garden is on my right and Catherine's garden is on my left.

In Diane's garden diagonal paths separate eight triangles of green all leading to a water fountain in the center. Throughout the year this geometric plot is populated with a variety of shrubs and flowers including pansies, daisies, begonias and climbing roses. Catherine's garden features five lawns centered around a circular pond and sports a plethora of roses and lavender.

Other features of the grounds include a 2 1/2 acre maze (I make it to the center and am rewarded with a view from a raised platform), a carriage gallery filled with a collection of horse-drawn vehicles, a tea room for fine dining and a vegetable garden.

The sun shines brightly as I await the train back to Tours, returning to the modern world after spending the day reveling in the history of some of the most enchanting women of the era.