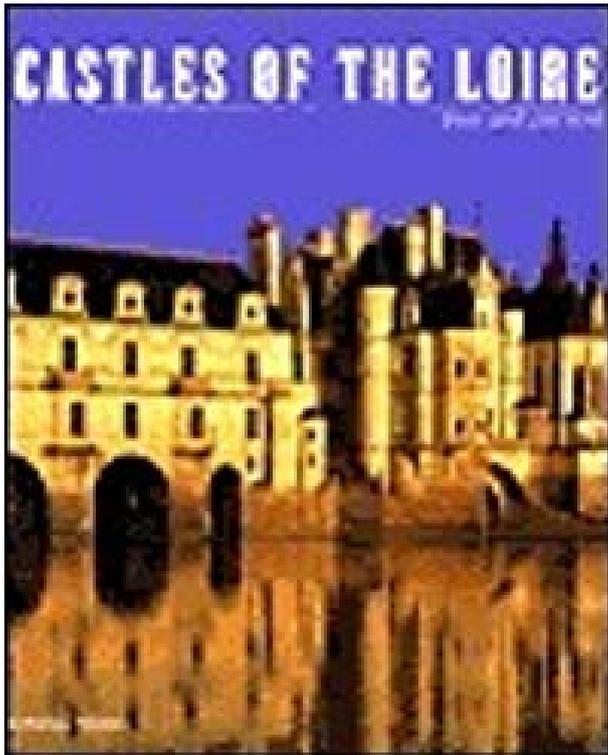


Castles of the Loire: Past and present



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From Giens to Angers, by the calm waters of what has been called the loveliest river in France and along its major tributaries, hundreds of fortresses and castles appear as if by magic from the woods. But why should there be so many princely residences in this area? One tragic night 600 years ago, the Burgundians put Paris to fire and sword. Tanguy du Chatel, a faithful servant of King Charles VI, hastened to the palace and, with a group of horsemen, escorted the 15-year-old /Castle. Thus, on the night of May 28, 1418, began the history of the castles of the Loire. For a century the court of the kings of France, with their retinue of noblemen and dignitaries, moved to the banks of the river. The dauphin (who ascended to the throne as Charles VII) and his successors found the Loire Valley to be the ideal refuge from the threats of a turbulent, unsafe capital. Great castles were built, ancient city walls resorted and patrician residences erected, housing a wealth of splendors, intrigues, vendettas, courtly pageants and decadent love affairs. But in a letter written on his return from Madrid on March 15, 1528, Francis I manifested the desire to return "to sojourn in the good city of Paris." The Loire had lost the privilege of being the Valley of Kings. A million tourist visit it every year not only because of the castles, but also for the countryside, the cuisine, and the secrets held by a region that always has something to say. The villages, with their quiet squares basking in the sun, encircle the larger towns, where the living hearts of Loire beats.