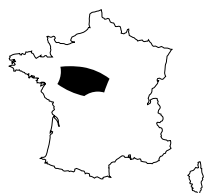


The Loire Valley

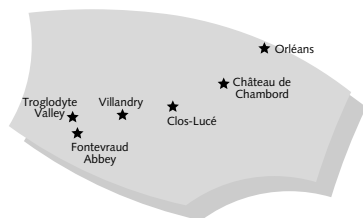


Flowing for over 1000km from its trickling source in the Massif Central west towards the Atlantic Ocean, the regal Loire is often dubbed one of the last *fleuves sauvages* (wild rivers) in France. It's a fickle and unruly body of water that frequently breaks its banks and floods the flat pastureland on either side of the river. For centuries before the Industrial Revolution, this huge waterway was one of France's great commercial highways, but these days most of the river traffic has long since sailed into the sunset, and the freight barges and steamers that once plied the waters have been replaced by occasional canoes and flat-bottomed *futreaux* (barges).

In centuries past, the Loire River was a key strategic area, one step removed from the French capital and poised on the crucial frontier between northern and southern France. Throughout the centuries kings, queens, dukes and nobles established their feudal strongholds and country seats along the Loire, and the valley is littered with some of the most extravagant architecture this side of Versailles. From sky-topping turrets and glittering banquet halls to slate-crowned cupolas, lavish chapels and crenellated towers, the hundreds of châteaux dotted around the Loire Valley provide a comprehensive cross-section of the changing architectural tastes over 1000 years of French high society. The result is an astonishingly rich collection of architectural treasures, ranging from the medieval fortresses of Chinon, Angers and Loches through to the extravagant pleasure palaces of Azay-le-Rideau, Chenonceau and Chambord. If it's aristocratic pomp and architectural splendour you're looking for, the Loire Valley is a place to linger.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Join the Joan of Arc trail in the historic city of **Orléans** (p418)
- Explore the cloisters and chapels of the Loire Valley's greatest ecclesiastical complex, **Abbaye Royale de Fontevraud** (p447)
- Climb up the fabulous double-helix staircase to the turret-covered rooftop of **Chambord** (p429), the Loire Valley's most over-the-top château
- Visit the retirement home of the original Renaissance Man, Leonardo da Vinci, at **Clos Lucé** (p439)
- Admire the fabulous kitchen gardens and floral displays of **Villandry** (p440)
- Wander around the hobbit houses and mushroom museums of the **Troglodyte Valley** (p448)



■ POPULATION: 2,589,000

■ AREA: 33,646 SQ KM

