

My idea of a "relaxing" day in France?



Azay le Rideau in the Loire Valley, one of many famous Chateaux you can visit in France, if you've got 9 euro (sometimes a bit more) to spare. Click on the photo for a larger version.

Any day that starts with an alarm clock can't be all that relaxing. Any day that ends with having to return a rental car cannot possibly be relaxing. And any day I'm doing both is certain to not run contrary to the basic premise here!

Yesterday we had the long drive from Pontorson (after our morning visit to Mont Saint Michel), complete with a myriad of wrong turns as my wife and I attempted the scenic rural route to the Loire Valley instead of the freeway. And not yet mentioned was the debacle at one of the freeway toll booths, which had always in the past taken my US non-chipped credit card without issue, but this time refused, causing me (after talking with the remote toll taker) to have to back up and use a different lane that took cash. There are very good reasons I prefer not to rent a car, and today they continued as we found it impossible to locate an open gas station to refill the tank before dropping it off. But first, the Chateaux tour.

We spent the night at an absolutely stunning hotel in Azay le Rideau, the Le Grand Monarque. A separate sitting room, amazingly-comfortable bed, great shower (in France, you don't take showers for granted!), wonderful staff (refused a tip for carrying bags up a lengthy staircase even, and he earned it), great location, all for 135 euros including breakfast. Not, not as inexpensive as the Etaps I often stay in, but don't think my wife would go for that. I have spent more for pretty dreadful places in the past however, and this one had the bonus of being walking distance from the first Chateaux, Azay le Rideau, which you see in the photo.

From there we drove a short (30 kilometers) distance to Chateau Villandry, known for its expansive and impressively-maintained gardens. We didn't even bother with the Chateaux itself; the gardens were more than enough for a couple of hours.

Next stop? Well, there has to be a low point on a trip, and this was it. Despite high recommendations, I cannot overstate how unimpressed I was with Chateau Clos Luce in Amboise. The Chateau was poorly maintained, dust was everywhere, signs in several places saying that it was their intention to acquire period-appropriate pieces for various rooms, etc. And the main attraction, an exhibit of Leonardo De Vinci's machines? I've seen much better in a museum. And the asking price for all this? 18.50 Euros!!! I fail to understand why this place gets great reviews on TripAdvisor. Must be a lot of die-hard Leonardo De Vinci fans, desperate to see a room he spent only a few years of his life in. It could be that the saving grace for this Chateau was its expansive grass field and lake at the bottom of the hill, but that's not what we came for.

After that we visited the crown jewel of the Loire Valley, Chateau Chenonceau. That place earns its keep; immaculate, run by people who seem to care, and beautiful. Definitely the best interior rooms we saw during our rounds, and a place we wish we could have spent more time with. Maybe another visit, although frankly, I think it more likely that I've done the Chateau thing and so can now cross it off my list and get back to bicycling.

Summing up the day- 4 Chateaux visits, returning a rental car without refilling the tank (for which they'll charge me a large number of euros), a quick train ride back to Paris and now settled in for three nights at the Concorde Montparnasse, my favorite combination of functional & price when in Paris. 1:13am so time to get some sleep! --Mike--