

EXCURSIONS

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Paris is encircled by the Île de France (literally 'Island of France'), the romantically named 12,000-sq-km area around Paris. It is shaped by five rivers and Seine tributaries: the Epte in the northwest, the Aisne (northeast), the Eure (southwest), the Yonne (southeast) and the Marne (east). From this relatively small area the kingdom of France began to expand beginning around 1100.

Today the region's excellent rail and road links with the French capital and its exceptional sights – châteaux, cathedrals, towns that hosted and inspired Impressionist painters, theme parks – make it especially popular with day-trippers from Paris. The many woodland areas around the city, including the forests of Fontainebleau and Chantilly, offer unlimited outdoor activities within easy striking distance of the capital.

Information & Tours

The official [Paris Île de France](http://www.nouveau-paris-ile-de-france.fr) (www.nouveau-paris-ile-de-france.fr) website is a treasure trove of information on the area, and you can gem up on exactly where you're going with IGN's *Île de France* (1:250,000; €5.70) or its larger scale *Paris et Ses Environs* (1:100,000; €4.30).

If you're pressed for time or don't want to do it alone, hop on an air-conditioned coach:

Cityrama (Map p72; ☎ 01 44 55 60 00; www.paris-cityrama.com; 2 rue des Pyramides, 1er; [M] Tuileries) Half-day trips to Versailles (€54 to €74) or Chartres (€63); day trips combining the State Apartments at Versailles with Chartres (€110), with Fontainebleau (€115) or with Giverny (€145).

Paris Vision (Map p72; ☎ 01 42 60 30 01; www.paris-vision.com; 214 rue de Rivoli, 1er, [M] Tuileries) Half-day trips to Versailles/Giverny (€67/70), or a full day to both Giverny and Versailles (€145). Many more including Fontainebleau, Barbizon and Vaux-le-Vicomte (€147), Disneyland (from €81) and Parc Astérix (€62).

CHÂTEAUX

The Île de France counts some of the nation's most extravagant châteaux, in particular Versailles, whose opulence and extravagances both inside and out were partially what spurred the revolutionary mob to storm the Bastille in July 1789. The fabled château at Fontainebleau (p362) is one of the most important Renaissance palaces in France while the nearby (and lesser-known) Vaux-le-Vicomte (p366) was designed by the same architect who was responsible for Versailles. Those who shun crowds should consider art-rich Chantilly (p366) with its heavenly stables, gardens and woodlands.

CATHEDRALS

The area also claims some of the nation's most beautiful – and ambitious – cathedrals. Senlis (p370) near Chantilly has a magnificent Gothic cathedral said to have inspired elements of the mother of all basilicas, the cathedral at Chartres (p370). The latter, with its breathtaking stained glass and intricately carved stone portals, is one of Western architecture's greatest achievements and unmissable. As for blind ambition nothing compares with the cathedral at Beauvais (p375), which attempted to reach too high before its time and partially collapsed.

ART TOWNS

Art lovers – but especially aficionados of Impressionism – will be inspired by Giverny (p376), with Monet's pink-and-green house and flower-filled garden. Strangely moving is Auvers-sur-Oise (p377), the place where Van Gogh painted like mad for two months before dying in the bedroom of a cheap inn from a self-inflicted bullet wound.

VERSAILLES

Seven hundred rooms, 67 staircases, 352 chimneys, 2153 windows, 6300 paintings, 2100 sculptures and statues, 15,000 engravings, 5000 decorative art objects and furnishings, more than five million château visitors annually: no wonder visiting France's most famous, grandest palace can be overwhelming. Six days a week (the château is shut Monday) tourist madness consumes the prosperous, leafy and bourgeois suburb of Versailles (population 84,225), political capital and seat of the royal court from 1682 until 1789, when Revolutionary mobs massacred the palace guard and