



# THE UNGUIDEBOOK™ LOIRE VALLEY

*For a sense of place—not a list of places to go*

*by K. MacKenzie Freeman and Douglas J. Freeman*

# The Unguidebook™ Loire Valley

A Picture Is Worth 1,000 Characters™



Cover photo of Château Brissac

Inside photo of Château Serrant

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## Preface

We know. Our travel books are different from any others. This is why we decided to offer a taste of what they're like. It's similar to when you walk into an ice cream store and are given a tiny spoonful of a tempting, but unfamiliar flavor. This mini-book will allow you to sample our unique style of writing and travel books before checking out our other books that feature between seven to 11 times more stories.

We also know that travel is a personal experience. And yet, everyone has the same questions before they pack their bags.

- 1) How will I get to and get around my destination?
- 2) Where should I stay?
- 3) What should I do?
- 4) Where will I eat?
- 5) What is it like?

Guidebooks tend to concentrate their advice on answering the first four questions. However, we understand that most people would love to have a sneak peek of what a place is like before they step off the plane. Since we have a passion for storytelling rather than giving advice, we choose to focus *The Unguidebooks* on the fifth question. Our goal is to offer travelers a sense of place rather than a list of places to go.

In addition to being different from guidebooks, our books are unlike other narrative travel books. We include an original photo with every story and give a modern twist to the old phrase, "A picture is worth a thousand words." Every tale we write is exactly 1,000 characters long, down to the last period.

We hope you enjoy this taste of one of our favorite regions in the world. Bon appétit and bon voyage.



## Eye Candy Inside and Out



The French are experts in many things. They've perfected gastronomic delights from gourmet food to superb wine, Champagne and Cognac. They are also specialists in creating those things that are pleasing to the eye.

Visitors to the Loire Valley are treated to a vast trove of eye candy dotting the countryside. Here, the French lords and ladies of the 15th through 19th centuries played an unending game of one-upmanship with their homes and gardens. And the architects and landscape designers of the time were more than happy to oblige their wealthy clients.

The 40+ chateaux throughout the region vary in size from "cozy" three-story stone and brick manor houses to the sprawling 440-room Chambord Castle. It's impossible not to be impressed and occasionally overwhelmed by the opulence within these mansions. Yet, we were also captivated by the magnificence on display outside. Many gardens like this one feature giant manicured topiary and sumptuous flower gardens surrounding the estate. Delicious!

## When Walls Do Talk



It's easy to walk right past, not giving them a second glance or thought. Once prevalent in the late 19th to mid-20th centuries, bold advertisements were painted on city buildings to encourage customers to buy everything from furniture to soft drinks. The majority of these ads that still remain have faded from being battered by sun, rain and time.

The term "ghost sign" is appropriate to describe these billboards of yesteryear. This disappearing ad found in Angers gently whispers to the 21st century resident or visitor that this was formerly a fabric store. One can imagine stylish ladies coming in and out of the sandstone building carry brown paper wrapped packages of cotton, linen and silk, along with dress, skirt and blouse patterns.

Just as the women transformed the fabric from this shop into something new, this building has been converted into an apartment complex. However, the lace curtains and the delicate petunias speak of the femininity of its former life. We guess walls do talk.

## A Fairy Tale Meets Reality



The idea of owning and living in a castle sounds like a fairy tale. Yet, the practicality of heating, dusting and maintaining a manor the size of several city blocks is daunting, if not overwhelming. And that doesn't even count doing any yardwork.

For this very reason, it's rare that any of these châteaux in the Loire Valley are privately owned. Rarer still is it that someone calls a place like this "home." Nonetheless, since the mid-1700s descendants of the Antoine Walsh and the Duc de la Trémoille families have lived in Château de Serrant.

To help offset the astronomical upkeep, the current owners, the Prince and Princess de Merode, charge the public admission to view portions of the estate. This includes the chance to walk through many of the museum-like living areas and sumptuous wood paneled library with its 12,000 books. Furthermore, they rent the orangery and grounds for weddings. How delightful we can share in the fairy tale, without having to wash any of the hundreds of windows.



## Endless Fields of Yellow



France's soil provides her farmers the chance to grow almost any crop, from wheat to her famous varietals. Yet, our two favorites are the lavender and sunflowers because the undulating hills of soft greens turn into endless fields of electric purples and golds.

Whereas French lavender is grown almost exclusively in the south, sunflowers blanket roadsides throughout the country. Our family drove through the Loire Valley in early August passing by millions of these flowers that usually grow taller than NBA centers. We were surprised to learn that they aren't native to Europe but were first cultivated by the Native Americans. Seeds were then brought to France during the 16th century and have been blooming here ever since.

The direct translation of *tournesol*, the French word for sunflower, is turn sun. While these plants do track the sun when they're young, mature flowers only face east. Nonetheless, we like to think that this photo shows them all turning and in a sense waving as we pass by.

## Le Jardin de France



The Loire Valley is often referred to as the Garden of France. This is primarily due to the area's superb soil for growing all kinds of vegetables and fruits, including wine grapes. However, the term could also refer to the collection of magnificent landscaped grounds that surround the sumptuous villas and châteaux dotting the countryside.

One look at the gardens of Villandry and it's easy to imagine French aristocrats during the 18th century parading around in their silk finery. Occasionally they may stop to smell the flowers or sit on a bench to gossip as they read passages from one of Marquis de Sade's racy novels.

Today, a mini-army of 10 gardeners toils to keep these gardens immaculate. When we were there the intricately patterned hedges appeared to be perfectly even in shape and height. As we strolled through the colorful mazes, we could easily believe one of the dedicated green thumbs walked around surreptitiously snipping anything that dared to grow a millimeter too tall or wide.

## Living the Royal Life, Temporarily



Most mere commoners like us will never receive a royal invitation to stay at a palace. So, we can only fantasize what it'd be like to live there.

Nonetheless, dreams can come true. There are numerous castles or châteaux throughout France that can be rented for a few days or weeks. Groups may split the fee to the point where in some villas, the price of a room is almost the same cost as a hotel.

Our family and friends entered Château du Pin's marble entryway adorned with gargoyles. Then we climbed the carved stone staircase to our tower bedrooms overlooking the manicured garden featuring topiary shaped like giant chess pieces.

This was no reverie. Our accommodations included the main house with a wine cellar, vineyard and tiny chapel. Most days were spent touring the region's more famous châteaux such as: Chambord, Ussé, Chinon, Amboise and Chenonceau. At night we enjoyed a bottle of the winery's private label as "lords and ladies" of the manor. That experience is now the perfect daydream.

## The Authors



The two of us were bitten by the travel bug at the very beginning of our marriage when we chose to have a small wedding and a big honeymoon. That 10-week adventure took us through western Europe. Thirty-four years later, we've visited 20 countries and 38 American states. Every new destination is a chance to immerse ourselves in another culture and an opportunity to share our experiences through our writing and photographs.

We hope you found this sampler both entertaining and enlightening. It's been a fun challenge to write our impressions about the places we visited following our theme, A Picture Is Worth 1,000 Characters.

Please check out the other books in our series that are available from multiple online retailers: [Amazon](#), [Apple Books](#), [Barnes & Noble](#). They can be found in paperback featuring black and white photographs and as e-books with color photos. We also encourage you to visit our website at [www.imaginexus.com](http://www.imaginexus.com) to read other stories about our journeys.

Bon voyage,  
MacKenzie and Doug