

The Loire Valley

POP 2.6 MILLION

Includes ➔

Orléans.....	366
Blois.....	371
Chambord.....	374
Tours.....	376
Amboise.....	382
Villandry.....	385
Saumur.....	393
Angers.....	400

Best Places to Eat

- ➔ Le Gambetta (p397)
- ➔ Les Années 30 (p393)
- ➔ Amboise Food Market (p384)
- ➔ Le Lièvre Gourmand (p369)
- ➔ Le Zinc (p380)

Best Places to Sleep

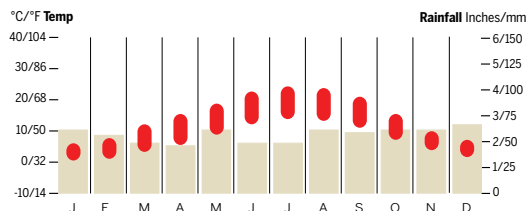
- ➔ Hôtel de l'Abeille (p368)
- ➔ Château de Beaulieu (p395)
- ➔ Demeure de la Vignole (p398)
- ➔ Château de Brissac (p403)
- ➔ Le Vieux Manoir (p384)

Why Go?

If it's French splendour, style and gastronomy you seek, the Loire Valley will exceed your expectations, no matter how great. Poised on the crucial frontier between northern and southern France, and just a short ride from Paris, the region was once of immense strategic importance. Kings, queens, dukes and nobles came here to establish feudal castles and, later on, sumptuous pleasure palaces – that's why this fertile river valley is sprinkled with hundreds of France's most extravagant fortresses. With crenellated towers, soaring cupolas and glittering banquet halls, the châteaux, and the villages and vineyards that surround them, attest to a thousand years of rich architectural, artistic and agrarian creativity. The Loire Valley – an enormous Unesco World Heritage Site – is also known for its outstanding wines and lively, sophisticated cities, including 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 Ideal time to cycle verdant back roads and bike paths from château to château.

Sep & Oct Wine tasting during harvest season; the châteaux are less crowded.

History

The Loire Valley and its châteaux were the backdrop for some of the most dramatic events in French history. By Roman times the Loire was one of Gaul's most important transport arteries. The earliest 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 must-haves for the region's potentates.

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 the aristocracy took to building extravagant châteaux as expressions of their 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 fought their bitter personal rivalries from castle to castle, while Henri's son Henri III (r 1573–89) used Blois' castle to assassinate two of his greatest rivals before being assassinated himself eight months later.



Tours

Bus

If you don't have your own car, minibus tours are a good way to see the châteaux without being dependent on sometimes infrequent public transport. A variety of private companies offer well-organised itineraries, taking in various combinations of Azay-le-Rideau, Villandry, Cheverny, Chambord, Chenonceau and vineyards offering wine tasting. Many are also happy to create custom-designed tours. Half-day trips cost between €23 and €36 per person; full-day trips range from €50 to €54. These prices don't include admission to the châteaux, though you often get slightly discounted tickets. Reserve online or via the Tours (p381) or Amboise (p385) tourist offices, from where most tours depart.

Boat

The Loire offers few opportunities to get out on the water because its currents are often too unpredictable to navigate safely, but the

FAST FACTS

Area 40,440 sq km

Local industry Viticulture

Signature drink Cointreau, wine

river is not completely off limits. Check at tourist offices for boat excursions or kayak rentals; the Amboise and Saumur/Candes-St-Martin areas offer several options.

Specialised Tours

Tourist offices can supply details on **hot-air-balloon rides** (generally from April to October, weather permitting) run by a dozen companies, **helicopter rides** and specialised tours with themes such as cycling and wine tasting. Saumur is particularly rich in equestrian options.

Cheval et Châteaux

HORSE RIDING

(www.cheval-et-chateaux.com; 4/7-day tours €1224/2448) Offers luxurious four- to seven-day horseback trips to some of the Loire's best-known châteaux, with overnights in castle-based B&Bs.

Art Montgolfières

BALLOON TOUR

(☎ 02 54 32 08 11; www.art-montgolfieres.fr; per person from €159; ☺ Apr-Oct) Floating silently over fields, vineyards and châteaux in a hot-air balloon – what could be more romantic? Spend an hour aloft and then quaff a celebratory glass of bubbly (or two).

Getting There & Away

AIR

Tours-Val de Loire Airport (www.tours.aeroport.fr) has Ryanair flights to London's Stansted airport and Dublin, while from **Angers Loire Airport** (www.angersloireaeroport.fr) British Airways goes to London-City Airport.

TRAIN

Tours is the Loire Valley's main rail hub. TGV trains connect St-Pierre-des-Corps (4km east of Tours) with Paris' Gare Montparnasse (one hour), Charles de Gaulle Airport (1¾ hours), Nantes (1½ hours) and Bordeaux (2¾ hours). Orléans, Blois, Amboise and other Loire towns also have fast rail links to Paris. TGVs from Angers to Paris' Gare Montparnasse (1¾ hours) go via Le Mans.

Getting Around

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