

The Gardens of Versailles: Views Fit for Royalty

by Cheryl Pendry, *PassPorter Featured Columnist*

If you're a member of royalty, then obviously you want a palace fit for a king or queen, but for some, that's not enough.

That was very much the case at Versailles, on the outskirts of Paris, France, where luxury extended far beyond the chateau itself. Half of the beauty of a visit to Versailles is enjoying the expansive gardens, which seem to stretch for forever, when viewed from the palace windows.

It's perhaps no surprise the gardens seem to go on and on, as they cover almost 2,000 acres. You really can't imagine how big they are, until you see them. As a sufferer of chronic fatigue, there was no way that I'd be able to enjoy a pleasant stroll through them, as it would just be too much for me. I was quite concerned about this, thinking that I'd be constrained to staying near the palace and just grabbing a few photos from there, but no, they've thought of everything there. If walking is too much for you, and let's face it, it may be for younger or indeed the more elderly members of the family, they have a solution. You can hire a golf cart to tour the gardens at a rate of €30 (about \$36) for an hour, and they even equip you with a route to follow that shows you all the highlights during that time. The carts are very simple to operate, and we found it to be the perfect solution, with my husband driving and me taking photos of the scenery.

There's certainly plenty to photograph, with the gardens intricately laid out, and the less-formal park beyond. King Louis XIV started the creation of the gardens, as in his view, gardens were just as important as the chateau itself. That creative process took about four decades, with vast amounts of earth moved so that the flowerbeds, fountains, and Grand Canal could all be created.

In the king's plans the center of the gardens would be water, and in particular, the spectacular fountains that perform to this day on selected times during the year. I was disappointed that we would not see the fountains in action, but sadly, they now only perform on dates when there is an additional charge. On those days, access to the gardens, which is usually free, is €8 (\$11). Even when the fountains aren't on, they are still home to some spectacular sculptures, and are well worth seeing. As with the interior decoration of the chateau, the sculptures represent various gods, and were designed to show how closely royalty was supposed to be related to divinity. Some of the

fountains can be found along the Water Parterre, which leads straight down from the palace to the Grand Canal beyond, but there are also smaller fountains set in the landscaped gardens to either side of the parterre, and our golf cart tour helped us to find some of those.

Immediately in front of the palace is the Water Parterre, essentially two huge ornamental pools that are directly beneath the ornate Hall of Mirrors in the chateau. These pools are designed to reflect light, and they're a stunning feature of the gardens, both seen from indoors and from outside, as they frame the palace beautifully. Both pools are decorated with four reclining statues representing the rivers of France: the Loire, the Rhone, the Seine, and the Garonne. I had no idea of their symbolism until after our visit was over, but even without knowing that, they're a beautiful part of the gardens.

The Grand Canal lies some distance from the chateau, in line with the Water Parterre above it, and it's a huge, sprawling body of water that seems to go on and on. You can get an idea of just how big it is from the fact that it took 11 years to complete, and in fact, it's the best part of a mile long, which is just a jaw dropping concept. Of course, it's a popular meeting point, particularly during the warmer weather, with many families enjoying time together there. You can even hire boats to head out on the water, if you're feeling a little more active.

Although the water features of the gardens are stunning, and the most obvious attraction here, you need to explore to find the full beauty of Versailles. In between the Water Parterre and the Grand Canal are a series of geometrically laid-out pathways, which is immediately obvious when you see a map of the gardens. You can tell straight away that these were very much planned gardens, rather than just being allowed to evolve. Head off on any of these pathways, and there's no telling what you'll find.

We were hampered a little by having the golf cart and by not wanting to stray into a second rental hour with it, but we still managed to hop off and see some of the delights that waited around every corner. Without warning, you can come across fountains, statues, and meticulously cared for hedges, while in other areas you can find entire secret gardens. On more than one occasion, I would set off looking for something marked on the map, and it was only when I stumbled across it that I'd be sure where I was. For the previous few minutes, I spent my time wondering whether the map was playing a trick on me, as there was nothing to see until you rounded the very final corner. The Colonnade was a perfect example, with its 32 marble columns. As you saw it, it was as if you'd stepped back in time to Roman days. It's certainly worth taking your time with the gardens, as there's something

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to reward your curiosity everywhere you look.

As you'd perhaps expect from a royal garden, sculptures can be found everywhere, and the Apollo fountain in front of the Grand Canal is a prime example, with sculptures lining both sides of the approach. Perhaps my favorites were the Sun Vases, some of which were copied from Roman models. There was something very unusual about seeing such huge vases in a garden, but it worked perfectly.

That's the real beauty about the gardens of Versailles. Literally everything fits together, almost as if it's a puzzle, with all the pieces there. You can see how much love and thought went into creating this place, and ensuring it was fit for a king. Even today that's still evident, particularly out of peak summer season. We visited in the early summer and saw work being done throughout the gardens, but when we returned later in the year, to see the fountains play on one of the busier days of the year, everything was finished and looking superb.

If you visit Versailles, and it is one of the must-see places in France, be sure to allow enough time to enjoy the gardens, as the chateau is only half the splendor of any visit. You can easily spend hours exploring what's on offer outside and marveling at the beauty that people can create with nature. You can find out more about visiting Versailles at their official web site at <http://en.chateauversailles.fr/homepage>. There is usually no charge to visit the gardens, except on special days, when the fountains perform to music - then there is a charge of €uro;8/adults, €uro;6/children aged 6-18. Under fives remain free. The gardens are open from 8:00 am to 6:00 pm from November 1 to March 31, and from 8:00 am to 8:30 pm from April 1 to October 31.

About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)

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