



Gateway to one of the largest national forests in France, Compiègne in Hauts de France is full of nice surprises. Gillian Thornton explored on two legs and four.

Easing my amiable mount to a standstill, I relaxed the reins for a few moments to take in the view down the broad grassy avenue towards the distant chateau of Compiègne. After all, it's not every day I get the chance to ride in the hoof prints of kings and emperors, nor to explore the vast natural paradise that lay at their back door.

Some 85 kilometres north of Paris in the department of Oise, Compiègne Forest is bisected by more than 300 km of footpaths and 130 km of cycle tracks. Walk it, bike it, or do as I did and book a guided hack from the Pôle Equestre du Compiégnois astride a French breed of horse ideally suited to a relaxed forest adventure.

Native to the Baie de Somme in Picardy, the Henson is a small, good-natured and suitable for both novice and expert riders. Our small

group walked and trotted along quiet forest trails to a soundtrack of birdsong, before eventually emerging from the trees for our distant view of the vast chateau.

Hensons back in the paddock, I headed into town for a close-up view. The first chateau was built here in the 15th century under Charles V, keeping its medieval appearance until the 17th century when Louis XV commissioned a new building. Most kings of France until Charles X in 1825 stopped over in Compiègne on the way to their coronation in Reims, with 'Sun King' Louis XIV visiting no less than 75 times, starting in 1646.

But whilst Louis XIV made some minor improvements, it was Louis XVI who masterminded a whole new wing and made changes to the interior décor, only to have the collections dispersed after he and his Austrian



Le Weekend: COMPIÈGNE, Picardy

wife Marie-Antoinette were parted from their heads during the Revolution.

Enter Napoleon I who repurposed Compiègne's vast chateau first for the military, then as a school for arts and crafts, before deciding to redesign the former Royal palace as an Imperial residence with new spaces, décor, and furnishings.

But it was his nephew, Napoléon III who really put the château at the forefront of court life. Together with his wife Empress Eugénie, he organised a weekly gathering or 'Series' for around one hundred guests for four to six weeks each year. Days were spent hunting in the forest, playing games and going to concerts, all the guests being accommodated in the chateau.

Walk through the colonnades and courtyards today, the ballroom and Imperial apartments, and you get a real feel for what life must have been like here for the favoured invitees. Largest of France's neoclassical chateaux, Compiègne is a must-see of the Hauts de France region, ranking with the Château de Versailles and the Château de Fontainebleau as one of the three most important Royal and Imperial residences in France. So allow plenty of time to discover its four very different collections.

I began with a journey from the 18th century through the Second Empire inside the Royal and Imperial Apartments, each room furnished in the period for which the most comprehensive collection of furniture and artworks was available. Tapestries woven for Louis XV in the Gobelins factory in Paris show the king hunting in the Compiègne forest – the perfect wall covering for a monarch with local connections. And I have a real 'wow' moment inside the lavish red and gold bedchamber of Empress Marie-Louise, wife of Napoleon I. Refurbished in 1810, it's the last word in Imperial bling.

Follow in the footsteps of prestigious guests attending the 'Series' to visit the Museum of the Second Empire, a behind-the-scenes peek into art, history and court life under Napoleon



III. But I'm particularly moved by the Empress Museum which reveals the private life of the last Imperial family through collections begun by local resident Doctor Ferrand. Covering the birth of the Empire to the family's exile in England after 1870, it shows the fragility of life at the top of the political food chain.

After the Second Empire fell at Sedan in 1870, Napoleon and his wife Eugénie settled at Chislehurst, near London, with their teenage son. Born in 1856, the Imperial Prince was also named Napoléon but quickly nicknamed 'Loulou' by his adoring parents. In 1873, Eugénie lost her ailing husband after a kidney stone operation and in 1879, Loulou was killed fighting the Zulus in South Africa with the

English, his bloodstained uniform poignantly displayed here beside a Zulu spear beneath a painting of his final moments.

Don't leave the chateau without taking a walk through the history of transport at the National Car Museum with its collection of horse-drawn vehicles, cars and bicycles from the 18th to early 20th century. And make like an emperor with a stroll in the scented air of the landscaped park that opens onto the forest.

The adjacent town of Compiègne, bisected by the river Oise, today numbers some 40,000 inhabitants, and is home to yet more unusual collections, so you'll need a couple of days to do them justice. Try the Antoine Vivenel Museum, packed with art and archaeological items; the Historic Figurine Museum with over 100,000 military and civilian figurines; or maybe the Cloister Museum at Saint-Corneille Abbey.

I finished my short break at a unique heritage site in the forest just 6km from the town centre. The two Napoleons were no strangers to war but the conflict remembered here at the Armistice Clearing would have been beyond even their wildest imagination.

Having recently been refitted as an office, the Wagon-Lits train carriage reserved for Marshal Foch was chosen for the signing of the Armistice in 1918. Normally such a surrender would have taken place at the headquarters of the commander-in-chief at Senlis, but the forest clearing ensured calm and isolation away from the capital.

When peace returned, the Armistice Clearing was opened as a memorial on 11 November 1922, and five years later, the historic train carriage was restored and rehoused in a purpose-built shelter. A statue of Marshal Foch by Michelet followed in 1937, but more upheaval was to come with the Occupation of France by Germany during World War II.

On 22 June 1940, a French delegation signed a second Armistice at the exact location of the first. Only this time the roles

were reversed. Now the site of Germany's 1918 humiliation was a symbol of the Third Reich's victory over France. The clearing was destroyed on Hitler's orders and carriage 2419D taken to Germany where it was later lost in a fire.

Today visitors can imagine those historic events, thanks to a similar carriage refurbished in 1950 to replicate the original. The centrepiece of a fascinating small museum, it is just a short walk from the statues and memorials of the Armistice Clearing.

Kings, Emperors and Dictators have all left their mark on Compiègne, a small town that is big on history, but also on outdoor adventure, ideal for a weekend break. Don't even try to resist!

*Gillian stayed at Aiden by Best Western @ T'Aim Hotel on the banks of the Oise in Margny-Les-Compiègne. **bestwestern.com***

*Château de Compiègne: **chateaudecompiègne.fr**. Closed Tuesdays, but open all year round apart from public holidays.*

*Armistice Museum: **musee-armistice-14-18.fr***

*For local visitor information, visit **compiègne-tourisme.fr**; **oisetourisme.com**; **hautsdefrancetourism.com**; or **frenchweekendbreaks.co.uk***

