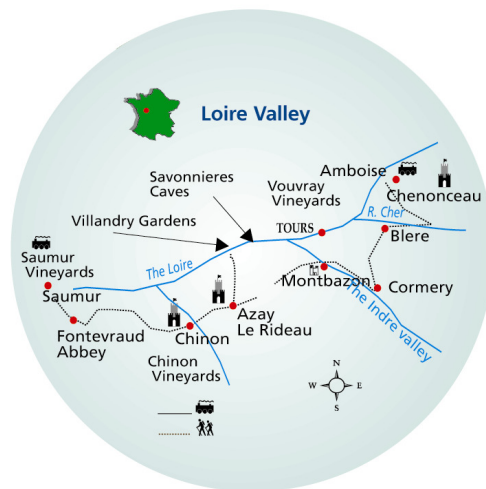


France: The Loire Valley

Tour code: JLV

Revised: October 09

The Loire is France's valley of the kings, where you will find much of its history and see the great palaces and castles. It is the countryside that inspired Balzac, where Leonardo Da Vinci spent his retirement and where Joan of Arc fought some of the battles of the 100 years war. The Loire is also one of the major wine producing areas of France, and it also has the advantage of being a great centre for cuisine and historical monuments. The walking is hilly at times, but generally the mix of old pathways, farm and forest trails make for fairly gentle walking. Our tour links the great chateaux at Amboise, Chenonceau, Azay le Rideau, Villandry and Chinon with the great vineyards of Vouvray, Chinon, Saumur, and Anjou. The combination of walking, spectacular historical sites, the food and wines of the Loire, makes this walk full of interest and pleasure and an ideal place to start for those with a love of France or setting out on a walking holiday for the first time.



Travel Information

Season: March to late October. Departure days: Wednesday, Friday and Sunday (other day on request).

Arrival: Between 4p.m and 7p.m on first day at the first hotel in Amboise. Amboise is reached by direct non-TGV train from Paris Gare d'Austerlitz (2 hours). These rail tickets are included in the Air Travel package. You will receive up-to-date train times for your date of travel, or alternatively you can visit Rail Europe's website at www.sncf.com.

At Amboise it is 15 minutes walk or a short taxi ride to the hotel (not included). There is a public phone close to the station. Car parking available in Amboise free of charge, but it is not guarded.

End of Tour: The tour ends at Saumur on the morning of day 8. Return by train from Saumur Rive Droite station (10 minutes walk or short taxi ride across the Loire bridge from the last hotel). Local train to Angers (30 mins) or Tours (1 hour). There are direct TGV services from both Angers and from Tours to each of (a) Paris Montparnasse (1.5 hours or 1 hour for ORLY airport), (b) CDG airport (about 2 hours) and (c) Paris (about 5 hours, for Eurostar to London St Pancras). Seat reservations are obligatory on TGV trains and a supplementary fare is payable for this.

Level of Difficulty

Grade: We grade this tour as easy to moderate; the region is hilly but there are no prolonged ascents or descents and few steep gradients. Several of the days are however fairly long and prospective customers should bear this fact in mind. See distances in daily itinerary below.

Fitness: This walk should present no difficulties for anyone in reasonable condition and accustomed to walking around 20km (12miles) on generally good trails.

Day stages: In the region of 15km to 27km per day with little altitude gain, 5 to 7 hours walking per day.

Waymarks: The trail follows in the main well-established paths, many of them with the distinctive white/red/white GR waymarks, and presents no special difficulties in normal conditions. Some of the forest trails can be muddy after rain.

General Information

Baths: it is not normal for your room to have a bath, the main reason being that it takes up a lot of space, some hotels/guesthouses may have a separate room in the house where a bath is available to guests, but in the main it is showers.

Breakfast: in countries such as France/Italy/Spain/Greece etc are usually coffee and toast/croissant, if you want more for breakfast then we would suggest you purchase some food the night before. It is important for you to tell us if you have any dietary requirements when you book your holiday so that we can inform everyone that you are staying with.

Single Supplements: are payable on most of our tours. The single supplement guarantees the privacy of your own room, however, rooms can at times be small and in some places may not enjoy the same facilities as double/twin rooms.

Language: Don't expect people to speak English, take a phrase book and try to learn some French!

Luggage: When staying in hotels, sometimes your luggage will have been taken to your room awaiting your arrival. However don't be surprised if your luggage is waiting for you to take it up to your room.

Accommodation & Meals

Accommodation is on a half board basis on 5 evenings in country inns (several of them 2* & 3* Logis de France approved) with one night in a well-appointed annex of one of the Relais et Chateaux chain of hotels. On two nights bed and breakfast only are included; on these nights an evening meal can be obtained close by. Picnic lunches are not included in the tour cost but are available from hotels at a cost of 8-10 Euros; alternatively picnic materials can be bought at each of

the towns and villages along the route. We indicate in the route notes where there are suitable restaurants or cafes for lunch stops, or recommend you carry food if there are none convenient to the trail.

An upgrade to a 3* hotel is possible in Chenonceau. Supplement 38 euros per person/per night in a double room. This charming hotel, where your hosts will kindly welcome you, is located 150 meters away from the Chateau de Chenonceau. Celebrities such as Eleanor Roosevelt, Harry Truman, Churchill, Rockefeller and many others stayed under this very roof. You will enjoy the swimming pool in a peaceful garden and taste all the local delights at the restaurant.

□ **Night 1:** A fine provincial wood beamed 2* Logis de France hotel at the heart of the historic town of Amboise, a short walk from Le Clos Luce, Leonardo da Vinci's last residence which contains a museum of models based on his designs. This was where he unenthusiastically sold his beloved Mona Lisa painting to the King of France. Half board (dinner at nearby restaurant).

□ **Night 2:** A comfortable 2* Logis de France hotel in Chenonceau, with wonderful exposed beams and a magnificent fireplace in the dining room. The cuisine here is famed for its quality. Half board.

□ **Night 3:** A well-appointed riverside annex of the Chateau d'Artigny, one of the famous 'Relais et Chateaux' group of hotels. Dinner and breakfast in the chateau itself, which is situated on a bluff with a fine view over the river Indre. The dinner has to be seen to be believed: an amazing assault on the senses! Shirt and tie are seriously recommended, as is a good penchant for wines.

□ **Night 4:** Azay-le-Rideau. The hotel is set in a semi pedestrian street in the heart of this charming village and just 50 metres from the elegant chateau. You will find here, the charm of the past combined with the comfort of today. The 18th century house was built in a style typical of the Tours area. One of the features of the hotel is the 19th century school, situated across the flower decked patio and which, like the rest of the hotel, has been tastefully transformed into delightful accommodation. Bed and breakfast only included; there is a choice of places to take your evening meal.

□ **Night 5:** Chinon. The hotel has the charm of an authentic dwelling-place built in the fifteenth century and modified in the eighteenth century. It is just a few hundred metres from the town center, the medieval quarter and the chateau. Half board.

□ **Night 6:** Fontevraud. The estate is a charming countryhouse built with luminous limestone of the Loire Valley. The oldest part as well as the tithe barn date from the 13th century. This agricultural estate was owned by the same family from the beginning of the 18th century. After being entirely renovated, they now receive guests in a fine, elegant and comfortable atmosphere. Half board.

□ **Night 7:** A small hotel (2* Logis) in the centre of the historic town of Saumur on the banks of the Loire, close to the old town and the chateau. Bed and breakfast is included; there is a wide choice of restaurants nearby for that final dinner.

Outline Itinerary

The following itinerary is included as a working guide only and may be subject to variation depending on the weather and other factors. Time is allowed to visit chateaux and other sites of interest along the way, but entry fees **are not** included in the tour price.

□ **Day 1:** Travel to Amboise. The old town boasts the still impressive remnants of what was a magnificent chateau as well as Le Clos Luce, a redbrick manor house that was the home of the great inventor Leonardo da Vinci for 3 years until his death in 1519. Chateau and Le Clos Luce (which incorporates a museum of models based on da Vinci's designs) are both open to the public, each visit requiring approx. 1 hour. Overnight in Amboise, a picturesque town on the south bank of the Loire.

□ **Day 2:** Walking through the Foret d'Amboise to Chenonceau where you can have lunch and then spend the rest of the day visiting one of the very finest of the Loire chateaux, the 'chateau shaped by women' which 'stretches across the River Cher in a perfect harmony of water, greenery, gardens and trees in a fine natural setting'. A visit takes up to 2 hours. About 4 hours walking to Chenonceau.

□ **Day 3:** From Chenonceau we start with a short drive (included in tour price) through farmland from the valley of the Cher to that of the Indre and the village of Reignac. The route then follows the GR46 along the valley, through fields of sunflowers to the village of Montbazou on the edge of the city of Tours. A highlight of the day is the ancient Gallo-Roman bridge, which carries the GR41 (here a narrow mule path through a forest), across a tributary of the Indre. The last part of the day from Veigne to Montbazou is rather suburban and can be avoided by taking a short taxi ride from Veigne. About 6.5 hours walking. 26km (16.25miles) can be shortened to 20.5km (12.8 miles) - 5 hours by taking taxi from Veigne on to Montbazou.

□ **Day 4:** Today there are two alternatives: the first is to follow the GR3 (long-distance trail extending the entire length of the Loire valley) from Montbazou along the banks of the Indre to the next night's stop at the evocatively named Azay-le-Rideau (about 5.5 hours walking). On the way there is time to visit the former home of the novelist Balzac in the small chateau at Sache. 26.5km (16.6 miles) -6 hours. The other alternative is to hire a taxi (about 35 Euros) to take you from Montbazou to the celebrated gardens at Villandry, one of the wonders of France. From Villandry it is about 3.5 hours walk past the confluence of the Rivers Cher and Loire and along picturesque woodland paths and quiet roads to Azay le Rideau. 14.5km(9.1 miles) -3.5hours. Both Villandry and Azay are awarded the highest accolade of 'worth a journey' by the Michelin Guide. The son et lumiere display at the Chateau is highly recommended for a delightful and memorable, if relatively expensive, stroll after dinner. Overnight at Azay-le-Rideau.

□ **Day 5:** There is time for a brief daytime visit to the chateau of Azay, one of the gems of the Renaissance, before continuing our walk by way of the tiny village of St Benoit-la-Forêt set in the midst of the vast forest of Chinon and on to Chinon itself, a mediaeval town dominated by the walls of its ruined castle and the centre of a well-known wine-growing region. At 27 km (17 miles) this is the longest day of the tour, requiring at least 7 hours over undulating terrain. Overnight at Chinon.

□ **Day 6:** After visiting the chateau and its Jeanne d'Arc museum (1 to 2 hours) you cross the river Vienne and follow its left bank downstream for a few km before striking off across the Foret de Fontevraud to the celebrated abbey of that name, the most extensive set of monastic buildings in France. The 12th C abbey church houses the tombs of several Plantagenet royals. Overnight near Fontevraud. 16km (10 miles) -4 hours approx.

□ **Day 7:** We continue our walk to Montsoreau, at the confluence of the Vienne and the Loire, where the caves in the river cliffs are used for mushroom cultivation. From

Montsoreau we continue through vineyards along the steep south bank of the Loire to Saumur, famous for its wines, its cavalry school, and its chateau overlooking the Loire. 20.5km (12.8 miles) -5 hours. Overnight at Saumur. Bed and breakfast only.

□ . **Day 8:** End of tour.