

The Loire Valley

HIGHLIGHTS

- Exploring the cloisters and chapels of the area's greatest ecclesiastical complex, **Abbaye Royale de Fontevraud** (p102)
- Climbing up the double-helix staircase to the turret-covered rooftop of the **Château de Chambord** (p111)
- Visiting the retirement home of the original Renaissance Man, Leonardo da Vinci, at **Clos Lucé** (p109)
- Admiring the fabulous kitchen gardens and floral displays of **Villandry** (p106)

TERRAIN

Flat along the Loire, but the riverside cliffs give way to rolling inland hills.

Telephone Code – 02

www.westernloire.com

www.visaloire.com

The Loire Valley – the ‘playground of kings’, ‘garden of France’, ‘cradle of the Renaissance’ and ‘land of arts and letters’ – attracts great and growing flocks of visitors, more and more of them on two wheels. They’re drawn first and foremost to the Loire River, flowing for over 1000km from its trickling source in the Massif Central to the Atlantic Ocean. It’s a regal waterway, often dubbed one of the last *fleuves sauvages* (wild rivers) in France.

They’re also attracted by the comprehensive network of cycling support services along the Loire – marked trails, up-to-date maps and guides, baggage transfers between hotels catering to pedallers, rental bike pick-up and delivery, on-site repair support and more. If the logistics of cycle touring have ever been an obstacle to anyone’s indulgence, action along the Loire has removed it.

Finally there’s the lure of history, culture and gastronomy. A self-propelled visit to the Loire frees you from the unrelenting pace of an over-packed bus tour program. Under your own power you can visit the châteaux you select at a rhythm all your own, including those hidden in the small communities of the region’s back roads. And what better way to end a day in the saddle than with a fine meal for which you’ve actually worked, whether it’s in a château-hotel or a picnic in a campground across the river from a floodlit fortress.



HISTORY

In centuries past the Loire River was a key strategic area, one step removed from the French capital and poised on the crucial frontier between northern and southern France. Over time monarchs and nobles established their feudal strongholds and country seats along the Loire, leaving behind a litter of the most extravagant architecture this side of Versailles.

The area's earliest châteaux were medieval fortresses, some constructed in the 9th century to defend against marauding Vikings. Eleventh-century improvements in the practice of masonry saw massive walls topped with battlements, flecked with castle loopholes (arrow slits) and surrounded by moats spanned by drawbridges.

As the threat of invasion diminished – and the cannon, introduced in the mid-15th century, made castles almost useless for defence – new architectural designs reflected a shift in priorities. Ornate palaces superseded defensive keeps as the Renaissance, introduced to France at the end of the 1400s, ushered in an era of aesthetic pleasure and more comfortable

living. From the 17th century, grand country houses built in the neoclassical style and set amid formal gardens took centre stage.

All in all, the hundreds of châteaux of the Loire Valley provide an all-inclusive cross-section of the changing architectural tastes over 1000 years of French high society. From sky-topping turrets and glittering banquet halls to slate-crowned cupolas, lavish chapels and crenellated towers, the result is an astonishingly rich collection of architectural treasures.

ENVIRONMENT

The Loire is a fickle and unruly body of water that frequently breaks its banks and floods the flat pastureland on either side of the river. For centuries before the Industrial Revolution, this huge waterway was one of France's great commercial highways. These days occasional canoes and flat-bottomed *futreaux* (barges) have replaced the freight barges and steamers that once plied the waters.

In 2000, the Unesco World Heritage list was updated to include 280km of the Loire Valley, from Sully-sur-Loire to Chalonnes-



TUFA ONE

For centuries, the creamy white tufa cliffs along the Loire have provided a key source of local building materials; in fact, many of the Loire's grandest châteaux were constructed from the distinctive stone quarried around Saumur and the surrounding area. *Tuffeau* (tufa) is a limestone that is soft when mined, thus lending itself to intricate carvings, but pales and hardens with age, which makes it perfect for construction.

But the cliffs weren't only used for their stone. While the kings of France were building self-glorifying edifices, many of their subjects were going underground. Quarrying tonnes of tufa left gaping holes, which, with a little ingenuity, were turned into homes and led to the development of a unique *culture troglodyte* (cave culture). The caves were cool in summer, required less heating than conventional homes in winter and provided shelters for animals from cold, thieves and wolves. The soft stone made catering for a growing family simple: when a new child was born the parents simply dug space for another bed.

Some settlements have been dated back to the 13th century and, at the turn of the 20th century, 5% of French people still lived in troglodyte dwellings. Most were dug into the riverside cliffs, but the Loire is one of the few places in France that also has *troglodytisme de plaine*, where houses are below the surface. Farming communities dug entire villages around a central, sunken courtyard, with radiating caves for homes, wine cellars, walnut presses, hemp-drying ovens and manglers, and with crops above to help absorb rainwater.

The Loire's riverside cliffs today conceal an astonishing underworld of wine cellars, mushroom farms and monumental art sculptures. Once the homes of the poor, some are being taken over by city dwellers willing to spend large amounts of money to convert them into comfortable holiday houses.

Europe's highest concentration of *habitations troglodytes* (troglodyte dwellings) is along the banks of the Loire around Saumur. Eat your heart out, Bilbo Baggins!