

## FRANCE – GUIDED, FULLY SUPPORTED SMALL GROUP CYCLING TOURS

Loire Valley, Provence, Dordogne, Bordeaux, Burgundy, Languedoc or the cols of the Pyrenees



Cycling in rural France has been a passion of ours for many years. We appreciate the importance of a well-chosen route – away from the maddening crowds and busy roads. We appreciate the value of knowledgeable and experienced guides, of well-maintained bikes – suitable for the terrain – and of a support vehicle or ‘sag wagon’ for the days (or hills) when you need it.

We appreciate the company of a small group of like-minded cyclist who share an interest not just in lots of fast kilometres – although the cycling is important - but in the scenery, the culture, the history and the wine and cuisine of some of the most spectacular cycling regions in Europe.

Our 7-day small group cycling program ticks all the boxes; stunning scenery, quiet roads and a French culture that embraces the bicycle as a fundamental part of its character and therefore welcomes cyclists with respect and enthusiasm. Yes, there are hills to climb but your efforts will be well rewarded by spectacular views and exhilarating downhill section.

We offer a selection of carefully planned routes through some of the most beautiful parts of France, travelling on minor roads and, where available, on designated cycle paths. A guide is with you on the road and detailed route maps are provided. All baggage is carried from hotel to hotel, leaving you free to enjoy each day. Food is important to these tours and each evening the restaurants we choose will highlight the region’s cuisine. Cycling each day, you will build-up a terrific appetite so you can indulge with a guarantee you’ve earned every morsel.

Our tours are recommended for anyone who is reasonably fit. They are ideal for more experienced cyclists, as our guides will be happy to accompany you on additional rides for those wishing to do a few more kilometres.

For partners and those less interested in hills and major climbs we have ‘easy’ graded routes in places such as the Loire Valley. For those interested in emulating the greats in cycling we offer tours specifically to attack some of France’s classic cols. All in all if it’s cycling in France you are after we have something for everyone.

Departs: Selected Saturdays from April - October 2009

Tours Includes: 6-nights in carefully selected 3-star hotels & typical B&B’s (all with private bathrooms), 6-breakfasts & dinners, route notes, sightseeing, luggage transfers, cycle tour guide, quality multi-gear bicycle hire, support vehicles

Distance: Moderate cycling - 40 to 55 kilometres on gently rolling to rolling terrain. Extra rides (extensions and loop rides) may be available each day.

**Call OUTDOOR TRAVEL on 1800 331 582 for details or reservations**

Inexperienced or beginner cyclist and week-ender cyclist not used to multi-day rides with some hills are advised to make a specific preparation in order to enjoy these holiday on bike – talk to our staff for suggestions.

Here is a summary of some tours and suggested itineraries - these are suggested itineraries as weather conditions, group interests and the tour guide will influence the final route taken each day:

## The Loire Valley

Easily accessible from Paris, the Valley of the Loire offers gentle rolling countryside, a rural landscape and of course the castles or châteaux, some of the finest in all France. Along the banks of the river, and its tributaries the Cher and the Indre, are medieval fortresses such as Amboise and Angers, renaissance masterpieces at Chenonceaux and Chambord and the *directoire* folly of Ussé. You will also find Leonardo Di Vinci's final resting place and studios at Clos Lucé near Amboise, 'troglodyte' houses carved out of the soft 'tufa' rock along the banks of the Loire and the fabulous gardens of Villandry.

The Loire region offers many fine wine *domaines*; sparkling Saumur, reds from Bourgueil and Chinon, Anjou rosés and Touraine whites. The cuisine of the region includes speciality cheeses (such as the distinctive Ste-Maure goats cheese), mushrooms (again grown in caves and wine cellars) and river fish like salmon, pike and the zander.



Our routes take in all of the major châteaux and Leonardo da Vinci's home with its codex prints and models of his inventions – such as a tank and a helicopter - in a lovely garden setting. We offer gentle cycling following riverbanks and meandering across country along quiet tree lined roads.

**Because of its size and diversity we have split the region into two distinctively different tours to show off the fantastic sights the Loire Valley region has to offer.**

**The Eastern Loire - the Valley of the Kings of France tour** takes in the fabulous chateau of the Renaissance: Chenonceau, Chaumont, Chambord and Cheverney, the oft-overlooked medieval town of Loches and Leonardo da Vinci's manor house at Amboise. The riding takes us through the ancient hunting forests of the kings, often on traffic-free well-surfaced bike tracks. And there is time to sample the wonderful white wines of Touraine.

**Western Loire - Sunflowers, Vines and Chateaux tour** features the more rugged castles of medieval times: Chinon and Saumur perch imposingly over the River Vienne and the River Loire. The Royal Abbey at Fontevraud is the burial place of Henry II of England, his wife Eleanor of Aquitaine and their son Richard the Lionheart. The famous chateaux are not overlooked - moated Azay-le-Rideau, Villandry with its fabulous gardens and the fairy-tale spires of Ussé are all on the route. Much of the riding on this route is on quiet riverside lanes following the Loire, Cher and Vienne. We will also sample the superior reds of Sumur, Saumur Champigny and Chinon.

## Cycling in Provence – the South of France

One of our most popular regions of France for cycling with a mild year-round climate – situated between the Côte d'Azur and the Rhone River delta and stretching inland to the foothills of the Alps in the east and to the plateau of the Ardèche in the west - the area derives its name from the Roman *Provincia Gallia* and

everywhere there is the evidence of the area's Roman past, with some of the best-preserved examples of Roman building anywhere.

Renowned for its olive trees, fields of lavender and sunflowers, and of course the Mediterranean sunshine, the landscape is wonderfully varied, from the rugged hinterland with terraced vineyards, to the mini-mountain range of the Alpilles near Arles, to the flat marshes of the Camargue where the Rhone flows to the sea.

The unique quality of the light in Provence has attracted artists for the last two centuries, notably Van Gogh and Gauguin who lived in Arles and Cézanne who immortalised the area with his many studies of Mont Ste-Victoire.

The cuisine of the region is as distinctive as the light, with emphasis on fresh fruit and vegetables, olive oil, seafood and the herbs de Provence — rosemary, thyme, lavender — which grow wild on the hillsides. There are wines here too; pink rosé from Bandol and Mont Ventoux, and reds from Nîmes in the west, but above all, grands crus like Châteauneuf-du-Pape and Gigondas in the Rhone Valley above Avignon.

**Again, because of the variety available we have two exciting tours in Provence.**

The **Roman Provence Heritage tour** will discover hidden treasures in Arles, Orange, Nîmes, Uzès, at the Pont du Gard and in Avignon, and taste world-renowned wines in the vineyards of Châteauneuf-du-Pape. The landscapes will shift from the green fruit-growing pastures of the Rhone valley to the dry garrigue of the inland hills to the pan-flat expanses of marshland that make up the Camargue National Park with its pink flamingos, black fighting bulls and wild grey horses.

The **Villages of the Luberon tour** takes in the Provence made famous in Peter Mayle's *A Year in Provence*, with its lavender farms and olive groves, visiting charming villages with bustling markets overlooked by apricot-coloured houses with pastel blue shutters. Ménerbes, Gordes, Roussillon with its ochre cliffs, Vaison-la-Romaine dominated by the Roman bridge – will each entrance you, as will the earthly delights of the wineries of Gigondas and Beaumes-de-Venise.

The terrain here can be challenging for cyclists because of the topography, although none of the hills are too daunting, and anybody of reasonable fitness will be able to manage the routes comfortably.



## **Rocamadour, the Dordogne & the River Lot**

A fabulous region in southwest central France with wonderful views with stunning landscapes of rivers and cliffs, hills and fields of sunflowers, with fascinating villages steeped in history and with some of the most interesting cycling in France.

Known to the French as the Périgord, the area is famous for the 'hundred year's war' between England and France resulting in the building of many castles, *bastides* or fortified villages. The village of Rocamadour was an important waypoint for pilgrims making the long journey to Santiago de Compostela and there are many fine medieval churches along the route of our tour. The caves of Lascaux are home to some of the finest examples of pre-historic art and the whole region is dotted with caves, underground rivers and ancient settlements.

The Dordogne is also blessed with a cuisine that has become synonymous with 'typical' French cooking. The famous duck and goose dishes, including the celebrated foie gras, truffles and cheeses are much sought after. The wine *appellations* include from the light and fruity Bergerac and Pecharmont in the north to the dark and powerful Cahors in the south.

The countryside on this route is fairly rugged, and there are some hills to tackle, but the route has been designed to ensure that each day's riding will be manageable for anyone with a reasonable level of fitness and the support vehicle is never far away.

### **Suggested itinerary:**

Day 1 The meeting point is Brive la Gaillard and we arrange a transfer from the railway station (regular trains run from Paris) to our hotel in Coly nestled against the limestone cliffs overlooking the river. Here we make sure everybody is fitted with their bikes and enjoy a trial ride to the ancient Abbey of St-Amand de Coly. Dinner is at the hotel with a chance to get to know your other group members and guides.

Day 2 We climb up above the River Vézère for spectacular views before descending to the caves of Lascaux II, with prehistoric cave paintings from 15,000–20,000 years ago.

We rejoin the river as it meanders downstream towards its confluence with the Dordogne. We then visit the village of **les Eyzies** and the Grotte de Font-de-Gaume is set high in the cliffs overlooking the town, with both Cro-Magnon cave art and natural rock formations. We stay overnight in the market town of **St-Cyprien** with its medieval old town. *Total distance: 47km*

Day 3 Today we cross the Dordogne to **Castelnaud-la-Chapelle** with its 12<sup>th</sup> century castle, and visit the chateaux at **Beynac** high on the cliffs overlooking the town and the river. We follow the river to **La Roque Gageac** and the *bastide* town of **Domme**. Our hotel is in **Sarlat-le-Canada**, with one of the best-preserved medieval centres in France, we can wander to the *vieux ville* for an aperitif before dinner. *Total distance: 37km*

Day 4 Heading back to the Dordogne, we reach **Cingle de Montfort** with its splendid views, then the market town of **Souillac** for lunch by the Romanesque Abbey-Church. At Lacave an underground train takes us to a guided tour of a series of caves renowned for impressive stalactites and stalagmites reflected in still pools of water. We then leave the river for our overnight stop at Rocamadour. This spectacular village on the River Alzou has been a place of pilgrimage since the 10<sup>th</sup> century. *Total distance: 54km*

Day 5 Today we rise to the uplands of the **Causse de Gramat**, a sparsely populated limestone plateau - the landscape a sharp contrast to the lush greens of the river valleys - our first stop is the **Gouffre de Padirac**, a 75m chasm leading to an subterranean river where we travel underground by boat and on foot. We cycle to Autoire, one of the most beautiful villages of France. This perfect lunch spot also benefits from a spectacular 30m waterfall.

After lunch, it's a short ride to the **Chateau de Castelnaud Bretenoux**, another medieval masterpiece. We then take an easy ride alongside the Dordogne to our hotel in the charming riverside town of Beaulieu-Sur-Dordogne. *Total distance: 52km*

Day 6 In the morning we have the option of a relaxing canoe trip downstream on the River Lot under the limestone cliffs and hilltop houses and castles. Those not wishing to canoe can take a gentle ride along the same cliffs and through peaceful countryside.

Both the canoe trip and the bike ride take us to the charming village of Carennac, officially one of the most beautiful villages in France, with a beautiful 12<sup>th</sup> century Abbey and a maze of higgledy-piggledy lanes to explore. The cycle ride goes though the beautiful hilltop village of Curemonte, often used as a location for French period dramas.

The short return ride from Carennac goes through the village of Queyssac, which has an orientation table from where you can get your bearings of the whole valley. We return to Beaulieu for the last of our dinners, which will hopefully be a memorable one! *Total distance: 50km maximum (20km minimum)*

Day 7 Breakfast at the hotel is a hearty affair, and there is a chance to check out the colourful morning market in the town's central covered *halles* before we make our way home.

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## The Wine Regions of Bordeaux

Bordeaux and the lower reaches of the River Garonne and the lower section of the Dordogne River are world renowned as fertile areas ideal for growing wines. But there is so much more to see and enjoy in this area as the rivers are broad, meandering and majestic, there are fields of fruit, nuts and sunflowers and thick forests and pine plantations.

The region is alive with history. Prehistoric cave paintings can be seen at several grottoes along the river valley. The Romans arrived in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC and vestiges of that period are scattered across the region. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century the English King Henry II married Eleanor of Aquitaine and gained the Bordeaux region for the English crown. This control lasted for three hundred years, from 1154 to 1453 and the English love of red wine (or claret) helped the region gain its worldwide reputation.

Today St-Emilion, Pomerol and Fronsac in the Libournais to the east, Graves and Sauternes in the Entre-Deux-Mers region to the southeast, and Pauillac, St-Julien and Margaux in the Medoc peninsular to the northwest are the most famous appellations in France. They include wines such as Chateaux Lafite-Rothschild, Latour, Lynch-Bages, Mouton-Rothschild, Margaux, Yquem, Cheval-Blanc and Petrus

### Suggested itinerary:

Day 1 Meet and transfers from Bergerac train station and airport to the village of St-Julien-de-Crempse. For those arriving early we offer a 9km excursion to the vineyards of Pecharmant where we can visit the Château de la Renaudie for a tasting. Those coming later can enjoy a stroll or swim before dinner.

Day 2 After breakfast we head to Chateau de Tiregand for a tour of the vineyard and tasting. We continue to Bergerac for coffee, with a chance to visit the impressive abbey-church before climbing away from the river to the hilltop village of Monbazillac for a picnic lunch. We visit the elegant 16<sup>th</sup> century Château de Monbazillac famed for its desert wine, a wonderful accompaniment to the foie gras of the region.

We continue to Chateau de Bridoire then through vineyards along the river valley to our hotel for the evening, the Chateau de Vigiers, and dinner. *Total distance: 52km*

Day 3 Our first stop today is the market town of Ste-Foy-La-Grande overlooking the Dordogne. Bitterly contested between the French and the English during the 100 Years War (1337-1453), a series of medieval villages, called *Bastides* were built on a strict grid pattern around a central arcaded square, and then enclosed within defensive walls.

We cross the Dordogne and continue to the village of Moncaret in the Montravel wine area. The elegant white wines are made with Semillon, Sauvignon and Muscadelle grapes. Moncaret is also home to a beautiful 11<sup>th</sup> century church and is the site of a Roman settlement.

The afternoon we follow along the Dordogne and climb to the village of St-Vincent-de-Pertignas and to our hotel at the converted *Maison Fort* or fortified manor of the Chateau de Naujan. The hotel has its own vineyard and we can visit and sample the Bordeaux appellation wines, and of course appreciate them more fully with dinner. *Total distance: 49km*

Day 4 A relaxing day cycling through the vines from the Garonne to the Dordogne, we are now entering the heart of the Bordeaux vineyards, as we arrive in the *Libournais*. A gentle climb through the Côtes-de-Castillon vineyards sees us into the ancient ramparts of St-Emilion. In addition to its fabulous wines, St-Emilion is one of the prettiest towns in Southwest France. We lunch in St-Emilion with various options of wine tasting before returning to our hotel in St-Vincent before visiting a local restaurant for dinner. *Total distance: 30km*

Day 5 Today we are in the Entre-Deux-Mers wine region - the land between the Dordogne and Garonne rivers - we take the Sauveterre to Bordeaux Rail Trail exploring towns and villages along the way.

The first of these is La-Sauve-Saint-Majeure, a village surmounted by a magnificent Benedictine Abbey. Founded in 1079 it quickly became one of the greatest abbeys in the South-West of France. Thanks to its spiritual influence, the abbey was soon regarded as a major stop for pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago (Way of St James). Next to the abbey, the Maison d'Entre-Deux-Mers is the visitor centre for all of the great white wines of the region; the different grapes are explained, and we will taste a variety of the wines to discover how *terroir* (the local soils and microclimates) can produce very different wines.

After lunch the continue into the heart of Bordeaux to explore the stately 18<sup>th</sup> century customs houses which line the Garonne River, and to visit the magnificent Cathédral Saint-André founded in 1053. There an optional ride out of Bordeaux on dedicated cycleways or you can spend more time in Bordeaux before travelling by minibus to the 4-star hotel in Pian-Medoc, at the foot of the Medoc peninsular. *Total distance: 48km / 68km optional*

Day 6 Our last day of riding takes us northward into the heart of the Medoc peninsular cycling through fields of Cabernet and Merlot grapevines. We visit **Châteaux Palmer** in the village of **Margaux**, where the elegance of the façade matches that of the famous wine. We continue through villages that have lent their names to great vintages such as **Moulis** and **Listrac**.

We arrive at the estuary village of Lamarque for lunch, then pass through the renowned vineyards of the truly great names: Château Lannemassan with its stables and carriage museum, Château Talbot, Château Beychevelle, and Château Lynch-Bages, where we visit the cellars and the winery for a tasting. The route then takes us past the Château Lafite Rothschild, where the cellars contain treasures with vintages dating back to 1811. Cycling through the vines we come to the end of our tour in Pauillac, at the harbour from where these great wines used to depart for all corners of the world. We transfer back to Pian Medoc for a final celebratory meal at the hotel. *Total distance: 50km*

Day 7 Tour ends after breakfast before a transfer to the station or the airport.



## The Cuisine, Wine and History of Burgundy

Burgundy (or *Bourgogne* to the French) is synonymous with the crisp whites of Chablis or the prestigious reds of the Côte D'Or, Nuits-St-George, Pommard, Aloxe-Corton and Puligny-Montrachet. Kir, the traditional aperitif of Burgundy, is made from Cassis blackcurrant liqueur from Dijon and Bourgogne Aligote white wine.

For many Burgundy is food with *Coq au Vin*, *Boeuf Bourguignon*, and snails and of course French Dijon mustard

Burgundy encompasses the rolling hills of the Maconnais and Chalonnais in the south; the wild Morvan plateau to the northwest; and of course the steep-sided côtes of the prestigious wine districts around Beaune. The scenery is a mixture of perfectly tended vineyards, fields of wheat interspaced with poppies in early summer, of maize and sunflowers. Woods and spinneys of French Oak are used for making the much-prized wine barrels used all over France and around the world. The countryside is undulating and peaceful, criss-crossed with canals, country lanes and bike trails and towpaths.

There are many rivers and streams that originate the Burgundy plateau feeding into the Seine to the north and the Saone and Rhone to the south.

From a historical perspective Burgundy has more than its fair share dating from the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC when Celts invaded, the Romans came here in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, the first Christian churches were built as early as the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Magnificent abbeys were founded at Cluny and Vézelay in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, and in the later Middle Ages cathedrals sprang up at Auxerre, Autun and Dijon. The burgeoning wine trade resulted in superb architecture for the wealthy merchants who built stunning houses and public buildings in Beaune, Auxerre, Dijon and Autun.

Our tour takes in all the varied aspects of Burgundy, both natural and man-made — and we make sure that you don't miss out on the regional gastronomic delights! The cycling ranges from easy on some days to moderate on others, but should be comfortably achievable for anyone of reasonable fitness.

## Languedoc – from Avignon to the Cevennes

This region of southern France is one of startling contrasts. From the coastal plain (the largest wine producing area of France) it stretches inland to the Black Mountains (Montagne Noire), and to the west it meets the Pyrénées. In the east, spectacular canyons and cliffs stretch to the lonely plateau of the Cevennes, and from here to the River Rhône. The Mediterranean washes miles of white sandy beaches from the Rhone delta to the Spanish frontier. Between these borders sit the rugged hinterlands of the Corbières and Minervois.

In the early middle ages this was the historic home to the Cathars, a religious sect who rejected the pomp of the Catholic Church, and who was persecuted to extinction as a result. The Cathars left a legacy of fortresses in the Pyrénéen foothills and the Montagne Noire that today are some of the most romantic ruins in Europe!

A feature of the region is the Canal du Midi, built in the eighteenth century to carry goods from the Mediterranean at Sète to the river Garonne at Toulouse and from there to the Atlantic coast at Bordeaux. It is a tranquil, tree-lined treasure that meanders across the Languedoc plain and into the hills.

Seafood, shellfish and freshwater fish dominate the regional cuisine - with many Spanish influences. Further inland the food is more substantial with specialities such as cassoulet (bean and meat stew in a pot) and wild game dishes. The wines of the Languedoc are diverse, with reds from the Faugeres and Minervois regions, the whites of Picpoul de Pinet and others from the coastal plain - providing a perfect accompaniment to shellfish dishes - and the sparkling wines of Limoux.

The region has a climate that can vary from the icy snows of the mountains in winter to the heat of the Mediterranean summer with May/June and September the ideal time to visit. The cycling in this area is as varied as the terrain and the weather, with moderate pedalling along the valley of the River Gardon, but challenging countryside in the more mountainous terrain of the Haut-Languedoc and its Cevennes National Park, and then easy cycling as we appreciate the wineries of the coastal plain. The tour involves a moderate amount of climbing, including a couple of cols or mountain passes, and is ideal for those with some cycling experience (although a support vehicle is available at all times).

## And for the more *sportif* cyclist – the Pyrenees Cols

Here is the chance for the more active cyclist to follow in the tracks of the world's greatest riders cycling on some of the Pyreneen climbs that have been made famous by the *Tour de France*. We have chosen a route that takes in the Marie Blanque, the Tourmalet, the Aspin, the Peyresourde and the Portillon.

On each day the cycling itinerary will cross at least one of the legendary cols of *Le Tour* but, unlike the professionals, we will be able to enjoy the breathtaking scenery as we go. Optional shorter or longer routes will be available on each day's ride, so that cyclists with a wide range of abilities will be able to take part. The tours offer full support, guides cycling with the group and minibus near at all times. Our guides are cycling enthusiasts with a detailed knowledge of the Pyrenees and their place in cycle racing history.

This holiday will present a challenge to even the most experienced cyclist but there is no reason why you shouldn't consider this a relaxing holiday too. We provide quality three-star hotels with character and ambience to ensure your time off the bike is just as enjoyable. Evening meals will not merely be a time to refuel they will offer the chance to indulge in some of fine food and a glass or two of wine with new friends!

**These are just a few of the many small group guided or self-guided inn-to-inn cycling tours we offer in Europe - including river rides from Passau to Vienna along the Danube or from Vienna to Budapest.**

Other cycling holiday destinations include several areas of Italy, Spain, France, Germany, Holland, Ireland, England and Scotland, Hungary, in the Czech Republic, New Zealand & Australia. We also offer group guided Bike & Barge cruises in many destinations including France, Belgium, Holland, Germany, Italy, the Dalmation Coast of Croatia, the islands of Greece, the Lycian coast of Turkey, Vietnam or Canada.

### Contact Outdoor Travel direct for more details and reservations

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