

TRAVEL ART & CULTURE

France's most innovative city has swapped its industry for art, discovers **Anthea Gerrie**

In a city which dreamed up a five-storey mechanical elephant to stalk its quays like a benign, urban King Kong, anything is possible. That city is Nantes, and the 21st century mammoth has become not only its emblem and prime attraction but a shining example of how art and imagination can regenerate a dying city.

The former industrial capital of Brittany, dubbed "the loopyest city in France" by The Sunday Times, is far removed from the Brittany of picture postcards. Devoid of charming, rocky coves, the once-powerful port built its fortunes on slave-trading, shipbuilding and food processing.

When the river silted up and manufacturing moved out, a seriously creative vision was required to transform defunct factories and shipyards into pleasure palaces worthy of the tourist euro. These include a beautiful Art Nouveau biscuit factory now home to bars, galleries and a hammam, an exquisite botanical garden awash in fanciful sculptures and the animatronics workshop which kickstarted the revival of Nantes 11 years ago by bringing that elephant to life.

But the biggest event of the year is *Le Voyage a Nantes*, which draws some half a million visitors to the city in July and August.



It's named for and inspired by the great imagineer Jules Verne, born and raised in the city. This culturefest gets more ambitious every year, with many eye-popping pieces of public art retained from previous festivals and new sculptures and installations added every summer.

They include an exterior slide attached to the wall of the 300-year-old moated castle, allowing visitors to speed around joyously, and a series of giant rings lighting up the quayside of an island which once housed shipyards and warehouses. There are also surreal outdoor ping pong tables which allow six players to compete and a children's playground resembling the cratered surface of the moon.

This year's new works, on show from June 30, will include a ghostly crystal

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Nantes reborn



Discovering the mechanical animals on the Ile de Nantes and castle slide installation

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and neon skeleton floating above the orchestra pit of the Graslin theatre, an immersive work by James Turrell at the newly-extended museum of modern art and a dizzying urban jungle perfectly in tune with a city determined to be green in every way.

In fact Nantes Tourism's most ingenious creation is the 10-mile green line which links everything worth seeing; follow the line clearly painted on the pavement and you won't miss a thing.

You don't need to wait for *Le Voyage* to enjoy Nantes, full of things to see and do year-round. They include *Les Machines de l'Île*, whose creators followed up the giant elephant – which offers rides to 49 people several times a day – with a wonderfully fantastical carousel in which horses are replaced by marine creatures and boats.

There are also workshops where visitors can see the giant spider, ant and flapping birds destined to be marching amongst visitors within five years, perched on the branches of a giant "heron tree" on the mainland shore.

And the town's Michelin-starred restaurant, L'Atlantide, will be a great vantage point for this new animatronic wonder – and is already unmissable for foodies. In its thrilling cliff-top location overlooking the island, chef Jean-Yves Gueho does full justice to Brittany's excellent fresh fish, vegetables and the buttery Breton baked delights which are the best in the whole of France.

Dining out, the city's choices are mouth-watering; there's a good choice of fish and vegetable dishes at Bistrot



for Ashkenazim into a house of mostly Sephardic worship. There's a full programme of events in an adjacent cultural centre, where kosher food is dispensed from a shop twice a week.

A plaque commemorating the city's Holocaust victims sits beside the war memorial, itself on the main boulevard named for the 50 hostages the Nazis took in reprisal for a Resistance effort.

Nearby the covered market of Talensac is one source of that famous butter, from the Beillevaire dairy, whose stall here is staffed by Bretons in typical striped tops and berets, while local cheeses sit alongside butter bursting with rock crystals or flavoured with three different peppers.

Or sample the finest of all French pastries, the impossibly buttery Kouign Amann in the fabulously ornate La Cigale brasserie, five minutes from the synagogue and opposite the opera house. Close by, there's retail therapy on all three floors of the equally elegant Passage Pommeraye, a covered Parisian-style shopping arcade.

While the city centre is very walkable, trams make it easy to venture into Nantes's diverse neighbourhoods. There is even a frequent water-bus service to sleepy Trentemoult, a charming boho suburb on the far side of the river whose colourful houses are worth a quiet stroll if this visually exciting city occasionally feels too frenetic.

Because with the world's first 3D-printed house newly opened in Nantes, there's no stopping this endlessly innovative corner of France.

GETTING THERE

► RETURN flights cost around £47 from Luton to Nantes and from £49 from Gatwick with easyjet (easyjet.com). The city is also two

hours from Paris by high-speed train. Rooms at La Perouse cost from around £140, room only. hotel-laperouse.fr

For more information visit levoyageanantes.fr or the city's tourist information at nantes-tourisme.com/en

nome Nantais, an elegant indoor-outdoor restaurant facing the Cathedral, while Le Bouchon, in one of the medieval half-timbered houses lining the back streets behind the Hotel La Perouse, is an atmospheric dining spot.

From La Perouse, with its own wonderful breakfast, it's easy to walk through the hilly but largely pedestrianised Graslin quarter leading up to

the synagogue, full of elegant squares and 18th century buildings.

Nantes' long Jewish history dates back to the 11th century; it was the first port of call for many Spanish and Portuguese Jews fleeing the Inquisition, and a community depleted by the Holocaust has been restored by an influx of North African Jews who have transformed the handsome synagogue built



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with a
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► YOU MAY not have considered staying in one of the increasingly popular, serviced apartments appearing in cities like London: too soulless and not suitable for a short stay, you might have assumed. But think again.

Because Cheval Residences' luxury collection of apartments is upping the ante with its design-led properties available to rent from one night

to three months or more.

As a Londoner, it might seem odd that I like nothing better than spending a night away in my hometown. But I do. I still get a thrill about packing a bag and travelling a few miles to rediscover another corner of my city.

Rapidly becoming an alternative to the swiftest five-star hotels, the Cheval group has outposts in some of the city's most desirable spots, including Chelsea, Hyde Park Gate and Gloucester Park. The most recent opening is Cheval Knightsbridge — where you

can choose to stay in a mews house, modern apartment or an urban cottage.

But with its enviable position on the North Bank of the Thames, looking out over Tower Bridge and the Tower of London, Cheval Three Quays is, quite aptly, the jewel in the company's crown, and for the wow factor, you can't beat its two-bedroom Tower Penthouse.

The interiors are show-stopping — there's a beautifully curated living space, a cutting edge-kitchen and swoon-worthy bedrooms — but you might not even notice them at first. Instead you'll be drawn to the views.

Seen through the floor-to-ceiling windows and the wrap-around terrace is the river in all its majesty. It's nothing short of spectacular: the impressive sight of the turrets of the Tower of London and the stately views of Tower Bridge up close.

When coming up with the interior concept, architectural designers Forme Design took inspiration from the historic riverside location, as well giving a nod to the area's futuristic vibe. The property's name refers to the docks here in the 17th century — the entry point for the exotic goods, such as tobacco, rum and sugar, coming into the UK from the West Indies.

The marriage of old and new is a theme that runs throughout. From the outside, it looks like any other glass-fronted, upmarket block. But step into the lobby and the feel is softened with artist's Barnaby Gorton's whimsically illustrated murals,



which depict the working life of the river in medieval times. Meanwhile, elegant columns reference the area's Roman heritage and a cascading water feature adds a touch of zen.

As well as a bespoke modern chandelier, custom-made rugs and huge photographic prints, the lobby is also presided over by an oversized leather and granite service desk, where you can access the around-the-clock concierge, from laundry services to theatre tickets and travel arrangements.

In the light-drenched penthouse, dramatic chandeliers, velvet sofas and thick bespoke rugs notch up the luxury factor and it's all tied together with layers of accessories. Petrol-blue glass vases, burnt-orange chenille cushions, and pretty Middle-Eastern-style trellis screens elevate it from a

'one-size-fits-all' design to a personality-filled pied-a-terre.

Luxury bathrooms have rows of Hermes toiletries, large bedrooms are equally cosseting with huge beds. In the white gloss kitchen, you can't move for avant-garde Gaggenau appliances. But if a 'home away from home' experience means downing tools, you can request daily apartment servicing and a chef to cater to your every whim.

Forget a nondescript experience, this has enough character to keep you wanting more.

RATES: A river-facing one-bedroom apartment costs from £307 per night. chevalresidences.com

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