

ESSENTIAL TRAVEL GUIDE SERIES

LOIRE VALLEY



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THE LOIRE VALLEY, FRANCE

The Loire Valley is one of the closest rural areas and wine regions to Paris, making it easily accessible for a few days for any visitor. Getting out of a large major center and exploring smaller towns and villages is a great way to experience the culture of a country. It is often something that is overlooked by tourists because of time constraints and logistics associated with

proximity.

This region of France is where the royals and nobles used to spend their summers, enjoying a slower pace of life. Here you will find grand châteaux, quaint farms and villages, wineries and plenty of history to be explored. Each château and its surrounding grounds feature a unique architectural style that is different from



the next. The Loire is excellent for sightseeing, cycling and taking in local French culture and cuisine with something to be enjoyed for young and old travelers alike!

I think it is important to address a potential language issue here as well. Like in Paris and other large centers, most people speak English (even if very little). You will have no trouble finding someone who speaks not only English but likely a number of other languages at each castle, major hotel, winery and tourist hot spot. What

might be a bit more difficult is navigating the language in smaller towns. If you are finding it difficult to communicate with staff at a restaurant, bed and breakfast, shop or smaller hotel, always remember that the Google Translate App is there to help! There is no shame in holding up a phone screen to someone to communicate in their native language. Be respectful and remember, you are in France where the national language is French, so please don't be upset when someone only speaks French. "When in Rome..." so they say.



How to Use This Guide

This guide will give you the highlights of what you can see in the Loire Valley, how to get there, get around, what to pack and more. I highly suggest taking a look at the list of castles and other sites included in the 'Things to Do' section and plotting out your course on a map. Decipher how much time you'd like to spend at each location and budget your time accordingly.



Logistics: When to Visit, Where to Stay, How to Get Around

When to Visit

I always recommend to visit European destinations in the shoulder seasons of Spring and Fall to avoid tourist crowds and visiting the Loire Valley is no different. There are a few additional reasons to stick to shoulder seasons in this region as well: weather and the Tour de France. France can get quite warm in the summer time and with that, I would suggest visiting one of the coastal regions rather than the landlocked Loire. The Tour de France also runs through this area making logistics a little tricki-

er and more costly. The winter months can also be quite cold and damp, making castle tours a bit miserable. You also would not be able to see the lovely gardens and chateau grounds which are often as impressive as the buildings themselves.

Where to Stay

The main cities and towns in the Loire Valley offer all of the amenities you could ever require, all with the charm you're hoping to find outside of Paris. Although the area looks quite large, each château and village are closer in proximity than you think which makes setting up camp in one of these centers a great way to experience the surrounding areas from one home base.

There are three towns or small cities that I suggest visiting while in the Loire: Blois, Amboise and Orleans. Each of these locations offers a variety of things to see and do, places to eat and shop and a great place to stay. I suggest making one of these places your mainstay location for your time in the Loire. For more on what to see and do in each of these locations, see the 'City Highlights' in the 'Things to See & Do' section of this guide.

Getting Around

There are a number of ways to get around in the Loire Valley – bus tours, cycling and by private vehicle. My favorite way to get around the countryside of any place is by rental car. Having your own vehicle to get around and explore the area can be a great deal of fun, plus it allows you the flexibility of traveling on your own schedule. Many rental cars are equipped with GPS but if not, Google Maps is the perfect guide.

Note that a few of the castles and attractions do charge for parking, however, it is not a prohibitive cost. Don't fret about fuel costs either as the vehicles you will rent in Europe are often highly fuel efficient. I suggest booking a rental car in advance for availability and better pricing.

If you choose to do a cycle tour, self-guided or otherwise, you will still require transportation of some kind to your mainstay town. The same is often the case for some bus tours, although there are a few companies that leave directly from Paris. With cycling and bus tours, it is highly recommended to book your tours ahead or bike rentals ahead of your arrival to ensure availability.

What to Pack & What to Wear

One thing that I love about visiting the countryside is the easy pace of life. There's no need to be all dressed up, unless you want to be. Packing for a trip to the Loire is quite simple because of the lack of formal requirements and dinner dress codes. Always consider the activities you'll be participating in when packing and planning out what to wear. Will you be hiking, cycling, paddling or simply strolling at a leisurely pace?

For the average traveler, I suggest a variety

of shorts, t-shirts, button down shirts, sweaters, pants or jeans, easy skirts and dresses and comfortable walking shoes. I also recommend bringing an umbrella and a rain coat with you as rainy days can be quite rainy! Dressing in layers can be helpful as temperatures can fluctuate from cool and rainy to hot and humid in just a few hours' time.

THINGS TO SEE & DO

Exploring the Châteaux

One of the main reasons to visit the Loire region of France is to explore its large number of impressive châteaux. These castles were once the vacation spots and summer homes of the French royal family and local nobility. There are many ways to explore each château as each offers its own unique experience. Some provide vast grounds to be explored either on foot or by rental bicycle while others have gardens full of mazes of blooms and other plants to get lost in. What is consistent for each location is there



Chateau Chenonceau

will always be an available audio guide that will provide you with the history and explanation of each room, piece of furniture or artwork and historical significance to the time of the château's prime.

Here are a few major châteaux that I suggest visiting while in the area:

Château de Chambord

Château de Chambord is the largest castle in the Loire Valley. It was once a game preserve and hunting lodge for the royal family. This immense and impressive structure was constructed as a secular rival to the Vatican (at the time) and features vast grounds that I would suggest exploring via rental bicycle. Because this château is so large, it will take more time to tour than others, so consider that when planning your visit. Guests can tour the château's inside rooms, turreted towers and balconies with incredible views of the surrounding land-

scape.

If traveling with a family, I suggest planning to take in one of the daily horse shows and livestock demonstrations. Also worth noting about this château is the adjacent village with a winery, chapel, market shops and a few cafés that offer both lunch and dinner. If you are only to visit one castle while in the Loire Valley, I highly suggest Château de Chambord.

Château de Villandry

Château de Villandry is most well-known for its stunning geometric gardens that have been maintained over the years by local monks. The château buildings themselves may not be as grand or impressive as some of the others you'll find in the area, but they do offer incredible lookout points for the famous garden pathways. This château is also next to a small village where you will find a number of places to dine for lunch and dinner, all along the main road



Chateau Chambord

leading up to the château. I suggest visiting early in the day to take in the tranquility of the gardens and avoid crowds, popping into one of the cafés for lunch before heading to your next destination.

Château de Cheverny

Château de Cheverny was one of the first French châteaux to open its doors to the public and is still maintained by one of its original owning families. This château has been bought, sold, donated and forfeited a number of times and because of this features a number of interesting restorations and finishes. The original building was used as a hunting lodge for the royal family and is most notable for its training of hunting dogs that visitors can watch being fed by their handlers each day.

Château de Chenonceau

Château de Chenonceau is a unique château in

that it is built on arched bridges that span out over the river. Although this château is smaller in square footage than some of the others in the area, it still offers expansive halls where balls and social gatherings were once held. This château was where the King of France used to house his mistresses and artwork that features these ladies is still featured on the walls in the building's study. The grounds offer stunning riverside walks and expansive flower gardens and an entrance through a long walkway canopied by trees several hundred meters tall.

Additional history for this site is that it was once a military hospital during the Great Wars. An exhibition about this can be found in the adjacent buildings where soldiers were once cared for. In the cellar of this building is where you will find the onsite wine tasting room for the Château de Chenonceau winery. Guests can taste the estate wines and purchase bottles and souvenirs to take home with them.



Château de Vaux-le-Vicomte

Château de Vaux-le-Vicomte

Château de Vaux-le-Vicomte is quite close to Paris making it easily accessible to travelers. This moated castle features stunning gardens that reflect the architecture of the building itself. This château is often considered to be like Versailles but less busy and has been featured in a number of movies and American television programs.

Château d'Amboise

Château d'Amboise is unique because it is on a large riverside hilltop. It is a bit of a trek to get to the top (pathways are paved or cobblestone) but the views make it well worth it. This château is easy to visit as it is located right in the center of the town of Amboise. Château d'Amboise has a very rich history which I won't spoil for you here, other than to mention that it once housed many royals, members of the Medici

family as well as Leonardo DaVinci.

Château Royal de Blois

Château Royal de Blois features four different architectural styles. It is also where Joan of Arc sought a blessing from the Archbishop before traveling to England. This château features an elaborate collection of buildings and rooms to be explored and features seasonal festivals and events to be enjoyed by visitors and locals alike.

City & Village Walks

There is much to be seen in each French town and village just by strolling the area. Each will feature a town square, lovely churches and cathedrals, a smaller château or manor plus a few other historic sites that make that place unique. Experience the quaint nature of these places by taking a stroll or leisurely bicycle ride by the river. Take in the shopping streets and



Château d'Amboise

local cuisine or simply take up temporary residence at a café table and observe passersby.

Cycling Tours

Cycling is a very popular way to experience the French countryside. When in the Loire Valley, you will see many cycling tours – both self-guided and in formal groups. It is a great way to experience the scenery and travel from one château to the next. Each château offers cycle parking so there is no need to worry about that. I highly recommend booking tours and reserving cycles in advance and of course, packing accordingly.

Wineries

If you're a North American traveler and have spent time in the wine regions of Canada and the United States, you might be a bit confused with finding and visiting wineries in Europe.

'Wine Trails' aren't as clearly laid out as they are in North America so planning ahead can be helpful. Wine is also named differently in France than it is in North America, citing the château, village or region on the bottle rather than the varietal itself.

Not all wineries offer tasting rooms at the vineyards themselves – many of them can be found in the nearby village or even on the grounds of one of the château. When driving through the countryside, keep your eyes open for winery and vineyard signs as they will direct you to local wineries. If you're unsure, you can always ask the staff at your hotel or at one of the main châteaux for directions and suggestions!

City Highlights

There are three cities that I would suggest making your 'home base' for exploring the Loire Valley close to Paris. Each city features great spots



France Cycling



to visit should you not want to venture too far!

Blois

Blois features so much incredible architecture and is city with hills that overlook its river valley and stunning Pont Jacques-Gabriel (Pont de Blois). One of its main sites of course is the Château Royal de Blois, the city's main landmark (see info in previous section), however there are other places worth checking out. Take a stroll along the river and take in the shops and traditional architecture or visit one of the town's gardens or many cathedrals. Highlights include: Les Jardins de l'Ancien Eveche, Cathedrale Saint-Louis, Basilique Notre-Dame de la Trinité, and Le Marché de Blois - Place Louis XII just to name a few.

I recommend visiting the Escalier Denis Pap-

in in the early evening where you can take a stroll through the winding shopping streets and have dinner at a local brasserie. If travelling with children, I highly recommend a visit to Maison de la Magie de Robert-Houdin (house of magic!) and the Natural History Museum. I would budget a minimum one day visit to explore Blois itself.

Amboise

Amboise is another stunning riverside town in the Loire Valley. The main site to visit in Amboise is of course Château d'Amboise which can be found in the heart of town, along the river. When visiting this part of the city, be sure to take a walk through the old quarter exploring the unique architecture and cobblestone streets. A stop at Rue National, their local market street, is a must for souvenirs and ice



cream! Located just on the edge of Amboise is where you'll find Parc Clos-Lucé, also referred to as "DaVinci House" where Leonardo DaVinci spent some of his last days as an inventor! This landmark is fantastic to visit with children and smaller family members as there is an interesting museum featuring highlights from DaVinci's life and work as an engineer. The surrounding park features interactive exhibits for kids to learn about basic engineering and physics that is fun for the whole family.

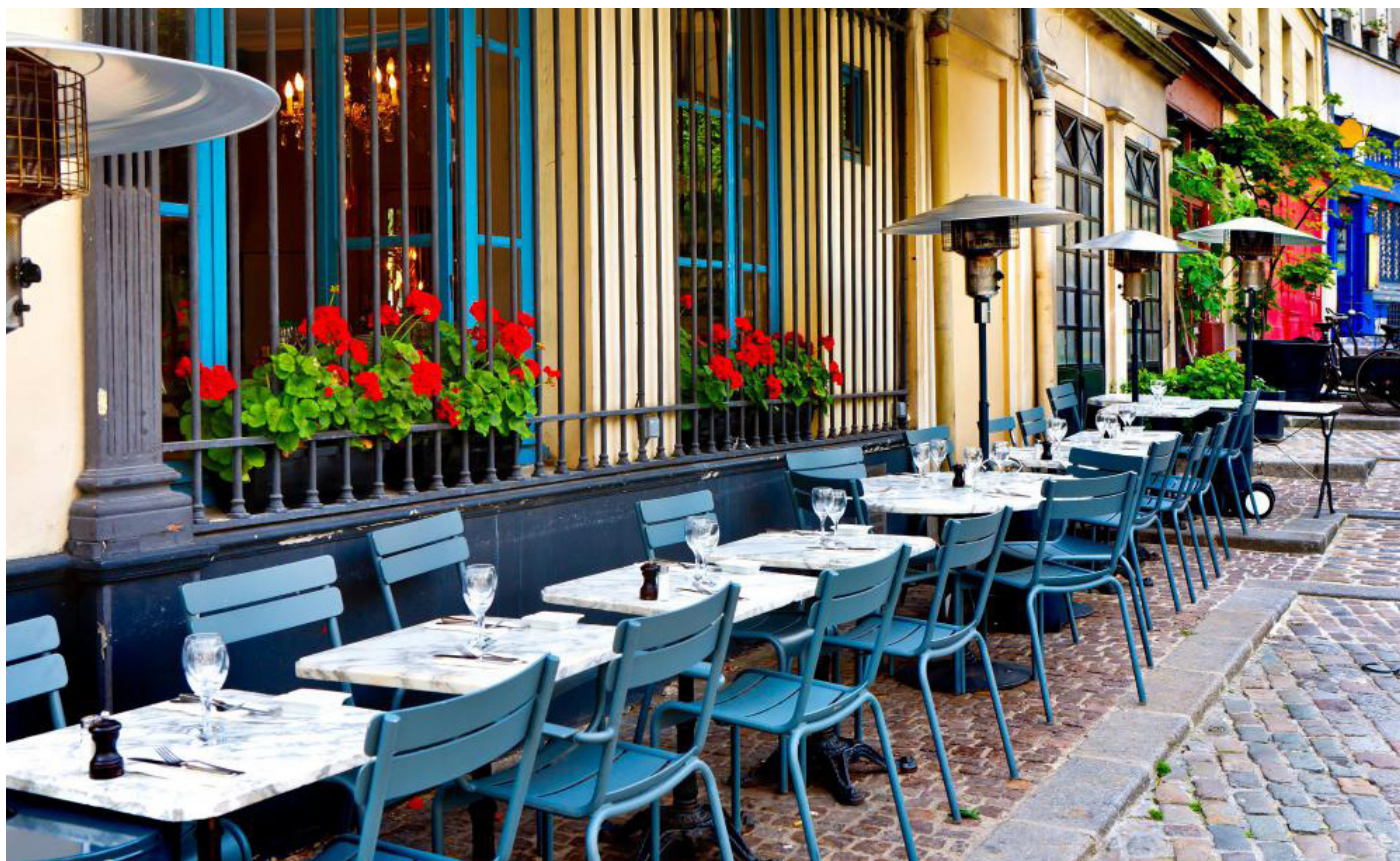
Orléans

Orléans is one of the most interesting old towns in the Loire Valley, rich in culture and history. Although it isn't home to a massive château like some of its neighboring cities, this central city is located in the heart of the Centre-Val de Loire making it the perfect home base for ex-

ploring the Loire Valley. Orléans is most noted for the homage it pays to the city's savior, Joan of Arc, and each year the city hosts a festival to celebrate their hero. If you aren't in Orléans during this festival, you can still visit the Maison de Jeanne d'Arc and take a walk down the adjacent shopping street that still maintains the architecture of 1400s Orléans.

Orléans is easy to navigate as many of the attractions you'll be looking to visit are all located within walking distance of the town's main square. Be sure to visit Place du Martroi, Rue de Bourgogne, Musée des Beaux-Arts and Orléans Cathedral. Also worth a visit is the Parc Floral de la Source.

What struck me most about Orléans is how closely the city of New Orléans, Louisiana in the United States resembles its namesake. From



the wide streets that head out in diagonal directions to the street cars and overall architecture, it is really interesting to visit both and compare! (If you do plan to visit New Orleans, please see my Travel Guide here).

Shopping

If you're visiting a smaller city or even a larger village in the Loire Valley, you can expect to see familiar European retailers such as H&M, Zara, Sephora, etc. mixed in with local brands and boutiques. This is highly convenient if you're in need of something but are outside of a major center such as Paris. When visiting these smaller centers you will also find purveyors of local goods such as wines, cheeses, honey, lavender, handmade wool goods, vinegars, chocolate and more.

Some of the best shopping in the Loire Valley can be done in the streets of the smaller local towns or the villages that surround the major châteaux. One of the best castle markets is at Château de Chambord and some lovely shop-

ping and market streets can be found in Amboise, Blois and Orleans.

If shopping for souvenirs at the local châteaux, you will find an array of handmade items, aprons, planting pots and other gardening tools, photobooks of the area as well as heirloom seeds for local plants such as lavender and poppies.

Where & What to Eat

Breakfast isn't a large meal in French culture as it's referred to as 'le petit déjeuner'. For breakfast in the Loire Valley I suggest a couple of different options. Many bakeries and coffee shops don't open until mid to late morning so if you are looking to get a quick start to the day, plan ahead and purchase some pastries from a local patisserie the day before to enjoy on your drive to your first site of the day. Most hotels offer a breakfast service of fruit, cheese, meats and pastries so that is an option as well.

Lunch is a meal that can be enjoyed a few dif-



ferent ways! If you're spending the day exploring châteaux and villages, there will be plenty of opportunities to stop for lunch. You could also visit a grocery store, patisserie or small bodega and pick up items for a picnic to be enjoyed overlooking the scenery of the area. Most châteaux are next to a small village or collection of shops and cafés that offer lunch and dinner menus, often from the hours of 11am to 2pm, many closing again until the 5pm dinner service begins.

Dinner service often begins at 5pm (some places will open earlier) and runs well into the evening. Restaurants, cafés and brasseries can always be found surrounding main town squares. If you're looking for something a little more 'local', venture off the beaten path down some side streets or along river walkways to find some great dining spots.

If you're unsure about where to eat, keep in mind that most restaurants post their menus outside so you can take a look and decide if it's for you before sitting down and committing.

Many restaurants also offer a Prix Fixe menu that allows you to choose from a list of appetizers, main dishes and desserts for a set price.

I highly recommend indulging in the local wines, cheeses, honeys, produce and meats that the area offers. These vary from region to region in France and can be a fun way to experience the local culture. French food can be quite intimidating and confusing to some, so again, if you aren't sure, just Google it! A quick translation or definition of something can be found at your fingertips. There is no shame in deciphering what a dish contains with this method – it's much better than being disappointed with your meal.

Always remember that in Europe, meal prices include tax and tip, so there are no additional surprises or tipping requirements when the cheque arrives. It is also worth noting that you will have to outright ask for your bill when you are ready to leave the restaurant as it is considered rude to rush you by bringing the bill before you've asked for it.



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