



The Loire Valley

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Best Places to Eat

- » LesAnnées30(p390)
- » Auberge de Launay (p385)
- » LeGambetta(p393)
- » CapSud(p377)
- » LaParenthèse(p367)

Best Places to Stay

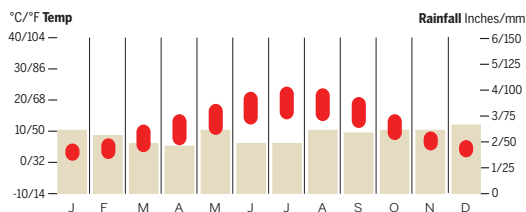
- » ChâteaudeVerrières (p392)
- » HôtelDiderot(p390)
- » ChâteauBeaulieu(p393)
- » Hôteldel'Abeille(p367)
- » La Maison de Thomas (p371)

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 other 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 a thousand 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 Apr-early May The Fêtes de Jeanne d'Arc in Orléans culminate with parades on 8 May.

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

Sep & Oct Wine tasting during the harvest season.

Wine in the Loire Valley

Vineyards (www.vinsdeloire.fr) 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 is the cabernet franc. Appellations include Saumur-Champigny, Bourgueil and Chinon.

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 booklet *Loire Valley Vineyards*, 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 were all born in the Loire; Leonardo da Vinci spent the last years of his life here; and luminaries from sculptor Alexander Calder to novelist Honoré de Balzac lived and created in this region. Some, like Jean Gênet, were imprisoned here. Then there were those, like Alexandre Dumas, who were simply inspired here.

Top 5 Activities for Kids

- » Be dazzled by magic and illusion at Maison de la Magie (p 371) in Blois.
- » Prowl through ancient cave dwellings (p 395) near Saumur and Doué-la-Fontaine.
- » Celebrate comic book character Tintin with cracks of lightning and pounding thunder at Cheverny (p 374).
- » Peer into itsy-bitsy châteaux or play in the parks around a pointy pagoda at Amboise (p 384).
- » Relive the tale of *Sleeping Beauty* as told by wax mannequins in period costume at Château d'Ussé (p 387).

PLAN AHEAD

Before you go, plan your transport, reserve rooms in hot spots like Amboise and Chinon and book castle tours or special events such as the Cadre Noir equestrian show (p392) in Saumur.

FastFacts

- » **Population** 2.9 million
- » **Area** 40,440 sq km
- » **Hotel overnights/yr** 6.1 million
- » **Signature drink** Cointreau

TheLoire'sBest Gardens

- » LeClosLucé(p384)
- » Château de Chambord (p372)
- » ChâteaudeVillandry (p386)
- » Château de Cheverny (p374)
- » Chateau de Chenonceau (p381)
- » Château de Chaumont-sur-Loire(p374)
- » Château de Beauregard (p375)

Resources

- » Loire Valley heritage site: www.valdeloire.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

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