

Travel

THE BIG WEEKEND

Medieval heart,
steampunk soul:
Jules Verne's arty
birthplace is still
futuristic, says

Sue Bryant

FRIDAY

Afternoon

Arty, edgy Nantes, the birthplace of Jules Verne, knows a thing or two about reinvention. Once France's busiest river port, the city grew rich on slave-trading and shipbuilding, but had to change tack in 1987 after the last boatyard closed. Three decades on, it's a cool, leafy centre of tech and design. This is where Parisians want to live; in fact, they're arriving in droves for an easier life on the banks of the Loire, surrounded by art and cosy bistros where you can idle over a three-course *prix fixe* menu with a glass of local Muscadet for less than £20.

First up is the **Château des Ducs de Bretagne**, former home to the kings of France. This is a proper castle, encircled by chunky granite towers and a moat, but cross the drawbridge and you're in a hi-tech museum that takes you through the city's history (£7; chateaunantes.fr).

Next, wander through the **medieval quarter**, where half-timbered buildings cluster round the gothic cathedral. You can't get lost: a green line on the pavement connects all the main sights. Your destination is Place Graslin, for an apéritif at **La Cigale**, a lavish art nouveau hang-out for power-lunchers and lovers alike, with extravagant murals and potted palms (£3 for a kir; lacigale.com).

Evening

Book ahead for dinner in **Les Chants d'Avril**, tucked away in the Champs de Mars quarter. Christophe François and his wife, Véronique (two of those Parisians who've escaped the capital) concoct a "mystery" three-course menu: exceptional value at £22.50. Just hope the tarragon ice cream with raspberries and creamy rice pudding is on when you visit (leschantsd'avril.fr).

After dinner, stroll over to **Le Lieu Unique**, a biscuit factory that's been converted into an arts centre, with DJs and bands in the evenings, and seating that spills onto the waterfront.

SATURDAY

Morning

To the **covered market** on Rue Talensac for supplies. Stock up on crispy baguettes from La Petite Boulangerie, cheeses from Beillevaire and tiny stuffed peppers from La Boite à Pâtes. Then head across town to the wonderful **Musée d'Arts de Nantes**, which reopened last week after a six-year, £75m renovation (10 Rue Georges Clemenceau; £7; museedartsdenantes.fr). There's a new wing, the Cube, clad in translucent marble and housing pieces by Picasso and Monet.

Next door, the **Jardin des Plantes** is full of exotic specimens brought back by



WHERE TO STAY

La Pérouse, opposite the Tour Bretagne, blends comfort and minimalist chic, with stripped-back wooden floors and white stucco walls. Doubles start at £99 (hotel-laperouse.fr). Or try the quirky **Hôtel Pommeraye**, right by the Passage Pommeraye shopping mall; doubles start at £61, or book one of the "Artist" rooms, from £80; No 309 has a circular bed (hotel-pommeraye.com). July and August are the busiest months,

when the whole city gets into party mode for the spectacular Voyage à Nantes arts festival (levoyageanantes.fr).

GETTING THERE

Fly direct to Nantes from Gatwick, Bristol, Liverpool or Luton and Bristol with easyJet (easyjet.com). When you arrive, buy a Pass Nantes card, which offers free public transport, entry to most museums, a cruise on the River Erdre and shopping discounts (£31 for 48 hours; nantes-tourisme.com).

sailors returning from the tropics in the 19th century. After exploring the ornate greenhouses, have a picnic on one of the sunny lawns or grab a spot on the **Café de l'Orangerie**'s wisteria-draped terrace (mains from £9).

Afternoon

Time to explore the city's elegant squares and boulevards. The **Passage Pommeraye** is a graceful 19th-century arcade filled with designer clothing stores. Nantes is packed with chocolate shops, a legacy of the cocoa, coffee and sugar that used to be landed here: follow your nose to **Debotté**, an institution for more than 160 years, and enjoy a free sample.

Ile Feydeau, no longer an island since the Loire was diverted in the 1920s, is an enclave of grand mansions that once housed the city's wealthy shipbuilders. Look for the mascarons over every window: a stone mask depicting the personality or desires of the owner.

Nearby, on Quai de la Fosse, is the **Mémorial de l'abolition de l'esclavage**, a sobering monument to the victims of the Atlantic slave trade and those who sought to abolish it. You walk through a tunnel, reading the words of Bob Marley, Martin Luther King and others inscribed in stone.

Evening

Tonight, head to **Pickles**, where the locals can't get enough of the imaginative dishes created by a *rosbif*, no less. Dominic Quirke uses only local ingredients, and the three-course evening menu is a steal at £30, plus £10 for two glasses of wine. On my visit, diners were feasting on organic lamb, stuffed octopus, foie gras and asparagus (pickles-restaurant.com).

Next, whizz up to the 32nd floor of the **Tour Bretagne**, the tallest building in town. Here, a giant white stork forms the centrepiece of a bonkers bar, Le Nid ("the nest"), with chairs and tables shaped like boiled eggs. The lights of the city stretch out below and, at weekends, DJs play anything from chillout to techno (beers from £2.50; www.lenidnantes.com).

SUNDAY

Morning

Cross the footbridge to the Ile de Nantes, where Jules Verne meets Leonardo da Vinci at **Les Machines de l'Île** – more mad inventor's workshop than theme park. A 40ft mechanical elephant, which can carry 50 people, marches around, blowing spray from its trunk; creepy sea creatures, among them a giant squid and a toothy angler fish, rotate on a multistorey carousel; and pterodactyl-like herons "fly" inside a hangar, carrying passengers in baskets (£7.50; lesmachines-nantes.fr).

Afterwards, follow the green line past avant-garde architecture: an office block adorned with a super-sized yellow tape measure, and the Manny building, draped in aluminium netting. Back across the bridge, there's just time to hop on the Navibus ferry and head for **Trentemoult**, on the south bank. Once a fishing village, it's now a boho neighbourhood of brightly painted terraced houses.

Drop into **La Civelle**, a bustling waterside bistro, for a final slurp of Atlantic oysters before you head to the airport (mains from £16; lacivelle.com).

Sue Bryant was a guest of easyJet and the Voyage à Nantes festival, which runs from Saturday until August 27 (levoyageanantes.fr)