

**Once again, we join Michael Taylor from French estate agency, Properties in France. So, what is on the cards for today Michael?**

Well, as it is Christmas, I thought we would have a bit of fun as well as providing some useful information. I am going to give you a rundown of the top 10 chateaux in the Loire Valley.

So no Leo Sayer in the charts today but I'll try and put on my DJ voice

**O.K. Let's start the countdown!**

## **JINGLE #10**

At number 10, we have the Chateau at Chaumont with its medieval fortress, which provides a stark contrast to the rest of its renaissance architecture.

Built in 1466 under direction of Charles d'Amboise and continued by his two sons, who were also both named Charles! It was built on the site of a former fort that was destroyed by Louis XI (11<sup>th</sup>). Catherine de Medici bought Chaumont after her husband died in 1559, although she had probably been living there for some time before that, since the King appeared to prefer the company of Diane de Poitiers, who was 20 years his junior, and lived at the Chateau at Chenonceau. Medici forced Poitiers to exchange the chateau with her a few years later.

## **JINGLE #9**

Coming in at number 9 is the Chateau at Blois featuring architecture from the middle ages right up to neo-classical periods. This castle has two museums, a fine arts and an archaeological museum.

Part of the chateau dates back to the 13<sup>th</sup> Century and houses the oldest civilian gothic hall in France. It is also the place where Joan of Arc visited in 1429 to be blessed by the Archbishop of Reims, before she left with her army to drive the English from Orleans.

When Francois I was in power, he created within its walls one of the France's most important libraries, so important in fact that in 1524 it was moved to the Chateau at Fontainebleau and was used to form the Bibliotheque Nationale, which we know as the National Library.

Many French royals have owned the castle over the centuries..... During the French Revolution, Blois was ransacked and the revolutionaries stole many of its statues, Royal Emblems and Coats of Arms. In a state of near total disrepair it was scheduled to be demolished, but was given a reprieve and used as a residence for the army.

Happily, in 1841, the chateau was classified as a historical monument, and was beautifully restored and turned into a museum. Items on view include the poison cabinets of Catherine de Medici.

Now it is owned by the town of Blois and is a major tourist attraction.

## **JINGLE #8**

Straight in at number 8 is the Chateau at Chambord (shambore) – this is the largest of all the chateaux in the Loire Valley, a beautiful renaissance castle, which is the creation of King Francois I and inspired by Leonardo de Vinci, who visited the chateau during its construction and added a few finishing touches.

The structure contains an amazing 440 rooms, 365 fireplaces, 13 great staircases and stables to accommodate up to 1200 horses - it took almost 30 years to complete. It is set in parkland and surrounded by a wall - 22 miles in circumference.

This castle was a favourite retreat for French kings especially Louis XIV (14<sup>th</sup>) and it was under his patronage that the French dramatist Moliere produced some of his finest work.

## JINGLE #7

At number 7, we have the Chateau d'Azay-le-Rideau, (*dazay le reedoh*) originally built in 1400 but extensively renovated between 1518 and 1529 by Etienne Rousseau. Rather cleverly, it is built on a small island along the River Indre and gives the impression that the castle has a moat! The building's foundations actually slope inwards toward the water line, helping the chateau seem larger and more imposing. It is set in beautifully picturesque countryside and in the warm summer months, the shallows around the castle fill with lily pads and algae, simulating a formal English lawn,

## JINGLE #6

Sneaking in at number 6 is the Chateau at Villandry. This castle was completed in 1536 and was the last of the large chateaux to be built on the banks of the Loire during the Renaissance. It was built by Jean le Breton. Its gardens are some of the finest examples of the formal Renaissance style of France.

The gardens were created by Italian gardeners hired by Charles VIII and are terraced on three levels. The first level is the highest and features fountains, lawns and a reflective pool. The second level includes the decorative flower garden, the garden of love, the garden of music and the garden of simple delights.

Finally, the third and lowest level is the kitchen garden, which consists of vegetable planting, fruit trees and bushes as well as herbs for seasoning and medicinal purposes. These grounds are immaculate and really are worth a visit.

## JINGLE #5

A surprise entry at number 5, Chateau d'Amboise, built in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, it houses an exceptional collection of gothic and renaissance furniture.

In the chapel St. Hubert is the tomb of Leonardo da Vinci, which has recently been elegantly restored. All the kings of France have stayed in this Chateau from Charles VII to Francois I.

In the middle ages, the chateau's position made it of great strategic importance as it overlooked one of the few bridges that crossed the Loire. The Counts of Anjou owned a keep that was confiscated by Charles VII in 1434. The chateau then became Crown Property.

The Valois and Bourbons honoured the castle with their presence until the revolution. In 1821, the Chateau was passed to Louis-Philippe by his mother and remained part of the heritage of the Maison de France. It now belongs to the Saint-Louis Foundation, which is run by the Count of Paris, who thankfully ensures the conservation of this historic building.

## JINGLE #4

Sliding down the chart at 4 is the Chateau at Saumur, currently closed to the public while it has a facelift! In April 2001, an outer wall of the chateau collapsed. The castle has suffered significant damage.

It is one of France's greatest castles. However, this was not always the case... the original building was constructed in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century as a fortress and lacked a lot of the detail it now has. It was destroyed in 1067 and then rebuilt by the Plantagenet Kings in the 1300s, when many features were added, including the octagonal towers.

Later, the Chateau became a bastion for the Huguenots, a military barracks, a prison and now a museum.

Reported to be closed for the next 2 years - I am sure it will be worth a visit when the restoration work is completed.

## JINGLE #3

Moving up to number 3 is the Chateau at Langeais. This is one of the oldest chateaux in France. From the outside, it is a fortress with a drawbridge, and a fine example of military architecture from the 15<sup>th</sup> century, with a working drawbridge, walk round battlements and imposing towers.

The Chateau gives the outside world the appearance of a defensive site. However, as you walk through its doors you will find a beautiful Renaissance Manor. There is a remarkable collection of furniture, paintings and tapestries displayed within its walls. This castle hosted the wedding of Charles VIII and Anne de Bretagne in 1491.

In 1886, Jacques Siegfried became the owner of Langeais, and restored and refurbished it. The castle is now owned by the Institut de France.

## JINGLE #2

Storming in at number 2 is the Chateau at Brissac-Quince (*breesac cansee*), known as the tallest castle of France, and owned by the Dukes of Brissac since 1502. Considered by some to be distasteful because the Dukes altered it in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century – that is not to say that it is not worth a visit!

The Dukes maintained the property until 1792, when it was ransacked during the Revolution. It lay to waste for over 50 years until a restoration program began in 1844. The castle spans over seven storeys and has some fantastic grounds.

In the main gallery is a portrait of Veuve Cliquot, one of France's 1<sup>st</sup> female business gurus, who owned the famous Cliquot Champagne business.

So that is the countdown from 10 to 2. Let us remind ourselves of the chart positions:

At:

- Number 10 is the chateau at Chaumont
- Number 9 is the chateau at Blois
- At 8 is the Loire valley's largest chateau to be found at Chambord
- In at 7 is the chateau at d'Azay le Rideau (dazay le reedoh)
- At 6 with its spectacular renaissance gardens is the chateau at Villandry
- While at 5, containing the tomb of Leonardo da Vinci, is the chateau at Amboise
- At 4, just holding on, is the fairy tale chateau of Saumur, closed to the public for renovation work
- Into the top 3, at 3, is one of the oldest chateaux of France, to be found at Langeais, just west of Tours
- And at 2, the tallest chateau in France, to be found south of Angers, at Brissac Quincé

And that brings us to the number one slot in this Christmas Chateau Countdown.....

## JINGLE #1

Untouchable at the number 1 spot, and the most visited chateau in France with the exception of the Palace of Versailles – is..... the chateau at Chenonceau.

This is one of the finest examples of the French Renaissance period and has over a million visitors every year – this really is unmissable!

It is known as one of the most romantic chateaux of the Loire, with its elegant turrets, arches and stately avenues. Its romantic feel is further heightened by the fact that its stylised and symmetrical structure is reflected in the waters of the River Cher.

Built on the site of an old mill during the 11<sup>th</sup> Century, it is also known as the ladies' castle, as over the centuries, it has been owned by several women and owes much of its design to them.

First on the scene was Catherine de Briconnet (breeconnais) who is largely responsible for its Renaissance styling. After her came, Diane de Poitiers, the mistress of Henri II, who was responsible for creating the beautiful formal gardens.

Unfortunately, as I mentioned before, she was forced to relinquish it by Henri II's embittered and unforgiving wife. Years later the castle was inherited by Louise of Lorraine, the bereaved wife of Henri III. Louise painted her ceilings black and white out of respect for her late husband.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, the fourth woman to take ownership of the chateau was Madame Dupin, and she had a key role in the development of Chenonceau, because she was responsible for encouraging many literary events to be held there. The likes of Rousseau and Voltaire both spent time at the chateau.

Today, Chenonceau is owned by the Menier family who are known as respected chocolatiers.

In my opinion, if time was short, and you had to pick one Loire chateau to visit, this would be the one, an elegant chateau with a colourful and historic past.

Of course, the whole Top 10 is subjective with several hundred in our region.....the combinations are endless. This countdown was compiled by Lulu, who leads our aftercare service here at Properties in France... She is certainly loved up in the Loire when it comes to chateaux.

So let us get some listener's experiences of visiting chateaux throughout our area, so we can challenge Lulu's Top Ten.. next year!