

Pays de la Loire

Your holiday destination

Summer getaways from the Loire to the coast



March 2016



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COAST

Yeu and Noirmoutier,
two enchanting islands

La Baule, one of the world's
most beautiful bays

HIKING

Cycling
along the river

LA LOIRE

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Nature, culture and architecture

The outstanding nature, culture and architecture of the Pays de la Loire region have always attracted visitors. It's no coincidence that Pays de la Loire is the region with the second highest number of protected sites in France.

It's no coincidence either that it is one of the French regions with the most towns and areas of art and history.

And it's certainly no coincidence that film makers are drawn to use the region's natural landscapes as backdrops for their cinematic masterpieces.

Before the advent of the silver screen, the region inspired many literary greats, who dipped their quills in the rushing waters of the Loire to pen some of the most memorable pages of French literature. From Joachim du Bellay to Julien Gracq, from Alexandre Dumas to Jules Verne, the work of these masters shows that the region's charm is nothing new.

Catch a glimpse of this timeless charm for yourself as you browse this supplement, which we hope will help you find your perfect holiday destination.

Claude Saulais

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Be assured of a warm welcome wherever you go in the Pays de la Loire region!

Tourist information centres, hotels, campsites, B&Bs and great attractions – local professionals have signed up to a quality charter to give British visitors a warmer welcome. They will tell you all about their region and what there is to see and do in English. Plus, you can expect to find tours, menus and brochures all in English. Get ready for a good time.

Find them on www.paysdelaloire.co.uk

Pays de la Loire, great for golf



Photo Michel Plassart

The Pays de la Loire region is a top golfing destination. The region's 17,000 registered golfers can practise their sport on 32 different courses, 14 of which can be found in Loire-Atlantique, 7 in Maine-et-Loire, 6 in Vendée, 4 in Sarthe and 1 in Mayenne. They include some of the finest 18-hole layouts in the whole of France, for example the Bretesche course in Missillac or the international La Baule course. Alongside these prestigious courses, the region also has some more scenic, tranquil fairways, such as those in Saint-Jean-des-Mauvrets near Angers or Solesmes in Sarthe. There are courses to suit golfers of all styles and levels in Pays de la Loire – especially since the emergence of "swin golf", a simplified form of the game played on more rustic terrain using a single three-sided club and a larger, foam golf ball. Two swin golf courses have opened in Maine-et-Loire (in Angers and Sainte-Christine), one in Loire Atlantique (in Rougé), and another in Mayenne (in Meslay-du-Maine).

www.ligue-golf-paysdelaloire.asso.fr

Golf courses to suit all tastes

In Loire-Atlantique

Rougé swin golf course

In addition to the 14 golf courses in Loire-Atlantique, the Rougé "swin golf" course, near Châteaubriant, offers a simpler, more rustic form of the game. A day's swin golf costs roughly €10.

www.swinconcept.com

Guérande golf course

In a wooded setting near the beautiful beaches along the coast, this course has an 18-hole layout as well as areas for beginners and for practice. Free introduction to golf every Sunday.

www.golfdeguerande.com

In Anjou

Swin golf and disc golf

For those who prefer the challenge of an obstacle-riddled course rather than the impeccable greens of the seven official golf courses in Maine-et-Loire, "swin golf" is the way to go. There are two courses in Anjou: at the Lac de Maine in Angers and in Sainte-Christine, at "La Dube" farm and activity park. Another new sport that's proving popular in Anjou is disc golf, also known as "Frolf" – a blend of Frisbee and golf. The great advantage of this sport invented in the 1970s is that it can be played in any natural surroundings.

In Vendée

La Domangère golf course in Nesmy

La Domangère golf course, 7km south of La Roche-sur-Yon, is undoubtedly the most visually stunning of the six courses in Vendée. Set in the hills that rise up from the river Yon, the layout designed by architect Michel Gayon appeals to golfers and nature lovers alike with its undulating fairways, pastoral feel and wide variety of holes.

www.bluegreen.com

Saint-Jean-de-Monts golf course

According to Golf Magazine, this course is the seventh most popular in France, out of a total of 700. This is partly down to its outstanding coastal setting, with some holes on the shore and some in pine woods. But it's also a technically challenging links: players have to grapple with the sea wind, sandy dunes and tricky rough.

www.golfsaintjeandemonts.fr

In Sarthe

Sablé-Solesmes golf course

This is one of France's finest golf courses in terms of the quality of the layout, the infrastructures and the scenic natural setting featuring woodland, open countryside and river. Sablé-Solesmes, one of four courses in Sarthe, is a must for golfers visiting the region. The 27 holes

spread over the vast 150-hectare Domaine de l'Outinière are grouped into several courses that vary in difficulty.

www.golfsablessolesmes.com

24 Hours of Le Mans golf course

In Le Mans, even the golf course owes its existence to the famous 24-hour motor race! Our British friends, huge Le Mans fans, decided to create a course behind the straight that runs along the stands. It was subsequently moved and is now adjacent to the legendary Hunaudières straight, with the entrance at the famous Mulsanne corner. The clubhouse roof terrace is the place to be during the 24 Hours of Le Mans. On 25 and 26 June 2016, the course will host the 22nd edition of the "24 Hours of Golf".

golfdes24heures.fr

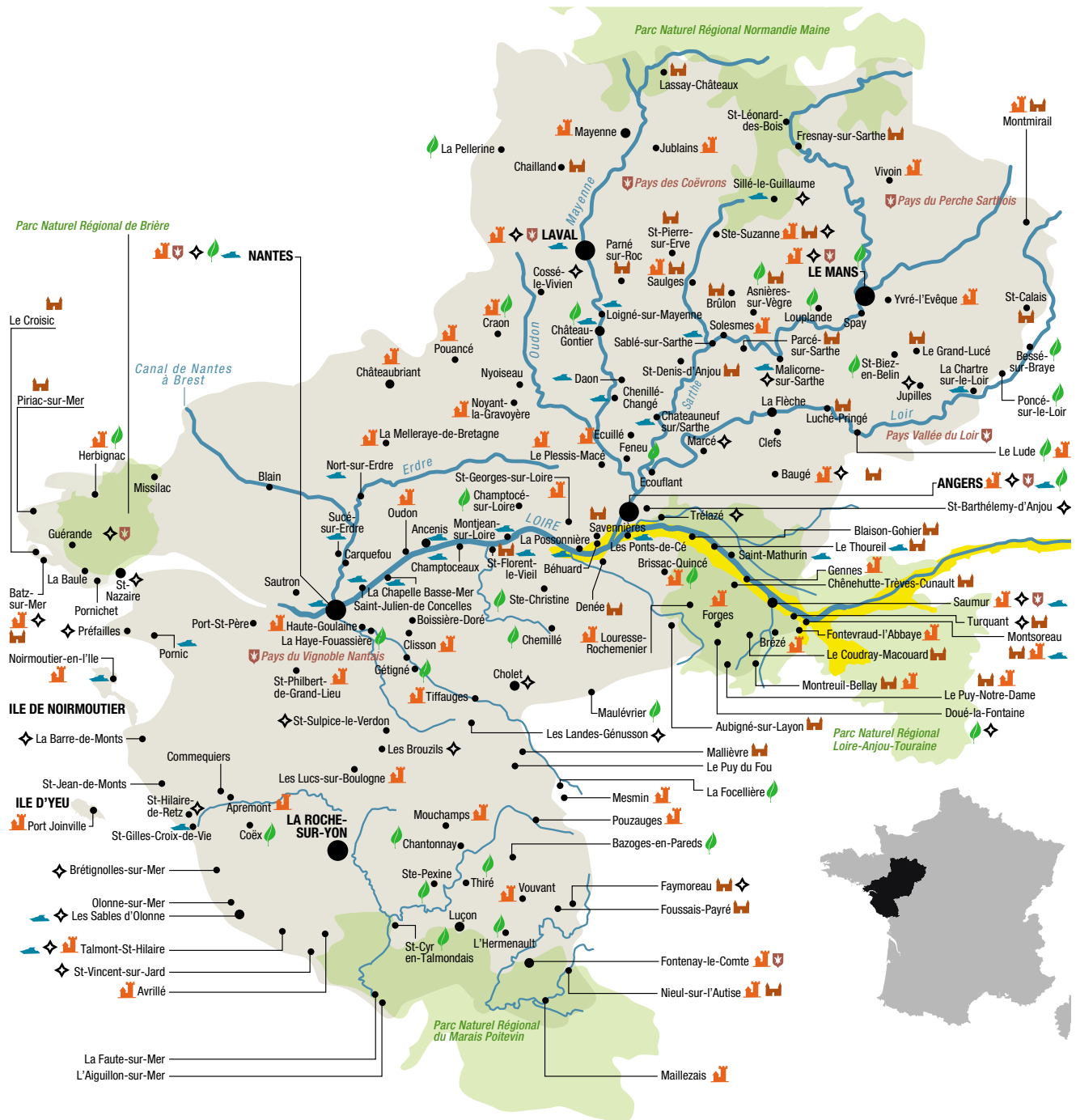
In Mayenne

Laval golf course

Just ten minutes from Laval, this golf club features two courses, with a total of 27 holes, in a hilly 82-hectare setting on the banks of the river Mayenne. The department's only traditional golf course is ideal for experienced golfers and beginners alike.

www.laval53-golf.com

Places to explore and visit







Atlantic Coast

Ever-changing coastal landscapes

The shores of the Pays de la Loire offer a stunning array of natural diversity. With fine sandy beaches, steep rocky coastlines and secluded creeks, there are endless spots for walkers and bathers to choose from. The region's geography also lends itself to a wide range of leisure activities. This is a place of untamed natural beauty.

The Jade Coast is one of the treasures of France's shores.



Photo Vincent Curutchet

Every four years, Les Sables-d'Olonne gears up to celebrate the start of the Vendée Globe race.

Vendée Globe 2016 – pushing the boundaries

The clock is ticking in Les Sables-d'Olonne. On 6 November 2016, the skippers of the 8th Vendée Globe will take to the ocean, embarking on the adventure of a lifetime. Text Annie Rapin

A record surge of skippers, a storm of media attention and a tidal wave of style. The 8th Vendée Globe is already promising to be a memorable edition. While the initial excitement will reach its crest on 6 November with the official start, the festivities will continue on dry land even after the participants have set sail.

A dedicated village

As the skippers disappear over the horizon, the village of Port Olona will come to life with a huge 7,240m² covered arena – "800m² more than in 2012", as Yves Auvinet, President of the Departmental Council and head of Saem Vendée, the semi-public company organising the event, pointed out at the official presentation. Accessibility will be improved for the entire site, which includes a 3,400m² area for businesses in the old harbour warehouses. The new layout for visitors around the village and the creation of a circuit will enable the public to get closer to the crew area and observe the work of the teams in real time.

The public will be able to get closer to the crew area

The race organisers will also be working flat out to ensure the best possible media coverage, bringing the public up close to the action. Digital coverage will be stepped up during the competition, with a web TV channel broadcasting information about the race, three live daily programmes and a weekly e-magazine show. At the time of writing, there are 15 confirmed participants and 11 pre-registered skippers – close to a record in the history of the Vendée Globe – with seven nationalities represented and the same number of new boats. This edition is also notable for the number of top-flight skippers, including Alex Thomson (Hugo Boss), third in the last Vendée Globe, Jérémie Beyou (Maître CoQ), Vincent Riou (PRB), Morgan Lagravière (Safran) and Tanguy de Lamotte (Initiative-cœurs). Skippers Alessandro di Benedetto, Arnaud Boissières and Jean Le Cam have also stated their intention to take to the starting line for this single-handed tour of the globe.

www.vendeeglobe.org



A great holiday idea from paysdelaloire.co.uk

SKIPPER FOR A DAY IN PORNIC

On board a J/80 sailboat, accompanied by a skipper, carve up the waves in the Bay of Bourgneuf with the wind on your back. From your comfortable apartment in the old harbour town of Pornic, take the Corniche de la Noëveillard coastal path to the marina, and simply hop on board.

From €70 per person (based on 4 sharing)
Mid-season price for 3 days/2 nights

Price includes: 2 nights in a spacious 2-bedroom flat and a 2-and-a-half hour sea cruise on a sailboat with a qualified skipper

Valid: all year round except July and August

Bookings: +33 (0)2 40 82 04 40



Photo: François Dubray

La Baule belongs to the select club of most beautiful bays in the world, together with Halong and San Francisco.

"La Baule, a perfect semi-circle"

Since 2011, La Baule has been an official member of the Most Beautiful Bays in the World Club. Damien Dejoie, director of the tourist information centre, explains why. Interview by David Prochasson

In 2011, La Baule became a member of the Most Beautiful Bays in the World Club. Could you tell us a little more?

Damien Dejoie: "The idea originally came from a twinning project between the Gulf of Morbihan and a bay in Vietnam. Then in 1997 a club was set up, with the aim of exploring together how to encourage tourism development while protecting natural heritage. Today there are around 30 bays in this select club, each with outstanding cultural and natural heritage and active conservation policies."

How does La Baule fit these criteria?

"We have a rich cultural heritage with our villas, and we have a conservation policy. Until the 19th century, La Baule was no more than a sand dune! The resort was able to develop because pine trees were planted to stabilise the sand. Today, La Baule's community is bound together by the roots of the town's 75,000 trees in protected green areas. All the inhabitants know how important our trees are, and no one is allowed to cut down a single tree without council permission."

La Baule is now up there alongside the bays of Halong and San Francisco. What can it offer tourists?

"A beautiful coastline: the bay forms a perfect south-facing semi-circle that is protected from westerly winds. It's a great spot for beaches, pleasure boating, etc. The bay is also closely linked to two environmentally sensitive areas – the Guérande salt marshes and Brière marshes. La Baule doesn't exist in isolation; it depends on these ecosystems. Developing one ecosystem can disrupt the development of another. It's important to maintain this balance."

What are the benefits of belonging to the club?

"We didn't apply just so that we could collect another logo. Being a member of this club gives us opportunities to exchange ideas about technical solutions to the problems facing us all, such as global warming and coastal erosion. In La Baule, the strong westerly gusts are now more south-westerly, which may lead to the silting-up of the bay and the erosion of the beach. We hope to set up a working group to examine these issues. The second point is excessive urban development on the sea front. We

need to draw on the experience of other bays which have witnessed a similar rise in tourism, and share this experience with those bays that haven't yet been in this position."

What impact might the club have on tourist numbers?

"This club won't necessarily attract more tourists, although it may bring in business people. But it is one more in a long list of reasons why people choose La Baule. We often describe our beloved bay as the most beautiful in Europe, although admittedly we are biased. But our membership of this club just goes to prove it!"

www.labaule.fr



Photo: Michel Plassat



Far from the mainland, Yeu has beautiful clear waters and countless possibilities for walks, just like Noirmoutier.

Yeu, Noirmoutier – two enchanting islands

The appeal of Yeu and Noirmoutier seems to rise along with the summer temperatures. But these two island gems are well worth a visit all year round. Text Annie Rapin

The picture-postcard island of Noirmoutier – famous for its temperate climate, golden sandy beaches, pine forests and pale blue salt marshes and easily accessible via the legendary Passage du Gois – has so much more to offer, all year round. Looking out from the top of the castle tower, visitors are treated to a colourful mosaic of landscapes. In spring, blow away the cobwebs by cycling along the 80km of tracks or exploring the 64km of pathways on foot. Head into the pine forests, carpeted with needles that crackle satisfyingly under foot, until you reach the sea front with its alternating marshes and potato fields. Take a boat trip out to sea with a former

skipper, stopping off to explore local beauty spots, or opt for a tall ship for a more traditional sailing experience. The island's 40km of beaches are perfect for trying out leisure activities such as paddle boarding, land sailing, kite surfing and sea kayaking – and working up an appetite! In late March, new potatoes are given pride of place on the market stalls, alongside other local

specialities. Thirty-five minutes from the mainland, Île d'Yeu exudes a different atmosphere: it is at one with the sea that surrounds it. The island has a rugged coastline that's a listed natural site, steep cliffs topped by an old castle and countless creeks bathed in turquoise water. The GR 80 hiking trail takes walkers right round the island on coastal paths, all year round. A programme of themed walks is available, along with a wide variety of watersports including sailing, fishing, diving and surfing. At "La Fabrique", the

island's skilled artisans and craft workers welcome visitors all year round to present their original artistic and culinary creations. The "Ferme d'Émilie" is a real treat – a traditional organic farm that breeds lambs for delicious meat and wool which is knitted on the island. Sample Émilie's products at the market in Port-Joinville, together with other island specialities: canned fish, fish soup, prune tarts and *betchets*, the famous sailors' biscuits.

www.ile-yeu.fr - www.ile-noirmoutier.com

These two pearls of the Atlantic are characterised by natural beauty and unspoiled charm



**A great holiday idea
from paysdelaloire.co.uk**

DESTINATION: ÎLE D'YEU

The incomparable charm of Île d'Yeu will delight nature lovers. Enjoy breathtaking ocean views from the island's jagged cliffs, sentinel castle and fine sandy beaches sheltered by shady pine forests.

From €142 per person (based on 2 adults sharing a room). 2 days/1 night

Price includes: return boat trip from Fromentine or St-Gilles-Croix-de-Vie, hotel or B&B accommodation, breakfast, bicycle hire for 2 days or 3-hour coach trip with commentary, route brochure, dinner (excluding drinks), booking fees. Tourist tax payable during your stay

Valid: throughout 2016

Bookings: + 33 (0)2 51 54 09 88

Seaside resorts to explore



Photo © A-Lamoureux

Walks around Saint-Gilles-Croix-de-Vie

The area around Saint-Gilles-Croix-de-Vie, a lively fishing harbour that encapsulates all the diversity and beauty of the coast, has 22 beaches and 300km of greenways. The town is famous for its delicious sardines.

www.payssaintgilles-tourisme.fr

Whet your appetite in Saint-Jean-de-Monts

With its "Cuisine montoise" label, Saint-Jean-de-Monts gives local specialities pride of place. Eleven restaurants have been awarded this label for their home-made dishes using local produce. A perfect way to end one of the 14 local plant and wildlife walks organised by the tourist information centre.

www.saint-jean-de-monts.com



Photo Michel Plassart

Préfailles, a taste of the ocean

Préfailles is renowned for its little beaches and rocky coves. This lively town offers countless activities including children's clubs and a sailing school. It's also a great spot for shore fishing with a line or net. And the customs path runs along the entire coastline, making it a great place for walks. Visitors should take a trip to Pointe Saint-Gildas, which became a listed regional nature reserve last year, to learn about the history of the estuary's shipwrecks at the signal station.

www.tourisme-prefailles.com

Batz-sur-Mer, a small town of character

In late 2013, Batz-sur-Mer became Loire-Atlantique's third "small town of character", a status that befits the charm of this little seaside resort, with its winding streets, granite houses and many heritage sites... right at the water's edge. Batz-sur-Mer lies between the beaches of the *côte sauvage*, or "wild coast", and its salt marshes. The town is also near the lively resort of La Baule and the peninsula of Le Croisic – all in all, a perfect holiday destination!

www.ot-batzsurmer.fr

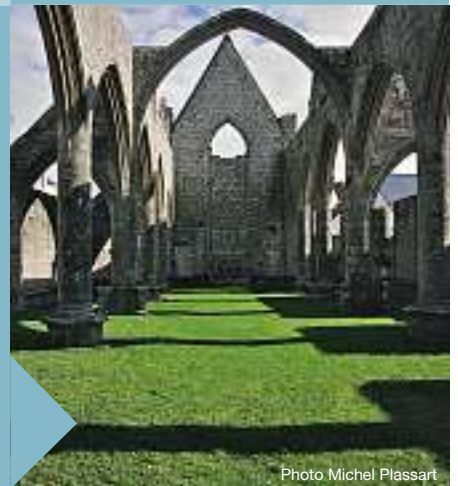


Photo Michel Plassart

Harbour and dunes in La Turballe

Nestled between Piriac and Le Croisic, La Turballe has two distinct characters: the north is full of tranquil beaches and rocky coves, while the south has vast expanses of sand that stretch towards the Pointe de Pen Bron and the peninsula's longest strip of dunes. In the town itself, professional fishermen come and go, unloading their precious cargo of sardines and anchovies – a local speciality – to be sold at the fish auction market in one of the region's largest fishing ports.

www.tourisme-laturballe.fr



Photo Michel Plassart

Red rocks at Saint-Michel-Chef-Chef

Saint-Michel-Chef-Chef is famed for its buttery biscuits that are sold all over France and the biscuit factory that's open to visitors. But the town also has two supervised sandy beaches, a marina and a fishing lake that's great for walks. Not to mention a singularly beautiful natural site: the *terres rouges* on Gohaud beach, an area protected by the coastal protection authority which owes its name to its pinkish red cliffs and dunes.

www.tharon-plage.fr



Photo: Joël Damase

The Vélodyssée route offers 400km of cycle paths in the Pays de la Loire region.

Tour the region at your own pace

Launched in 2012, the Vélodyssée cycle route crosses the departments of Loire-Atlantique and Vendée, following the Nantes–Brest canal, the banks of the Loire and the coast. Text David Prochasson

It brings a breath of fresh air from across the Channel, journeys down through the centre of Brittany from Roscoff, joins the coast at Saint-Brévin-les-Pins and follows the sea right down to Hendaye. With over 1,400km in cycle paths, the Vélodyssée is the longest cycle route in France and it travels part of the way through the Pays de la Loire region. Starting in Loire-Atlantique, you can hop on the saddle in Saint-Nicolas-de-Redon on the Nantes–Brest canal. The route then follows the towpath until Nort-sur-Erdre and promises delightful locks and shaded paths before arriving in the bustling city of Nantes. From here, the Vélodyssée and Loire à vélo trails follow the same path to the sea. The shaded Canal de la Martinière is reminiscent of the start of the trail and the trip is dotted with the "Estuaire" art installations – Le Pellerin and its floppy boat, and Paimboeuf and its star-studded garden. Then, the remarkable sea snake, with its jaws wide open in the direction of Saint-Nazaire bridge, marks the boundary between the estuary and the coast. From Saint-Brévin, the Vélodyssée route begins its long downward journey south. Pedal through Saint-Michel-Chef-Chef, Pornic and La Bernerie-en-Retz and take in the sandy coves and rocky coastline. By the

time you reach Bouin, with its four harbours, oyster farm and wind turbines, you'll be in Vendée. In Beauvoir-sur-Mer, you'll need to wait for low tide to take the legendary Passage du Gois causeway to Noirmoutier. Then, from La Barre de Monts to Saint-Jean-de-Monts there is a change of scene with a stretch of forest. "You can't see the ocean but you can hear it in the shade of the pines", explains Joël Lesage, the engineer responsible for cycle paths in Vendée. It is not until Sion-sur-l'Océan that the cliffs come back into view with their rocky outcrop. This delightful stage of the journey leads to the sardine capital Saint-Gilles-Croix-de-Vie. The kilometres clock up as you pass by seaside resorts, including Brétignolles and Brem-sur-Mer, and then you reach the marshes of Olonne – "The most beautiful section of the Vélodyssée in the department, believes Joël Lesage. You are far from the busy roads and guided by bird song". Then it's back to bustling town life in Les Sables-d'Olonne before heading to Talmont and its peaceful marshes. Longeville, La Tranche-sur-Mer and La Faute-sur-Mer are next along the route before the Vélodyssée leaves Vendée at Aiguillon Bay.

www.velodysses.com





Enjoy a relaxing ride with ever-changing scenery.

The Guérande Peninsula by bike

Follow the guide through the Brière marshes, stretching along the wild coastline, and discover the Cap Atlantique and Vélocéan cycle routes. Text David Prochasson

Along the wild coastline

Le Pouliguen - Batz-sur-Mer (10km - 45 min.)

Enjoy the sea air on this popular summertime trail that is perfect for families. Set off from Le Pouliguen marina and head for the Pointe de Penchâteau. "Before going inland, take advantage of the low tide to walk down to the Grotte des Korrigans, the home of many legends", recommends Emmanuel Lebreton, responsible for active transport and coastal paths at Cap Atlantique. The trail then joins the Vélocéan cycle route.

Between salt marshes and sea

La Turballe - Pen Bron (20km - 1 hr 30)

This trail is perfect for discovering the many facets of Guérande. It begins in a busy fishing harbour and you can either do a round trip by heading towards Piriac and then travelling down the Guérande hillside to Pen Bron, or you can ride straight to the headland. "You'll cross the sandy bar, or tombolo. On one side, you'll get a view of the salt marshes, and on the other, the Atlantic, beyond the dunes", explains Emmanuel Lebreton.

The heart of Brière

Herbignac - Kerhinet (20km - 1 hr 30)

Set out from the Château de Ranrouët in Herbignac and pedal towards the centre of the Brière marshes. On the way to Saint-Lyphard, you'll ride past traditional reed-thatched cottages and there are plenty of small harbours for getting out onto the water. If you still have some energy left, you can carry on to Kerhinet, a village with 18 thatched cottages that were restored in the 1970s. Otherwise you can stop off in Saint-Lyphard and admire the 360° view of the Brière marshland from the top of the church tower.

Along the old railway line

Guérande - La Baule (11km - 50 min.)

This circuit begins in the mediaeval town of Guérande. Follow the Vélocéan waymarked trail to the railway line that used to link Guérande and La Baule. Now disused, this safe cycle track, which covers most of the route, takes you slowly down to the beaches and shoreline. Of course, you'll need to pedal back up the hill on the return journey!

www.cap-atlantique.fr/rubrique/velo



A great holiday idea
from paysdelaloire.co.uk

RELAXING BREAK IN SAINT-JEAN-DE-MONTS

Thanks to the invigorating ocean climate in Saint-Jean-de-Monts, come and enjoy all the benefits of seawater therapy in a light and spacious setting surrounded by sandy beaches, dunes and trees.

From €197 per person. 2 days/1 night

Price includes: 1 night in a 3-star hotel with breakfast, dinner (excluding drinks), three seawater therapy treatments and access to the aqua relaxation area

Valid: all year round

Bookings: + 33 (0)2 51 62 76 82

Other highlights along the coast



Seawater therapy with a sea view

With the Baie de la Baule in Pornichet, Le Temps d'un Spa and Barrière in La Baule, and Pornic Resort along the Jade Coast, there are certainly plenty of seawater therapy centres to choose from along the coast. The very latest one, Thalasso des Tourelles, is set in a château of the same name overlooking the sea. And a new seawater therapy centre, Rivage, is also due to open in spring 2016 on Boulevard de l'Océan in La Baule.

In Vendée, two wellness and seawater therapy centres

The Côte Ouest in Les Sables-d'Olonne boasts 16 treatment rooms and has added the new "wellness à la carte" option to its 2016 brochure. Be sure to make the most of its 32°C seawater pool, jacuzzi and armatherapy room. Meanwhile, the centre in Saint-Jean-de-Monts offers very unique treatments using sea mud from the Baie de Bourgneuf.

www.vendee-tourisme.com



Photo Dominique Drouot

Follow the GR8 hiking trail

The coastal path from Le Croisic to Le Poulguen overlooks the cliffs for about 15 kilometres. South of the Loire, from Saint-Brévin-Pins to Les Moutiers-en-Retz, the customs trail joins another hiking trail — the GR8. For 221km, hikers are treated to marshland, forests, dunes, rocks and of course beautiful sandy beaches. This trail is also connected to the 4,000 kilometres of waymarked trails in Vendée.

www.vendee-tourisme.com
www.rando.loire-atlantique.fr

Water sports

Whether you are on the Côte d'Amour, the Jade Coast, in the Retz area or on the Vendée coast, water sports are the in thing. The latest crazes include cable skiing in Saint-Viaud, a new board sport which uses a cable like in the mountains. You can also go sea fishing from La Turballe or Saint-Gilles-Croix-de-Vie or step aboard a trimaran or an outrigger canoe in Vendée. Contact the tourist information centres for more details.



Photo Michel Plassart

Find out all about oysters

How do oysters grow? What are their different appellations? All these questions will be answered on the oyster route — a seven-stop tour of oyster farms located between the marshes and the sea (two in Loire-Atlantique and five in Vendée). Here, oyster farmers will explain their trade around the oyster beds and you can sample the delicacy with a glass of local white wine.

www.huitre-vendee-atlantique.fr



Photo © A.Lamoureux

Coastal paths

Slip on your rucksack and walking shoes for an invigorating dose of fresh air. From north to south, the shores of Loire-Atlantique and Vendée can be explored via a series of coastal paths. The trail between Le Croisic and Le Poulguen runs along the cliff tops. South of the Loire, the customs trail is the first stretch of another famous hiking path, the GR8. This lengthy route alternates between marshland and forest, dunes and sandy beaches.

www.balades-nautiques.enpaysdelaloire.com



Photo © A.Lamoureux

A 360° view at Pointe du Payré

Set off for an unforgettable trip from La Mine beach car park in Jard-sur-Mer. The trail runs between the sea and the forest and offers breathtaking views right up to the headland, where you'll get a panorama of the Payré estuary and Veillon beach. Some even say that, during a storm, butterflies arrive here from the US in just 48 hours!

www.jardsurmer-tourisme.fr

Biotopia in Notre-Dame-de-Monts

So you've seen an interactive pond, played hide and seek in the sand and felt like you'd been shrunk? There is no doubt about it, you are in Biotopia. Explore the world of the forest and shoreline thanks to this new centre in Notre-Dame-de-Monts, which boasts a 250-square metre interactive exhibition and an outdoor 3D trail.

www.biotopia.fr

From Airbus to the St-Nazaire shipyard

These phenomenal companies have built up a reputation outside of France. The STX shipyard will reveal little-known facts about the huge seagoing vessels under construction during a two-hour tour. And, if you're lucky, you'll get a glimpse of the largest cruise ship in the world — Harmony of the seas — which is due to enter into service in May 2016. Switching to air travel now, Airbus is the master of the skies. The two-hour tour here enables visitors to get up close to the A380 production line.

www.saint-nazaire-tourisme.com

Escal' Atlantic

Saint-Nazaire is well-placed for telling the story of the transatlantic ocean liners. The Escal 'Atlantic museum, which opened 16 years ago and was fully refurbished and extended in 2013, lets you discover the most famous ocean liners built in Saint-Nazaire. Interactive activities, reconstructions and original artefacts give a sense of what life was like on board these giants of the seas.

www.saint-nazaire-tourisme.com



Photo © Bernard Henry

Georges Clemenceau's house and gardens

Come here and discover another side to the great French statesman through his collections of exotic objects and his garden — a marvel designed by his close friend Claude Monet. The artist created this garden like a work of art, shimmering with specks of colour.

www.maison-clemenceau.monuments-nationaux.fr

Signal station at Pointe Saint-Gildas

This former lookout post, which became a signal station in 1862 and then a lighthouse in 1954, stands on Pointe Saint-Gildas in Préfailles. It bears witness to developments in maritime communications and serves as a reminder of the shipwrecks that have cast a shadow on the Loire's estuary and coastline. It regularly hosts temporary exhibitions.

www.tourisme-prefailles.com



A wide, calm river flows through a landscape. The banks are sandy and dotted with small pools of water. In the background, a dense line of trees with autumn-colored foliage stretches across the horizon under a clear blue sky.

Loire Valley

Art and literature

This regal and untameable river, the very backbone of the Pays de la Loire region, has inspired many writers. Joachim du Bellay, Julien Gracq and Alexandre Dumas, to name but a few, put pen to paper here to offer us some of their best works. The Loire also provides a source of inspiration for artists. Painters and visual artists regularly pay homage to the river through their creations.



The former home of Julien Gracq in St-Florent-Le-Vieil offers residencies for writers and is also open to visitors.

The Loire, the writers' river

The Loire has been the birthplace and source of inspiration for many successful writers. Today you can follow in the footsteps of several great names, including Joachim du Bellay and Julien Gracq. Text Sébastien Rochard

A dozen kilometres and just over four centuries separate two of the leading figures in French literature today. The first, Joachim du Bellay, founded La Pléiade – an influential group of 16th century poets – alongside Pierre de Ronsard, while the second, Julien Gracq, born Lucien Poirier in Saint-Florent-le-Vieil, brought a dream-like quality to his works. Both were from the Loire Valley. Of course, you don't have to travel as far as Anjou to enjoy their poetry and prose. "The Regrets", "The Olive" and "The Antiquities of Rome", by the poet Du Bellay, are taught in French schools. The works of Julien Gracq are perhaps less accessible but "The Opposing Shore", "A Balcony in the Forest" and "The Narrow Waters" are among the must-reads of the 20th century.

Still, for more insight into their artistic journeys and inspiration, a trip to Maine-et-Loire is called for. The ruins of Château de la Turmelière, where Du Bellay was born c.1522, offer a very peculiar atmosphere and a unique view of the valley below. In the centre of Liré, a museum traces the life of the poet in Anjou, Paris and Rome. To link the ruins and museum, a Joachim du Bellay trail has been created that enables visitors to tread the

same paths as the poet did in his formative years. The trace of Julien Gracq in Saint-Florent-le-Vieil is even more marked, as the writer died here in 2007 and stipulated in his will his plans for the house he lived in on the quays of the Loire. "He wanted to turn it into a place where writers could work and relax", explains Cathie Barreau, responsible for the Maison Julien Gracq. Since 2013, the house has run writers' residencies and offered a tour reflecting the writer's love of geography with an unusual map room and a surprising library that is kept alive with regular additions from other writers.

It would be impossible not to mention French writer Alexandre Dumas who immortalised the décor of the Château de Montsoreau in "La Dame de Montsoreau". And Angers' Hervé-Bazin, one of Gracq's contemporaries, also deserves a mention as his "Vipère au poing" and "La mort du petit cheval" are part of France's literary heritage.

www.maisonjuliengracq.fr
www.museejoachimdubellay.com



A great holiday idea
from paysdelaloire.co.uk

CHOLET'S GARDENS

Looking for some calm? The oriental garden in Maulévrier, the largest Japanese garden in Europe, promises a complete change of scene just 10km from Cholet. And then the following day, a different world awaits – medicinal and aromatic plants at Camifolia. Choose between a hotel and B&B!

From €58.50 per person (based on 2 sharing a double room) 2 days/1 night

Prices includes: 1 night, breakfast, tourist tax, entry to the Parc Oriental (Maulévrier) and Camifolia (Chemillé)

Valid: from 1 May to 31 October 2016, according to site opening times

Bookings: +33 (0)2 41 49 80 00



Jules Verne, a native of Nantes and still very much remembered in the city, is the main inspiration behind the Machines de l'île.

Follow in the footsteps of Jules Verne

Poetry on river life in Nantes greatly influenced Jules Verne's writings and he, in turn, left his mark on the city. Text David Prochasson

Agnès Marcetteau, curator of the museum devoted to the writer, is certain of one thing – "There wouldn't have been a Jules Verne without Nantes. His imagination, identity and sensitivity were all shaped by the city." Jules Verne was born in 1828 at 4 Cours Olivier de Clisson on Ile Feydeau, at the time surrounded by two arms of the Loire, and it was here he developed his love of travel. As a child, he lived a Robinson Crusoesque existence, moving from island to island with his dreams for company and making his way down the river to meet the sea in Saint-Nazaire. These memories were recalled in "The Mighty Orinoco" and "The Danube Pilot". Following in the footsteps of Jules Verne means strolling past his old haunts. There's his childhood home at 2 Allée Jean Bart on today's Cours des 50-Otages. He moved to 6 Rue Jean-Jacques Rousseau with his family in 1840 and, four years later, wrote his first (unfinished) novel – "A Priest in 1839" – set in St. Nicolas Church. At the age of 49, he stayed over a year at 1 Rue de Suffren and wrote "Dick Sand, A Captain at Fifteen". Following in the footsteps of Jules Verne also means discovering an indistinct and often

indirect legacy. The Marine World Carousel on Ile de Nantes evokes the universe of Jules Verne and is the work of La Machine Company. "Jules Verne is part of a universal imaginary heritage, explains its artistic director François Delarozière. I don't make direct references to him in my projects but this imaginary world and the prints that illustrated his books have been my inspiration". In the same way the writer peppered his universe with scientific discoveries, La Machine makes use of technology. "But there's a difference, argues François Delarozière. Verne used words to describe scenes that remained on paper while we invent a universe and bring it to life". Finally, following in the footsteps of Jules Verne means looking out for memorials. There is the bronze statue of Michel Ardan, the hero of "From the Earth to the Moon", in Rue de l'Héronnière, a fresco illustrating Verne's "Voyages Extraordinaires" in Rue de l'Echelle and the set of statues in Rue de l'Hermitage featuring Jules Verne as a child facing one of his characters, Captain Nemo.

www.lesmachines-nantes.fr
www.julesverne.nantesmetropole.fr



A great holiday idea
 from paysdelaloire.co.uk

A NIGHT ON THE LEFT BANK

Be at one with nature and spend a night like no other on the Loire, just a few kilometres upstream from Nantes. Just imagine... it's 7pm and you are boarding a cabin boat, inspired by the flat-bottomed boats that used to travel up and down the Loire. After dinner on deck, you'll be rocked to sleep by the river.

€149 for 2 people (24 weekends in Loire-Atlantique L.A Box gift box) - 2 days/1 night

Price includes: 1 night in a Clévacances off-beat cabin, breakfast on-board, picnic basket for the 2nd day and hiking trail sheet

Valid: all year round*

*From November to April, the boat is moored on the river Erdre

Bookings: +33 (0)2 51 72 95 32



The Château de Montsoreau has recently become home to a contemporary art centre.

Montsoreau, a contemporary venue!

The Château de Montsoreau has begun a new life as a contemporary art centre. Open to all, it is run by collector Philippe Méaille. Text Sébastien Rochard

The history of the Château de Montsoreau is worthy of a novel. Alexandre Dumas was insightful in turning it into the setting for the love affair between Diane de Méridor and Louis de Bussy d'Amboise in "La Dame de Montsoreau", during the troubled times of the Wars of Religion and Catherine de Medici. Set on a site dating back a thousand years, the current castle will soon be 500 years old, having survived the ravages of time and periods of neglect. It was given a very different future in June 2015 when Maine-et-Loire Departmental Council, which owns the site, signed a 25-year emphyteutic lease with collector Philippe Méaille. This means that while it remains the property of the council, Philippe Méaille is now responsible for its use and upkeep. After several months of planning and restoration work, Mr Méaille opened a contemporary art centre for his impressive Art&Language collection on the same scale as its twin in the Barcelona Museum of Contemporary Art (MacBa). To give a little context, Art&Language is one of

Nestling at the confluence of the Loire and Vienne rivers

the main artistic movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and Philippe Méaille is its greatest collector in the world. So why choose Montsoreau, a small village of 500 inhabitants huddled at the confluence of the Vienne and Loire rivers? "I've long been convinced that my collection belongs to the art world and needs to be displayed in an international venue. And what choice is there apart from Paris and the French Riviera? A Loire Valley château of course!", he says with certainty. He was won over by the Montsoreau flea market in the noughties and visitors can now come and consider the works of art and their setting. Because it is very much a three-way thing. "The site is so steeped in history and important in terms of architectural heritage that we couldn't redecorate. It is interesting to see how the works have found their place in the castle. And visitors are involved in this process too", adds Philippe Méaille. A new life has begun for Montsoreau.

www.chateau-montsoreau.com



Photo Michel Plassart

An astonishing estuary

Between 2007 and 2012, around thirty works of art found a home in the waters of the Loire between Nantes and Saint-Nazaire. Some have become popular attractions, such as Huang Yong Ping's Sea Snake in Saint-Brévin, Buren's Rings in Nantes, the Villa Cheminée by Tatzu Nishi in Cordemais, Felice Varini's Triangles in Saint-Nazaire and Tadashi Kawamata's Lookout Tower in Lavau-sur-Loire.

www.estuaire.info

Contemporary art ideas



Photo Laurent Combet

Contemporary art at Bouvet-Ladubay

For the last twenty or so years, wine producer Bouvet-Ladubay has welcomed a dozen local and international artists close to Saumur. This cultural centre is housed in a former electrical power station. "Hospitality is in our blood" claims the manager Juliette Monmousseau. Every year, the centre hosts the Ar(t)Cheval exhibition, a contemporary art event on the equestrian theme.

www.bouvet-ladubay.fr

Fontevraud Abbey

More than nine centuries after it was founded by Robert of Arbrissel, Fontevraud Abbey can look forward to a bright future. It was once the necropolis of the Plantagenet dynasty, housing the tombs of Eleanor of Aquitaine and Richard the Lionheart. It opened to the public in 1985 and is now a heritage and contemporary arts centre, offering concerts, exhibitions and multimedia tours.

www.fontevraud.fr



Chaissac and the giant blue sugar box

Welcome to the world of Gaston Chaissac in Sainte-Florence. Here, you can walk into a giant blue sugar box, share the more private moments of the artist in the school's listed lavatories, try on his clothes or get a feeling for what inspired him on a walking or cycling trail. Works by Chaissac are also on display at the Contemporary Art Museum in Les Sables d'Olonne.

www.gastonchaissac-sainteflorence.fr

Contemporary art in Pontmain

Pontmain's contemporary art centre offers a varied programme featuring individual or group exhibitions with works specially created for the site or taken from private and public collections. The Mayenne contemporary art centre in the Chapelle des Calvairiennes is more experimental, with a pioneering, avant-garde approach.

www.centredartpontmain.fr
www.chapelledescalvairiennes-mayenne.com



Photo Musée Tatin

Delve into the world of Robert Tatin

The Robert Tatin museum, which can be found in Cossé-le-Vivien, close to Craon, is a real open-air work of art. The artist bought a small house in 1962 and, over the years, turned it into the "Maison des champs", or country house. His huge sculptures are rooted in nature and intended to be a "crossroads of civilisations". The full tour includes the artist's house, the butterfly sanctuary and the apple and pear orchard. Restoration work began on the Allée des Géants and Dragon sculptures in 2015.

www.musee-robert-tatin.fr

Art collection in Cholet's Museum

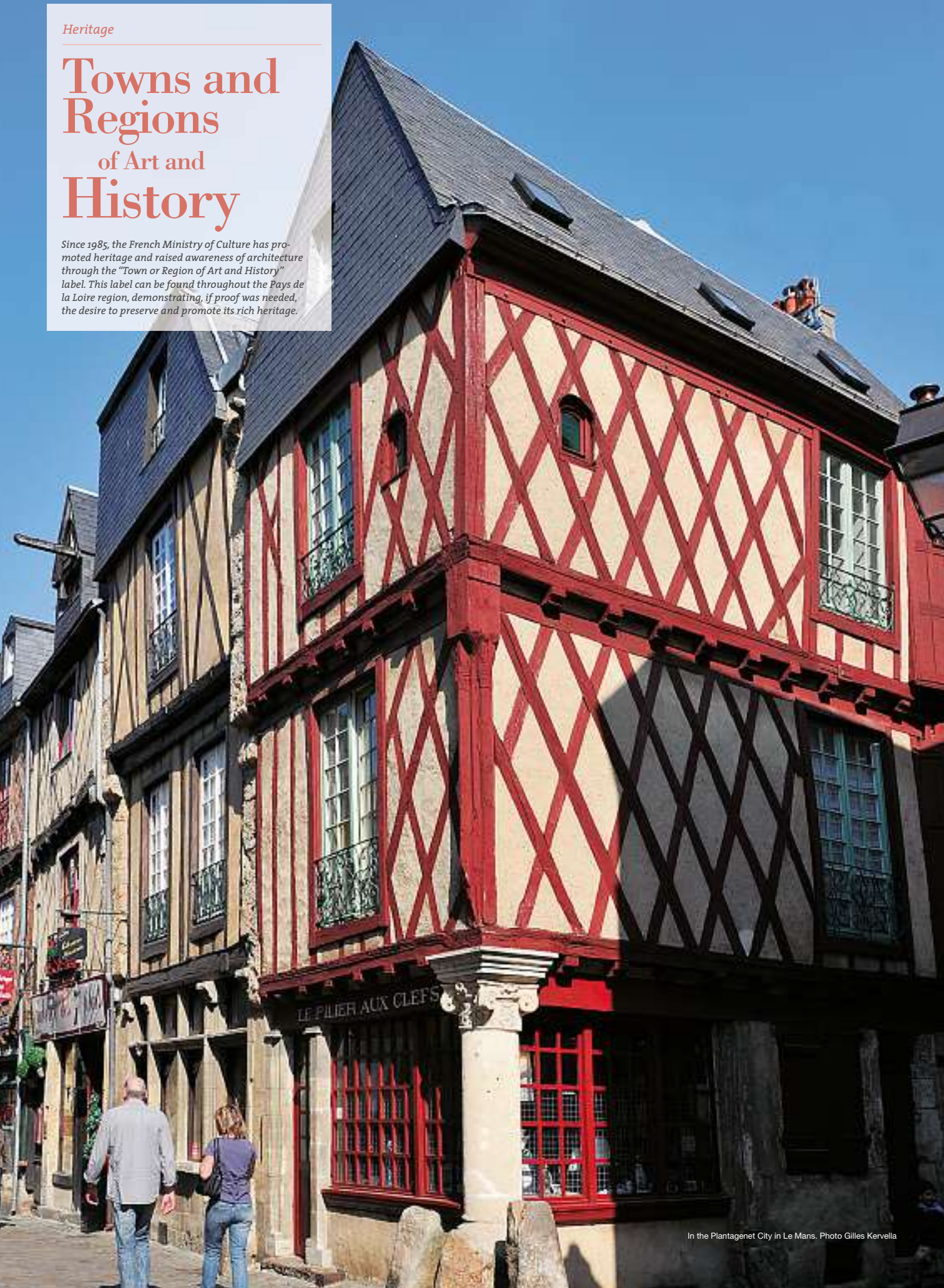
The Art Gallery in Cholet's Art and History Museum is home to an outstanding but surprising collection. From the Rococo-style paintings by Pierre-Charles Trémolières to contemporary installations by François Morellet, a major name in geometric abstraction, the works on display illustrate how art has changed from the 16th to 20th century. Don't miss paintings by Coypel, Van Loo, Nattier and Vasarely.

www.ot-cholet.fr

Heritage

Towns and Regions of Art and History

Since 1985, the French Ministry of Culture has promoted heritage and raised awareness of architecture through the "Town or Region of Art and History" label. This label can be found throughout the Pays de la Loire region, demonstrating, if proof was needed, the desire to preserve and promote its rich heritage.





The imposing Château of Angers, set right in the city centre, is one of the department's architectural gems.

Storming the Château of Angers

Steeped in culture, nature and heritage, Angers is very popular with visitors and offers a wide range of engaging activities. Text Sébastien Rochard

The unmissable Château of Angers

With its seventeen huge towers and 900 years of history, the castle is the historical building in the city and you cannot help but be drawn to it when passing on foot or by car. While a tour of the gardens, castle and various temporary exhibitions is fascinating, the real treasure of the site is the Apocalypse Tapestry, crafted in the late 14th century.

Soak up the culture at the Fine Arts Museum

A jewel among Angers' museums, it was renovated a little over 10 years ago. Located in the very centre of the city, just a stone's throw from the cobbled streets of La Cité, it boasts remarkable collections of paintings from the early Renaissance to the present day. The museum also holds various exhibitions throughout the year.

Get up close to plant life at Terra Botanica

This botanical park, which opened its gates in 2010, encourages visitors to delve deep into the plant world through a tour of its incredible gardens. Although the plants on display take visitors on a journey around the world, the site

also showcases local botanical and horticultural know-how. The site offers many attractions, including "The Amber Rush", a 4D cinema and the now famous tethered balloon.

Nature wherever you look

With its many parks and gardens, Angers is certainly deserving of its green city title. While on the outskirts Ile Saint-Aubin – a haven of biodiversity which is only accessible for a couple of months of the year – is well worth the detour, the city centre itself is home to many wonderful sites, such as the Parc de l'Arboretum with its four gardens, the Jardin des Plantes and its English-style park, and Saint-Nicolas Lake.

The bicycle, the other star of the city

Angers' urban area offers a whole host of outstanding sites that feature on the Loire à Vélo cycling route. Take, for example, Les Ardoisières in Trélazé, a site that has been shaped by 600 years of slate production.

www.angersloiretourisme.com

 **paysdelaloire.co.uk**
Brimming with holiday ideas

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BREAK FOR TWO AT TERRA BOTANICA

While in Angers, delve deep into the incredible gardens of Terra Botanica, the first theme park devoted to plant life in Europe, and set off on a journey from Anjou to Japan passing through Madagascar and the Amazon rain forest. When high up in the tethered balloon, take in the park, Angers and the low-lying Anjou valleys. A unique ride in Western France, 150 metres from the ground!

From €49 per person (based on 2 sharing) 2 days/1 night

Price includes: 1 night in a hotel or B&B, breakfast, entry to the Terra Botanica theme park, tourist tax and travel pack

Valid: from 2 April to 30 September 2016

Bookings: +33 (0)2 41 23 50 00



The Water Mirror at the foot of the Château of Nantes delights children in summer time.

Five ideas for a weekend in Nantes

So what's new in Nantes? Well, there's culture of course and the city of the Dukes of Brittany is constantly reinventing itself. Here are a few sites to visit over the course of a weekend. Text David Prochasson

Visit the new Pommeraye shopping centre

It's going to be one of the events of the year in Nantes. In spring 2016, a new shopping centre will open alongside the original Passage Pommeraye, which dates back to 1843. This very contemporary addition will feature around 15 shops and link Rue Santeuil to the middle floor of the 19th-century construction. By the time it opens, last summer's refurbishment work on this masterpiece of Nantes' heritage will be well and truly forgotten.

Catch your reflection in the Water Mirror

It didn't take long for the locals to adopt this water feature. As soon as the sun comes out, children take off their shoes and socks and weave in and out of the spurting fountains. A perfect picture moment. Unveiled last September, this water mirror is a reference to the time when the Loire passed by the foot of the Castle of the Dukes of Brittany.

Get right to the heart of the city

Nantes has a truly vibrant cultural centre. Neglected in the past, this former heartland of the French navy has been slowly transforming itself

since the 1990s. From Les Quais Mitterrand to the western tip of Ile de Nantes — known for its banana warehouse filled with bars — the district abounds in works of art and buildings designed by the great names in architecture. It is above all home to the famous La Machine Company with its Machine Gallery, Marine World Carousel and the Great Elephant.

Wander along the quays of the Loire

Away from the hustle and bustle of the city, the Trentemoult district in the town of Rezé is perfect for an evening stroll. Take the Navibus to the south bank of the Loire and enjoy the sunset. This former fishing village, with its delightful winding streets, is now awash with colour as the locals have repainted the façades and artists have taken up residence here.

Relax in the Jardin des Plantes

More than just a park, Nantes' Jardin des Plantes has become quite an attraction since illustrator Claude Ponti brought his sleeping chicks, funny installations and strange creatures here. The Jardin des Plantes offers a welcome break when visiting the city centre.

www.nantes-tourisme.com



**A great holiday idea
from paysdelaloire.co.uk**

THE EASY LIFE IN CLISSON

Enjoy the breathtaking view of the Château de Clisson during a romantic dinner on the banks of the Sèvre and make the most of the charming terrace at the water's edge. Savour some "you" time in the heated pool and wellness area.

From €86.50 per person (based on 2 people sharing a double room).
2 days/1 night

Price includes: 1 night in a three-star hotel with breakfast, 1/2 bottle of champagne and sweet treats, 1 entry to the wellness area and pool, 1 dinner at the hotel (starter, main course and dessert, excl. drinks), 1 iPhone tour of Clisson

Valid: from 01/01 to 30/11/2016

Bookings: +33 (0)2 40 54 24 22



Enjoy a peaceful stroll through the delightful cobbled streets of Le Mans.

48 hours in Le Mans on foot

There is more to Le Mans than just racing cars. To really get a feel for the Cité Plantagenêt, or historical centre, lose yourself in the cobbled streets and seek out the timber-framed houses. Text Pierre-Jacques Provost

Of course there is the 24 Hours of Le Mans race and while Le Mans has much more to offer, this legendary race does not just attract motor racing enthusiasts. The track can be visited like a historical monument and the 24 Hours of Le Mans Museum should not be missed either. There are plenty of occasions to see the track buzzing with activity as, besides the famous 24 Hours sports car race, it also hosts the 24 Hours of Le Mans motorcycle, truck, go-kart, rollerblade and cycle races, the Le Mans Classic vintage car race, the French Motorcycle Grand Prix, the Automobile Club de l'Ouest's festival, the French Superbike Championship and the World Series by Renault. A packed programme that also draws visitors to the rest of Le Mans, starting with the historical centre and its cobbled streets and alleyways, timber-framed houses, magnificently restored Renaissance town houses and the splendid cathedral. In early October, the Cité Plantagenêt organises an "Entre cours et jardins" weekend where visitors can catch a glimpse of the private gardens that are hidden away from sight for the rest of the year.

Gems outside of the historical centre

The Cité Plantagenêt stands out for its size and

preservation efforts. The only shop signs visible are those of traditional craftsmen and they punctuate this delightful walk. The district is still protected by its Gallo-Roman defensive wall – one of the best preserved in Europe – and archaeological digs have also uncovered the remains of Roman baths, which are today open to visitors. The Marché des Jacobins, an impressive market held at the foot of the cathedral, is also very popular with the locals. Architecture lovers will do well to stray from the old town because Place de la République and the church of the Visitation are well worth the detour as are Notre-Dame de la Couture church a little further on, and Notre Dame du Pré church, the most beautiful Romanesque church in the Maine province, set on the other side of the Sarthe. Don't miss Épau Abbey at the entrance to the city either. This superb Cistercian abbey hosts many cultural events and borders on the Arche de la Nature, an expanse of green made up of a forest, playing fields, a river museum and an educational farm – an ideal address for families. Le Mans is also home to four museums, several cinemas showing the latest films and plenty of restaurants, bars and nightclubs.

www.lemans-tourisme.com



A great holiday idea
from paysdelaloire.co.uk

MAGICAL NUIT DES CHIMÈRES IN LE MANS

In July and August, explore Le Mans by night as you follow the trail of mythical chimeras and grylli – you'll discover the charms of the Cité Plantagenêt in a whole new light!

From €76 for 2 - 2 days/1 night

Price includes: 1 night, 2 breakfasts, treasure hunt (self-guided tour in the historical centre of Le Mans)

Valid: July and August 2016

Bookings: +33 (0)2 43 28 17 22



Photo Kevin Rouschausse

Stunning light installations transform the town of Laval.

The magic of Laval by night

Are you thinking of visiting Mayenne's capital? Why not plan your trip to coincide with one of the many cultural events in the town's calendar? Here's a brief guide. Text Juliette Cottin

Calling all computer nerds!

The "Laval Virtual" trade show showcases the latest technological innovations in the field of virtual reality. Some 150 exhibitors from 40 countries come each year to display their wares. The show is mainly aimed at professionals and students, but anyone interested in virtual reality is welcome on 26 and 27 March for the open days, which include events and entertainment for the whole family.

Unmissable arts festival

Since the festival "Les 3 Éléphants" moved from Lassay-les-Châteaux to Laval in 2008, it has become a firm fixture in the local calendar. This innovative arts festival features concerts with established stars and young talents, street art, shows for children, and inspired exhibitions and art installations. "Les 3 Éléphants" brings a festive atmosphere to the town centre – it even includes concerts in local bars. Come to Laval with friends or family or for a romantic break from 27 to 29 May 2016.

Laval by night

For the past two years, "Laval Tourism Night" has showcased the town's major tourist attractions and monuments via a whole night of activities: a cruise on the Mayenne, a "cheese" fashion show in the dairy capital, walks and bike rides, star gazing, a trip to Entrammes spa, and more. The programme includes around twenty cultural, artistic, culinary and sporting events – all free of charge. The third edition will take place in September 2016.

The other City of Light

From late November to early January, Laval's monuments are lit up at night for the "Lumières de Laval" festival. In every corner – on the river, along the quays and in the streets – spectacular light installations create a magical atmosphere. The illuminations, which change each year, attract some 200,000 visitors, who make the most of the season to enjoy the local Christmas markets and culinary specialities. This family-friendly event is guaranteed to make your children's eyes light up!

www.laval-tourisme.com



Photo Michel Plassart

The Carcassonne of the West

Guérande, a mediaeval and Celtic town known for its salt production, is sometimes referred to as the "Carcassonne of the West" for its imposing ramparts. This town of art and history enjoys a unique setting in the midst of the salt marshes and the wonderful Brière heathland, but the walled city itself is also well worth a visit. A series of tours are available: one offers an overview of the heritage and history of the mediaeval town, another focuses on Saint-Aubin collegiate church and Notre-Dame-la-Blanche chapel, and a third takes visitors along the famous ramparts and explores the military history of these fortifications. www.ot-guerande.fr



The Château de Saumur stands proudly over the town and houses some fascinating collections.

Saumur: bubbly, heritage and horses

The town resembles many along the Loire, with its attractive blend of heritage and vineyards. But Saumur is above all known for its equine tradition. Text Sébastien Rochard

The Château de Saumur

The château, a listed historical monument since 1862 and a gateway to the region's history, is perched high above the town of Saumur and the majestic Loire. Once a royal fortress before passing into the hands of Philippe Duplessis-Mornay, it is now also a museum, hosting a variety of events and remarkable collections of decorative arts, including one of France's finest collections of earthenware. An equine museum is also housed within its walls, reflecting the tradition of the nearby "Cadre Noir".

Cave dwellings

It's impossible to come to Saumur without stopping to admire one of the former cave dwellings carved into the rock face. Some have since been turned into wine cellars (including the prestigious Bouvet-Ladubay and Ackerman), others into museums (such as the mushroom museum in Saint-Hilaire-Saint-Florent), and the "Pierre et Lumière" underground model village – also in Saint-Hilaire-Saint-Florent – features sculpted models of around twenty tourist sites in Anjou and Touraine.

The equine capital

The centre of Saumur has a number of fascinating places to visit on foot, by bike or by horse-drawn carriage, some of which are predictably linked to the town's horse riding heritage. The famous Cadre Noir dressage academy is 10km away, but Saumur itself is home to the Musée de la Cavalerie (horse riding museum) in the military district, as you enter the town via the Pont du Cadre Noir. Continue your visit with Saint-Nicolas church, then take the pedestrian street until you reach Saint-Pierre church. And don't miss the Saturday morning market with its wide range of quality produce.

Île Millocheau

This island is the place to go on a scorching summer's day. Together with Île d'Offard, Île Millocheau links the two sections of Saumur, flanked on both sides by the Loire. The island has a natural lake that is open to the public, and a watersports base.

www.ot-saumur.fr



Photo André Lamoureux

Rich heritage in Fontenay-le-Comte

This town of art and history, the former capital of Lower Poitou (now part of Vendée), can be explored via two guided tours: one takes you through the winding streets of the Renaissance district in the footsteps of the famous writer Rabelais; the other reveals another side to Fontenay via its ancient underground galleries. Two guided tours of the museum and its remarkable collection of Gallo-Roman glassware are also available.

www.tourisme-sudvendee.com



The banks of the river Erve have long been home to flour and paper mills.

Vibrant local heritage

The Coëvrons-Mayenne region of art and history, covering more than a quarter of the Mayenne department, has some outstanding natural and heritage sites. Text Pierre-Jacques Provost

The mediaeval town of Sainte-Suzanne, perched high above the valley and known as the "Pearl of the Maine", has a superb 17th-century château that is a jewel in the department's crown. At mezzanine level in the château, in a mediaeval room with vaulted ceiling, we find the office of Pascal Trégan, Head of the Region of Art and History. "When I arrived in Mayenne in 1999, I didn't think for a minute that I would discover such a wealth of natural and historical heritage. Few people outside Mayenne – and even those living here – are aware of all that it has to offer."

A stroll through time

This area is home to six outstanding tourist sites. "We're lucky enough to have six sites within a fairly small area, each of which perfectly encapsulates an aspect of Mayenne's history," continues Pascal Trégan. If you want a short break where you'll be transported back through the ages, this is certainly the place to come. The Erve valley, with its jagged rock face, carves through a series of *causses*, or limestone plateaus – unusual in western France – creating prehistoric

caves and galleries with rock paintings that are only now being revealed and preserved. "Just a few kilometres away is Jublains, the largest Gallo-Roman site in western France, with remains of Roman baths, a temple, a theatre and even a fortified warehouse, the only one of its kind," says Pascal Trégan. The department's other historical sites include Carolingian architecture at the Château de Mayenne, Romanesque and Gothic religious heritage in Évron, the mediaeval town and castle in Sainte-Suzanne and the castle in Lassay-les-Châteaux.

Bringing heritage to life

One aim of the region of art and history is to promote local heritage. Pascal Trégan and his team run around a hundred events each year between March and October, including guided tours, themed discovery tours, heritage walks, workshops for children, open-air films at heritage sites and concerts in churches. This is the perfect way to explore the area's most popular attractions and also to discover lesser known sites. Consult the 2016 agenda at chateaudesaintesuzanne.fr

Perche Sarthois and Loir Valley

The Loir Valley region of art and history is going all out in 2016 to celebrate its tenth anniversary, with organised walks, themed tours, workshops and shows.

One attraction that deserves a special mention is "Alea Jacta Est", on the Cherré archaeological site in Aubigné-Racan. Excavations began here in 1977, revealing a Gallo-Roman complex dating from the 1st to the 3rd century A.D.

Extending north-east from the Sarthe is the area known as Perche Sarthois, recognised as a region of art and history in 1998. It lies at the confluence of the Le Mans and Paris basins and is full of characterful little towns such as Montmirail and Saint-Calais. Ferté-Bernard, the main town in this region of 80,000 people, has a historic centre which offers a range of activities in season to help visitors discover the rich heritage of Perche Sarthois.

www.perche-sarthis.fr
www.vallee-du-loir.com



The increasingly popular Nantes wine region is surrounded by characterful villages (here Clisson) and picturesque châteaux.

Exploring the heritage of Nantes wine region

The Nantes wine region has scenic landscapes dotted with vineyards. In 2011 it was awarded special heritage status by the French Ministry of Culture. Text David Prochasson

There's the orange Italian-style architecture along the river Sèvre, epitomised by the town of Clisson. Then there are the green vineyards growing *melon de Bourgogne*, the grape used to produce Muscadet. And finally there's the deep blue of the Loire as it flows northwards, floods the Goulaine marshes and joins the Sèvre. These three colours encapsulate the identity of the Nantes wine region and its status as a region of art and history. The two main aims of this quality label, created in 1985 by the French Ministry of Culture, are to protect and showcase local heritage – including architecture, natural landscapes, and also the collective memory of the area's thirty towns and villages and their inhabitants. "We have a very broad understanding of the word 'heritage'", explains Stéphane Bureau, Architecture and Heritage Officer for Nantes wine region as a region of art and history. "We've put on tours of contemporary architecture, tram-train trips, landscape interpretation workshops and rail discovery trips." To find your way around the region, keep your eyes peeled for the quality label. All year round, the tourist information centres organise a range of themed discovery tours with expert tour guides. And a series of explanatory brochures entitled *Laissez-vous conter...* provide an overview of all

the sights in different areas in the region. The brochure about Clisson presents the beautiful view from the bridge over the valley: "It's the perfect spot to admire the various periods of architecture in Clisson," explains Stéphane Bureau. As you turn through 360°, you see the key elements of the natural landscape: the Sèvre Nantaise and the Moine which join together in Clisson, the causeway which facilitates the operation of the water mills, and the rugged landscape which made Clisson a strategic military site. You then begin to glimpse the architectural features, such as the mediaeval castle overlooking the town and the Italian-style architecture captured in the brushstrokes of many a painter.

Other brochures, available in tourist information centres or on the Nantes wine region website, describe local sites including the village of Saint-Fiacre, the Château de Goulaine and the Divatte levee. A brochure on the river Sèvre is due to be published this year. In its role as a region of art and history, the Nantes wine region also puts on several events for young people, such as stone masonry workshops at the Château de Goulaine, one of the last Loire Valley châteaux before the river flows into the Atlantic.

www.vpah-paysdelaloire.culture.fr



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Architecture in town and country



Photo T. Thudor

Thatched cottages in Brière

These traditional dwellings are part of the landscape in Brière. Thatched cottages – traditional houses with roofs made of tightly packed reeds – are enjoying a real comeback. The material for the roofs used to come from the 8,000 hectares of reed beds in the surrounding marshes but is now largely imported from Camargue. The village of Kerhinnet, with 18 thatched cottages that were restored in the 1970s, is a great place to discover these traditional houses. www.parc-naturel-briere.fr

Forty small towns of character

The Pays de la Loire region is liberally sprinkled with traditional towns and villages. From Lassay-les-Châteaux in Mayenne to Vouvan in Vendée, not forgetting Montsoreau and Montreuil-Bellay in Maine-et-Loire and Vivoin in Sarthe, they perfectly reflect the charm and inimitable *art de vivre* of Loire country.

www.pcc-paysdelaloire.fr



Photo Yvan Georget

Slate roofs

To suggest that the origins of slate roofs are linked to the history of the Loire and Anjou would be something of an understatement. Slate roofs are thought to have been invented here by Lucinus, a Bishop of Angers way back in the 6th century. Dark blue shale is not only a characteristic feature of Loire Valley architecture; it has also played an important part in the area's history and industry. For six centuries, slate was extracted from the quarries in Trélazé, the second largest town in the Angers conurbation.

Cave dwellings

The Saumur region is the undisputed cave kingdom of France, with more than a thousand kilometres of underground galleries. This geological feature has been put to good use over the years, in *tuffeau* stone quarries, mushroom farms and museums. And since the 1980s, several people have taken up residence in the caves, reviving a forgotten way of life: back in the 18th century, virtually half the population of the southern Saumur region lived underground!



Photo Dominique Drouet

Traditional houses in Vendée

There are four traditional dwellings to look out for in Vendée: characteristic white fisherman's cottages with blue shutters, which can be found in the winding streets of Saint-Gilles-Croix-de-Vie or La Chaume; *borderies* or small farms, which housed all farming activities under a single roof; thatched-roof *bouirines*; and sprawling rural *métairies* with several outbuildings.

Roussard stone, a Sarthe speciality

Roussard is an iron-rich, rust-coloured sandstone which can be seen in buildings all over the upper Sarthe area, giving the local architecture a radiant quality. It is a unique stone that is part of the area's geological make-up. The only quarry still in production is La Bazoge, in the hamlet of Les Calonnes.



Photo Dominique Drouet

"We need to fly the flag!"



Bruno Retailleau
President of the Pays de la Loire Region

What are the main aspects of your tourism policy?

Firstly, it's very important to point out something that I think is not mentioned enough: tourism in Pays de la Loire brings in approximately €2.6 billion in added value – almost as much as the entire agrifood sector. It's a key driver in the region's economy and one that we should all be trying to promote – by encouraging those involved in tourism to join forces and come up with combined packages, by stepping up our efforts to target new visitors abroad, and also by organising and supporting major national or international events in our region. The best way we can boost tourism is to increase our visibility through major events. And I know what I'm talking about – I used to be President of the Vendée Globe! From the Le Mans 24 Hours to the "Folles Journées" festival, not forgetting other major cultural events and

Bruno Retailleau, President of the Pays de la Loire Region, identifies the priorities for tourism in his area. He believes it's vital to boost the region's visibility.

sports competitions, our region has a real energy and commitment to reaching beyond its borders, and that directly benefits the tourism industry. We need to strengthen this trend.

Can we expect major changes in the region's tourism priorities?

Tourism isn't something that's politically motivated, so it's not about trying to push a new agenda. But I am certain of one thing, and that's that we need a real regional strategy in the area of tourism. Our region is home to some tourist destinations that already have a strong identity – La Baule, the Loire Valley, Nantes and the Vendée Coast, for example – but the "Pays de la Loire" destination itself isn't yet well known. We need to create a Pays de la Loire "brand", without ignoring the breadth of regional diversity we enjoy here in Pays de la Loire – something of which we should be rightly proud.

Do you think that enough is being done to showcase the heritage in the Pays de la Loire region?

Here in Pays de la Loire we are lucky to have an incredibly rich heritage. When you cross our region from east to west along the Loire, or from north to south along the Atlantic coastline, it's impossible to ignore the sheer diversity of natural landscapes and cultural heritage. And I'm keen for the region to showcase this unique heritage more effectively – at all the major attractions, such as the Passage du Gois, the remarkable village of Montsoreau and

Fontevraud Abbey – but also more broadly, helping to preserve and promote lesser-known local heritage, which plays such a vital part in our region's character. It's incredibly important for us to uphold this character: nowadays, tourists are looking for destinations that are unique and authentic. The future of tourism is about gaining in quality, not just in quantity.

What are the most urgent measures that need to be taken to develop tourism in the region?

First and foremost, we need to listen to tourism professionals. We're not here to do their job for them; it's up to us to create an environment that facilitates their work. Only by taking into account all the expectations of the different sectors that make our region attractive for tourists – from hotels and restaurants to the equine industry – will we be able to introduce a new regional tourism strategy that is firmly rooted in today's economic realities and is therefore more effective. It's also vital for us to increase the visibility of Pays de la Loire, both in the media, via a concerted effort to promote tourism, and also at specialist trade fairs, where we should be strengthening our presence. If we want to attract more tourists, we need to fly the flag for our region!



The Passage du Gois, between the mainland and Noirmoutier, is one of the region's top tourist attractions.



Cinema

A region with cinematic charm

Monsieur Hulot's Holiday, César and Rosalie, On Guard, Cyrano de Bergerac, The Man in the Iron Mask, Le Mans, Murderous Maids... The list of films shot on location in the Pays de la Loire is long. Local Nantes-based director Jacques Demy may have shown the way, but other film makers soon flocked to the region – especially those looking for scenic locations.

The film "Les vacances du Petit Nicolas" was shot on location in Noirmoutier in 2013.

A French blockbuster in Noirmoutier

A film shoot in the height of summer? In 2013, Noirmoutier decided to take the gamble. Les Vacances du Petit Nicolas certainly made its mark on the island – and on the silver screen. Text Annie Rapin

It all started with a film director's vision. On holiday on Noirmoutier, Laurent Tirard (who directed *Le Petit Nicolas* in 2009) fell in love with the Plage des Dames, a beach that backs onto La Chaize forest at the tip of Noirmoutier. "He immediately realised that the hotel could be easily transformed for *Les Vacances du Petit Nicolas*," recalls Franck Depoux from the town hall. "The unspoiled landscapes would be ideal for creating the atmosphere of 1960s beach resorts. A residential centre even agreed to house the crew for three months." Preparations got under way. Around a hundred Noirmoutier locals were delighted to be cast as extras, while long-standing residents offered guidance to the crew, introducing them to La Guérinière, Sion-sur-l'Océan and even the Île d'Yeu. "We closed streets and removed benches and street furniture." Beach huts were repainted light blue and the "Beau Rivage" hotel turned lemon yellow.

Action!

"We started filming on 17 June," recalls Franck Depoux. The all-star French cast included Kad Merad, Valérie Lemerrier, Bouli Lanners, Mathéo Boisselet and Dominique Lavanant,

who stood in for Bernardette Lafont at the last minute after her untimely death. "For the big wave scene, the Plage des Dames was completely closed to the public for several days of rehearsals and shooting. Then we opened just the top of the beach, which meant that we could contain the crowds of tourists." The production team had to try to maintain consistent lighting and landscapes despite the changing tides and unpredictable weather. Up to 23 July, then for the whole of September, actors could be seen on the island – including the young Mathéo, a local from La Bruffière, who starred as Nicolas. One year later, on 9 July 2014, the film opened, attracting an audience of more than two million in a couple of months. On Noirmoutier – even though the name of the island is only listed in the credits – the economic impact has been extremely positive. "From the B&Bs and restaurants frequented by the actors to boat hire, décor and costumes, the film is thought to have generated some €1.1 million for the island. It's the biggest film ever shot on Noirmoutier."



Photo AFP

Jacques Demy, the pride of Nantes

Born in 1931 in Pontchâteau, Jacques Demy spent his childhood in a flat on the Cours des 50 Otages in Nantes. So it was natural for him to choose his city as the setting for two of his most successful films (*Lola* in 1961 and *Une chambre en ville* in 1982). The director filmed some scenes in the famous Passage Pommeraye, where as a child he traded in a stack of books for a video camera. He also chose Nantes' harbour atmosphere for his *The Young Girls of Rochefort* and *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*.



The Château du Plessis-Bourré in Écuillé, Maine-et-Loire, has been used as a set for several swashbuckler movies.

On location in Anjou and Sarthe

The outstanding heritage of Maine-et-Loire and Sarthe regularly attracts film and TV directors. Texts Sébastien Rochard and Pierre Jacques Provost

You may think that visiting eight heritage sites in Anjou in under three hours is a little ambitious. But nothing could be simpler – you just need to settle down in your armchair and watch *La Dame de Monsoreau*, a 2008 feature-length drama loosely based on the book by Alexandre Dumas. The film features a jumble of shots of local châteaux – Plessis-Macé, Plessis-Bourré, Brissac-Quincé, Brézé and Montreuil-Bellay – as well as the Manoir de Launay, former residence of King René, and the Royal Abbey of Fontevraud. Strangely, the only château not listed in the credits is the Château de Montsoreau itself! That aside, one thing remains clear: Anjou's relationship with the film industry is all about its architectural heritage.

"In Maine-et-Loire, we don't have mountains or a coastline. Our real distinguishing feature is the number of châteaux and manor houses we have that are furnished or still lived in. That's what attracts producers and directors," explains the Pays de la Loire Film Commission. Here, the film sets are places that you can visit for yourself, from the cobbled streets of Angers (*Ces dames aux chapeaux verts*, way back in 1929) to Fontevraud Abbey (Bertrand Tavernier's *Let*

Joy Reign Supreme and *La cage aux rossignols* in 1944), not forgetting the elegant Château des Briottières in Champigné, where Hugh Grant and Emma Thompson starred in *Impromptu* in the late 1980s. But perhaps the most famous of the region's film sets is the Château du Plessis-Bourré, in Écuillé. It has served as the perfect

Fanfan la Tulipe, On Guard and Cyrano de Bergerac

backdrop for swashbuckling adventures such as *On Guard* in 1997 and *Fanfan la Tulipe* in 2003. It was also the scene of Mélanie Thierry's starring performance as *The Princess of Montpensier*, directed by Bertrand Tavernier – forty years after Catherine Deneuve's sparkling turn there in Jacques Demy's *Peau d'Ane* in 1970.

Le Mans and its famous 24-hour race track have also attracted a host of film makers. Many films have been shot in Sarthe, and several great actors, including Hollywood stars, have trodden the cobbles of the Plantagenet City or the tarmac of

the race track over the years.

In 1970, Steve McQueen arrived in Le Mans to play a driver in the 24-hour race. The shoot was fraught with difficulty and the film was a commercial flop, though that didn't stop Le Mans from becoming a cult location for devoted fans. In Sydney Pollack's *Bobby Deerfield*, filmed in 1976, Al Pacino starred as a racing driver. And in 2002, *Michel Vaillant*, an adaptation of the famous comic by Luc Besson, was also shot in Le Mans.

The historical city itself has also hosted its fair share of famous names: Philippe Noiret and Jean Rochefort in Bertrand Tavernier's *Let Joy Reign Supreme* in 1974; Gérard Depardieu in *Cyrano de Bergerac* by Jean-Paul Rappeneau in 1989; Daniel Auteuil and Fabrice Luchini in *On Guard*, the 1997 Philippe de Broca film; and John Malkovich, Jeremy Irons and Leonardo DiCaprio in Randall Wallace's *The Man in the Iron Mask* in 1998, to name but a few.

The Plantagenet City was also the location for Jean-Pierre Denis' *Murderous Maids*, starring Sylvie Testud and shot in the very city where the scandal occurred.



Louane Emera, Luca Gelberg, Karine Viard and François Damiens, was partly shot at a farm in Mayenne

The Cousins play host to *La Famille Bélière*

Blockbuster film La Famille Bélière was shot at the Mayenne-based farm of the Cousin family. Nathalie Cousin tells us what it was like having a film set in her house. Text Juliette Cottin

How did you end up hosting a film set on your farm?

Nathalie Cousin: "We had recently come into possession of a farmhouse with 25 hectares of land. My husband Cédric had been living a few kilometres away since 2004, so we put the farm up for sale on a property website. When the film crew contacted us, we initially thought it was a joke. We wondered if these Parisians actually realised where they were headed – the farm is in the middle of nowhere! But director Eric Lartigau had fallen in love with the place. That was in June 2013. Over the summer, they came and put up all the sets, and the film was shot over five weeks in September and October."

What memories do you have of the shoot?

"We got quite a shock when 60 people turned up! We didn't realise it took so many people to make a film. They were very friendly and interested in our life here, and we were interested in their work. We spent a lot of time on the set. We let them use our cows and our calf Obama! Eric Lartigau and lead actor François Damiens often asked my husband for advice to make sure the scenes would be realistic. I was given a part as an extra in one scene, together with two friends. It was an intense, tiring experience, but

it was a great adventure and it's given us some fantastic memories."

What have you been up to since the end of filming?

"We were quite nostalgic for a while afterwards when we had to go back to our everyday life. We didn't expect it to be such a hit – and neither did they! Now we get tourists coming to take selfies in front of the house with the red shutters. My daughter Maëlys, who's six now, knows all the songs by Louane, who starred in the film, off by heart, and she has a treasured photo where Louane is giving her a kiss!"

La Famille Bélière, a runaway success

With more than 7 million tickets sold in France, the film, released at the end of 2014, proved to be one of the French hits of 2015. The story of Paula, the only hearing member in an otherwise deaf family who discovers she has a gift for singing and decides to enter a prestigious radio competition, proved immensely popular with French audiences. The film's success was due to its poignant original storyline as well as a pitch-perfect cast, with François Damiens and Karin Viard as the parents of former *The Voice* contestant Louane Emera.



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Places to visit

Cycling along the river

Five national cycle routes cross the Pays de la Loire region: Vélo Francette, Loire à Vélo, Vélodyssée, V44 and V47. In total there are 2,500 km of waymarked cycle routes that are available all year round for those looking to explore the region on two wheels. Most of these routes run along the rivers in the Loire Valley.

Keen cyclists will take roughly ten days to cover the 615km Vélo Francette route from one end to the other.

The exciting new "Vélo Francette" route

The 615km-long Vélo Francette cycle route, open since June 2015, links Ouistreham to La Rochelle via the Pays de la Loire region. Text Juliette Cottin

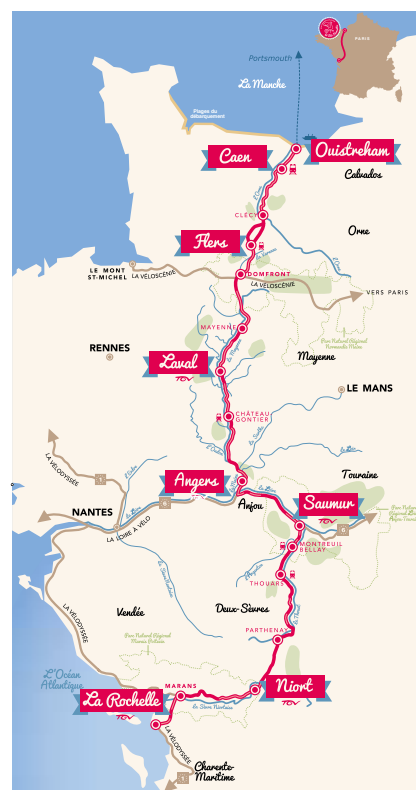
It's now possible to cycle all the way from Normandy to the Atlantic coast on a signposted cycle track. The 615km route crosses seven departments (Calvados, Orne, Mayenne, Maine-et-Loire, Deux-Sèvres, Vendée and Charente-Maritime), taking in natural heritage and historical sites. It often follows the rivers that wend their way through the region, particularly the Mayenne, the Thouet, the Loire and the rivulets that flow through the Poitou marshes. "Cyclists had been waiting for an alternative route to the "Loire à Vélo" for some time now," explains Michel Talvard, Head of Press Relations for the Mayenne tourist board. "The varied landscapes along this new route make for a fascinating ride." The "Vélo Francette" starts on the coast at Ouistreham before heading into the hills of Calvados (known as "Normandy's Switzerland"), along the towpaths in Mayenne, past the Loire Valley châteaux in Angers and Saumur and the Poitou marshes, and ending up in style in the beautiful harbour town of La Rochelle. While eager cyclists will attempt to cover the whole route from coast to coast, most tend to choose a shorter stretch that will take them a day or a weekend. "People often stay in one place over a weekend and do shorter rides out and back each day, but some tourists from

countries that are especially keen on cycling, such as Germany, discover whole areas of France this way." The entire route takes about ten days. It follows existing paths, such as the towpath along the river Mayenne, or quiet country roads. "The Vélo Francette is also a practical option for tourists because it goes through several towns and villages, meaning that cyclists can enjoy scenic countryside during the day and end up in a place with a choice of restaurants and places to stay in the evening," concludes Michel Talvard.

Preparing your trip

Although the route is fully signposted, the Vélo Francette website has plenty of additional information about the full route and ideas for shorter stretches. It lists the various tourist attractions and also gives details about accommodation options that are specially geared towards tourists. The "Accueil Vélo" label is awarded to those offering a bike shelter and sometimes an area for repairs, as well as a good breakfast. A dedicated guide with detailed information about the Vélo Francette route is due to be published by Éditions Ouest-France in 2016.

www.cycling.lavelofrancette.com





Two years ago a novel accommodation solution appeared in a number of campsites in the Anjou area – the platform tent. This is how it works. Text Sébastien Rochard

• Text Sébastien Rochard

panels. People can sit down around a wooden table underneath the platform. There's nothing Spartan about it," assures Clément de Carvalho – and this is especially true given that the walkers don't even have to worry about transporting their luggage, which is all taken care of by Bagafrance. Surely the last word in camping! Breakfast is enjoyed onsite, surrounded by nature, looking over the Loire.

Map of the Loire Valley region in France, showing the "Loire à Vélo" route (orange line) and other major routes (green line). The map highlights major attractions, including the Loire Valley Châteaux (yellow area) and the "Loire Valley" UNESCO World Heritage Site (light yellow area). Key cities and towns shown include Nantes, Angers, Saumur, Tours, Blois, Orléans, and Paris. The map also indicates the location of the "Loire Valley" UNESCO World Heritage Site and the "Loire Valley" Regional Nature Park. A legend on the right explains the symbols used: orange line for "Loire à Vélo" route, green line for Euroveloroute and other major routes, blue castle icon for major attractions, yellow area for "Loire Valley" UNESCO World Heritage Site, and light yellow area for Regional Nature Park. A scale bar and compass rose are also present.



Photo: Alexandre Lanouar

The Nantes-Brest canal is part of the Vélodyssée EuroVelo route between Roscoff and Hendaye.

By bike along the Nantes-Brest canal

Almost 90 of the Nantes-Brest canal's 364 kilometres are in the Loire-Atlantique department. We look at three stages between Saint-Nicolas-de-Redon and Nort-sur-Erdre. Text David Prochasson

Gone from the landscape are the bargemen who transported goods and farm produce up and down the canal. Nowadays the Nantes-Brest canal is used mostly by pleasure seekers. They meander happily through a diversity of landscapes, between meadows and marshes, on waterways that are part natural, part man-made. The canal, in all its picture-postcard beauty, was commissioned by Napoleon in the 19th century as a counter-measure to the British blockade of Brest. The canal's locks are impressive. There are 17 locks in Loire-Atlantique, and all are still operated manually. From March to October eleven permanent lock keepers (now a rarity in France) see boats safely up and down the canal. They live year-round in their attractive lockmasters' houses, complete with floral displays, and in winter they join the maintenance teams. On dry land, enjoying all this scenery, cyclists share the towpath with walkers and horse riders. The towpath itself is built of sand and cement, and runs alongside the canal from Nort-sur-Erdre to Saint-Nicolas-de-Redon, from the Quiheix lock to the Digue lock. Quiheix is our starting point, and can be reached by tram-train or by bike via the Vélodyssée cycle route from Nantes. "This is one of the three locks where we count the boats

coming onto the canal", explains Julie Declève, who heads up the natural environments and navigable waters units for the departmental council. "We make sure that it is always one of the most attractive – one of the most floral." Points of interest at Nort-sur-Erdre include the supply channel and its succession of arched bridges. This channel supplies the canal from the Vioreau reservoir. The stretch of water at Bout de Bois is a lovely spot to stop for a picnic or for a rest before continuing your journey. At Blain there is a pretty quayside and six locks across the town. To the north, the Gâvre forest offers a number of cycling loops for those who would like to take a detour or two. By the quayside, the mediaeval Château de la Groulais offers educational activities. "You then reach a section of canalised river," explains Julie Declève, "which has islands with a variety of natural habitats." Take the road to Guenrouët (22km). "At the quayside town of Saint-Clair the landscape opens out," says Julie Declève. "This is marsh country." A large number of wildlife species can be seen along the way to Saint-Nicolas-de-Redon. At the end of the trail you can return from Redon to Nantes by train.

www.velodyssy.com



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CYCLING AND CAMPING

The Vélo Francette trail along the river Mayenne

1st day: 65km – Laval / Mayenne
Lunch in Mayenne. Return via the greenway. Overnight in St-Jean-sur-Mayenne.

2nd day: 9km – Departure for Laval
Visit to the historic town centre and the Museum of Naïve Art. Lunch at your leisure.

From €40 per person (based on 2 sharing)
2 days/1 night

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This excursion is available without bike hire

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Bookings: +33 (0)2 43 49 45 26



Photo Joël Damase

The Benedictine abbey of Saint-Pierre in Solesmes, near Sablé, rises majestically above the river Sarthe.

V44, the alternative Sarthe circuit

The river Sarthe meanders its way through the western corner of the Sarthe department, and cyclists can follow its route along the V44. Text Pierre-Jacques Provost

The V44 starts in Alençon, in the Orme department, and quickly sweeps away from the river. It goes through Saint-Paterne, Arçonnay, Gesnes-le-Gandelin and Moulins-le-Carbonnel, rejoining the river Sarthe in Saint-Céneri-le-Gérais – one of the loveliest villages in France and the perfect spot for a first stop. The next section leads to Saint-Léonard-des-Bois, one of the main tourist spots in the Sarthe department, right in the heart of the "Alpes Mancelles", with its far-reaching patchwork of rolling views across Maine. The landscape gradually unfolds as you head towards Fresnay-sur-Sarthe, classified as a Small Town of Character, and then on to Beaumont-sur-Sarthe.

To get back to Alençon from Beaumont-sur-Sarthe there is an alternative eastern route that goes through Mamers. Fans of the Tour de France can stop in La Fresnaye-sur-Chédouet and revel in a visit to the cycling museum, "La Belle Echapée". After this the trail crosses the imposing national forest of Perseigne, and climbs to a panoramic viewpoint before descending towards Mamers. From there the route takes the Saosnois greenway along a former railway, crossing the small village of Vivoin, complete with its splen-

did priory, before arriving in Beaumont. The next section leads to the small mediaeval town of Beaumont au Mans, perfectly located at the half-way point in the circuit. The route then idles along little country lanes, passing through Montbizot, Neuville-sur-Sarthe and Sargé-lès-Le

In La Flèche the V44 crosses the V47, which runs along the valley of the river Loir

Mans, finally ending up in Le Mans. Between Le Mans and Noyen-sur-Sarthe the trail initially takes a greenway along the river Sarthe and its lateral canals. It then joins the road that goes through Fillé-sur-Sarthe, Roëzé-sur-Sarthe and La Suze-sur-Sarthe, where it cuts across woods to join Noyen-sur-Sarthe. There, if you want to continue along the river Sarthe you need to take a detour at Sablé-sur-Sarthe. This variation allows you to discover the villages of Avoise and the magnificent Small Town of Character, Asnières-sur-Vègre. Just before Sablé, you come to the Benedictine abbey of Saint-Pierre in So-

lesmes, rising majestically above the river Sarthe. The V44 trail leaves the river Sarthe at the lovely town of Malicorne-sur-Sarthe, with its pottery heritage. At the pretty sub-prefecture town of La Flèche the V44 crosses the V47, which runs along the valley of the river Loir. Cyclists leave the Sarthe department on a greenway, heading toward Baugé and the next leg of their journey in Anjou. www.lasarthavelo.com



Wine becomes the perfect excuse for a holiday

The stereotype of the wine grower jealously guarding the secrets of the wine press has become a thing of the past. Increasingly, wine growers are opening up their cellars and vineyards to the public to showcase their expertise. Wine tourism is a relatively new and rapidly expanding phenomenon. Bed and Breakfast accommodation has flourished among the Loire vineyards – sometimes in unusual forms.

Photo Dominique Drolet

At the "Domaine des Trois-Versants", proprietors Yves and Patricia run 3 B&B guest rooms and a gîte, and have been awarded the "Accueil Paysan" label.

Muscadet and rural hospitality

Yves and Patricia Bretonnière welcome their guests at the Domaine des Trois-Versants in Maisdon-sur-Sèvre and share the secrets of Muscadet. Text David Prochasson



Yves and Patricia Bretonnière

"Here we are on pure rock, in the very birthplace of Muscadet." Yves Bretonnière talks avidly about La Fêvrie, in the village of Maisdon-sur-Sèvre. There is a touch of pride in his voice, too. It is clear that he is an ardent champion of his region, his village and his mineral wines produced on shale soil.

Whether it comes from the mist that covers the hillsides of a morning, or those little vineyard plots on the hillsides plunging down towards the river Sèvre, when you listen to him you can't help but believe that this "rock" has its own personality. "Paradise is right here," he says, "with a glass of Muscadet." On the terrace outside two of their guest rooms there is a won-

*"Paradise is right here,
with a glass of Muscadet."*

Yves Bretonnière

derful view over the hillsides. Three B&B guest rooms and a self-catering gîte are on offer here at the vineyard. Himself the son of a wine grower, Yves was a vineyard employee before he and his wife Patricia took over from his employer in 1990. They have kept only three of the seventeen hectares they once cultivated, after deciding to concentrate on direct selling, at home, from their cellar. "Every stage of the process is important," he explains, "from the vine to the glass." Most of the couple's production goes for export, with the rest sold to loyal customers and tourists, who always receive the time and attention they deserve – but without any airs and graces. In 2016 they are to open to the public under the

Caves Touristiques appellation, awarded by the Interloire Federation.

Their pride, naturally enough, stems from their cellars, where they show off a bottling machine, corker, labelling machine and other old treasures. "We have 1,000 hectolitres of underground barrels accessible for visiting", says Yves. With pipette at the ready, he bends over to sample

the nectar. "The magic moment," he says with a smile. "Underground cellars were the old way in the Nantes area, and we have kept the tradition alive." The couple have turned these concrete, glass-lined cellars into a museum piece, where you can see into the very heart of Muscadet. In the reception room, a fire crackles in the fireplace. The tasting session tells its own stories.

www.accueil-paysan.com

Rooms with a view over the vineyard

How about staying at the vineyard itself? A number of vineyards in the region offer this option. In Maine-et-Loire, the Domaine de la Soucherie in Beaulieu-sur-Layon offers four guest rooms with views over the vineyard; in Vix, in the Vendée, the Château de la Sebranière in the Domaine Mercier, offers a 3-star hotel-restaurant; in Mareuil, on the edge of the Domaine Mourat, the Château Saint-André offers La Maison des Roses – family self-catering accommodation; B&B rooms are also available in Saint-Hilaire-de-Loulay, in the feudal château of La Preuille in the heart of the vineyard.



A boat trip along the Loire is transformed into a gastronomic adventure.

Gastronomic delights in full flow

Denis Rétiveau is a wine grower who offers trips along the Loire aboard his cabin boat, the Etoile qui Rit. Text Sébastien Rochard

Who said that it was unreasonable to mix one's pleasures? Whoever it was had obviously never set foot aboard the Etoile qui Rit – a traditional flat-bottomed cabin boat owned by Denis Rétiveau. The royal river has seen a huge increase in tourist traffic over the past few years, and even the odd traffic jam on the water. However, it is still rare for the delights of a river trip to be combined with an opportunity to taste the best wines. You will find that Denis Rétiveau is a different sort of boatman altogether. First and foremost he is a wine grower, working on the family estate of Les Champs Fleuris in Turquant. In 2013 his increasing interest in the river Loire inspired him to take to the water. This river captain is primarily a wine grower, and on his excursions you can sample the wines he has produced in his own vineyard. He may not be the only boatman to offer onboard wine tasting, but how many can accomplish the deceptively difficult task of navigating the Loire whilst offering a taste of wines produced by their own efforts? As a man of impeccable taste and

The excursion can be transformed into a gastronomic treat

everything that goes with it, his excursions can turn into gastronomic adventures of the first order. Between Montsoreau and Gennes, the Etoile qui Rit might tie up at lunchtime, and Denis will go off to collect a delicious lunch prepared in one of three excellent restaurants – Diane de Méridor (Montsoreau), L'Amuse-Bouche (Dampierre-sur-Loire) or L'Aubergade (Gennes). And whilst you are wining and dining on the Loire you can also discover the natural habitat. Navigating up and down the river has given Denis a deep insight into its flora, fauna, its subtle changes and its incredible diversity. For example, beyond the Château de Montsoreau, coming back up the river Vienne, you will see mangroves on the banks of the Loire – a vision that has nothing to do with the excellent wine and food you have consumed! A simple boat trip along the Loire is transformed into a wonderful treat for all the senses.

www.loire-vins-aventure.fr

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Every year on the first weekend in September, hikers can come and explore the Loire Valley vineyards.

Hiking and wine-tasting combined

Each year, the first weekend in September attracts 11,000 walking and wine enthusiasts throughout the Loire Valley, for the Vignes Vins Randos event. Text Juliette Cottin

On a sunny Sunday morning, not far from the sports hall in Sainte-Melaine-sur-Aubance, an animated crowd gathers excitedly round the official stands. Michel Trémouin is a member of the Brissac-Quincé walking club; his associate is a wine grower. Together they give the starting orders. The group sets off for 3 1/2 hours' hiking, punctuated by four wine-tasting sessions offered by wine growers under the Anjou Village Brissac and Coteaux de l'Aubance appellations. It's a leisurely walk along the pathway between the vineyards – and each person in the group wears a tasting glass around their neck. Friends and families chatter about the wines on offer or simply about the delights of the walk. Lucie, Aude and two Florians are taking part in the event for the first time. "We heard about it from a wine merchant in Nantes, where we live, explain Aude and one of the Florians. It's great to learn all about wine growing and discover the region at the same time." They reach the first of the vineyard stops. While some opt for a lesson in geology and vine

Tasting glasses around their necks

management, others prefer to taste the Caves de la Loire Coteaux de l'Aubance Feuille d'Or 2013. The lovely Moulin de Gaubourg B&B offers another tasting session, introducing the group to yuzu marmalade and Coteaux de l'Aubance from the Domaine de Gaubourg. Walking groups meet each other and mingle in a relaxed, friendly atmosphere. On the way to the third stop – the Chateau d'Avrillé with its magnificent view over the valley – François is chatting in English to Camille, an American student here to learn about the wine business. Camille is thrilled with her walk, and even plans to take the idea to the USA, as a novel way of teaching her fellow Americans all about wine. It's safe to assume that the last tasting session, to the accompaniment of the lovely voices of the A'Gienchina choral group, will be the crowning glory of the event, before most of the walkers head off to finish their adventure with a lunch or picnic in Sainte-Melaine.

www.vvr-valdeloire.fr



Photo Laurent Combet

Also on the agenda...

Other events based on wine and wine growing are held throughout the year. For example Loire Wine Week, in association with the Loire Valley Wine Trade Fair, held in Angers in early February. In summer, the Grandes Tablées du Saumur Champigny organises two festive evenings for tasting regionally produced wines. In October, the vineyards of Nantes play host to Les Muscadétours, offering a combination of viticulture, gastronomy, heritage and culture. Need we say more?



Sarthe also has its own fine wines and famous appellations: Jasnières and Coteaux du Loir

Cellars and stories in Sarthe

Tasting and visiting are high on the agenda at the Jasnières and Coteaux du Loir AOC vineyards. A little-known circuit that is well worth the detour. Text Pierre-Jacques Provost

Sarthe wines are synonymous with Pineau d'Aunis and Chenin. Although the AOC region itself is small, the reputation of the red, white and rosé Jasnières and Coteaux du Loir wines has spread far beyond the valley of the river Loir. Tourism has followed in its wake. Just like the most famous appellations in France (and therefore, it goes without saying, in the world!), the Loir Valley has been awarded the "Vignobles et Découvertes" quality label, which recognises wine growing areas that provide a selection of high quality visitor facilities, including accommodation, restaurants, museums, visits to cellars and tasting sessions. In short, the Loir Valley has an abundance of attractions for wine lovers.

The wine museum in Lhomme – one of the two villages that produce Jasnières (AOC since 1937) – is dedicated to local wine production. Hotels and B&Bs are plentiful. But, whilst other regions show off their renowned châteaux, this region has something truly unique to offer, with exquisite cellars carved into the tufa stone that is everywhere in the Loir Valley region. All these cellars have their charm, but some of the troglodyte caves are absolutely extraordinary. Take, for

example, the Domaine des Gauletteries cellar in Ruillé-sur-Loir, where Francine and Raynald Lelais conduct a visit to a cellar adorned with signatures before moving on to the tasting session. For several decades visitors have followed a tradition of leaving a record of their visit – writing their name and the date (or their birth date) on the tufa stone walls.

Four generations of wine growing, passed down from father to son

Such is the way of life at the Domaine de Cézin in Marçon, where the Fresneau family has been producing wine for four generations. Their cellar is another wonderful sight – its ancient bottles proof, if any were needed, that a passion for wine is woven into the very history of the region. Then there is La Chartre-sur-le-Loir, another very old cellar carved into the tufa stone at the Domaine Gigou, where Joël, a self-taught wine grower, set up his business in 1974. These cellars – and their owners – all tell a fascinating story.

www.vinsvaldeloire.fr



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On the trail of wines and cellars



Photo Laurent Combet



Photo Domaine Cassemichère

Ackerman fine sparkling wines

Maison Jean Ackerman, renowned for its sparkling Loire wines, is right in the midst of 7km of cellars carved into the tufa stone near Saumur. It offers an extraordinary voyage of discovery into a fascinating world of tradition and innovation. This fantastical expedition combines dramatic scenery, an explosion of colours and a world of enchanting aromas.

www.ackerman.fr

Wine Museum in St-Lambert-du-Lattay

Located in the very heart of the Layon vineyard, the museum is a showcase for Anjou's wines and wine trade. As well as presenting a vast range of wines – 130 bottles demonstrate the exceptional keeping quality of Anjou-Saumur wines (since 1887, no less!) – a new display shows how containers and accessories have changed through the ages. A varied schedule of cultural activities is also on offer.

www.musee-vigne-vin-anjou.fr
www.vignoble-nantais.eu

Domaine de la Cassemichère

With the first rootstock planted in 1740, this vineyard can be considered the birthplace of Muscadet. This is one of the stories its owners like to tell during visits to the château or wine tasting sessions in the cellars. Outside, along a 2km trail, nine interactive terminals allow you to tour the vineyard with a tablet.

www.chateaucassemichere.fr

Wine and tasty appetisers at the Château de Coing

In Saint-Fiacre, Véronique Gunther and her daughter Aurore invite their guests to share their passion for wine. In this 16th century château, which was reconstructed after the French Revolution, guided tours tell the history of the castle and include a lesson in wine growing. Various formats are on offer for sampling wines and tasty appetisers. Every Tuesday and Saturday in July and August the château offers a light meal (€10) as part of the Voyage à Nantes event.

www.vgc.fr



Photo Laurent Combet

The Petit Train des Vignes in Chalonnes

This little tourist train is run by the "Chalonnes Par Vignes et Vallées" association, and combines a discovery tour of the rich heritage of the Loire Valley with a chance to taste local wines. The train starts with a tour of Chalonnes-sur-Loire on the banks of the river, and then takes to the hills, with their vineyards and unrivalled panoramic views over the heights of Angers, before returning for a tasting session of the various Loire wines.

www.capsurlanjou.org

Robert and Marcel, in Saint-Cyr-en-Bourg

It all happened in another era. Exactly 60 years ago, a number of Saumur producers joined forces to present their culture, wines and expertise to the world. The name may have changed but the spirit remains the same. Interactive displays throughout the underground passageways add a personal touch to the tasting sessions and the appreciation of fine aromas.

www.robertetmarcel.com



Photo © Puy du Fou Vendée Expansion

In 2015 the Puy du Fou theme park welcomed over two million visitors.

The Puy du Fou just keeps on getting better

Le Dernier Panache is the brand new show for 2016, and follows the fortunes of a naval officer seeking freedom in America in 1793. Text Annie Rapin

With over €10m invested in new attractions in 2015, visitors might well expect the same extravagance at the Puy du Fou in 2016. 2015 was a record year for France's second theme park, which reached a significant milestone by exceeding 2 million visitors in the season. Visitors typically spend two or three days there, and the Cité Nocturne hotels see occupancy rates of 85%. Having twice been voted the world's best theme park – in 2012 and 2014 – the Puy du Fou has risen to the challenge with even more ambitious plans.

After the Lovers of Verdun, which brought to life the Great War, a new show is to appear in the Grand Parc in 2016 – an original dramatisation created by the Puy du Fou teams, entitled *Le Dernier Panache*. This new extravaganza will follow the glorious destiny of a French naval officer, a hero of the American War of Independence, whose life changes dramatically in 1793 in a desperate bid for freedom. It is to be staged in a hall of spectacular dimensions, and is heralded as "a breathtaking,

epic and moving dramatisation with a totally original production". The fate of the Maupillier family, between the Middle Ages and the Second World War, is followed each season by audiences of 14,000 people from all around the world. Staging these shows depends on the efforts of 3,400 volunteer actors, and has featured some innovative technical installations over the last

The Cinéscénie relies on 3,400 volunteers

few years, including 3D video projection and decor, and special lighting. In the space of six years, ten new scenes have been launched on the famous Cinéscénie, with unprecedented special effects. The most spectacular of these are the 50 drones – the first airborne fleet in the world able to perform an aerial ballet in choreographed synchronisation, carrying "giant candles" high above the stage show.

www.puydufou.com

Grand Parc open from April to September.

Cinéscénie from June to September



Parks aplenty

Pays de la Loire has a large number of theme parks. Take, for example, Terra Botanica, near Angers, which immerses you in the wonderful world of plants, or Petite Couère park with its Anjou village of 1900, which takes you right back in time. If it's rides and attractions you're after, look no further than Les Naudières, in Sautron, near Nantes, or Papea, in the Sarthe department. In Mayenne, the Manoir de Merlin takes you to an enchanted world, whilst in Noirmoutier and Saint-Hilaire-de-Riez respectively you can dive right into water attractions at Océanile and Atlantic Toboggan.

www.enpaysdelaloire.com



Photo Dominique Drouot

Doué-la-Fontaine Biopark has established a worldwide reputation for its biodiversity.

An excursion into the animal world

Doué-la-Fontaine Biopark is both a sanctuary for 1,000 animals from endangered species and a major tourist attraction. Text Sébastien Rochard

When describing a visit to Doué-la-Fontaine, a child might refer to a zoo or a wildlife park. He almost certainly won't call it a biopark. And yet the word is significant, and bears witness to the commitment of all the teams that have been involved since the park opened over 50 years ago. Doué-la-Fontaine Biopark may not be the biggest or best known of France's wildlife parks, but it has one of the best reputations in the business, based on its commitment to an ethical approach. Some may say that a commitment doesn't attract visitors. The Biopark, however, has the distinction of living up to its environmental aims. Its exceptionally well-designed, 14-hectare site is home to nearly 1,000 animals, representing 130 species. Located a few kilometres from the banks of the Loire in a former falun quarry, the park offers a large number of cave habitats. An ideal situation for visitors and animals alike, because the very nature of the rock allows each animal's habitat to be sculpted and fine-tuned to its particular needs. Doué-la-Fontaine Biopark celebrated its

Optimum animal welfare combined with a visual treat for visitors

50th anniversary in 2011. Over half a century of dynamic forward thinking have made the park what it is today, and it's all down to its founders, the Gay family. The aim of the park is to combine optimum animal welfare with a visual treat for visitors. A highly successful innovation at the beginning of the millennium was the installation of the "biozones" that have forged the park's reputation. And so the giraffe camp, rhinoceros valley, the South American aviaries and the okapi sanctuary offer unrivalled visual spectacles. Nearly half the 130 species living at the park are endangered species and, in keeping with the aim of raising public awareness of conservation issues, there are various activities for children, including totem poles containing simple animal information, the footprint table, exhibitions aimed at children and sculptures throughout the park.

www.bioparc-zoo.fr



Photo Gilles Kervella

Wildlife attractions abound

In addition to the Doué-la-Fontaine Biopark, the Pays de la Loire region boasts another ten wildlife attractions of various sizes, including La Boissière-du-Doré zoo and Planète Sauvage in Loire Atlantique, or Vendée's Les Sables-d'Olonne zoo and Natur'Zoo in Mervent. In the Sarthe department, you can visit La Flèche zoo or Pescheray zoo in Breil-sur-Mérize and lastly in Mayenne, the Refuge de l'Arche animal shelter in Château-Gontier.



Visitors to some of the Loire châteaux can try their hand at mediaeval contests.

Châteaux: bringing history to life

Several of the Loire châteaux offer fun activities for children and parents alike, thus creating the most convincing living monuments ever. Text Annie Rapin

Gilles de Rais was a most unpleasant character! This comrade in arms of Joan of Arc was reputedly the inspiration for Bluebeard, and was Lord of the Château de Tiffauges in the heart of the Vendée. The castle walls have stood the test of time. Younger visitors are enthralled by the terrible legend of Gilles de Rais (somewhat diluted for them, of course) and stare wide-eyed at demonstrations of the impressive war machines that have been reconstructed at the castle. Charge! It is a popular theme in all the region's châteaux. The Château des Ducs de Bretagne in Nantes, or the château in Saumur, for example. In Angers, the challenge is on for the vassals of King René.

They work on reproducing and understanding the depictions in the famous Apocalypse Tapestry, or creating their own coat of arms, and study long and hard to form a strategy for conquering a castle of this size. It is a similar story at Château de Clisson, which has long been deemed

an unassailable stronghold. Children can learn about life in a 13th century fortified castle, or the history of its fabrics and tableware.

Back in Anjou, the Château du Plessis-Macé has become synonymous with theatrical production since the advent of the Festival d'Anjou,

which takes place there every year. Theatrical visits organised all year round cater even for the youngest visitors. A slightly different event – a murder mystery – takes

place within the walls of the Château de Courtanvaux, in the far south-eastern corner of the Sarthe department. It takes the form of a giant Cluedo game. Here you can also take part in the popular treasure-hunting activity known as geocaching.

There are also treasures – of the archaeological and paleontological kind – to be found and reconstructed at the Château de Mayenne museum.

Suspense, treasure and battles – it's all to play for in the châteaux



Time for an adventure!

The Oh la l.a. Quelle aventure ! network was created in 2010, and includes 21 tourist sites in Loire Atlantique. A range of exciting and unusual educational activities are on offer for the whole family to enjoy. The network includes the châteaux of Clisson, Oudon, Goulaine, Châteaubriant and Ranrouët.

www.enpaysdeloire.com

For all the family to enjoy



Photo Gilles Kervella

The Transvapeur is 40!

Last summer, the Transvapeur tourist railway celebrated four decades of activity. The Transvapeur association was created by railway enthusiasts at a time when France was starting to turn its back on the steam era. The closure of the Mamers to Saint-Calais line, known locally as the "Ligne des Ducs" (or Dukes' Line) because it had been financed by local dukes, actually came at an ideal time for the Transvapeur association, which was looking for an available line.

www.transvapeur.fr

Decauville trains are still going strong

Semur-en-Vallon has its own railway. The little tourist train has become the main business activity for an association aiming to preserve the famous Decauville locomotives. These small trains, which were extensively used in farming and industry in the last century, now offer tourist rides and a visit to a railway history museum. Each ride takes about one hour fifteen minutes. Visitors are carried back in time aboard an authentic period train.

www.lepetittraindesemur.com



Photo Alexandre Lamoureux

A ride on board the Vendée Railway

Immediate boarding is underway for a 1948 steam train at Mortagne-sur-Sèvre station. From June to September this two and a half hour ride with commentary through the Vendée countryside and its steep valleys takes visitors to Les Herbiers, on a journey into the lives of the railwaymen of the past. Inside the train are activities for 5 to 13 year-olds. Why not make a real meal of it with lunch aboard the Orient Express carriage?

www.vendee-vapeur.fr

Espadon submarine tour

The Espadon submarine has been round the world 17 times. In a journey reminiscent of 20,000 leagues under the sea, you can visit the first French submarine to cross the North Pole under the ice. It is moored in the fortified lock in the port of Saint-Nazaire, and is a place of fascination for parents and children alike. Excitement guaranteed!

www.saint-nazaire-tourisme.com



The Air Museum

In Marcé, right next to Angers-Marcé Airport, Espace Air Passion is France's second aeronautical museum, with the size of its aircraft display only just behind that of the Air and Space Museum in Le Bourget. The site has an impressive collection of gliders, prototypes and legendary machines such as the Moynet or the 360-6 Jupiter or René-Gasnier, which made the first powered flight in Anjou, in 1908. You can also visit the restoration workshops.

www.musee-aviation-angers.fr



Photo Laurent Combet

La Mine bleue

In Noyant-la-Gravoyère, on the site of a former slate quarry – la Gatelière – and in the very heart of Anjou Bleu, tourism replaced mining as the main industry almost 30 years ago. Mine Bleue retraces the history of slate quarrying, taking its visitors 126 metres below ground by funicular railway. Once underground, a little mining train takes them around the circuit worked by miners a century ago.

www.laminebleue.com



The return of the "sauteurs" continues to enthral spectators in the finest tradition of French horsemanship.

Behind the scenes at the Cadre Noir

It's a legendary name in the equestrian world. Not far from Saumur, the Cadre Noir cavalry school continues the fine, long-standing tradition of French horsemanship. We take you on a guided tour. Text Sébastien Rochard

150 years on, the "calm, forward, straight" doctrine extolled by General L'Hotte, Ecuyer en Chef of the Cadre Noir between 1864 and 1870, still seems to be the mantra of his successors.

Just a few kilometres from Saumur, surrounded by fields and forest, the Ecole Nationale d'Équitation has for decades confirmed its reputation as a showcase for equestrianism not only in France, but worldwide.

It is here that the forty or so instructors of the Cadre Noir perform and teach their skills, in the most representative institution of French equestrianism, which was recognised in 2011 as an intangible cultural heritage of humanity. According to the head of communications Frédéric Mercier, this tradition is based not so much on technical aspects as on "the approach to getting the best out of one's horse".

On the 150-hectare site, the famous riders can easily be recognised in their black uniforms, shown off during public displays, galas or other events between April and October in the site's main arena, the Grand Manège.

At the entrance you can see the names of all the ecuyers who have worn the famous ceremonial

dress. A door to the side takes you to the outdoor arena, the "Carrière d'Honneur". On two sides of the arena are the imposing and prestigious stable buildings, housing 150 dressage horses in their red and green boxes. Inside one of these buildings the unassuming exterior of a room belies the treasures to be found inside. This is the tack room, with its saddles and bridles designed for each dressage horse individually. Each horse requires about an hour's careful preparation by a groom perfectly versed in the Cadre Noir's very own braiding technique.

Here, wisdom and expertise abound, and 100 metres further on you come to the school's veterinary clinic and farriers. The 300 or so horses of the Cadre Noir are shod every six weeks – each time by the same farriers.

There are various different opportunities – for complete novices and committed enthusiasts alike – to view the everyday life behind the scenes at the school, between April and October, both on show days and non-show days. A visit that can only serve to heighten the magic of the Cadre Noir!

www.ot-saumur.fr



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from paysdelaloire.co.uk

A JOURNEY BACK IN TIME AT THE PUY DU FOU

Voted the world's best theme park, the Puy du Fou is a profusion of extravagant shows and adventures for the whole family. In 2016, the journey back in time is set to continue with Le Dernier Panache, the greatest original dramatization in the history of the Puy du Fou!*

*The Thea Classic Award for the world's best theme park in Los Angeles in 2012, and the Applause Award for the world's best theme park in Orlando in 2014.

From €69 per person (based on 2 sharing)
2 days/1 night

Price includes: 1 night's accommodation in the park or nearby, with breakfast, 2-day entry ticket to the Grand Parc and entry to the night time show "The Organs of Fire" (depending on the season)

Valid: for yellow and green periods from Sunday to Thursday all season, and weekends in April, May and the last two weeks in September – please see the 2016 calendar.

Bookings: +33 (0)2 51 62 76 82

Events in 2016

Loire-Atlantique

Hellfest - Clisson

Clisson is to stage some 170 heavy rock concerts between 17 and 19 June. Heading up the bill are Rammstein and Black Sabbath. Having featured here in 2014, Ozzy Osbourne's Black Sabbath will appear again in the only French venue of their farewell tour.

www.hellfest.fr

Les Escales - Saint-Nazaire

The international music festival is back for its 25th edition between 29 and 31 July. The theme for 2016 is South Africa and the Cape. The atmosphere promises to be as festive as ever in Saint-Nazaire this year. www.les-escales.com

Rendez-vous de l'Erdre - Nantes

This jazz festival is generally considered the most popular in France, and is back for its 30th edition. From 25 to 28 August, some 150,000 spectators will enjoy the music as they stroll along the banks of the river between Nantes and Nort-sur-Erdre. www.rendezvouserdre.com

The Folle Journée, a classical extravaganza

The Folle Journée is a hugely popular event in early February that gives thousands of music lovers the opportunity to hear a series of high-quality classical concerts. In 2016, 150 concerts were held in 11 towns and cities across the Pays de la Loire.

www.follejournee.fr

Maine-et-Loire

Festival d'Anjou

This is one of the oldest theatre festivals in France, and the second largest open-air festival after Avignon. June will see the 67th edition of the Festival d'Anjou.

www.festivaldanjou.com



2016, the year of the bike in Anjou
2016 is the year of the bike in Anjou. The 6th edition of Anjou Vélo Vintage in Saumur will be a meeting place for cycling enthusiasts on 18 and 19 June. Sunday 19 June will also see the family cycling festival, La Fête du Vélo en Anjou, back for its 20th edition. These two events will be a perfect prologue to the Anjou stage of the Tour de France. This year, the world's top cycling race will arrive in Angers from Normandy on 4 July, with a start in Saumur the following morning.

anjou-velo-vintage.com ; fete-du-velo.com
letour.fr

Les Accroche-Cœurs

Every year in early September, this festival of street entertainment attracts over 250,000 people onto the main thoroughfares of Angers. Music, theatre, circus acts and cinema come together in a wonderful mix of entertainment, making this festival one of the liveliest events to take place in Angers.

www.angersloiretourisme.com

Vendée

2016 – the year of the sail

As a trial run ahead of the Vendée Globe, which will take place on 6th November, the Vendée is to stage a completely new and first-rate event, the solo transatlantic race from New York to Les Sables-d'Olonne. This race in the IMOCA class will set sail from Manhattan on 29 May and arrive in Les Sables d'Olonne between 6 and 9 June 2016.

www.vendeeglobe.org

Noirmoutier regattas

Over 100 private boats from the entire Atlantic coast will gather in Noirmoutier for a three-day event from 5 to 7 August, with the Bois de la Chaise Regattas promising a spectacular event on land and sea. There will be cultural events and festivities in the town centre, mast climbing, recreational workshops, free concerts, firework display at the château and more.

www.associationlachaloupe.org

Sarthe

Le Mans 24 Hours, 18 to 19 June

The 84th edition of the legendary endurance race will take place on 18 and 19 June 2016, with the festivities getting under way on the previous Sunday and Monday with the Scrutineering process – or technical checks. Practice sessions and qualifying rounds will take place on Wednesday and Thursday, followed by the drivers' parade through the centre of Le Mans on Friday, culminating in the race itself at the weekend.

www.24h-lemans.com



Le Mans Classic

The 8th edition of the biennial Le Mans Classic will take place between 8 and 10 July 2016 on the same circuit as the Le Mans 24 Hours, in a race wholly dedicated to the glory of the 24-hour race. It is a showcase for old cars that have previously taken part in the Le Mans 24 Hours.

www.lemansclassic.com

Mayenne

Vintage two-wheelers

Old bicycles will be dusted down and caps, braces and three-quarter length skirts will come out on 19 June for the 2nd edition of the Vélo Agglo Rétro in Laval in which participants can enjoy a bike ride along the River Mayenne.

www.laval-tourisme.com



Theatre and heritage

Every summer for the last forty years the Nuits de la Mayenne festival has been attracting spectators to towns and villages throughout the department. Live events are staged in typical heritage venues throughout the department, and set the scene for a shared experience between actors and the public. This 43rd edition will take place in July and August 2016.

www.nuitsdelamayenne.com



A great holiday idea
from paysdelaloire.co.uk

A FAMILY TRIP TO NANTES

This summer take the greenway and discover a host of breathtaking attractions, from the sculptures by Claude Ponti in the Jardin des Plantes to a discovery cruise along the Loire to see contemporary works of art, the Great Elephant and the Marine World Carousel, the amazing Château of the Dukes of Brittany with its reflection in the water mirror, a gigantic tape measure and much more.

From €215 for 4 people
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Valid: from 1 July to 28 August 2016

Offer valid outside these dates on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays, public holidays and on weekdays during school holidays

Bookings: 0892 464 044 (€0.35/min., calls from France only)

Try

Bobbing along on the river



Photo Gilles Kervella

Together, the Erdre basin, the Maine basin which incorporates the Mayenne, Sarthe, Oudon and Maine, and the Nantes-Brest Canal comprise 375km of navigable waterways that offer endless possibilities for boating. No licence required – simply take to the helm of a canal boat that can sleep up to 12 people and meander along the river, stopping as the fancy takes you. Explore the towpath along the Mayenne, the characterful villages in the meanders of the Sarthe, the elegant châteaux by the Erdre and the centuries-old locks on the Nantes-Brest Canal.

Picnic with local produce

This is a great idea for those visiting the region on foot, by bike, on horseback or by car. Simply phone up and say where you're planning to stop off the next day and a picnic will be waiting nearby for you, lovingly prepared with seasonal produce and regional specialities – all for just €10. Around ten producers including bakers and butchers are already involved in this scheme on the Loire à Vélo cycle route.

www.lepiqueniquedesartisans.fr

Safari Lodges at Zoo de La Flèche

The unique range of accommodation at La Flèche zoo offers visitors a chance to stay within spitting distance of the animals. Lodges inspired by cabins in Canada's Great North or exotic Asian-style bamboo huts – the choice is yours. If you're a fan of polar bears, French windows will give you an unbeatable view of your

furry white neighbours. If the forest is more your thing, the trapper's cabin is the perfect viewing point for a pack of white wolves. And in a cabin in the midst of a bamboo forest, prepare for an unforgettable encounter with the white tiger...

www.safari-lodge.fr

The laundry boat – a fascinating piece of history



Photo Mayenne Tourisme

The Saint-Julien laundry boat, built in 1904 and now fully restored, has been open to the public since October 2013. This is a great way to find out about the laundries that flourished along the river Mayenne in the 19th century. The boat, unique in France and a listed historical monument, is one of only two surviving relics of the 22 public laundry boats set up along the Mayenne after works were carried out on the river in 1850. It had around twenty washboards and could house some forty washerwomen in its flat-bottomed hull. The house where the launderer and his family lived can be seen on the first floor. The boat is moored at Quai Paul-Boudet in Laval and is open to visitors in summer.

www.laval.tourisme.com

"Green Venice" at a leisurely pace

Had you ever thought of exploring the Marais Poitevin by horse-drawn caravan? Relax and unwind in the beautiful marshland for six days as you travel at a gentle trot with this traditional, peaceful mode of transport. If you're lucky you'll see a deer at dusk or a heron fishing in the canal. The programme includes stops in local villages, boat trips and a farm tour.

www.sejourenroulotte.com

Sailor for a day in Les Sables-d'Olonne



Photo Michel Plassart

Find out about the work of a sailor on board a listed historical boat. On the Kifanlo, former hardened sailors will introduce you to traditional fishing techniques and give you a glimpse of what their life used to be like.

www.lessablesdolonne-tourisme.com

Boating on the Loire

Whether on board a traditional cabin boat in Montsoreau or Le Thoureil, on a river trip in Saumur or Angers or on an estuary cruise from Nantes to Saint-Nazaire, there are any number of ways to take to the majestic river Loire.

www.enpaysdelaloire.com

A balloon ride over rolling hills

A hot air balloon trip gives you a unique bird's eye view of the Vendée countryside. Relax as the breeze transports you gently over rolling fields and meadows and the Puy du Fou theme park. You'll feel quite literally on top of the world as you float up into the clouds and survey the magical spectacle below.

www.la-montgolfiere.com

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