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The capital charms of TOURS

On the banks of the River Loire, Tours is not only a great base for exploring local chateaux, but also a fascinating destination resembling Paris, says **TODD MAUER**



Musée des Beaux Arts

‘Tours? *C’est le mini-Paris!*
This is how the local *Tourangeaux* describe their Roman city on the Loire, which has on



several occasions in its history stood in as the capital of France. The bold comparison – made in what’s claimed to be the purest French in France – must surely provoke some nose-wrinkling among proud Parisians. But even the most partisan *Parigot* must recognise that provincial Tours does have much in common with the City of Light, albeit on a much smaller – and, some might say, more human and friendlier – scale.

In the shade of the plane trees lining Boulevard Béranger, Tours’ twice-weekly flower market provides a splash of colour and a heady perfume to one of several broad thoroughfares that could justly be described as Haussmannesque. Tours’ imposing Belle Epoque Hôtel de Ville, built by noted native-son architect Victor Laloux, who also designed the train station in Paris that was later to become the Musée D’Orsay, bears more than a passing resemblance to the city hall in the nation’s capital.

Operatic and orchestral echoes of Paris’ Palais Garnier can be found in the opulent Grand Théâtre de Tours – hardly surprising considering that Charles Garnier was also involved in its construction. Towering Saint Gatien’s Cathedral, despite its ornate façade and owl-eyed twin

towers topped with Renaissance belfries, has an interior that’s a Gothic marvel fit for Quasimodo. And inspired by the success of *‘Paris-Plage’*, in the summer months Tours puts on its own beach-party festival on the banks of the Loire, with evening concerts, open-air cinema showings and *guinguette* dancing.

But if Tours harbours a thinly-concealed rivalry with its larger sibling on the Seine, it’s remarkably laid-back about it, and that’s what makes the city so appealing. Paris may be the nation’s pacesetter, but Tours somehow manages to never be far behind, yet still takes time to smell the roses. This easygoing approach has given rise to the expression *‘le quart d’heure Tourangeau’*, which essentially means you shouldn’t expect anything to start until 15 minutes after the scheduled time.

It’s easy to see why Tours is used as a base by many of the estimated nine million tourists who come to the centre of France every year to visit the Renaissance chateaux of the Loire Valley. Centrally located, its modern transport links (an hour by TGV from Paris)

MORE INFO

www.tours-tourisme.fr

HOW TO GET THERE

Ryanair operates several flights a week from London-Stansted to the Tours Val de Loire Airport. Alternatively, Tours is a 55-minute TGV ride from Paris.

BELOW:
Promenade
along the Loire



The city's sleek new tram passes the Hôtel de Ville



WHERE TO STAY

Hôtel de l'Univers
5 Boulevard Heurteloup
37000 Tours
Tel: 00 33 (0)247 05 37 12
www.oceaniahotels.com/hotel-lunivers-tours

Central Tours' poshest hotel. If it was good enough for Franklin Roosevelt, Henry James, Ernest Hemingway and Winston Churchill, it's probably good enough for most people!

Hôtel l'Adresse
12 Rue de la Rôtisserie
37000 Tours
Tel: 00 33 (0)247 20 85 76
www.hotel-ladresse.com
Small, charming hotel literally a one-minute walk from Place Plumereau

Hôtel Ronsard
2 Rue Pimbert
37000 Tours
Tel: 00 33(0)247 05 25 36
www.hotel-ronsard.com
Pleasant, cosy hotel conveniently situated between the Cathedral Quarter and Old Tours

WHERE TO EAT

Le Rive Gauche
23 Rue de Commerce
37000 Tours
Tel: 00 33 (0)247 05 71 21
www.tours-rivegauche.com
Modern ambiance, innovative gourmet cuisine

Le Turon
94 Rue Colbert
37000 Tours
Tel: 00 33 (0)247 66 14 25
Quality regional specialties and classic French cooking at a reasonable price

Comme Autrefois
11 Rue de la Monnaie
37000 Tours
Tel: 00 33 (0)247 05 94 78
Just off Place Plum, an original dining experience in a medieval setting. The meal consists primarily of focaces – traditional wood-oven baked bread filled with rillettes, haricots blancs or local goat's cheese

and wide array of restaurants and hotels make it a logical hub. But Tours offers visitors much more than just a place to quell rumbling stomachs and rest weary heads after a long day exploring Chenonceau or the extraordinary gardens of Villandry. The city of 300,000 (counting the suburbs) has many attractions of its own to help castled-out tourists recharge their batteries.

In late 2013, after more than two years choking back dust and enduring daily traffic jams, the long-suffering residents of Tours have finally found themselves members of the elite club of French cities offering its denizens a modern tram service. Now, in lieu of buses and cars, sleek and stylish electric trams glide soundlessly up and down the Rue Nationale, Tours' main shopping thoroughfare. The arrival of the tramway has also brought many other smaller but appreciable changes to the city, such as the creation of new public spaces, cycleways and river-spanning bridges.

The Loire gives Tours its scenic setting, but is also the most useful reference when navigating the city, which is actually sandwiched between two rivers: the Loire and the Cher. Urban sprawl has extended in a not always prepossessing fashion far beyond the opposite banks of both rivers, so it's the area closest to the Loire that merits the most attention.

In fact, it's not a bad idea to start a visit of Tours with a lazy stroll along the banks of the great river. On



Place Plumereau



A tempting shop front



The Cathedral of Saint Gatien

the western part of the city there's a mini-promenade designed just for that purpose, under weeping willows dangling their wistful tendrils into the languorous current. Rue Nationale, running perpendicular to the river, is lined with shops all the way to the Hôtel de Ville and the elegant place Jean-Jaurès, with its arching twin fountains and immaculate flower arrangements. It also divides the city into two distinct areas, with Vieux Tours to the west and the Cathedral Quarter to the east.

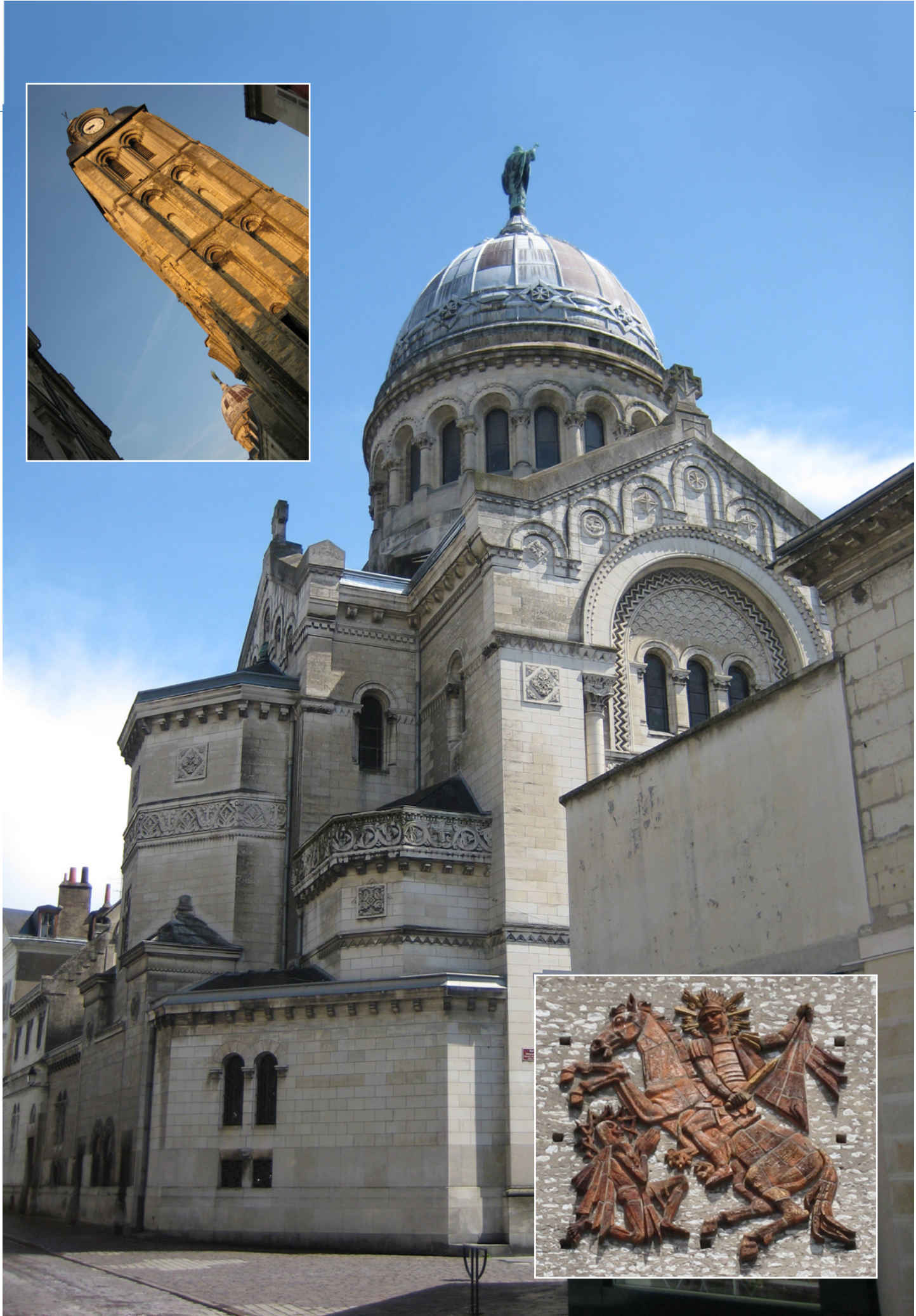
'Vieux Tours' may indeed be old, but the Gallo-Roman Cathedral Quarter actually predates medieval Tours by several centuries. Still, any potentially misleading problem of nomenclature is quickly forgiven in Old Tours' beguiling warren of cobbled streets lined with 14-16th century half-timbered and slate-clad townhouses. All cobbled arteries lead to the pedestrian Place Plumereau, the pulsing heart of Old Tours and a carefully preserved jewel of late medieval architecture.

There's something irresistibly appealing about sitting in Place Plum (as it's known locally, pronounced like the feather and not the fruit) and absorbing the quintessentially continental atmosphere. In the shade of parasols and café canopies, locals, students and tourists converse while sipping coffee and nursing glasses of sparkling Vouvray. Children lick artisanale icecreams under the old mulberry tree, and diners tuck into salads topped with goat's cheese from Saint Maure de Touraine and toasts lathered with the regional speciality *rillettes de porc*.

The jumbled streets around Place Plumereau offer a good choice of chic restaurants and bars, although there's a premium to pay for the medieval milieu. An alternative area to dine with an equally diverse but more international flavour is along Rue Colbert, the preferred hangout of many of Tours' 30,000 students. In addition to several gourmet options there are plenty of budget-friendly restaurants to choose from – and at number 39, a plaque marks the half-timbered house of the *armurier* who made Joan of Arc's armour in 1429 before she set off to lift the siege of Orleans.

Further down Rue Colbert, Saint Gatien's Cathedral leaps out of the Tours skyline. The evolution of medieval architecture is writ large on the ornate facade: begun in the 13th and completed in the 16th century, the cathedral reflects the development of architectural styles from Romanesque to Flamboyant Gothic to early Renaissance, yet somehow manages to avoid looking like a stylistic mishmash. The interior houses the elaborate white marble tomb of two princes – both children of Anne of Brittany and Charles VIII – who died in their infancy, effectively marking the end of the royal Valois dynasty in France.

There's also some magnificent stained glass, including Tours' smaller-scale ripostes to the rose windows of Notre Dame de Paris. On clear days, the sunlight streaming through the windows over the choir throws magical polychrome patterns on the ambulatory floor.



OPPOSITE
PAGE:
**Basilica of
Saint Martin**

INSET ABOVE:
**Medieval part
of the Basilica
of Saint Martin**

INSET BELOW:
**Image of the
local Saint
Martin**

A short walk from Saint Gatien's is the Musée des Beaux Arts, formerly the archbishop's episcopal palace, built in the 17th and 18th centuries. The courtyard entrance harbours a living masterpiece, an enormous cedar of Lebanon, allegedly planted by Napoleon in 1804 and now one of the largest in Europe. The museum houses a surprisingly rich collection of paintings, sculptures and furniture, including works by Rubens, Rembrandt, Mantegna, Monet, Degas and Delacroix. There are also two portraits and a statue by Rodin of the novelist Honoré de Balzac, who was born in Tours and spent a good portion of his adult life writing and hiding from Parisian creditors in the region. Outside the museum a small formal garden offers a fine view of the former palace and the cathedral.

Visitors may find themselves wondering why the Cathedral Quarter is nearly a mile from Old Tours... the answer is that Tours is actually two distinct settlements grown together. When the Celtic Turone tribe first established their settlement here, it was on the northern side of the Loire. The Romans arrived in the 1st century, and with characteristic imperiousness transferred the settlement south to its current site and re-named it *Caesarodunum* (Caesar's Hill). As industrious as they were imperious, the Romans built a large protective wall around the settlement, significant traces of which can still be seen in the garden of the Musée des Beaux Arts and Rue des Ursulines.

They also built an amphitheater large enough to seat 34,000 spectators, making it one of the five largest in the Roman Empire. Sadly, only the structure's foundations remain today in the cellars of private mansions, but the curling outline of the amphitheater can still be traced on rue du Général Meunier. The Cathedral Quarter which grew up around Saint Gatien was basically built on the site of the Roman settlement.

The Romans left their indelible mark on Tours, but it was one Roman soldier in particular who would

dramatically shape Tours' history. Famed for cutting his military cloak in half to share with a beggar, Saint Martin of Tours died in 397 and quickly became one of the most important Catholic saints. His name can still be found on more than 4,000 churches and cathedrals worldwide – including Saint Martin-in-the-Fields in London's Trafalgar Square. The cult of Saint Martin grew in importance as he was adopted as a patron saint first by the Merovingian and then the Carolingian kings of the Franks. The original Basilica of Saint Martin – built in the area now known as Old Tours, a good 15-minute walk from the Roman settlement – housed the saint's shrine and in the early Middle Ages was the third most important pilgrimage site in Christendom after Jerusalem and Rome.

The great wealth of the Basilica of Saint Martin was a tempting target to marauders, and in fact was the destination of the Saracen army defeated by Charles Martel – Charlemagne's grandfather – in 732 at the pivotal Battle of Tours. Walls were built to protect the new settlement that grew up around the basilica to play host to the many pilgrims, which meant that up until the 14th century Tours was two distinct settlements, each with their own character. It was only in the late Middle Ages – as the city prospered with the arrival of the silk trade and royal favour during the reign of Louis XI – that the area between the two settlements developed, effectively fusing them together.

The Basilica of Saint Martin was destroyed and rebuilt several times, eventually succumbing to the combined destructive forces of Viking and Norman raids, fire, religious wars and revolution. But vestiges of the medieval basilica remain on Rue du Châteauneuf – most notably Charlemagne's Tower, named after the Frankish king's wife Luitgarde who was buried there. In the late 19th and early 20th century, architect Victor Laloux – also responsible for Tours' stately and recently restored train station, and the chancery of the US Embassy in Paris – built a new basilica in the neo-Byzantine style on the site of the old. Constructed at the same time as the Sacré Coeur in Paris, the interior is fortunately a more restrained affair than its grandiose and extravagant Parisian cousin. In the crypt of the basilica lies the tomb of Saint Martin, which still draws Catholic pilgrims more than 1,500 years after the saint's death.

Like Paris, Tours is sometimes described as *bourgeois*. Depending on your perspective, this may be good or bad, but it's undoubtedly true – and in more ways than one. When most people use the term to describe Tours, they're referring to its general air of unpretentious prosperity, most visibly reflected in its wealth of gourmet restaurants, fine shops and impressive architecture. But the first known French usage of the word *bourg* dates from 837 and was used to describe the walled settlement around the Basilica of Saint Martin in Tours. The *Tourangeaux* have every reason to be proud of it.

BELOW:
Hôtel de Ville

