

# Gourmet's paradise

## Carly Lockhart finds a treat for the tastebuds in the Loire Valley



The Loire Valley is a favoured holiday destination for the French themselves

### EXPERT TRAVEL TIP

By Paul Baguet, director of Jules Boutin Travel Bureau



Use a good travel agent and their expertise can save you time and money. For example, flying Jersey to Manchester out and back via Gatwick, instead of using a direct service, could save you around £100 per person. Amazingly the vast majority of Airlines no longer remunerate travel agents for the work they do on behalf of their customers so the agent will still be able to provide this type of un-biased information and make all your travel arrangements in return for a reasonable service/booking fee.

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France is the country of fine wine and gourmet food, then the Loire Valley should be its capital.

For a long-weekend trip there is no better place to indulge in the finer things in life and experience France through your tastebuds.

At the heart of the region is the Loire itself, which flows through historic towns, bustling markets and countless vineyards.

Our hotel, La Croix Blanche, was a fine mix of luxury and history. Situated in Fontevraud l'Abbaye, a charming village of just over 1,000 people, it was built in 1696 as a coaching inn for travellers visiting a nearby abbey.

Now, complete with a grand courtyard, swimming pool and sunny terrace, the hotel has maintained its rich history while catering for the more discerning holidaymaker.

Shortly after checking in to our swanky room, we sat in the courtyard and enjoyed our first of many glasses of wine.

It didn't take us long to realise that hotel owners Christophe and Mieke Chabenat were food and wine-lovers. Their hotel boasts a tapas restaurant, a brasserie and a gourmet restaurant, which won the prestigious Table du Goût this year.

And after dining in Le Plantagenêt, the restaurant gastronomique, it wasn't hard to see why. Every mouthful of our three-course meal was a taste of luxury.

The restaurant's wine list was like nothing we had ever seen before – it was like a book.

But, in an area where 170 different types of wines are produced, this is not surprising.

With miles and miles of vineyards, the Loire is France's third largest winemaking region.

Having an expensive taste, I was delighted to discover that, outside of Champagne, the Loire is renowned for producing leading sparkling wines.

The region is a magnet for wine-lovers and, with 7,000



Carly samples the local produce on offer at the market in Saumur

winemakers, cellars and wine merchants in the area, it is easy to sample the local talent.

We visited Cave de Saumur, situated among scores of vineyards, and Maison Veuve Amiot, a sparkling wine cellar. They call it a cellar but it was 5 km in size. We must have walked past thousands of bottles as we toured the place.

It was a real treat to taste some of the local wines, from velvety reds to crisp whites and bubbles that tickled your lips.

Sampling the local produce was just as much fun. We arrived at a market in Saumur, a town nestled just alongside

**The smell of crêpes, spices and freshly baked baguettes wafted up and down the quaint square as locals carried out their weekly shop**

the river, while it was in full swing.

The smell of crêpes, spices and freshly baked baguettes wafted up and down the quaint square as locals carried out their weekly shop.

We eyed up the cakes that looked too good to eat and tried some of the mountains of cheeses on offer.

Thankfully, I could recall enough from school French class to get by and we left the market with a few treats to take home.

Not only is the Loire a hub for foodies, it is a World Heritage site thanks to its rich history, which boasts some of the oldest châteaux in France.

We drove out to Villandry, a château, set in beautifully-kept gardens. Completed in 1536, it was built on the site of an earlier castle where King Philip II of France once met King Richard I of England to discuss peace.

Every room and hallway of the château was steeped in history. Countless paintings adorned the walls and each window offered a different view of the magnificent gardens below.

With so much to do in the Loire, we were lucky that one of the must-see attractions was on our doorstep.

A stone's throw across the cobbles from our hotel was Abbaye de Fontevraud – one of the largest abbeys in France.

Built in the 10th century, the abbey houses the effigies of Henry II, his wife Eleanor of Aquitaine and their son

Richard the Lionheart.

From the tombs of royalty to the stunning architecture, the abbey was a breathtaking place, and we spent a few hours milling around the buildings and gardens.

As well as being a monastery for both nuns and monks, the abbey was also a prison for 200 years after monasteries were evacuated during the French Revolution.

Aside from the abbey, we drove to all the other destinations – something we could not have done easily without the Sat Nav we hired from Fotosound.

Even if you think you have a knack for map reading, hiring a Sat Nav takes out all the stress of travelling. You just punch in your destination and off you go.

Not only was it a breeze to get from A to B everyday but the device got us from St Malo to the Loire in the first place.

Speaking of which, our journeys across the water to and from St Malo were particularly pleasant. People may knock Condor Ferries for their time-keeping, but we found them a treat to travel with. Not only was the boat on time for both sailings, but we arrived early on each occasion.

It was a sad goodbye when we left the Loire, particularly as all the supermarkets were shut (it being a Sunday).

Our hopes of returning home laden with French treats were all but dashed until Mieke suggested we stop off at a Sunday market in a Loire town that, luckily, was on our way.

We were pleased to see that nothing about the Loire Valley had been Anglicised. It was refreshing to feel embedded in another culture, where you have to attempt to speak the language rather than rely on locals to understand you.

In fact, we never came across any English people in the Loire. The region, with its expanse of wineries, seemed to draw more French holidaymakers.

This added to the experience and confirmed that the Loire Valley is, rightly so, the French Mecca for food and wine.

### THE DETAILS

**Why visit?** *The Loire Valley is a taste of luxury mingled with history. There won't be a wine you can't find or a château that doesn't take your breath away.*

**How to get there:** *Condor Ferries sail to St Malo, from where it takes about three hours to drive down to the Loire. A Sat Nav is an important travel companion if map-reading isn't your forte. Fotosound rent out Sat Navs if you don't fancy splashing out on one.*

**When to go:** *Any time is ideal to visit the Loire Valley. While it is a treat to walk around the historic attractions and vineyards in the sunshine, there is plenty to do if it rains.*

**Star budget attraction:** *Wine cellar tours and tastings cost around two euros per*



The elegant chateau at Saumur on the Loire

*person and you get discount off any wine you buy afterwards.*

**Star last-day blow-out attraction:** *Foodies must eat at the gourmet*

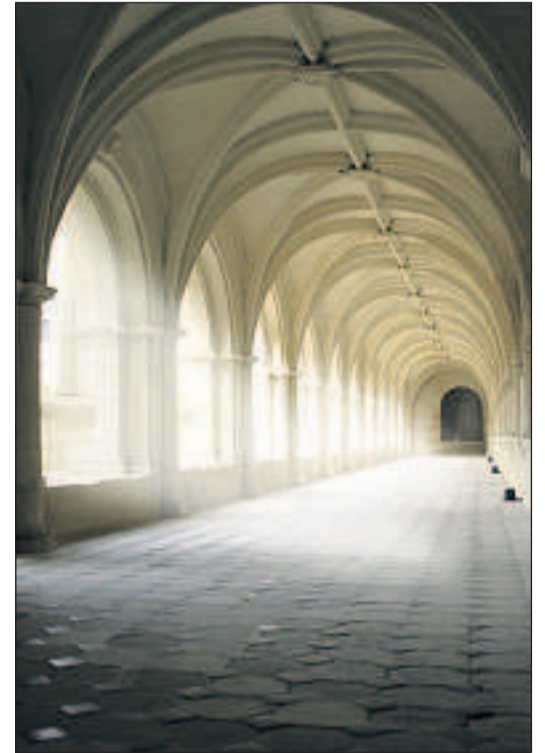
*restaurant, Le Plantagenêt, at La Croix Blanche. The classic French dishes, presented and cooked to Michelin-starred standards, are to die for.*

*Carly and her boyfriend went to the Loire Valley in September. They sailed to St Malo with Condor Ferries and then drove to Fontevraud l'Abbaye – a village in the heart of the Loire. They stayed at Hostellerie La Croix Blanche, a quaint hotel with packages to suit all budgets. For more information visit [www.hotel-croixblanche.com](http://www.hotel-croixblanche.com). Bontour arrange packages to include the ferry, accommodation at Hostellerie La Croix Blanche and entry to wine cellars and attractions. Visit [www.bontourit.com](http://www.bontourit.com) for more information.*

**Next week: Jo Hutchison makes the most of a London Pass for a weekend**



The Loire Valley is famous for its fairytale chateaux, such as Château Villandry (left), built in the early decades of the 16th century



Fontevraud abbey (above) contains the tombs (below) of former kings of England Henry II and Richard the Lionheart, along with Henry's queen, Eleanor of Aquitaine



Hotel La Croix Blanche, next to the abbey in Fontevraud, is a fine mixture of luxury and history with an award-winning gourmet restaurant

There are some 7,000 winemakers in the Loire region and the landscape is studded with vineyards



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