



The Loire Valley

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Best Places to Eat

- » Le Pot de Lapin (p381)
- » Les Années 30 (p379)
- » Le Gambetta (p381)
- » Cap Sud (p367)
- » Chez Noé (p356)

Best Places to Stay

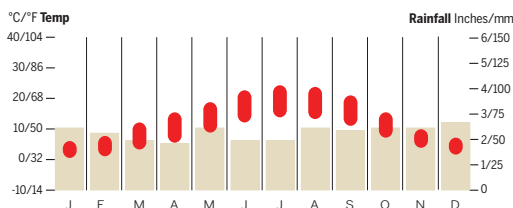
- » Château de Verrières (p381)
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Why Go?

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 and country seats along the Loire, and the broad, flat 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 châteaux dotted around the Loire Valley – now a Unesco World Heritage Site – comprise 1000 years of astonishingly rich architectural and artistic treasures. If it's aristocratic pomp and architectural splendour you're looking for, the Loire Valley is the place to explore.

When to Go

Tours



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

June and July Cycle the trails of the Loire Valley from château to château.

September and October Wine tasting during the harvest time.

PLAN AHEAD

Before you go, plan your transport, reserve rooms in hot spots like Saumur, Amboise or Chinon and book castle tours (opposite) or the Cadre Noir equestrian presentation (p379).

The Loire's Best Gardens

- » Le Clos Lucé (p373)
- » Chambord (p361)
- » Villandry (p374)
- » Cheverny (p362)
- » Chenonceau (p369)
- » Chaumont (p363)
- » Beauregard (p364)

Spring Music Festival

Every Easter over 100,000 music fans converge on Bourges to take in the latest in innovative rock, rous and French music at **Le Printemps de Bourges** (www.printemps-bourges.com).

Resources

- » Loire Valley heritage site: www.valde Loire.org
- » Walks and cycling routes in the Loire Valley: www.randonnee-en-val-de-loire.com
- » The natural environment of the River Loire: www.observatoireloire.fr, www.cpie-val-de-loire.org, in French
- » Regional transport details: www.destineo.fr

Wine in the Loire Valley

Vineyards (www.vinsdeloire.com) dot the fertile Loire Valley and produce some excellent, but relatively little-known red, white and *crémant* (sparkling) wines. Anjou and Saumur alone have 30 AOCs (Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée), and Touraine has nine, including some lively gamays. The most predominant red, though, is the cabernet franc.

Appellations include Saumur-Champigny (try Domaine Clos Rougeard), Bourgueil (try Domaine de la Butte) and Chinon (try the Cuvée des Tireaux from Domaine Olek-Mery).

For whites, Vouvray's chenin blancs are excellent and Sancerre and the appellation across the river, Pouilly-Fumé, produce great sauvignon blancs. The bubbly appellation Crémant de Loire spans many communities.

Maisons des Vins (literally, wine houses) in Blois, Saumur, Cheverny and Angers welcome visitors for tasting and guidance on the region's wine. The Route Touristique des Vignobles is a Loire Valley wine route; before you set out, stop by a tourist office and arm yourself with the *Loire Valley Vineyards* booklet, which lists and maps all the domaines, and *Sur La Route des Vins de Loire*, which maps from Blois to Angers and the coast.

ON THE TRAIL OF ARTISTS & WRITERS

While the fantastical history and high jinks of French royalty gets top billing in the Loire, the valley has also played host to a stream of Europe's greatest artists and thinkers. Mathematician and philosopher René Descartes, poet Pierre de Ronsard and writer and doctor François Rabelais (p378) were all born in the Loire; Leonardo da Vinci (see p373) spent the last years of his life here; and luminaries from sculptor Alexander Calder to novelist Honoré de Balzac (p376) lived and created in this region. Some, like Jean Gênet, were imprisoned here (p383). Then there were those, like Alexandre Dumas (see p383), who were simply inspired here.

Top 5 Activities for Kids

- » Be razzle-dazzled by magic and illusion at Maison de la Magie (p359).
- » Explore kooky, spooky caves around Saumur (p382).
- » Celebrate comic book character Tintin with cracks of lightning and pounding thunder (p362).
- » Peer into itsy-bitsy châteaux or play in the parks around a pointy pagoda (p373).
- » Hunt for treasure at Château de Montsoreau (p383).