

# Into the woods

Venturing deep into the **Forêt de Lyons**, *Nick Rider* discovers an historic Norman town, refined luxuries and wonderful walks



**Arriving in Lyons-la-Forêt**, it's hard to resist a well-worn cliché; the town really does look like a film set, and indeed has been used as such.

Perhaps the most completely intact half-timbered town in all Normandy, it's ravishingly pretty. From minute cottages to townhouses and grand mansions, the building facades are patterned with black or brown timber diagonals, chevrons and zigzags, and embellished with exuberant displays of flowers.

Lyons' visual impact and lost-world atmosphere are accentuated by the approach through the Forêt de Lyons that surrounds it – a magnificently dense, wild woodland of oak and towering beeches, extending over 10,000 hectares (40 square miles). Beautiful Lyons draws crowds

on summer weekends, but the rest of the year is placidly relaxed, with the forest paths often empty for miles.

Lyons and its forest were a favourite hunting retreat of Henry I of England, youngest son of William the Conqueror, who died here in 1135. The King had many troubles, but the immediate cause of his death was famously recorded as over-eating, specifically 'a surfeit of lampreys'. Lampreys, French *lamproies*, are eel-like fish once common in local rivers that were a prized delicacy in the middle ages. Largely forgotten for centuries, lately they have reappeared on menus.

Unusually, little of Henry's Norman castle can still be seen; it crumbled away in the 16th century, and the half-timbered town was built on top of it. This is

why Lyons' main church of St-Denis – mostly 12th century, with Gothic additions – is oddly located a five-minute walk outside the town beside the River Lieure, on the site of the first village below the castle. Also beside the river are the Trois Moulins, a set of three micro-sized watermills.

The steep Rue d'Enfer ('Hell Street'), half-timbered from end to end, is the best route up from the riverside to the centre of town. At number 4, Maurice Ravel composed several works during the 1920s – one of many artists attracted to Lyons by its rural seclusion.

Rue d'Enfer ends at Lyons' spectacular centrepiece. A triumph of half-timbering, the main square, Place Benserade, is named after Isaac de Benserade, a poet and courtier of Louis XIV who was born in one of its grandest houses (Maison Benserade) in 1612. Dominating the square is Les Halles, a timber-framed marketplace that's still in use.

From the 16th to the 18th century, Lyons was a prosperous coaching stop between Paris and the north. But with railways and highways having subsequently ignored it, the town's historic buildings have survived almost untouched.

Today, Lyons offers many sophisticated pleasures beyond contemplating the architecture from the square's café tables. One of the grandest old coaching inns, the →

### Getting there

Lyons-la-Forêt is one hour and 40 minutes' drive east of Le Havre, or two hours from Caen.



1 Composer Maurice Ravel's house on Rue d'Enfer

2 A café terrace is the perfect place to sit and admire the town's architecture



- 3 Les Halles, the market hall  
 4 This verdant town is approached through the wild woodlands of the Forêt de Lyons  
 5 The 17th-century Chapelle Saint-Jean-baptiste de l'Essart Mador



### Hôtel La Licorne

27 Place Isaac  
 Benserade  
 +33 (0)2 32 48 24 24  
 hotel-licorne.com

### Le Grand Cerf

30 Place Isaac  
 Benserade  
 +33 (0)2 32 48 24 24  
 grandcerf.fr

### Château de Fleury-la-Forêt

Fleury-la-Forêt  
 +33 (0)2 32 49 63 91  
 chateau-fleury-la-foret.com

1610 La Licorne has been transformed into a stylish luxury hotel, combining original features such as massive beams and a superb carved staircase with sleek decor in muted blues and greys – and, of course, every comfort. In the restaurant, La Licorne Royale, Michelin-starred chef Christophe Poirier presents creative cuisine. The same owners have also renovated another historic inn nearby, Le Grand Cerf, with more traditional decor and a bistro-style menu, while a few streets away there is an opulent spa.

Lyons is naturally an exceptional base for walking, and autumn is a great time to enjoy the woods as shades of red and gold appear in the clear light. Easy walks include the Chemin des Ecoliers, a circular one-to-two-hour path from the church through the woods north-west and back through delightful tiny villages. Several walks into the deepest beechwoods begin at the Carrefour des Veneurs crossroads, from a relaxed circuit to Mortemer Abbey to more demanding 12-mile hikes. The forest trails are also great for cycling and riding; the tourist office provides full information on walks and other facilities.

Around the Forêt de Lyons there is also a choice of chateaux and historic edifices to visit. Vascoeuil, to the north-west, is an imposing Norman castle best known for its sculpture garden, which has works by major artists such



3

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5



4

as Braque and Dalí (open April to November; [chateauvascoeuil.com](http://chateauvascoeuil.com)).

South of Lyons, the aforementioned Abbaye de Mortemer was founded by Henry I. Now partly ruined, it's said to be the most haunted abbey in France, with the King's own daughter, Queen Matilda, among its reputed ghosts. The abbey trades on this fame with a fun museum of ghosts and legends (check website for opening times; [abbaye-de-mortemer.fr](http://abbaye-de-mortemer.fr)).

Quirkiest of all local mansions, though, is the Château de Fleury-la-Forêt, hidden among the trees on the eastern edge of the forest. An elegant pile from the 1590s, Fleury has superb wood-panelled decor, an extraordinary doll museum and rambling gardens (visits by reservation for non-residents). But it also boasts five exceptional B&B rooms, from a baronial 1650s suite to another that hosted an 18th-century countess. Breakfast is served in an astonishing 19th-century kitchen, where overnight guests can get a distinct flavour of life under the *ancien régime*.

Where better to soak up the rich history of this atmospheric corner of Normandy?