



The Loire Valley

POP 2.9 MILLION

Includes →

Orléans.....	371
Blois.....	376
Tours.....	384
Amboise.....	390
Chinon.....	396
Saumur.....	398
Angers.....	404

Best Places to Eat

- Le Pot de Lapin (p401)
- La Parenthèse (p374)
- Le Lièvre Gourmand (p374)
- Le Gambetta (p401)
- Le Petit Comptoir (p406)
- Les Années 30 (p398)

Best Places to Stay

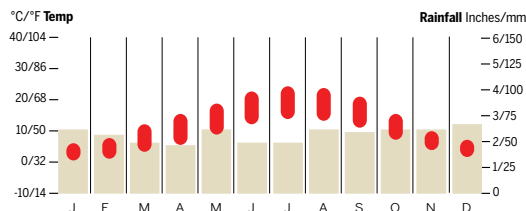
- Château de Verrières (p400)
- Château Beaulieu (p400)
- La Maison de Thomas (p378)
- Hôtel de l'Abeille (p373)

Why Go?

In centuries past, the River Loire was a key strategic area, one step removed from the French capital and poised on the crucial frontier between northern and southern France. Kings, queens, dukes and nobles established their feudal strongholds, country seats and, later, their posh playhouses along the Loire, and the broad, flat fertile valley is sprinkled with many of the most extravagant castles and fortresses in France. From sky-topping turrets and glittering banquet halls to slate-crowned cupolas and crenellated towers, the hundreds of Loire Valley châteaux, and the villages vineyards, and agriculture surrounding them – all an enormous Unesco World Heritage Site – comprise 1000 years of astonishingly rich architectural, artistic and agrarian treasures. If it's pomp and splendour you're looking for, the Loire Valley is the place to explore. And don't forget: it's also a modern-day wine region dotted with lively cosmopolitan cities such as Orléans, Tours, Saumur and Angers.

When to Go

Tours



Late Apr–early May The Fêtes de Jeanne d'Arc in Orléans culminate with parades on 8 May.

May & Jun Cycle the verdant trails of the Loire Valley, from château to château.

Sep & Oct Wine tasting during harvest season and châteaux start to be less crowded.

History

The dramas of French history are writ large across the face of the Loire Valley's châteaux. Early on, the Loire was one of Roman Gaul's most important transport arteries. The first châteaux were medieval fortresses established in the 9th century to fend off marauding Vikings. By the 11th century massive walls, fortified keeps and moats were all the rage.

During the Hundred Years War (1337–1453) the Loire marked one of the boundaries between French and English forces and the area was ravaged by fierce fighting. After Charles VII regained his crown with the help of Joan of Arc, the Loire emerged as the centre of French court life. Charles took up residence in Loches with his mistress, Agnès Sorel, and the French nobility, and from then on the bourgeois elite established their own extravagant châteaux as expressions of wealth and influence.

François I (r 1515–47) made his mark by introducing ornate Renaissance palaces to the Loire. François' successor Henri II (r 1547–59), his wife Catherine de Médicis and his mistress Diane de Poitiers played out their interpersonal dramas from castle to castle, while Henri's son, Henri III (r 1573–89), had two of his greatest rivals assassinated at Blois' Castle before being assassinated himself eight months later.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Tours' airport has flights to London's Stansted, Southampton (England), Dublin (Ireland), Marseille, Marrakesh (Morocco) and Porto (Portugal), while Angers' small airport serves London and Nice.

TRAIN

The TGV connects St-Pierre-des-Corps, 4km east of Tours, with Paris' Gare Montparnasse (one hour) and Charles de Gaulle Airport (1½ hour); in the west, Saumur, Angers and Nantes; and in the south, La Rochelle and Bordeaux. Angers is also on the TGV line via Le Mans to Paris. Blois and Amboise are served by high-speed trains to Paris. Some châteaux are on or near regional lines.

Getting Around


Most main towns and many châteaux are accessible by train or bus, but having your own wheels allows significantly more freedom.


Blois has decent public buses and shuttles to nearby châteaux. Tours and Amboise are loaded with bus tour options.


BICYCLE

The mostly flat Loire Valley is fabulous cycling country – peddle through villages and vineyards on your way to châteaux. **Loire à Vélo** (www.loireavelo.fr) maintains 800km of signposted routes from Cuffly (near Nevers) all the way to the Atlantic. Pick up a free guide from tourist offices, or download material (including route maps, audioguides and bike-hire details) from the website. Individual regions, like Anjou, Touraine, Centre or the Loiret (around Orléans), also have their own routes and accommodation guides. Tourist offices (and their websites) are well stocked with material.

If you'd like to cycle but want some help, **Bagafrance** (www.bagafrance.com) transports luggage and bikes, and many outfits rent electric bikes. Or consider a tour.

Détours de Loire ( 02 47 61 22 23; www.locationdevelos.com) Has bike-rental shops in Tours, Amboise, Blois and Saumur and myriad partners. Delivers bikes and also allows you to pick up and drop off bikes along the route for a small surcharge. Prices include a lock, helmet, repair kit and pump. Classic bikes cost €15/€60 per day/week, with extra days €5. Tandems cost €45/140 per day/week.

Les Châteaux à Vélo ( in Blois 02 54 78 62 52; www.chateauxavelo.com; per day €12-14) Bike rental circuit between Blois, Chambord, Cheverny and Chaumont-sur-Loire; 400km of marked trails and minibus shuttle. Get route maps and MP3 guides from the website, or pick up brochures at local tourist offices.

Wheel Free ( 02 38 44 26 85; www.wheel-free.fr; 33 rue du Général de Gaulle, St-Jean le Blanc; first/additional days €20/9.60) Rents, delivers and picks up electric bikes.

Tours & Activities

Bus

Hard-core indie travellers might balk at the idea of a minibus tour of the châteaux, but don't dismiss it out of hand, especially if you don't have your own transport. Many private companies offer a choice of well-organised itineraries, taking in various combinations of Azay-le-Rideau, Villandry, Cheverny, Chambord and Chenonceau (plus wine-tasting tours). Half-day trips cost between €23 and €36; full-day trips range from €50 to €54. Many also offer custom-designed tours. Entry to the châteaux isn't included, though you often get

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 40,440 sq km
- **Local industry** viticulture
- **Signature drink** Cointreau