



Burgundy

HIGHLIGHTS

- Sipping a true Grand Cru straight out of the **Côte d'Or cave** (p168) in which it was bottled
- Exploring the World Heritage-listed hilltop village of **Vézelay** (p177)
- Imagining ancient life in the pre-AD ruins at **Bibracte** (p160)
- Soaking up the natural majesty of the **Morvan** (p163) at St-Brisson

TERRAIN

Mainly rolling hills and pastures; the Parc Régional du Morvan can be surprisingly steep.

Telephone Code – 03

www.bourgogne-tourisme.com

With the vineyards and plains of Champagne to the north and the Rhône Valley, gateway to the Midi-Pyrénées, to the south, Burgundy (Bourgogne in French) can make a strong case for being the real heartland of France. Some of the country's most gorgeous and historically significant lands set the perfect scene for cycle touring, and two other great French passions – wine and food – come together in a particularly enticing and hearty form.

Burgundy is a paradise for lovers of the great outdoors. The gentle rolling terrain makes the region a deservedly popular cycling destination. A patchwork of meadows and vine-covered hillsides, Burgundy is dotted with tiny villages and stunning châteaux, crisscrossed by peaceful canals and quiet back roads, and rich with artistic and cultural heritage.

Dijon, capital of the Côte-d'Or *département*, is one of France's most appealing provincial cities. Filled with elegant medieval and Renaissance buildings, the lively centre is wonderful for strolling, especially if you like to leaven your cultural enrichment with excellent food, fine wine and shopping.

But even with this superabundance of charm, there's far more than immediately meets the eye. The epicurean profusion may make an initial indulgent splash, but the vast forests and rocky escarpments of off-the-beaten-path areas like the Parc Régional du Morvan round out the sense of enchantment. Here, more ambitious riders will find some tough cycling challenges.

HISTORY

Burgundy has been inhabited since ancient times. The Morvan was the site of several Gaulish settlements dating back to the 1st and 2nd centuries BC, and the former capital, Bibracte, is now a major archaeological site (see p160).

At its height during the 14th and 15th centuries, the independent Duchy of Burgundy was one of the richest and most powerful states in Europe. Its prosperity is preserved in the artistic and architectural heritage of the capital city, Dijon. This was, however, also a time of bitter rivalry between Burgundy and France – indeed, it was the Burgundians who sold Jeanne d'Arc (Joan of Arc) to the English – and for a while it seemed like Burgundy would triumph. In the end, though, Burgundy became French in 1477.

Burgundy comprises the *départements* (administrative divisions) of Côte d'Or, Nièvre, Saône-et-Loire and Yonne.

ENVIRONMENT

The region's most dominant natural feature is the unspoiled Parc Naturel Régional du Morvan. Established in 1970 and covering 700 sq km, its granite massif is thickly forested by extensive tracts of beech, oak, hornbeam, birch and conifers, though much of it has been logged.

The limestone escarpments anchoring the Côte d'Or vineyards rise where the Morvan meets the plains. Plush and green with grape vines, they also harbour the blackcurrants, strawberries and gooseberries that add subtly to the taste of the region's wines. In the flats, cherry trees and poppy fields are common.

More limestone hills, cast as shallow valleys, cover an area of the northeast. The sunny slopes there lend themselves to the cultivation of white-wine grapes, as in the area around Chablis.

Burgundy has an abundance of water and waterways. Canals snake through the region, while the Yonne and the Seine Rivers both spring from sources in the Morvan.

Like most agricultural regions, much of the animal life in Burgundy inevitably ends up on the table as part of the regional cuisine. The white Charolais cattle that graze on the plains are the succulent stuff of the emblematic *boeuf bourguignon*.

CLIMATE

Average temperatures hover around 26°C in August and 6°C in January and do not prompt excessive precipitation, except in the Morvan. The storms that do blow in tend to come from the west, dropping their bundles around the Côte d'Or. The prevailing winds from the south, however, bring warmer whiffs of the Mediterranean, necessary for healthy grape vines.

For *météo* (weather information), call **Côte d'Or** ☎ 08 92 68 02 21, **Nièvre** ☎ 08 92 68 02 58, **Saône-et-Loire** ☎ 08 92 68 02 71 or **Yonne** ☎ 08 92 68 02 89.

PLANNING

At the time of writing, Burgundy had developed more than 600km of a planned 800km network of *véloroutes* (bikepaths) and *voies vertes* (greenways) including extensive segments along the Canal du Nivernais, Canal du Centre, Canal de Bourgogne and on small roads via the vineyards. For more detail, including downloadable maps and guides, see www.la-bourgogne-a-velo.com.

When to Cycle

Spring is the most attractive time to cycle: summer hordes have not yet arrived and the colourful natural profusion is astounding. Avoid high season, when tourist swarms add to the ambient heat. Late-summer harvests leave large swaths of bare dirt in autumn, although the forests and vineyards are aflame with the bright colour-coded leaves. The busy *vendanges* (grape harvests) are in September and October. Festivals and celebrations take place year round along the Côte d'Or.

Bike Hire

Most cities and many villages have something available, usually mountain bikes or hybrids (€14 to €25 per day). A €50 to €350 deposit is required (cash, signed travellers cheques or a credit card). See the Sales & Equipment sections of each town.

Maps

Both rides in this chapter are covered by the Michelin 1:275,000 regional road map No 519 *Bourgogne*, but the detail is far better with the 1:150,000 local road map No 319 *Nièvre, Yonne* and the 1:175,000 local road map No 320 *Côte d'Or, Saône-et-Loire*.

