

Cycling Safaris

LOIRE VALLEY 2019

Self guided Tour
315 km | 7 nights / 8 days



Known as the Valley of the Kings and the Garden of France, the Loire Valley is a lush region steeped in History. The French Royal Court moved there in the 14th Century, sparking a riot of Renaissance architecture including the magnificent chateaux of Chambord with its 365 chimneys, Chenonceau with its spectacular ballroom, and dozens more. The Loire Valley also boasts fields and fields of sunflowers and a surprising variety of wines as well as distinctive and delicious cuisine.

TOUR ITINERARY

DAY 1 Arrive

Transfers will be arranged from Saumur train station. You start from Montreuil Bellay, a delightful walled village with striking chateau overlooking the river Thouet. A chance to lounge by the pool and enjoy a cold pastis.

DAY 2 Montreuil Bellay to Chinon

26 miles / 42 km

Between Montreuil Bellay and your first sight of the Loire lies the vineyard of Saumur-Champigny, rated by many as the finest red wines of the Loire Valley.

Your first stop is at Château Brézé, a wine-making estate, but most famous for its amazing underground chateau. Dating back to the 7th century, these troglodyte homes and villages are a feature of this area. The limestone is so easily worked that it was easier to carve out a new bedroom than to build one!

One of the reasons behind the underground Château at Brézé was to avoid the attention of invaders, such as vikings, and the whole château is geared toward defence, including the deepest dry moat in Europe. There are fascinating defensive structures here, but most interestingly, it was never attacked, let alone defeated. All that effort over more than 1,000 years, and nobody ever attacked it.

If time permits you can also stop for a wine tasting with the Comte de Colbert, still resident at the château. Afterwards we make your way to the Royal Abbey at Fontevraud. This huge Abbey was traditionally the home of many French Queens, but is most famous as the resting place of Henry II, his wife Eleanor of Aquitaine and their son Richard the Lionheart. King John I's wife, Isabelle of Angouleme, also lies with them, but is a bit less famous.

Today you can choose to pass through Montsoreau where the Vienne flows into the Loire. The Loire is very wide here, and Montsoreau looks beautiful stretching along the south bank. You end the day in Chinon. To my mind Chinon boasts one of the only 'true' château in the Loire - i.e. it was English, and it's ruined.

In the 12th Century Chinon was effectively the English capital as successive Kings made their home in the château. It is much older than most Loire château, and its military purpose is obvious from its commanding position along the ridge that overlooks the medieval town of Chinon. You stay at the Hotel de France overlooking the beautiful Place du Général de Gaulle where you can relax in any of the many pavement bars and cafes.

DAY 3 Chinon to Azay-le-Rideau

34 miles / 55 km

Today is fairly light cycling as you have a lot of château-action to fit in. You can start with a tour of the castle of Chinon. As well as home to English Kings, the castle contains the tower where Joan of Arc 'heard the voices' telling her she would be granted an army to relieve the siege of Orléans.

You leave the Vienne and continue the cycling tour back towards the Indre and the Loire.

Overlooking the Indre is the first of the big-league château, Château Ussé, the inspiration for Charles Perrault's Sleeping Beauty.

Next on the hit-list is Villandry, an unexceptional château, but with gardens that Michelin rate as a 3*** attraction - 'worth a journey in their own right'. There are three gardens - a vegetable garden, a flower garden and a water garden.

Each year the gardening team choose a theme and tell a story in flowers. Villandry is really something, and not to be missed.

Finally today on our cycling holiday we will travel the 11 km or so to Azay-le-Rideau, another member of the Premier League of Loire Châteaux. Azay-le-Rideau is surrounded on three sides by the River Indre, which has been carefully landscaped to provide a beautiful reflective setting for this ornate château.

There was no military purpose to Azay-le-Rideau, it was just designed to be beautiful, and it is.

Tonight you stay at the Hotel des Chateaux, on the outskirts of Azay-le-Rideau from where is a short stroll down into the town for perhaps our finest dinner of the week.

DAY 4 Azay-le-Rideau to Loches

37 miles / 59 km

You start the day with a visit to the purely decorative château of Azay-le-Rideau on the river Indre, and boy is it decorative, and finish in the medieval Cité Royale of Loches, on the Indre, where sits the Donjon of Loches. A donjon is a fortress and this place is very obviously built for function rather than form.

In between we cycle over the beautiful rolling farmland of the river Indre, acclaimed as the most beautiful landscape of all the rivers of the Loire Valley.

Depending on timing and inclination, you may be able to visit the Donjon in Loches on our arrival in town, or, if you prefer, a stroll around the royal residence, home of many French Kings, not to mention their wives and mistresses. There will also be more opportunity for these visits tomorrow morning as both are just a stroll (okay, a steep stroll) away from tonight's hotel, the George Sands.

DAY 5 Loches to Montrichard**26 miles / 42 km**

Before leaving Loches, you can attempt to fill any gaps left in your knowledge of its medieval royal buildings (possibly caused by indulging in an extra beer or two on the delightful terrace of the Georges Sands yesterday afternoon.) after which you will head back across country to the most visited of all Loire Châteaux, Chenonceau.

Built as a bridge over the Cher and surrounded by ornamental gardens and man-made moats, this château manages to live up to the usual French hyperbole of its website. It truly is unforgettable.

Most of the rooms are open, and this is a chance to see original floors, tapestries and furniture. In general French Châteaux don't have all the furnishings and interior detail that you can often see in British castles. Chenonceau is a pleasant exception, and Louise of Lorraine's room, painted entirely in black with silver motifs of tears and crowns of thorns to mourn her dead husband, is especially memorable.

The ballroom, built by Catherine de Medici, spans the Cher in spectacular fashion, and although the Château had no military value it took on a gloomy historical role in the 20th century. First, it served as an army hospital in the First World War. Then, In the Second World War, the Cher was the boundary between Nazi-occupied France and Vichy France. Château Chenonceau was a border post, each end of the ballroom opening into a different country.

Your hotel tonight is the Hotel Bellevue in Montrichard, a few kilometres upstream from Chenonceau, overlooking the Cher.

DAY 6 Montrichard to Chambord**35 miles / 57 km**

A short ride beyond Montrichard, This morning, are the fascinating mushroom caves of Bourré, where they grow Blue Foot, Shitake, Oyster and Paris mushrooms.

Mushroom mycelia need a stimulus to prompt growth - European mushrooms tend to need a light or heat stimulus, but the shitake mushroom from Japan grows naturally on trees and responds to earth tremors common in that neck of the woods. Earthquakes are simulated in the caves using the state-of-the-art device of slapping the bin-liner that contains the mushroom compost. Result? Lots of 'shrooms. It's true, honest!

Bring something warm for a visit of around an hour underground. As well as mushrooms, there are a few spectacular galleries where you can see fantastic sculptures of local village scenes through the ages carved from solid rock. If you've never seen a sheet of paper carved in limestone before, complete with curled up corners and the heads of the nails pinning it to a wooden notice board (also carved in limestone, complete with wood grain), then you're in for a treat.

The end of today is my favourite part of the whole week, the enormous Château Chambord. This is by far the largest of all the Loire château and was originally built by Francois 1 as a hunting lodge. It lies inside a huge park contained by the longest wall in Europe, all 32 km of it. The château itself contains a famous double-helix staircase designed by Leonardo da Vinci, where two people can ascend or descend at the same time without meeting.

Our hotel tonight is the Hotel St Florent, 10km further on from the château in Mont-pres-Chambord.

DAY 7**Chambord to Amboise****32 miles / 52 km**

Well, sadly, nobody explained this to whoever designed the route of the Loire cycle path into Amboise with the result that one or two lumpy climbs feature in an otherwise easy ride into Amboise.

However, before that, you can visit and taste the wines at Vignoble Tevenot, a very traditional family winemaker in Cellettes, just on the edge of the enormous forests that surround Chambord.

The final destination of our tour is Amboise, where the setting of the château overlooking the Loire is one of the most used images of the Loire valley.

The town has a medieval centre, largely pedestrianised and full of bustle. There are a number of bars and cafes sitting directly beneath the huge château walls, and I reckon we've usually earned a sit-down and a glass of the local Touraine or Vouvray.

For anyone who hasn't visited Leonardo's place at the Clos-Lucé, it's well worth it. Many of the original furnishings are still in place, including the great man's bed, and there is a permanent exhibition of his inventions and writings including several exquisite scale models. Leonardo invented wings that didn't work, helicopters that didn't work and airplanes that didn't work. To be honest, they're nothing special, but he did so much more than we generally associate with him. There are touching examples of his philosophy, and wonderful models of inventions that did work, like an ingenious water pump. Definitely worth visiting.

Tonight we are staying at the Hotel Vinci and you can eat at the Lion d'Or.

DAY 8**Homeward bound**

We will arrange transport to Amboise train station with an 11-minute journey to the TGV station at St Pierre des Corps. A gentle departure time from St Pierre of 10.30 arrives in Paris before midday, and London by mid-afternoon.

2019 TOUR DATES

Arrival any day between June 1 – September 22

2019 TOUR PRICE

€1,210.00 euro per person sharing

+ €395.00 single room supplement if travelling with others

+ €155.00 additional solo supplement if travelling on your own

WHAT THE TOUR PRICE INCLUDES

- 7 nights hotel accommodation
- Luggage transferred locally
- 24 speed hybrid touring bike
- Basic repair kit
- Helmet, if required
- Waterproof jacket
- Panniers, water bottle, cycling jersey
- Comprehensive road book
- Transfer from Saumur train station to the starting point of the tour
- Transfer to Amboise train station at the tour end

Not included:

Dinners

Train tickets

WHAT TO BRING

Comfortable cycling clothing – padded cycling shorts and cycling gloves are invaluable.

Training shoes are fine for cycling.

Hat, sunglasses, suntan lotion, swimwear.

Casual clothes for evening. You may be grateful for something warm with long sleeves.

Helmets, though not obligatory in France, are highly recommended. To be sure of comfort we suggest you bring your own helmet, however, in the event that you need a helmet, they are provided.

BIKE / FITNESS



We use Trek 7300 FX Hybrid 24 speed touring bike with aluminium frame and Shimano gear system.

Level of difficulty:	Loire Valley - ** flat throughout, with a few 'lurkers'
Average daily distance	30 miles
Maximum daily distance	35 miles

***** Training camps / sport cyclists. 50 to 80 miles per day, hills an integral part.

**** Distances and / or hills make this a challenging tour suitable for people who exercise regularly.

*** Moderate level of fitness required. Distances are no more than 40 miles a day, but hilly terrain.

** Distances and terrain are slightly easier, suitable for people who are not strangers to exercise, but don't get out as often as they'd like!

BACK UP SERVICE

As this is a self led trip you do not have the back-up of a guide and support van. Our aim is to allow you feel like an independent traveller, free to cycle each day at your own pace while at the same time having the security of knowing that your luggage will be waiting for you in your next accommodation.

If you experience small problems with the bike (e.g., a puncture) you will have a spare tube, pump and tyre levers. You also have access to a 24 hour helpline.

TRAVEL INFORMATION

It is up to you to make your way to and from the tour. To help you in your travel arrangements we will arrange a transfer to the start point (included in the tour price).

The best way to arrive on the tour is by train from London or Paris (Charles de Gaulle Airport or Montparnasse Train Station). (Please note: Check-in no later than 30 minutes before departure.)

Recommended times:

From/To London:

Outward Journey	Depart London St Pancras International	11.25
	Arrive Paris Gare du Nord	14.58
	Depart Paris Montparnasse	16:46
	Arrive St Pierre Des Corps	17:45
	Depart St Pierree Des Corps	18:06
	Arrive Saumur	18:38
	Transfer to Hotel	
Inbound Journey	Transfer from Hotel	
	Depart Amboise	09:39
	Arrive St Pierre Des Corps	09:50
	Depart St Pierre Des Corps	10:15
	Arrive Paris Montparnasse	11:16
	Depart Paris Gare du Nord	13:13
	Arrive London St Pancras	14:39

From /To Paris

Outward Journey	Depart Paris Montparnasse	16:46
	Arrive St Pierre Des Corps	17:45
	Depart St Pierre Des Corps	18:06
	Arrive Saumur	18:38
Inbound Journey	Transfer from Hotel	
	Depart Amboise	09:39
	Arrive Paris Montparnasse	11:16

There are no direct trains from Paris Charles de Gaulle Airport.

If you do miss the train, try and arrange to get on the next one. If you have to pay for another ticket you are responsible for the cost (depending on circumstances you may be covered by insurance). Call the owner of the first hotel and give them your name and arrival details. Our representative will help you arrange another transfer to the hotel.

You can of course make your own way to and from the tour. All details on trains in France are available through the website www.raileurope.com/us/index.htm.

Local transfers are from Saumur train station to the first hotel, and from the last hotel to Amboise station. Please note the arrival and departure stations are different.

Please take careful note of the train times above. Our transfers are scheduled to meet these designated trains; if these train times are inconvenient, please contact us so that we can be sure of arranging appropriate transfers.

You will be met at Saumur at 18:40 by a tour representative who will be easily identifiable and brought by minibus to the starting point at Montreuil Bellay. Our transfer aims to leave Saumur station by 18:45. At the end of the week you will be brought to the train station Amboise for the departure to Paris Charles de Gaulle / Montparnasse and London (via Lille) at 11:01 Both transfers are included in the tour price.

These are the only transfers that we arrange from Saumur and from St Pierre so it is very important that you are on the right train. If you are experiencing any difficulties, do let us know and we will try to help as much as we can. If you do miss the train, try and arrange to get on the next one. If you have to pay for another ticket you are responsible for the cost (depending on circumstances you may be covered by insurance). Call the owner of the first hotel and give them your name and arrival details. The representative will help you arrange another transfer to the hotel.

Making your own way to Saumur

You can get a train to Saumur either from Paris or from St Pierre Des Corps.

Information on trains in France can be found on the website: www.raileurope.com/us/index.htm

You have to arrange train tickets yourselves. You can contact a company called Rail Canterbury who supply European rail tickets all over the world: www.rail-canterbury.co.uk/

GENERAL INFORMATION

The Wines of the Loire Valley

The Loire valley is a long way north for a wine region, but for centuries 'the Garden of France' has produced vast quantities of wine. The only world class wines from the Loire are the imperishable vins liquoreux found among the Coteaux du Layon in appellations such as Bonnezeaux and Chaume, but there are wines of real interest and quality to be found by those willing to look.

The first vineyards on its descent from the Massif Central are found in Pouilly Fumé and Sancerre, renowned for their flinty dry sauvignon blancs. Further downstream there are red wine appellations such as Chinon, St Nicholas de Bourgueil and the more prestigious Saumur-Champigny, all made primarily from the Cabernet France grape.

Saumur-Champigny is restricted to just 9 municipalities, but the wider appellation of Saumur is the largest producer of sparkling wines in the world outside Champagne. The history of sparkling wine here is a result of too many unreliable harvests producing thin, acidic wine. Locals developed the method of adding sugar to encourage a secondary fermentation that produces a more reliable product, and the famous fizz. This isn't cheap Champagne – some argue that this is where the 'traditional method' was first discovered, and there are some wines of real quality produced under the appellation of Saumur Brut.

Another appellation of note is Vouvray, once one of the most renowned appellations in France, and now rebuilding that reputation. Vignerons in Vouvray can only produce white wine, and can only use the Chenin Blanc grape, but the variety of wines is surprising. There are bone-dry Vouvray Sec wines, and they range from off-dry to moelleux (not quite as sweet as a vin liquoreux). There are also sparkling wines and most unusually of all, Vouvray Pétillant – very slightly sparkling wine. This method requires a better quality wine to start with, and so a good Pétillant can be a delight on a hot summer day.

Food and Drink

What if I have any special dietary requirements?

Vegetarians are catered for (please advise if you eat fish). Vegans choice will be limited, but they can be accommodated.

Are beverages included with the meals?

No, all beverages are to your own account.