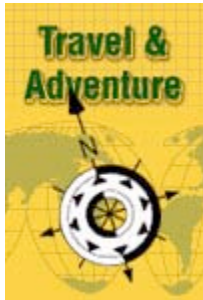


Biking through the Loire Valley

Photos and Story by John Blanchette
Copley News Service



Biking Through the Loire Valley:

Land of Chateaux, Vineyards and Medieval Hillside Towns

Bourges, France – The Central Loire Valley spreads like a tablecloth under Paris, a land rich in agricultural resources, royal chateaux and fine vineyards. It is a flat, rolling land strewn with the color of fruit orchards, corn fields, vegetables and sunflowers, with white Charolais cattle, goats, horses and sheep grazing together amid rolled golden hay bales baking in the summer sun; full of wild game, forests, lakes and streams all corralled by the meandering Loire, France’s longest and Europe’s only wild river. Its enormous beauty led Rabelais to famously name the region “le jardin de France.”

This is where the nobles and Monarchy retreated from the rigors of Paris to their summer castles, and where Parisians today drive less than two hours on the weekends to enjoy France as it once was. Things haven’t changed very much among the hillside medieval towns that dot the rural countryside. Over 800 chateaux grace the Loire and 100 are open to the public, many providing lodging.

We choose to explore the treasures of this land by bike. It is, after all, relatively flat

and with gas prices at \$7-\$8 a gallon, one can preserve one's own treasure by taking a leisurely and sensual self-propelled tour of this quiet land. The region offers 300 kilometers of bike paths and other alternative forms of transportation, including horseback riding, kayaking and canoeing, all of which can be rented on an hourly, daily or weekly basis to augment a motor tour.

While pedaling between small towns on surprisingly traffic free country lanes, a pleasant way to divide the day involves indulging in France's main passions, food and wine. It is easy to visit five to 10 tasting rooms in between dining or picnicking along the bike path.

We concentrated on the Sancerre wine region, a medieval hilltop town surrounded by thousands of acres of vines containing over 300 vineyards. They produce exceptional dry and flowery wines, primarily from the Pinot Noir and Sauvignon Blanc grapes. In Sancerre there are a number of "auberges" that offer a wide variety of local wines, in case you missed a few on your tour, or would rather drink when you've finished your ride.

Goat cheese is an area specialty and served at almost every meal. Goat cheeses match extremely well with the wines and a big plate full is traditionally served with drinks in the afternoon. The town of Sancerre is a joy to explore with beautiful views revealing themselves as you wind around the steep narrow roads and walkways.

The capital of the area is the cathedral city of Bourges, a 25-mile bike ride Southeast of Sancerre. Julius Caesar, one of its first "tourists," called it the most beautiful city in all of Gaul. A UNESCO World Heritage Site, the immense 12th Century Cathedral St-Etienne is the oldest Gothic cathedral South of the Loire and dominates the town. Watch out for the bats when you visit. They are considered to be a lucky sign and are welcomed in through the front door during the day.

The area is noted particularly for two desserts. Tarte Tatin, sort of a French upside down apple pie, and Forestines, the first baked candy confection in Europe, composed of a crisp sugar shell and a soft center of almond paste and chocolate. Visit Maison des Forestines in Bourges at 3 Place Cujas and indulge.

VINEYARDS AND RESTAURANTS:

Contact the wine bureau at www.vins-centre-loire.com to get a comprehensive English language pamphlet with a full listing of vineyards open to the public.

It's not hard to find a good meal in the Central Loire Valley and they all come with the local wine. Some of the most memorable meals we had were served at D'Antan Sancerrois, Le Bourbonnoux and La Cote des Monts Damnes. For the more difficult palates, pizzas and hamburgers can also be found.

SOME BICYCLE TRAVEL TIPS:

If you are not used to the slim bicycle seats favored by the French, make sure you have padded riding pants or a sore derriere could cause you to finish your bike trip in a rental car. Always use sunscreen and carry plenty of water. It gets very hot and dry biking through the vineyards, and there are no water stops.

The Loire regional tourist office (www.visaloire.com) and the French Tourist Office (212/838-7800), www.franceguide.com, publish a number of free pamphlets and maps for bicycle tourism that include places that cater to bike riders, rental shops, special trips and popular trails, information on guided tours, and places to stay and dine.

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PHOTO CAPTIONS:

1) The Central Loire Valley countryside features little villages nestled among rich farmlands.





2) One of the hundreds of bicycle trails meandering through the Loire Valley





3) 12th Century Cathedral St-Etienne is the oldest Gothic cathedral south of the

Loire.