



The impressive Chateau of Fontainebleau. © SMT



Sketching beside the river in Moret-sur-Loing, as Alfred Sisley used to do. © SMT

Magnificence in Seine-et-Marne

Home to Disneyland Paris, the region of Seine-et-Marne in France also has a collection of fairytale castles and palaces, and beautiful historic towns, that rival anything the famous mouse has to offer your group, as **Stuart Render** reports.



In any normal situation, the Seine-et-Marne region would have groups flocking to discover its many magnificent visitor attractions. After all, it has a chateau that not only features in a James Bond film, but was also the inspiration that led Louis XIV to build the palace of Versailles. It has another chateau that was home to Napoleon and a medieval walled town that certainly competes with York in the UK!

So, sitting just to the east of Paris, why isn't Seine-et-Marne more popular with UK groups? As popular as Disneyland Paris is, it acts as a magnet, drawing people to the theme park resort, and most visitors are therefore almost certainly blissfully unaware of what gems lie just a few kilometres away. For tour planners looking for a way to refresh a Paris-based itinerary, or to put together a new group tour, Seine-et-Marne ticks a fair few boxes.

The region's tourism team has just launched a new campaign to attract more UK groups. Under the branding 'Paris, What else?', the team is making the point that the region's proximity to the French capital opens up many opportunities for group visits. At the launch of the campaign in May, head of tourism Florence Bruaux said that she was keen to highlight the possibilities for groups to combine a visit to Paris with visits to the region's attractions. She said that the region also has a number of quality, group-friendly hotels that give tour planners the option to stay in one of the region's charming towns, and then travel into Paris.

However, what makes all of this stand out from the usual tourism messages is a central booking service. Group travel organisers can get in touch with the tourism team (see details on page 34) and they will make all the arrangements. As Florence Bruaux quite rightly says: "We want to encourage more UK groups to visit us, so we're making it as easy as possible for this to happen."

Chateaux with charm

With a clear enthusiasm from the Seine-et-Marne tourism team to engage with UK tour planners, and leaving Disneyland Paris to one side, what does the region have to offer? There are, to use the parlance, five tourism big-hitters: the Chateau of Fontainebleau; the Chateau of Vaux le Vicomte; the Chateau of Champs-sur-Marne; the medieval walled town of Provins, and the Museum of the Great War in Meaux. These five attractions sit amidst picturesque countryside that features a number of delightful villages including **Barbizon**, **Moret-sur-Loing**, **Blandy-les-Tours** and **Bourron-Marlotte**.



An aerial view of Vaux le Vicomte. © Chicurel



The picturesque village of Barbizon. © CDT77 F.Milochau

If you try to save money and use your own guide, they will be shown the gate! The typical dwell time for the chateau itself is around two hours, but allow an extra hour to visit the extensive gardens.

There's no doubting that Fontainebleau is impressive. Its pedigree and back story set it apart from many of France's traditional chateaux. But it has never appeared in a Bond film. Our next chateau most certainly has. **Vaux le Vicomte**, near Melun, featured as the home of arch villain Hugo Drax in the 1979 film *Moonraker* starring Roger Moore. The phrase 'hidden gem' can often be overused, but in this instance, the description is absolutely spot on. A tree-lined avenue leads your group to the attraction and a visitor centre helps set the scene. Built for Nicolas Fouquet, the superintendent of royal finances for Louis XIV, the 'chateau' is not technically a chateau, but has remained a family home, today owned and lived in by the de Vogue family. Fouquet was a clever chap, building up his wealth through marriage,

investments and the various government offices he held. He commissioned the building of Vaux le Vicomte, a project that took 20 years to complete. But his success brought him many enemies and although a firm supporter of the monarchy, Fouquet became distrusted by Louis. On 17th August 1661, Fouquet hosted a lavish banquet, inviting the king to Vaux le Vicomte for the first time. The king was impressed, but had already decided to imprison Fouquet and three weeks later, while visiting Nantes, he was arrested and sentenced to life imprisonment. He died on 23rd March 1680, having never set foot in his beloved chateau again. However, Louis' visit to Vaux le Vicomte gave him the inspiration to build an even bigger and more lavish palace, a palace that was to



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+ Barbizon (1)

The famous "Barbizon School" includes over 150 painters, who came to Barbizon from around the world between 1830 and 1875. Their approach broke with academic art by painting nature for nature's sake. The most famous painters include Millet, Corot, Rousseau, Diaz, Daubigny and others. Today, Barbizon has kept its country charm, with stately stone houses and rose gardens... It remains the "Painter's Village" for all painters!

www.barbizontourisme.fr +33 (0) 60 66 41 87

+ Melun (4)

The city thrived at the end of the 10th century. As a royal city, Melun regularly welcomed French Kings and their courts until the middle of the 15th century. Melun has preserved two exceptional buildings from the 11th century: the Notre-Dame collegiate church and the Saint-Sauveur priory church. Today, Melun celebrates the emblematic cheese of the region: the Brie de Melun (PDO). The Museum of the National Gendarmerie was opened in 2015. The Museum of Military Traditions houses a collection of society and history artefacts.

www.ville-tourisme.fr +33 (0) 64 52 64 52

+ Château de Fontainebleau (2)

With more than 1,500 exceptionally decorated rooms, the Château de Fontainebleau, listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site since 1981, has hosted all of France's major monarchs. Discover the Renaissance masterpieces commissioned by Francis I, the additions of Henry IV, the splendour of Napoleon I, and the taste of Napoleon III and Empress Eugénie.

www.chateaudefontainebleau.fr +33 (0) 60 71 50 70

+ Fontainebleau (5)

A favorite vacation spot throughout the ages, Fontainebleau can be considered as the birthplace of French history. A royal city with a chateau, stately squares and a splendid theatre, it is a haven of peace, tucked away in the heart of a 17,000-hectare forest, which was named a "Forêt d'Exception" (Exceptional Forest) in June 2013. Recognized around the world for its natural wonders, the Fontainebleau forest welcomes many hikers, rock climbers, mountain bikers, and hunters. As the Horse Capital, the city holds international equestrian competitions throughout the year at the Grand Parquet and at the Solle racecourse.

www.fontainebleau-tourisme.com +33 (0) 60 74 99 99

+ Meaux (3)

Promising a rich experience, the Pays de Meaux, land of commemoration, invites you to attend the 100th anniversary of World War I.

The Museum of the Great War is located on the very ground where the first Battle of the Marne took place in 1914. Its collection is unparalleled in Europe and gathers more than 50,000 artefacts and documents, recreations of trenches, as well as 200 uniforms, in an innovative setup.

The Meaux region is also home to the now famous Brie de Meaux (PDO)! Visit and discover all of its secrets at the next opening event of the House of Brie, in the city centre of Meaux.

www.tourisme-paysdemeaux.fr +33 (0) 64 33 02 26

+ Moret Seine & Loing (6)

Inspired by the countryside and the light on the riverbanks of the Loing and Seine rivers, Moret-sur-Loing is where the famous painter Alfred Sisley decided to live until the end of his life. The charming medieval city and beautiful banks of the Loing, the port of Saint-Mammès and the views from Thormery and Verveux-les-Sablonns invite you to follow in Sisley's footsteps...

www.msl-tourisme.fr +33 (0) 60 70 41 66

+ Château de Vaux le Vicomte (7)

Vaux le Vicomte, Nicolas Fouquet's chateau, is the result of an inspired collaboration between three men: architect Louis le Vau, painter decorator Charles le Brun and landscape gardener André le Nôtre. The chateau was designed to be in harmony with the garden, so that it could be admired from all angles. Vaux le Vicomte became the original model that would inspire many masterpieces across Europe: Versailles, Schönbrunn, Drottningholm...

www.vaux-le-vicomte.com +33 (0) 64 14 41 90

+ Provins (8) Cité Médiévale

In the 7th and 8th centuries, Provins was at its height with the Champagne Fairs, which attracted merchants from across Europe. Provins then became an essential trading centre and one of the most powerful medieval cities in France. Now listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Provins attests to this period of history with its heritage that has remained intact and authentic: ramparts, dungeon, underground galleries and vaulted lower rooms...

Parking for camper vans located at the entrance to the medieval city, Chemin de Villecrati, 77160 Provins.

www.provins.net +33 (0) 64 60 26 26



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The ancient walls of Provins. © J. F. Benard

The Château of Champs-sur-Marne. © CDT77

play an important role in French history, the Palace of Versailles. Visitors get to see Fouquet's private apartments, the staterooms and the royal apartment. They are unlikely to disappoint any group. The formal gardens extend for some three kilometres, and are built with an eye for perspective, with a lake hidden in a dip. The good news is that you can hire a self-drive buggy. It's rather a good way to see what's on offer, especially if you're not so nimble on your feet. The chateau hosts a programme of events including evening candlelight and fireworks displays too. For groups well used to a diet of history and heritage, Vaux le Vicomte really does stand out.

Not far from Disneyland Paris is the **Château of Champs-sur-Marne**. Re-opened in 2013 after a seven-year refurbishment, the chateau, in the style popular during the Age of Enlightenment, recreates the refined setting and atmosphere of an 18th century pleasure home. Originally built for two bankers, it was home to Madame la Marquise de Pompadour for two years. The chateau is surrounded by parkland designed around 1710 by André Le Nôtre in the French formal garden style, and adopted English influences during the Revolution. However, in 1985 the gardens were returned to their original French style. The chateau, clearly not wishing to be outdone in the filming stakes by Vaux le Vicomte, provided the setting for the 2006 film *Marie Antoinette* and the 1988 film *Dangerous Liaisons*. It offers groups of 20 or more a saving on admission.

French history on display

A UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2001, the medieval walled town of **Provins** enjoyed its golden age during the 12th and 13th centuries when it was home to the Trade Fairs of Champagne. Guarded by the knights of the Counts of Champagne, the fortifications brought added security to the many merchants who gathered to do business at this crossroads of the early trade routes. Today, the walls remain intact, and the various architectural styles that have shaped the town have been remarkably well preserved.

The **Caesar Tower**, built in the 12th century, is a symbol of the power of the Counts of Champagne. Nearby, the **Tithe Barn** is a typical Provins house with a superb vaulted cellar. It was originally rented to the merchants of Toulouse when they came to town for the Champagne Fairs. An audio-guided visit through recreated tableaux takes visitors back to the era.

Provins hosts two shows that are likely to appeal to groups, which take place in a special theatre area by the walls of the town. The daily **The Legend of the Knights** features horses and their riders, and transports you into a world of knights



The Caesar Tower.
© OT-Provins-J.C.Jacquin

and princesses. Those princesses are replaced by birds of prey for **The Eagles of the Ramparts**, billed as an 'enchanted aerial ballet'. It's worth noting that the commentary for these shows is only in French, but for most groups, not knowing the exact details of what's happening is unlikely to spoil the spectacle.

Meaux, meanwhile, is a town that's over 2,000 years old. Once the former 'breadbasket' of Paris, it now offers the visitor a mix of medieval, Gallo-Roman and Gothic architecture. However, it is perhaps best known today for its mustard and cheese - above all, its 'Brie de Meaux'. The **Meaux Saint-Faron Cheese Dairy**, situated on the edge of the town, offers tours and tastings of the Meaux and Melun Brie.

Close by is the **Museum of the Great War**, bringing together one of the most extensive displays in Europe. Purposefully opened on 11th November 2011, it was built on the site of the first Battle of the Marne. But if, in this centenary of World War One, you've already visited other wartime museums, why add this one? The answer lies with one man - Jean-Pierre Verney. Verney is a self-taught private collector and renowned expert on the First World War. What you see in this museum is his personal collection of more than 50,000 items and documents. Although only part of that vast collection is on display at any one time, the items are rotated at regular intervals. There are more than 200 full uniforms from most of the countries involved, and different displays focusing on separate elements of the conflict. Visitors are given the opportunity to understand what village life was like before the war, and why so many young men saw it as their duty to defend their countries. For most visitors, a visit, which is free flow, will last around an hour and a half. As a contrast to the older history and heritage found elsewhere in the region, it's well worth considering.

Getting there

If travelling to the Seine et Marne region by train from the UK, it takes 2 hours 20 minutes by Eurostar from St Pancras to Paris, where you can then join the local rail network. Flights operate from various airports around the country into Paris Charles de Gaulle, with a flight time of around an hour and a quarter generally. By coach, the best route is either using Eurotunnel services from Folkestone to Calais or taking the ferry from Dover to Calais and then continuing via the road network. Travel time via coach from Calais, including a comfort stop, is around four hours. **GTO**

For further information

The Seine et Marne tourism team is proactively looking to engage with UK group tour planners and Marjorie Sebille at tourist agency **Tourism 77** will work with you to help you plan and book your tours. Email her at sebille@tourisme77.fr For more information about the region, go to www.tourism77.co.uk