

'Chambord, history on horseback'

Introduction

Welcome to a place bursting with history. Today, we'd like to show you around.

Table 1

The year is 1515. The wars in Italy have been going on for over 20 years – for as long as the king, Francis I, has been alive. He has just won a decisive battle: Marignan. Captivated by the art, architecture and magnificence of Italian palaces, Francis I seeks to bring this modernity to his own kingdom. Little by little, France enters its first Renaissance.

Table 2

Francis I, a keen hunter, is won over by this estate held by the French crown – made up of forests, moors, marshes and ponds – where he decides to build his castle. A castle where he and his 'petite bande', his gang of friends, could go hunting and party in absolute privacy. The birth of Chambord.

Table 3

But what would this castle be like? The perfect castle. A castle between tradition and modernity, a castle worthy of the Knight King, just as much as a Renaissance prince's palace. A castle of dreams, an extraordinary structure that defies the imagination: 'A great, beautiful and sumptuous edifice', in the words of Francis I himself. An estate that reflects his power.

Table 4

Francis I commissions Chambord's construction in 1519. Who is the architect? Is it the king himself, or Leonardo da Vinci, whom he brought to the Loire Valley in 1516 and who died there in May 1519, and by whom sketches and drawings of the famous double spiral staircase have been found? The mystery remains ...

Table 5

But what is the king doing at this time?
He hunts in the woods around Chambord.
He sets off hunting with his 'petite bande', his friends.
He hunts wild boar and deer with a pack of up to 200 dogs.
And he comes to see his castle, monitoring every stage of its construction ...

Table 7

In 1539, the city of Ghent in Flanders revolts against Charles V, eternal rival of Francis I, King of Spain and Holy Roman Emperor. Francis I invites Charles V to cross his kingdom with his troops to quash this revolt.

Table 8

Francis invites him to stay in the Loire Valley, where hunting leads them from castle to castle. The king hopes to impress the emperor with Chambord, which is still under construction at the time. The workers hurry to dismantle the scaffolding, clean the barely completed keep and prepare the decorations for a feast.

Charles V is astonished and announces that he has never seen anything more beautiful than this palace which rises from the depths of the woods: 'Chambord is the most beautiful summary of human industry that I have ever seen!' On 18 December 1539, all eyes are on Chambord! The king and emperor pit their best knights against each other in a great tournament ...

Table 11

After two days of feasting and hunting, Charles V departs. Work resumes. Henry, future King of France, then comes to visit his father Francis I. After a lesson in high politics, Francis offers his son another lesson: that of arms. As a French writer once said, the warrior who polishes his weapons cultivates his spirit. He inherited a taste for chivalry from his father, who trained him in fencing and jousting.

Table 12

1547: Francis I dies in Rambouillet. Chambord is far from completed. But as always, we cry: The king is dead, long live the king! Henry II, his son, becomes king and has the chapel wing built.

Table 13

Henry II continues some of his father's political and artistic work and remains faithful to the ideals of French chivalry. He maintains the tradition of jousting, a sport for which he himself holds a particular passion – often appearing on the pitch at tournaments. That is, of course, until that cursed 30 June 1559 in Paris, when he comes up against his captain, Gabriel de Montgomery. That day, he rides his steed 'Malheureux', the 'Unfortunate'.

Table 14

Montgomery's lance violently strikes the king's eye and Henry II dies 10 days later, aged 40. Since then, jousting has been banned in France.

Table 15

And as for Chambord? After the death of Henry II, construction work comes to a halt. Little by little, Chambord falls into oblivion. The kings of France begin to prefer Paris to the banks of the Loire. But in 1626, Louis XIII gives Chambord to his brother Gaston d'Orléans.

Table 16 (poem by Victor Hugo)

Gaston d'Orléans falls in love with Chambord. He moves into the castle and brings it back to life. He orders works to resume and completes the estate's perimeter wall, the longest in Europe with a total span of 32 km.

Table 17

This is how the young Louis XIV discovers Chambord. He visits his uncle's castle and grows to appreciate it. After the death of Gaston d'Orléans, Chambord reverts to the French crown. Louis has the chapel wing completed and asks Mansard to cover the outer bailey. For 25 years, the Sun King comes to Chambord in the autumn with his court to be entertained. For several weeks each year, Chambord once again becomes the epicentre of France. Hunts, processions, comedies and balls follow one another. It is at Chambord that Molière first performs his famous play 'Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme'.

Table 18

Extract from Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme by Molière.

Table 19

Again, as they did for centuries, the king hunts. He hunts in the woods around Chambord. He hunts with his companies. He hunts deer and wild boar with his packs.

Table 20

Molière sees the Sun King go hunting every day with his pack of dogs, his guests and his magnificent horses, and dreams of accompanying him. There's only one problem: He doesn't know how to ride.

Table 22

From 1685 onwards, Chambord falls into further decline. The Sun King grows old and stays in his beloved Versailles. The castle then falls asleep, lying dormant for 40 years. Until Louis XV loans it to his father-in-law, Stanislas Leszczynski, the exiled king of Poland. Stanislas doesn't like Chambord: it's damp, the weather is grey, it's always cold and sixty carts of furniture are not enough to furnish the castle. He grows depressed. Eight years later, he leaves the Loire Valley and Chambord once again lies empty, waiting for its next occupant.

Table 23

In 1745, Maurice de Saxe, Marshal of France, wins a series of dazzling victories over the Austrians: Fontenoy, Rocourt, Lauffeld and Maastricht! After such feats of arms, Louis XV rewards him by entrusting him with the castle and hunting estate of Chambord in 1748.

Table 24

Marshal de Saxe moves to Chambord and garrisons it with his three cavalry regiments. Every day, his Dragoons and Uhlans parade, manoeuvre and train in the forecourt, known as the 'Place d'Armes'.

Table 25

But Chambord's history doesn't end there. The castle narrowly escapes destruction during the French Revolution. Under the Empire, Chambord becomes the principality of Wagram. Then, in 1930, the estate becomes the property of the French Republic. Now, this jewel offers itself up to you. I invite you to go and discover it.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This show is brought to you by Mario Luraschi and his Cavalcade troupe.

The Domaine National de Chambord, its General Manager Pierre Dubreuil and his teams hope you enjoy your day at Chambord.