

Musée des Carrosses

By Amanda MacKenzie

Until recently, I could never quite get myself to the Musée des Carrosses. With all the tra-la-la of a visit to Versailles, it was too easy to overlook the discreet sign opposite the château entrance on Place des Armes. Besides, we're talking about a museum devoted to carriages. Unforgivable, I know, but the word "plodding" sprang unbidden to mind.

In the end, a sudden downpour decided the matter. Two euros seemed a reasonable price to escape a drenching and, as my eyes adjusted to the lantern-light, the vaulted ceiling and cobbled floor of the old stables, it struck me what a cool haven this would make on sizzling summer days. That was when I realized that I'd stumbled into one of those unique little gems that help make the capital and its surroundings such incomparably nice places to explore.

I left my remaining prejudices at the doorway. In fact, the first exhibits aren't carriages at all, but sledges. On a good day, there are six of them, all dating to the 1720s-1740s, when racing along the snowy aisles of Versailles was all the rage among courtiers. It wasn't a sport for the faint-hearted. The sledge was towed by a single, crampon-shod horse decked with sleigh-bells, and the driver hung on precariously at the rear, while the passenger took his (or her) chances in the snug seat in between. Spills often followed thrills, and even the Dauphin wasn't spared a dunking when the solid ice of the Grand Canal turned out to be nothing of the sort.

Quite how these fragile speed machines survived is a miracle. Up to fifteen coats of original paint, gold-leaf and lacquer kept their papier-mâché reliefs from disintegrating forever. Painstakingly restored, exquisitely modeled—a shell, a tortoise, a leopard complete with ferocious snarl and writhing tail—they give a captivating glimpse into the golden days of the Versailles regime.

Among the other early oddities on show are sedan chairs, those up-

holstered boxes-on-poles that enabled courtiers to travel through the streets without fear of stepping in "ordures" (an idea that strikes me as having some merit today). It's surprising to learn that they were even used within Versailles itself, all the way up the Royal staircase: a low-tech forerunner of the elevator, if you like.



And, of course, there are the carriages. Ranked along the 210-foot-long gallery are seven of the sumptuous "berlins" deployed on the day of Napoleon's wedding to Eugenie. Impressive indeed—but to grasp the splendor of the day, try picturing fifty more, each as ornate as the last, drawn by a cavalcade of 240 horses along the Champs-Élysées. Even these carriages are overshadowed by the macabre pomp of Louis XVIII's funeral coach. Adorned with black velvet, gold fleur-de-lis and towering ostrich plumes, it looks set to embark for the Underworld at any moment. Pause, and shudder.

For poignancy's sake alone, the Dauphin's miniature carriage is not to be missed. Accurate in every detail, down to the shuttered window and upholstered interior, it was made for Louis XVI's delicate eldest son, the Dauphin, to ride around the grounds of Versailles. A valet took the vehicle's yoke, while one of the prince's young retinue took the office of coachman. It conjures an image of privilege and innocence, a world away from the ghastly, solitary cell where the boy spent his last days.

A little curiosity is all it takes to slot the Musée des Carrosses into a Versailles visit, and to be pleasantly repaid by the detour. Compared to the regal offerings nearby, it's a modest museum—but then, when did that stop anyone from getting carried away?

•Musée des Carrosses: 1 Rue Rockefeller, Versailles. Open: weekends from Apr-Oct, 9am-6.30pm. Site: www.chateauversailles.fr.

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Château de Champs-sur-Marne

By Maisie Wilhelm

An impressive mansion nestled amid sculpted gardens and serene forests awaits you in Champs-sur-Marne, just thirty minutes (13 miles) east of Paris. With a sprawling view of the countryside and splendidly decorated rooms, the Château de Champs-sur-Marne, nicknamed "Champs," is a stunning example of French-château architecture and garden landscaping. A short hop on the train, it provides Paris visitors with a pleasant respite from the bustling streets and hot summer days in the city.

The château, situated on 200 acres, was built in the early 1700s by Bullet de Chamblain; its pleasing proportions and subtle elegance were envied by many European aristocrats of the time, who incorporated its style in their own châteaux. Renowned for its remarkable gardens and magnificent interior, Champs feels grand and luxurious yet cozy. It is a building with a storied past. Over the years it has been lived in by a number of famous people, including the Duc de La Vallière and the Marquise de Pompadour.

In the 1880s the Comte Louis Cahen d'Anvers (a wealthy banker) bought the château, which by then was in a state of major disrepair. But Cahen d'Anvers and his wife Louise lovingly restored the aging château to its former glory, meticulously staying true to its eighteenth-century origins. Their loving efforts paid off. Today, Champs is one of the few eighteenth-century châteaux near Paris and it is a superb study of what life was like during those years.

In 1935, Cahen d'Anvers' son Charles, who had inherited Champs, donated the estate to France (it was promptly classified as a historical monument). While in his hands he had made every effort to preserve his parents' vision by maintaining the château's authentic eighteenth-century spirit. Today, this mission is the charge of Jean-Louis Charpentier, head "conservateur." He told me, "It's rare to find an eighteenth-century estate near Paris this well preserved. We don't want to transform it into a

museum. We want visitors to feel like they are in a house that is still lived in." A similar intimacy is present in Paris' Musée Nissim de Camondo. This is no coincidence—Irene, Louis Cahen d'Anvers' sister (famously painted by Renoir), married Moïse de Camondo and left her mark on his Paris home.



Champs is more than just a château; it's also an exquisite garden. The original gardens, with their ornate Louis XIV parterres, were abandoned during the Revolution, but were eventually restored by the famous Duchêne father/son team. Visitors can now stroll amid water basins, fountains, Greek-deity sculptures and an orangerie (flowers from which are cut and displayed in the château every Friday morning).

As in its early days, Champs' modern guest list has been impressive. After it was donated to the state, it served temporarily as a residence for the President of the Republic: its ornate setting and proximity to Paris were perfect for housing—and impressing—visiting VIPs, dignitaries and other heads of state. The list of visitors includes various kings of Africa, Isadora Duncan and Marcel Proust. It has also been used by filmmakers. Parts of "Dangerous Liaisons" were filmed at Champs, and, most recently, Sofia Coppola used it in "Marie Antoinette."

But you don't have to be an important person to visit Champs. Anyone who visits Château de Champs-sur-Marne can both observe how well-to-do eighteenth-century French families once lived in the countryside and enjoy a stroll in a beautiful rural setting.

•Château de Champs-sur-Marne: 31 Rue de Paris, Champs-sur-Marne. Take the RER A to Noisiel-Le Lizard. Then Bus 220 to Bry-sur-Marne. Open 9:45am-noon, 1:30-5pm. Site (Tourisme Seine-et-Marne): www.tourisme77.net.