CITIES, GUIDE

4 Luxurious Countryside Escapes From Paris

By Forbes Travel Guide Correspondent Lane Nieset

JANUARY 30, 2020

Waldorf Astoria Versailles – Trianon Palace. *Credit: Waldorf Astoria Versailles – Trianon Palace*

Every season in Paris has its charm, and while winter sparkles with twinkling lights lining the city's iconic boulevards, there are only so many cafés and museums you can steal away to when the weather takes a turn for the worse. After spending a few days in the French capital, break up your visit with a quick jaunt to one of the postcard-worthy towns scattered across the countryside.

From vineyard visits to horseback riding to museums as impressive as the Louvre, here are four countryside escapes worth taking from Paris.

Versailles

One of the easiest — and most popular — day trips from the city is the Palace of Versailles, the former royal residence just an hour train ride from the Eiffel Tower that draws close to 10 million visitors per year to its nearly 2,000-acre grounds.

One hundred of the palace's rooms have been preserved in time, so you can get a sense of how French royalty once lived. Many others have been converted into a museum with more than 60,000 pieces of art spanning five centuries of French history.

At the edge of the property lies Waldorf Astoria Versailles – Trianon Palace, an opulent hotel where the Treaty of Versailles was prepared over a century ago before it was signed at the palace to officially end World War I.

The 199-room property features views of the palace's park, as well as acclaimed cuisine at Gordon Ramsay au Trianon, an intimate, 10-table dining room modeled after the celebrity chef's London flagship.

Royal Champagne Hotel & Spa. *Credit: Royal Champagne Hotel & Spa*

Champagne

A 45-minute, high-speed train ride away from Paris is Reims, the unofficial capital of this sparkling-wine-producing region, whose UNESCO-listed Notre-Dame Cathedral served as the longtime coronation spot for French kings.

Equally as splendid, thousands of cathedral-like chalk quarries (or *crayères*) form a labyrinth of cellars under the city. Take a tour of the deepest in the region — and the only one classified as a national monument — at one of the world's oldest champagne houses, Ruinart.

While you're in town, reserve a table for dinner at Franco-Japanese hot spot Racine and end your evening lingering over nightcaps (or more champagne) at 19th-century wine magnate Louise Pommery's former château, Domaine Les Crayères.

After all that sparkling wine, opt for a detox at Royal Champagne Hotel & Spa, a hideaway that debuted in 2018 and is home to a 16,000-square-foot spa with treatments by lauded French skincare brand Biologique Recherche. Spend the night at the 49-room contemporary beauty overlooking the vine-covered hills of Épernay.

Strasbourg. *Credit: Sarah Sergent*

Strasbourg

With an average of 14 trains a day from Paris (the quickest being one hour and 45 minutes), there are few reasons not to visit this picturesque village in northeastern France. Get your bearings soaking up Strasbourg's 20 centuries of history on a boat tour along the Rhine past Louis XIV-era fortifications and the pastel-colored, half-timbered homes in the Petite France quarter, where fishermen, millers and tanners lived and worked in the 16th and 17th centuries.

Strasbourg sits near the start of the Alsace Wine Route, which stretches nearly 106 miles and winds through 70 winemaking villages. One winery worth stopping at is ninth-generation-run Maison Pierre Sparr in the Haut-Rhin, which models its winemaking after traditions that started during the reign of King Louis XIV.

Call it a night at Les Haras, a 55-room hotel in Strasbourg housed in 18th-century former royal stables with a brasserie helmed by chef Marc Haeberlin, the same creative force behind highly acclaimed L'Auberge de l'Ill near Colmar.

Loire Valley

The Loire Valley is famous for two reasons: wine and châteaus. There are two castles that are must-visits: Château de Chambord (the valley's largest) and Château du Clos-Lucé, a former residence of Leonardo da Vinci.

You can sleep like French royalty in the newly opened Hotel Château du Grand-Lucé, an elegant retreat built by a baron in the 1760s. A 55-minute train ride from Paris, the 45,000-square-foot castle features just 17 rooms and suites, so you'll feel like you've got the whole place — and its 80 acres of Versailles-like gardens — to yourself.

Attentive staff can help you make the most of your stay by arranging everything from horseback-riding treks through the maze-like gardens to picnics in the forest, packed in baskets with wine from the valley and baguettes from the village bakery.

If you're feeling decadent, opt for a three-course, seasonally inspired dinner in the hotel's formal dining room, a soft pink-coated space draped in chandeliers, candelabras and centuries-old portraits hanging in gilded frames along the wall.