

FRANCE – LOIRE VALLEY, THE VALLEY OF THE KINGS

8-days / 7-nights GUIDED inn-to-inn cycling Chinon, Fontevraud, Villandry, Chambord & Chenonceau



France's 'Valley of the Kings', the Loire Valley, offers spectacular castles and châteaux, flat or gently rolling rural countryside, and fine wine and food. The valley and its tributaries are dotted with castles: the medieval fortress at Amboise, the fairy-tale Château Ussé, the 'chateau des dames' (ladies' castle) of Chenonceau and the Renaissance masterpiece at Chambord. The Loire Valley resounds with famous names: Eleanor of Aquitaine, Richard the Lionheart, Joan of Arc, Catherine de Medici, and innumerable French and English kings. It is associated with authors Honoré de Balzac and Charles Perrault, and here we also find Leonardo da Vinci's final resting place at Clos Lucé near Amboise, 'troglodyte' houses carved out of the soft 'tufa' limestone along the banks of the Loire, and the fabulous gardens of Villandry.

The Loire is a major wine growing region with the renowned vineyards of Chinon, Anjou, Vouvray, and Saumur producing crisp whites, beautiful blush-pink rosés, light-bodied reds and sparkling *Crémant*. The cuisine of the region includes local delicacies like the distinctive Ste-Maure goat cheese, *fouace* (bread filled with rillettes or goat cheese), local mushrooms grown in caves and wine cellars, and river fish like salmon, pike and zander.

Cost from: **\$2950** per person, twin-share. Single room supplement from \$735

Departs: 11th, 25th July; 8th, 22nd August, 2020

Grading: Easy to moderate - 40 to 60 kilometres daily over flat to gently undulating terrain.

Includes: 7 nights in carefully selected, 2- and 3-star hotels (all rooms with private bathrooms), breakfast and dinner daily, wine-tasting at vineyards, route notes, luggage transfers, cycle tour guide, hire of quality multi-gear hybrid touring bicycle with helmet, lock, panniers and water bottle, transfers from/to nearby train stations at the start/end of the tour

Not included: Lunches, drinks, entrance fees at local attractions, personal expenses.

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Suggested itinerary: *please note weather and road conditions, group interests and the decision of the tour guide will influence the final route taken each day:*

Day 1: Arrive Montreuil Bellay

Make your way to the hotel or join the late afternoon transfer from Angers train station. Time to set up our bikes for a warm-up ride or relax by the pool enjoying a cold *pastis*. Montreuil Bellay is an interesting village, perched inside its wall on top of a hill overlooking the river Thouet.

Day 2: Montreuil Bellay to Chinon

cycling @ 45km

Between Montreuil Bellay and our first sight of the Loire lies Saumur-Champigny, regarded as the finest red wines of the Loire Valley. We stop at Château Brézé, a wine-making estate, more famous for its underground château. The underground 'troglodyte' homes and villages, dating back to the 7th Century, are a feature of this area. The tufa limestone is so easily worked that it was easier to carve out a new bedroom than to build one! If time permits we may stop for a wine tasting with the Comte de Colbert, still resident at the château.

We make our way to the Royal Abbey at Fontevraud. This huge Abbey was traditionally the home of many French queens and other royalty, but is most famous as the final resting place of Eleanor of Aquitaine, King Henry II, and their son Richard the Lionheart. We can choose a route through Montsoreau where the Vienne flows into the Loire. The Loire is very wide here, and Montsoreau looks beautiful stretching along the south bank. We end the day in Chinon. In the 12th Century Chinon was effectively the English capital, as successive kings made their home in the château. It is much older than most Loire châteaux, and its military purpose is obvious from its commanding position along the ridge that overlooks medieval Chinon.

Day 3: Chinon to Azay-le-Rideau

cycling @ 55km

We leave the Vienne and continue our cycling tour back towards the Indre and the Loire. Overlooking the Indre is the first of the big-league châteaux, Ussé, reputedly the inspiration for *Sleeping Beauty's* castle. Next up is Villandry, notable not so much for the château as for the gardens, rated by the Michelin guide as 'worth a journey in their own right'. There are three – a vegetable garden, a flower garden and a water garden – with a unifying theme chosen each year by the gardeners and groundskeepers.

We then cycle from Villandry to Azay-le-Rideau, another spectacular Loire château, surrounded on three sides by the River Indre, which has been carefully landscaped to provide a beautiful reflective setting for this ornate château. There was no military purpose to Azay-le-Rideau, it was just designed to be beautiful, and it is. We in a 3-star hotel surrounded by vineyards and just a short stroll from the town centre and the château. In July August we may have the chance to see the *son et lumière* – sound and light show – after dinner, and the spectacle at Azay-le-Rideau is worth the stroll.

Day 4: Azay-le-Rideau to Loches

cycling @ 60km

We start the day with a visit to the Château d'Azay-le-Rideau, followed by a ride mostly following the Indre valley, over gently undulating countryside. The landscape surrounding the Indre has been called the most beautiful of all the tributaries of the Loire in this part of the Loire Valley. We ride to Loches, a well-preserved medieval town with a royal palace and a fortress, the Donjon of Loches. The donjon is obviously built for function rather than form, and if time permits we may visit it. Those who prefer Renaissance palaces to 12th Century fortresses may like to stroll around the royal residence, built by Charles VII in the 15th Century, home of many French kings, not to mention their wives and mistresses. We stay in a comfortable 2-star hotel in a 15th Century home not far from the river.

Day 5: Loches to Chenonceau to Montrichard

cycling @ 40km

Time to visit the royal palace or donjon this morning before we head to the château of Chenonceau, the most famous and most visited of all the Loire châteaux. It is nicknamed 'château des dames' – the ladies' chateau – as many women had a hand in planning and overseeing its construction. The ballroom, built by Catherine de Medici, spans the Cher in spectacular fashion, and although the château had no military value it took on a gloomy historical role in the 20th Century. It served as an army hospital in the First World War, and in the Second World War, the Cher formed the boundary between occupied France and Vichy France, and each end of the ballroom opened into a different country. Most of the rooms are open, and this is a chance to see original floors, tapestries and furniture. Often French châteaux lack period furnishings and interior detail; Chenonceau is a pleasant exception, and Louise of Lorraine's room, painted entirely in black with silver motifs of tears and crowns of thorns to mourn her dead husband, is especially memorable. Chenonceau boasts huge formal gardens, including the original garden of Diane de Poitiers and rose garden of Catherine de Medici. From Chenonceau we continue on to our hotel at Montrichard, a few kilometres upstream on the Cher.

Day 6: Montrichard to Chambord

cycling @ 60km

In the morning we cycle to the fascinating mushroom caves of Bourré, where they grow blue foot, shiitake, oyster and Paris mushrooms. Mushroom mycelia need a stimulus to prompt growth – European mushrooms tend to need a light or heat stimulus, but the shiitake mushroom from Japan grows naturally on trees and responds to earth tremors common in that neck of the woods. Earthquakes are simulated in the caves using the state-of-the-art device of shaking the container of mushroom compost. As well as mushrooms there are some spectacular galleries with sculptures of local village scenes through the ages carved in limestone, some with exquisite attention to detail.

Afterwards we cycle on to the highlight of the week for many, the Château Chambord. This is the largest of all the Loire châteaux, originally built by Francois I as a hunting lodge. It lies inside a huge park surrounded by the longest wall in France, all 32km of it. The whole setting is fantastic. The park is still a hunting reserve, and there are observation platforms to watch for deer and wild boar feeding. The château itself contains a famous double-helix staircase designed by Leonardo da Vinci, where two people can ascend or descend at the same time without meeting. After our visit to the chateau we continue to our hotel in Mont-pres-Chambord.

Day 7: Chambord to Amboise

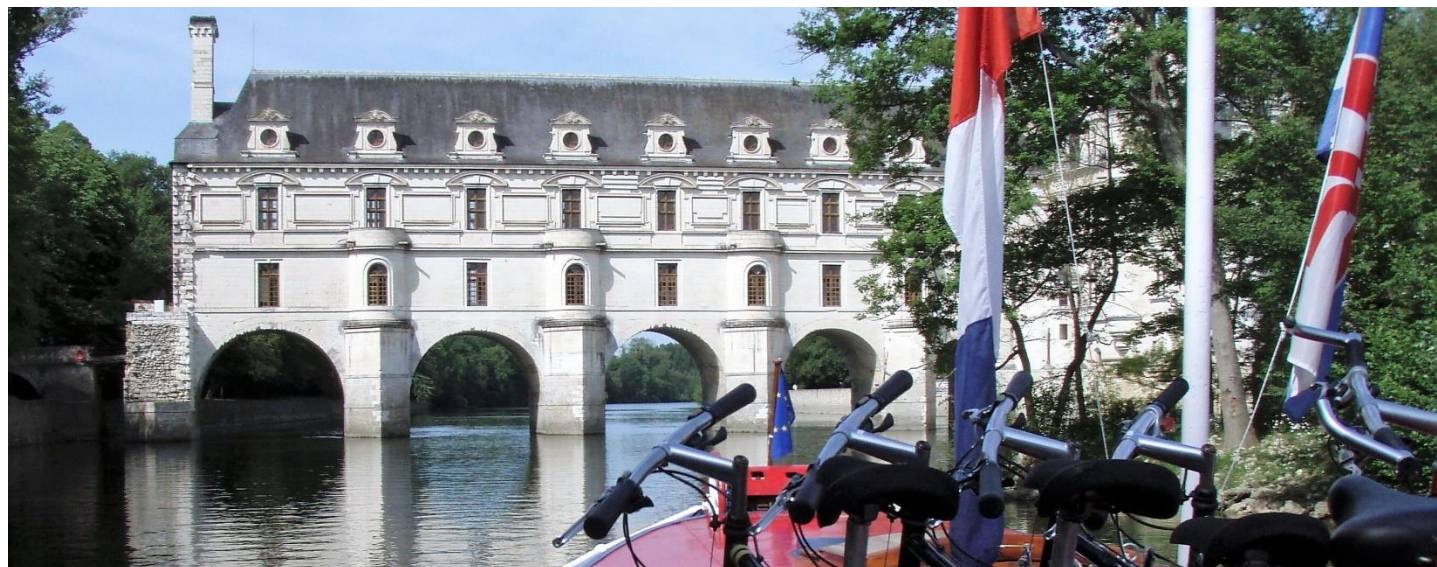
cycling @ 50km

We spend most of today cycling downstream beside the Loire, with one or two hills in an otherwise easy finish. We visit and taste the wines at Vignoble Tevenot, a very traditional family winemaker in Cellettes, just on the edge of the enormous forests that surround Chambord. Our final destination is Amboise. The setting of the château overlooking the Loire is one of the most iconic images of the Loire valley, and Amboise also puts on one of the better *son et lumière* shows. The town has a medieval centre, largely pedestrianised and full of bustle. There are a number of bars and cafés directly beneath the huge château walls, and you will have earned a sit-down and a glass of local wine. Tonight we eat at the Lion d'Or.

A visit to Leonardo's place at Le Clos-Lucé is well worth while. Many of the original furnishings are still in place, including the great man's bed, and there is a permanent exhibition of his inventions and writings including several exquisite scale models. There are touching examples of his philosophy, and wonderful models of inventions that could work, like an ingenious water pump, a military tank and prototype helicopter.

Day 8: Departure day.

Tour ends after a relaxed breakfast at our hotel in Amboise. There is an optional late-morning transfer to the TGV station at Saint-Pierre-des-Corps if required.





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