

Champagne

HIGHLIGHTS

- Sipping champagne at the end of a cellar tour in **Épernay** (p119)
- Wandering the alleys of the medieval city of **Troyes** (p135), one of the best preserved in Europe
- Coasting through the **Parc Naturel Régional de la Montagne de Reims** (p123) on the scenic Champagne Tourist Route

TERRAIN

Undulating hills in the north and south; low-lying plains in the centre.

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Pop! Fizzle. Ahhh. The mere mention of Champagne conjures up one thing: the celebrated sparkling wines that have been produced in northeastern France for more than three centuries. According to French law, only bubbly from this region – grown in designated areas, then aged and bottled according to the strictest rules – can be labelled as champagne. This takes place mainly in two *départements* (administrative divisions): Marne, whose metropolis is the ‘Coronation City’ of Reims, and the less prestigious (though increasingly respected) Aube, whose *préfecture* is the ancient and picturesque city of Troyes, home to entire streets lined with half-timbered houses. Épernay, 30km south of Reims, is the de facto capital of champagne (the drink) and the best place to head for *dégustation* (tasting).

The Champagne route wends its way through the region’s diverse vineyards, taking visitors from one picturesque – and prosperous – wine-growing village to the next. A number of name-brand *maisons* (‘houses’ or Champagne producers) have achieved international renown, but much of the region’s liquid gold is made by almost 5000 small-scale *vignerons* (wine producers) in 320-odd villages, many of whose family-run facilities welcome visitors.



HISTORY

Champagne's place in history was cemented in 496 when Clovis I, the Christianity-embracing warrior king of the Franks, was baptised in Reims, after which it became the traditional site of French coronations.

In the Middle Ages the area was known for its fairs, and cities like Troyes flourished as centres of trade, learning and religion. The region was also known for its textile industry.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, after Dom Pérignon harnessed the bubbles in wine, the grape ruled the economy. However, only a small part of the region is devoted to growing grapes. According to AOC (Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée) rules, only sparkling

wine from the Marne and Aube regions can rightfully be called champagne (see North Versus South boxed text p119).

ENVIRONMENT

Champagne, known in Roman times as Campania (literally, 'Land of Plains'), is a largely agricultural region made up of two distinct areas. *Champagne crayeuse* has the deep, chalky soil – a remnant of an ancient seabed – essential to grape cultivation and the storage of champagne. *Champagne humide*, with its damp soil, is an area of forests and pastures.

The forests of the region – the Montagne de Reims in the north, the Forêt d'Orient and woods of the Aube to the south, and

