



Versailles: Seat of the Sun King

The greatest palace & garden

9–12 June 2023 (MJ 762)

4 days • £2,140

Lecturer: Professor Antony Spawforth

Focused tour examining the most influential of European palaces and related buildings.

A study not only of art, architecture and gardens but also of history and statecraft.

Includes a performance of André Grétry's opera-ballet *La Caravane du Caire* at the Versailles Opéra Royal.

Versailles was the grandest and most influential palace and garden complex in Europe, and arguably the most lavish and luxurious and most beautifully embellished too.

It was much more than a building to house the monarch, his family and his court. It was conceived as the seat of government when France was at the apogee of her power, and as a structure to demonstrate and magnify the power of Louis XIV, to subdue his subjects and to overawe foreigners. A study of Versailles encompasses not only architectural history and garden history but also political science and the psychology of power.

Built and altered by five French kings, Versailles is several palaces. Even during Louis XIV's reign elements changed constantly, reflecting not only changes of taste but also political realities as they changed from decade to decade. Indeed, at its core it remains a small-scale hunting lodge built by his father (surely meant to be demolished in due course), and apartments were refurbished and parts added right up until the Revolution.

Enlarging the understanding of Versailles and to set it in context we also visit the château of Vaux-le-Vicomte, in many ways its inspiration. Attention is likewise paid to the town of Versailles, first laid out by Louis XIV, as well as to the park and gardens at Versailles.

Itinerary

Day 1: Versailles. Leave London St Pancras at c. 9.30am by Eurostar for Paris. Drive to Versailles where all three nights are spent. Introductory walk to view the grand approach to the palace and some of the palace's dependencies in Versailles town.

Day 2: Versailles. After circumnavigating the vast palace, spend the morning immersed in the grandeur, the beauty and the symbolism



Versailles, steel engraving 1839.

of the King's and Queen's apartments, which culminate in the Hall of Mirrors (*please note that some rooms in the King's apartments are currently closed for refurbishments and may not reopen before the tour*). Continue with a guided tour of apartments from the time of Louis XV, characterised by lightness and delicacy and frivolity. *Evening performance at the Opéra Royal (the château's opera house): Le Caravane du Caire (Grétry).*

Day 3: Versailles. Explore the palace's gardens, which remain largely as Le Nôtre created them, the parterres, basins and sculpture around the palace and the avenues and canal which seem to stretch to infinity. Then visit the family retreats of Grand Trianon, Petit Trianon and the Domaine de Marie Antoinette.

Day 4: Vaux-le-Vicomte, Paris. The greatest country house and garden complex of its time (1656–61), Vaux-le-Vicomte was built by Nicholas Fouquet, Louis XIV's finance minister. It is in many ways the predecessor of Versailles, for Louis XIV, after arresting

Fouquet for corruption, plundered the property and later employed its chief designers and craftsmen at Versailles. Continue to Paris for the Eurostar arriving at St Pancras at c. 6.30pm.

Lecturer

Professor Antony Spawforth. Historian, broadcaster, lecturer and writer specialising in Greek and Roman antiquity and in rulers' courts. Books include *The Complete Greek Temples, Greece: An Oxford Archaeological Guide* (with C. Mee), and *Versailles: A Biography of a Palace*. Formerly Assistant Director of the British School at Athens, he is now Emeritus Professor of Ancient History at Newcastle University.

Practicalities

Price, per person. Two sharing: £2,140 or £1,910 without Eurostar. **Single occupancy:** £2,410 or £2,180 without Eurostar.

Included: rail travel (Standard Premier)

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continued

by Eurostar from London to Paris; travel by private coach; hotel accommodation as described below; breakfasts, 1 lunch and 2 dinners with wine, water and coffee; all admissions to gardens and châteaux; first category concert ticket; all tips; all taxes; the services of the lecturer and tour manager.

Accommodation. Hôtel Le Louis Versailles Château (all.accor.com). A modern 4-star hotel within walking distance of the château. *Single rooms are doubles for sole use.*

How strenuous? There is a lot of walking and standing around. The gardens cover a large area and paths are often uneven so sure-footedness is essential. You need to lift your luggage on and off the train and wheel it within stations.

Group size: between 10 to 22 participants.