

# Living le theme

Juliet Dennis finds thrills without the spills at little-known French theme park Puy du Fou

@juliet\_dennis

Imagine a theme park dedicated to historical re-enactments, theatrical shows and entertainment – without a rollercoaster in sight.

Voilà! That's Puy du Fou, a theme park in western France, about an hour's drive from Nantes, yet largely unknown to the UK market – until now.

Instead of traditional rides, gladiators race on horse-drawn chariots, birds of prey swoop inches from your head, a Viking ship charges to battle, knights joust and a castle catches fire.

And all that in the space of a day, spiced with comedy and acrobatics that had our children splitting their sides one moment and gasping in astonishment the next.

France's second-most-popular theme park, after Disneyland Paris, has experiences that educate, inspire and shock by the bucketload.

#### ▶ SHOW TIME

There are seven 'grand' historical shows, each of which is staged up to seven times per day. They include the large-scale, night-time spectacular Les Orgues de Feu, in which ballerinas glide serenely across a lake dotted

with multicoloured fountains to the strains of classical music.

Other smaller, walk-through attractions include Les Amoureux de Verdun, a recreation of a First World War trench and, new for this year, Le Mystère de la Pérouse. This follows in the footsteps of a famous French explorer on his 1785 sailing, using special effects and 3D videos.

In addition, there is the hugely popular La Cinéscénie night show, upon which the park was founded and which features up to 4,000 volunteer actors. It's staged only on Friday and Saturday nights from June to September – although we had a great time without seeing it. Tickets cost €27 and should be booked well in advance.

Meanwhile, traditional craftsmen work in four period villages ranging from the first to the 20th century. The park also boasts lush vegetation, a rose garden, labyrinth, ponds and lakes, piped classical musical playing as you walk down its paths, as well as restaurants and on-site hotels.

Queues? All bearable. Stress factor? Low to non-existent. Parents, rejoice – this is the theme park you have been waiting for. ➔

NEED TO KNOW

- The park is open from April to early November.
- Clients will need two days to see the whole park.
- Expect a very French experience – not everyone speaks perfect English! Only 14% of the 2.3 million visitors last year were from outside France.
- The park is big, so it involves a fair amount of walking. But it doesn't feel packed, even in peak season. There is a train for clients with reduced mobility to get around.
- Five on-site hotels offer more than 400 rooms in total. Each is dedicated to a different period in history, from ancient Rome to the 18th century.
- There are 27 places to eat in the park and its hotels, from fast food to gourmet cuisine.
- Translation headsets are available, or Puy du Fou's app translates shows into four languages. There is Wi-Fi coverage across the park.



LEFT: La Cinéscénie

RIGHT: Le Bal des Oiseaux Fantômes



BELOW: Juliet, Joe and Nina outside La Citadelle

BELOW RIGHT: Mousquetaire de Richelieu



“Our dapper waiter served our drinks and first course, then ran to the stage to perform the can-can with aplomb

recommend. As we took our seats in the packed belle époque-style restaurant, with low lamps glowing on the tables, our dapper black-tie-adorned waiter served our drinks and first course. Minutes later, to Joe and Nina's astonishment, the waiters ran to the stage – performing the can-can, singing and dancing with aplomb. A fun and interactive cabaret

ensued, similar to those performed at early 20th-century French cafes, while we ate, drank and laughed, still being served our food by the same waiter between 'dance shifts'. "I am a dancer, not a waiter," he explained in broken French afterwards to Joe and Nina, though they took some convincing. "Is that really true?" Nina whispered to me afterwards. To say we were all blown away is an understatement. Every show and attraction we visited was a spectacle, a story, an education and a surprise packed into one – we simply haven't visited anywhere else quite like it. The chances are, your clients haven't either. **Book it:** Two nights' bed and breakfast for a family of four at a themed on-site hotel, including two days' park entry, costs from €568, based on a stay this autumn, before the park closes on November 4. A Pass Emotion costs an extra €14 per person per day. A one-night stay for a family of four at on-site hotel La Villa Gallo-Romaine, with two-day park pass, one-day Pass Emotion, and breakfast, costs from €400, excluding flights, in next year's Easter holidays. Most clients organise car rental from the nearest airport, at Nantes. For those travelling by train, there are shuttles from Angers TGV station to Puy du Fou. Agents can book direct via the park's trade site at [puydufou.com/en/user](http://puydufou.com/en/user)

**▶ LET THE GAMES BEGIN**  
As soon as we had checked in to our on-site hotel La Citadelle, which to the kids' delight was in a mock medieval village, we strolled into the park and headed for the 700-seat stadium that was hosting Le Signe du Triomphe Roman games. Soon we were joining the French peasants as they booed the Romans who dragged in prisoners to 'fight' soldiers and animals – including a real lion and tiger – before charging round the ring in horse-drawn chariots. One of my personal highlights was Le Bal des Oiseaux Fantômes – a birds of prey display like no other. I've never been a huge fan of this type of attraction, but this was different, with a dramatic storyline as its backdrop. There were, at any one time, up to 330 eagles, falcons, vultures, kites and owls circling in the sky. Joe shrieked with delight when an owl brushed the top of his head as it swooped to the ground. A family favourite was the Mousquetaire de Richelieu, which

was based on a 17th-century love story. Set in an indoor theatre that filled with water to create a river, it featured everything from sword duels to flamenco dancing and equestrian stunts. Even before the show began, the warm-up comedian had us all in stitches, as we watched a soldier attempt a sword fight with a boy from the audience. All the shows are in French and although we had audio translation headsets, Joe and Nina did not need to understand the words to become engrossed in the action. No theme park is complete without shops, but Puy du Fou uses history to its advantage with traditional craftsmen working and selling their wares in its period villages. It has also created an art nouveau-style village, Le Bourg, where the main tourist shop sells every battle costume, sword, helmet or souvenir a child could want. Needless to say, Joe soon had an impressive-looking sword and Nina was claspng a quill ink pen (who says gender stereotypes don't exist?). We ate at a variety of restaurants in the park; our lunch favourite was the typically French Le Bistrot and our dinner favourite, Le Café de la Madelon, which was new this year. If your clients want to splash out on an evening meal during their stay, Le Café de la Madelon is the one to

**▶ EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED**  
Of course, trying to explain to two eight-year-olds that they are going to a theme park but will not be strapped into seats and whizzing through the air at high speed is a challenge. Before we arrived, twins Joe and Nina were more excited about going to France than to Puy du Fou. In truth, none of us knew what to be expect. By the time we left, they couldn't stop talking about the fun they'd had – and they wanted to know more about the Vikings, the Romans, the Stone Age, the three musketeers and more. Like other theme parks, Puy du Fou has a queue-jump option, called a Pass Emotion, to avoid big queues for its signature attractions. We didn't think the queues were excessive, but the pass enabled us to get seating first and arrive just 20 minutes before each performance, which definitely made our day easier. Two days was ample to see most of what the park had to offer, and a daily timetable was available each night for us to plan our next day's schedule.

Tried & Tested  
LA CITADELLE, PUY DU FOU

Our 'back in time' experience at Puy du Fou started the moment we walked under the portcullis into a 'medieval' fortress to our hotel, where even the staff dress in period costume. La Citadelle is the park's newest hotel, with 74 classic rooms sleeping up to five, and 26 comfort rooms with space for three. Our family option included a separate room with bunk beds for Joe and Nina. The rooms have been designed to look

like an opulent, medieval chamber, with ornate oak beds, hand-painted murals, stained-glass windows and suspended lanterns. Even the toilet looked authentic! There was also a spacious walk-in shower (no bath) and a TV to relax in front of after a day in the park. The hotel features a main restaurant, offering a good variety of buffet food, and an adjoining bar. It's about a 10-minute walk from the park down tree-lined paths.

