

A wide-angle photograph of a grand French chateau, likely Château de Vaux-le-Vicomte, set against a clear blue sky. The building is a classic example of French Renaissance architecture, featuring a large central dome topped with a golden spire, flanked by two smaller domes. The facade is made of light-colored stone and is adorned with numerous statues and architectural details. In front of the chateau is a vast, well-manicured lawn. A large, rectangular water feature or reflecting pool is visible in the middle ground, with a prominent bronze fountain on the right side. The background shows a dense line of trees under a clear blue sky.

*At the gates of  
Paris*

The Seine-et-Marne department of France, sitting to the east and south east of Paris, can boast Disneyland Paris and the Château de Fontainebleau as two of its best known attractions. But as Stuart Render reports, a look around the area reveals other group-friendly options that could be worth considering as a way of refreshing a Parisian itinerary

FEBRUARY 2016

**I**t's a story of loyalty and betrayal, with a surprising link to one of France's most popular visitor attractions.

It's 1661 and Nicholas Fouquet is Superintendent of Finance in the French government, a role given to him by Cardinal Mazarin, Chief Minister to the young King Louis XIV (the 'Sun King').

In March, Mazarin dies and Fouquet is expecting to take the role. But the 22-year-old Louis is having none of it. He's abolished the role and has taken absolute control of the French state.

Fouquet is disappointed, but he's a firm supporter of the monarchy, and it's not as if he needs the money. He's already amassed a fortune of his own through marriage, investments and the various government offices held. That fortune gave him the opportunity to commission the building of a magnificent château on his estate at Vaux-le-Vicomte, near Melun, south east of Paris. It's taken 20 years to complete.

But behind the scenes, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, Mazarin's private

sumptuous 17th century tapestries.

There are three floors of the house to explore with exceptional furniture in the ground floor State Rooms and private apartments of Nicholas Fouquet.

A tour of the house lasts around an hour-and-a-half, and can be done free-flow, with an audio guide (€3), or with your own guide (at no extra charge). A local guide can be hired if required.

But while the house is magnificent, the gardens are equally so.

Designed by André Le Nôtre, the gardens, covering 83 acres, are noted for their formal perfection and a mastery of perspective. Le Nôtre's design makes liberal use of surprise effects. Trompe l'oeil ('deceive the eye') dimensions and optical illusions are dotted throughout.

The view of the house from the 'rondo' at the far end of the garden is spectacular, but it's quite a walk. There's also a 'surprise' lake hidden in a dip along the way. One option to explore the gardens is to hire a



Vaux-le-Vicomte, a 17th-century family home



The gardens at Vaux-le-Vicomte



The medieval walled town of Provins

secretary, jealous of Fouquet's success, is looking at ways to discredit him. Despite warnings from his friends, Fouquet, who remains confident of the king's favour, doesn't suspect a plot is brewing.

On the night of 17 August 1661, Fouquet hosts a lavish soirée at the château to honour Louis. It's the first time the king has visited the estate.

Days earlier, Louis had succumbed to Colbert's scheming and made his decision to imprison Fouquet. But on the evening of the soirée, the king walks through the gardens, dines, and watches a specially commissioned theatrical performance followed by fireworks, without giving any indication that he's anything other than impressed. Fouquet, oblivious to what's really going on, is clearly in his seventh heaven.

Three weeks later, Fouquet is arrested in Nantes and sentenced to life imprisonment. He dies on 23 March 1680, never having set foot in his beloved château again.

It's a fascinating story of power and ambition in 17th-century France, but there's a footnote to this story that makes Vaux-le-Vicomte stand out when it comes to itinerary planning.

Louis's visit inspired him to come up with an idea for an even grander château, a château that sits to the south west of Paris, and a château that was to play a pivotal role in the history of France in the following years – the Château de Versailles.

### A private house

Today, visitors to Vaux-le-Vicomte arrive along an impressive tree-lined avenue. Coaches drop off and park opposite the main visitor centre.

Although called a château, it's actually a private house, today the home of the de Vogüé family.

The walk from the visitor centre up to the building is an absolute joy. The ground floor sits at the top of a flight of 37 steps. But as you get closer you realise you can see straight through the main ground floor reception and out to the gardens beyond. In the 17th century this was a design that hadn't been seen before.

The fully furnished and richly decorated château houses

four-seat, self-drive electric buggy. They're easy to drive and great fun.

Back at the visitor centre and there's a Carriage Museum to explore and one of the best gift shops this writer has seen in a long time.

Typical dwell time at Vaux-le-Vicomte is around three hours. School groups tend to visit in the morning, so try and plan a visit for the afternoon.

Group bookings are handled by Erika Dubois. She can also give you more information about catering options, and a new joint package with the Château de Fontainebleau.

Vaux-le-Vicomte not only looks magnificent, but having been a family home for nearly 400 years, it also stands out as a rather special place to visit.

### Influenced by the Counts of Champagne

Due east from Vaux-le-Vicomte is the remarkable fortified medieval town of Provins. It became wealthy in the 12th and 13th centuries due to its position on the crossroads of the trade routes for the influential Counts of Champagne. They established the 'Trade Fairs of Champagne', attracting merchants from all over Europe. Recognising that the merchants and visitors required protection, the Counts built the walls. This in turn added to the town's reputation and it became the undisputed capital of trade and one of the most powerful cities in the kingdom.

Today, Provins, now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, bears witness to this period in history with a wonderfully preserved upper town and a heritage that's largely intact and authentic.

### Provins' big four

When it comes to the main historical attractions to see, there are four worth noting. By far the best of these is the Tithe Barn. A former merchant's house, and described as being "one of the most sumptuous buildings of Provins", its vaulted cellar was used up to the end of the 13th century as a covered market during the fairs of Champagne. It then found a use as a place for paying tithes. Those days are brought to life by scenes and characters depicting the main crafts and merchants' activities. The dwell time in the Tithe Barn is

around 30 minutes. Built at the start of the 12th century, the Caesar Tower dominates the old town. Erected as a symbol of power, the tower used to be a prison, a watch tower, a bell tower and a place for military retreat. The keep was built to a highly complex layout, giving the building its unique appearance. Today, it offers a panoramic view over the town.

Provins' underground galleries, originally used as a quarry to extract a special type of fuller's earth for degreasing wool cloth, were also used as hiding places, and meeting places for freemasons and crafts associations. Graffiti inscriptions testify to this. It's an unusual place with a mysterious atmosphere.

The fourth historical attraction, housed in the oldest house in Provins, the 'Romanesque House', is the town's museum. Objects ranging from the 12th century to more modern times help tell the story of this fascinating destination.



Provins' unique Caesar Tower



Recreating the 13th century - Provins' Tithe Barn



Jean-Pierre Verney - collector extraordinaire

## Organising a visit

Coaches drop-off at the purpose-built visitor centre located a short walk from the entrance to the walled town. Coach parking is a not unreasonable €20 per day and the driver receives a free ticket into the town. The groups pages on the website feature a map showing the route to be taken by coaches. It's a nice touch.

Groups are limited to 35 people at a time, so a full coach load will need to be split. Rates are €7 per person and include entrance to the various monuments. You can visit free-flow, and there's a tourist guide app that you can download onto your phone or tablet, but with so much history to see and interpret it's worth considering an English-speaking guide. There's a choice of tours with options for the able and less able. A typical medieval walking tour, including admission and a visit into the Tithe Barn, costs €341 for 30 people (around €11 per

person). There's also a dotti train that can be hired.

A full programme of events, shows and festivals, from Easter through to November, brings the town's history to life, inviting visitors to travel back through time. Check out the Medieval Festival in June and the 'Eagles of the Ramparts' birds of prey show at weekends.

## One man's collection

The centenary of WWI has generated a renewed interest in the many wartime locations dotted across France and Belgium. Cemeteries highlight the loss of life, while exhibitions give an opportunity to understand what life might have been like for those involved.

On the outskirts of the town of Meaux, due east of Paris, is the remarkable Musée de la Grande Guerre – the Museum of the Great War.

Built on the historic site of the first Battle of the Marne, the museum, which purposefully opened on 11 November 2011

(11.11.11) takes this event as its starting point for painting an overall picture of WWI.

But this isn't just another museum. This is, in effect, the life's work of one man, 68-year-old Jean-Pierre Verney.

A self-taught private collector, and renowned expert on the conflict, Jean-Pierre has collected more than 50,000 items. The unique and diverse collection, generally regarded as the most important and most extensive in Europe, includes more than 200 full uniforms from most of the countries involved, including rare Japanese examples. In some cases, it has taken Jean-Pierre 20 years to collect a whole uniform, and he's not finished collecting yet.

But don't expect to see everything on your visit. Only 15% of Jean-Pierre's collection can be displayed at any one time, with items being rotated every January.

## Accommodation options

On this visit there were opportunities to look at a selection of hotels that could appeal to groups of different sizes.

### 'Aux Vieux Remparts' - Provins

This contemporary three-star boutique-style hotel is located in one of the oldest buildings in the heart of the medieval walled town of Provins. There are 40 air-conditioned bedrooms, two restaurants, and a wonderful lounge bar squirrelled away in the original cellar. Owners Xavier and Cecile Roy are keen to welcome groups from the UK saying the hotel is an ideal base from which to visit Paris, Seine-et-Marne and Champagne. For information go to [www.auxvieuxremparts.com](http://www.auxvieuxremparts.com), contact Cecile Roy on 00 33 1 64 08 94 00, or email [info@auxvieuxremparts.com](mailto:info@auxvieuxremparts.com).

### Dream Castle Hotel and Magic Circus Hotel, Disneyland Paris Resort

Operated by Vienna House, the re-branded Vienna International, these two 400-bedroom, 4-star family-friendly themed hotels are located on the perimeter of Disneyland Paris Resort, less than 10 minutes from the park by free shuttle bus. To find out more, talk to Corinne Allard, Sales Executive on 00 33 1 64 17 90 11, email her at [sales4@vi-hotels.fr](mailto:sales4@vi-hotels.fr), or go to [www.dreamcastle-hotel.com](http://www.dreamcastle-hotel.com) or [www.magiccircus-hotel.com](http://www.magiccircus-hotel.com).

### Hotel Le Richelieu, Fontainebleau

Here's a privately owned 18-bedroom hotel in the centre of Fontainebleau. Once an annexe to the famous château across the road, this is a cosy, charming, rabbit warren of a hotel, and full of atmosphere. Acquired by the present owner,

Jean-Pierre Baubant, three years ago, the hotel is now a member of Logis de France, always a sign of quality. The hotel restaurant has a well-deserved reputation, but only 35 covers. The location also means prices can be a little keen, but worth looking at for small groups. There's no lift. You can see more at [www.richelieu-fontainebleau.com](http://www.richelieu-fontainebleau.com) or contact Jean-Pierre on 00 33 1 64 22 26 46 or email [richelieu.bacchus@orange.fr](mailto:richelieu.bacchus@orange.fr)

### Ibis Château de Fontainebleau

This modern three-star, 86-bedroom hotel, designed in traditional French Ibis style, is also located in the centre of Fontainebleau, and a short walk from the château. There's free wi-fi. Vincent Bray is the manager and would welcome enquiries from UK tour planners. For details go to [www.accorhotels.com](http://www.accorhotels.com)



In the Museum of the Great War, you join soldiers heading to the conflict



A powerful reminder of those who didn't come home



The Château de Fontainebleau, a visitor attraction to rival Versailles



The 'Museum of Napoleon I' features the Emperor's 'bicorne' hat

## Contact information:

### Château de Fontainebleau

Group information  
00 33 1 60 71 50 60  
reservation@chateaudfontainebleau.fr  
[www.chateaudfontainebleau.fr](http://www.chateaudfontainebleau.fr)

### Musée de la Grande Guerre, Meaux

Book through the Office de Tourisme du pays de Meaux  
00 33 1 64 33 10 99  
[reservation.tourisme@paysdemeaux.fr](mailto:reservation.tourisme@paysdemeaux.fr)  
[www.museedelagrandeguerre.eu](http://www.museedelagrandeguerre.eu)

### Provins – Office de Tourisme

Laetitia Bordeaux – Groups Manager  
00 33 1 64 60 26 20  
[lbordeaux@provins.net](mailto:lbordeaux@provins.net)  
[www.provins.net](http://www.provins.net)

### Seine-et-Marne Tourisme

00 33 1 60 39 60 39  
[smt@tourisme77.fr](mailto:smt@tourisme77.fr)  
[www.tourisme77.co.uk](http://www.tourisme77.co.uk)  
[www.visit.paris-whatelse.com](http://www.visit.paris-whatelse.com)

### Vaux-le-Vicomte

Erika Dubois  
00 33 1 64 14 41 99  
[erikadubois@vaux-le-vicomte.com](mailto:erikadubois@vaux-le-vicomte.com)

### Thought-provoking

There's a dedicated (and free) coach drop-off and parking area, and as you walk across to the museum you find yourself surrounded by a soundscape of aircraft and vehicles.

The exterior of the building has been designed to look (a little) like a tank. Inside, your visit begins in 1870, explaining the social and economic conditions in France at the time.

One display focuses on a school room at the end of the 19th century, making the point that French schoolchildren were taught to be prepared to fight for their country.

But as the museum timeline reaches the outbreak of war, the displays take an imaginative turn.

You come up to the rear of several queues of soldiers. They're dressed in the uniforms of their respective countries, including the British, and they're heading off to war.

Yes, they're mannequins, but the line-up presents a powerful image.

Walking past the queues, you enter the main hall, the displays showing how warfare changed over the four years from 1914 to 1918. There are side rooms to explore, each focusing on a specific element of the war – posters, guns, the aforementioned uniforms.

Throughout the museum, mannequins are used to highlight situations and events, and allow the uniforms to be fully displayed. But these aren't your typical cheesy shop dummies. The mannequins have been specially made to reflect the age profile of the various soldiers and nationalities. The detail is spot on.

As you reach the far end of the main hall you come across an enclosed display that makes you stop in your tracks. Inside the display, soldiers in full uniform are striding forwards. But wait, because there are two soldiers, their bodies part inside the display, and part outside. And these two soldiers are completely white from head to toe. A third soldier, again in white, is standing out in front of the

display, leading his men. It's a reminder, should it be needed, that so many soldiers died doing their duty.

Dwell time at the museum for a typical group will be between one-and-a-half and two hours. You can make a visit free-flow (with an audio guide) or hire a guide. There are different guides for private groups and school groups. There are English translations throughout.

This isn't a big museum, and you won't get lost, but the creativity and thought that's gone into it certainly makes it stand out from the crowd. Rates for groups of 15 or more are €7 per person. Bookings are made through Meaux's tourist office.

### Magnificent Fontainebleau

In the south of the Seine-et-Marne department lies a château that rivals Versailles in terms of magnificence and its position in French history. The Château de Fontainebleau, often referred to as the 'sovereigns' favourite residence', brings together some eight centuries of French history.

Remarkably, the château (or palace if you prefer, and both are correct) survived the French revolution, although the furniture was systematically sold. It regained its pride at the accession of Napoleon Bonaparte and the empire. The new emperor refurnished the apartments, stayed there on rare occasions between campaigns, and spent the last days of his reign there before abdicating in April 1814.

Today, Fontainebleau, the most lavishly furnished French royal châteaux, is a national museum and a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Although the kings who succeeded Napoleon also stayed in the château, visitors will find it much as Napoleon would have known it. A permanent exhibition, the 'Museum of Napoleon I', is located in a wing close to the main entrance.

Fontainebleau, like Versailles, probably needs little introduction, so here's how the guidebook describes what there is to see. "Visitors will enjoy the renaissance masterpieces commissioned by Francois I, the great works of Henri IV, the pomp of Napoleon I's apartments, the sophisticated interiors of Marie Antoinette, Napoleon III and Eugenie's taste, and more". And if all that doesn't impress, the château sits in

around 320 acres (130 hectares) of parkland and gardens.

Coaches drop-off and park in dedicated bays along the Boulevard Magenta directly adjacent to the château. Drivers are admitted free of charge.

Most visitors explore the château free-flow using an audio guide (€3). You can also hire a guide. If you're thinking of using your own guide, be warned! Only officially licensed guides are permitted.

The dwell time for the château itself is around two hours, but allow another hour or so to include the gardens.

The rates for groups of 20 or more is €9 per person. From March to October you can book an English-speaking guide for €30.

For more information, and for details of joint packages with the Vaux-le-Vicomte, download the Groups Brochure from the website.

There are, not unsurprisingly, many more destinations and attractions to discover within the Seine-et-Marne department, not least the town of Meaux itself, famous for its brie cheese, the medieval castle of Blandy-les-Tours, and Champs-sur-Marne, the residence of Madame la Marquise de Pompadour. To find out more, have a look at the website and talk to the team at Seine-et-Marne Tourism.

*Coach Monthly* would like to thank Seine-et-Marne Tourisme and Voyages SNCF for their assistance in facilitating this article.

### COACH MONTHLY SAYS

*While Paris will always remain the tourism magnet, the undoubtedly attractiveness of Vaux-le-Vicomte, Provins, the Château de Fontainebleau, and, to some, the Musée de la Grande Guerre, gives tour planners the opportunity to develop new itinerary options. Combining say two days in Paris with two days exploring Seine-et-Marne would offer a welcome contrast. But there's another option. Using Provins, Fontainebleau or the Disneyland Paris area as an accommodation base presents new opportunities to turn a Paris break on its head. It's an option worth looking at.*

# BBC TOURS

FROM BEHIND THE SCENES  
TO IN FRONT OF THE CAMERA.  
TRANSFORM YOUR VIEW  
WITH THE BBC.

Guided tours of BBC buildings are available in London, Salford, Bristol, Birmingham, Newcastle, Norwich, Glasgow, Cardiff and Belfast.

To book a tour of the BBC please visit;

[bbc.co.uk/tours](http://bbc.co.uk/tours)

