

Saddling up for the Loire à Vélo

Stunning châteaux, exceptional food and drink – there’s much to enjoy cycling the Loire à Vélo, whatever your fitness level. Travel writer **Jo Caird** shares her experiences of this popular trail.

It was only as I huffed and puffed my way up the steep hill to the Château de Saumur that I realised just how easy the cycling had been so far. The Loire à Vélo, an 800km (500 mile) network of signposted cycle routes running along the River Loire from the Atlantic coast to just outside Nevers in Burgundy, is almost entirely flat and gentle. Some of the routes that splinter off it – the Châteaux à Vélo and the L’Indre à Vélo for example – are even flatter still. With a bit of planning you could cycle for days on end with barely an incline to be found.

So why I had decided to attempt the climb up to the imposing 12th century fortification that overlooks the town of Saumur, I don’t know. It might have had something to do with the tour and wine tasting session I’d done earlier that afternoon at the atmospheric cellars of sparkling winemaker Bouvet-Ladubay in nearby Saint-Hilaire-Saint-Florent. One thing’s for sure: the two bottles of delicious bubbly stowed in my panniers didn’t make the climb any easier.

Fortunately the view from the castle terrace – when I eventually made it up there – was worth it: the late September sun sparkling on the river, the pretty black-tiled buildings of Saumur reflected in the water,

the Loire Valley stretching away as far as the eye could see.

And the free wheel back down to the riverbank with the wind in my hair? I wouldn’t have missed it for the world.

Saumur castle itself, though impressive from the outside, has nothing on some of the other châteaux I visited. The Loire à Vélo links up a mind-

boggling 800 of them, from the petite and domestic Château de Villesavin to the imposing architectural masterpiece that is Château de Chambord.

At Villesavin, a 16th century manor house that I came upon in the midst of a pleasant woodland ride one lazy afternoon, there’s an ancient range in the historic kitchen and friendly donkeys grazing in

the grounds. At Chambord, one the region’s largest castles, I marvelled at Leonardo da Vinci’s extraordinary double helix staircase and tasted the delicious raspberry liqueur that bears the château’s name.

My favourite of them all was probably Chenonceaux, a remarkable building dating back to 1513 that arches its way across the River Cher, the



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water flowing serenely beneath it. The beautifully restored interiors and engaging audio guide shine a light on life in this former royal residence, offering insights that aided my understanding of the period no end.

Walking through the gorgeous gardens I caught sight of people navigating the river by canoe, and on the way back

to my bicycle spotted otters playing in a stream. It's hard to imagine somewhere more blissful. The only downside was the crowds; if I ever go back, I'll make sure it's first thing in the morning so I have the place to myself.

You can take your own bike on the Loire à Vélo, or you can use one of the many cycle hire schemes available. These

companies let you hire bikes from one location and return them elsewhere along the route, so you're not limited to circular itineraries and can plan a journey that suits your interests and abilities [at Château des Marais, page 15, you can also hire a bike].

The trail itself is mostly very easy to navigate. Even when it passes through cities like

Angers – home to the amazing Apocalypse Tapestry, on display at the Château d'Angers – you're guided safely through with the help of dozens of reassuring green-bordered signs.

All that said, I'm glad I'd stocked up with free maps from a local tourist office and

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invested in the official Loire à Vélo guide before my trip: it was good to have them as back-up for the occasional moments when the signs were nowhere to be found.

The beauty of the Loire à Vélo is its variety. Twenty minutes after leaving Angers, the provincial capital, I was cycling through the otherworldly landscape of Trélazé. Slate, quarried in this area for the last six centuries, littered the ground on both sides of the cycle path. In some places it formed huge hills, elsewhere, trees grew up through it, somehow surviving in this unforgiving environment.

Later that day, back alongside the Loire itself (the route follows the mighty waterway pretty closely, but there were several stretches where I lost sight of it for a while), I gazed up at the towering limestone cliffs that line the southern bank of the river between Angers and Saumur, before stopping for a picnic in the graveyard of an adorable church in the village of Le Thoureil.

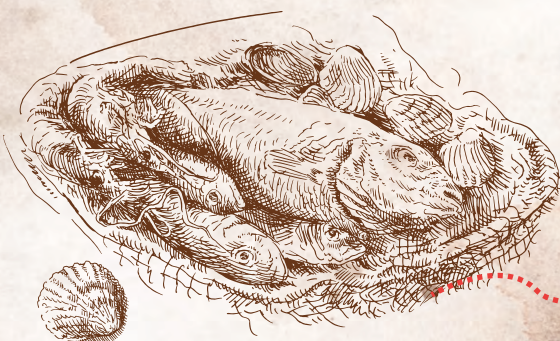
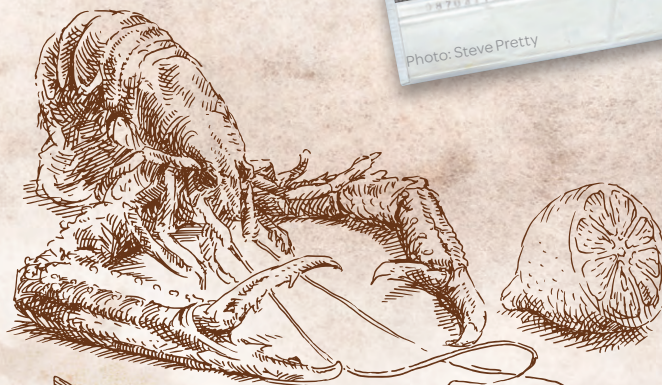
There are some fine restaurants in the area –

Restaurant La Toque Blanche in Les-Rosiers-sur-Loire, the less formal but no less excellent Restaurant Côté Cour in Azay-le-Rideau and the lunch place Isabeau de Touraine in Loches all stood out – but such is the quality of the produce markets here that it was tempting just to dine on gourmet homemade sandwiches every day. The produce and flower market by the banks of the Loire in Amboise (Friday and Sunday mornings) was particularly impressive and left me laden with delicious local products to take home as souvenirs.

And of course the brilliant thing about a cycling holiday is that you can eat and drink whatever you like, secure in the knowledge that all those calories will be burned off on the following day's ride.

Another piece of cheese? Don't mind if I do...

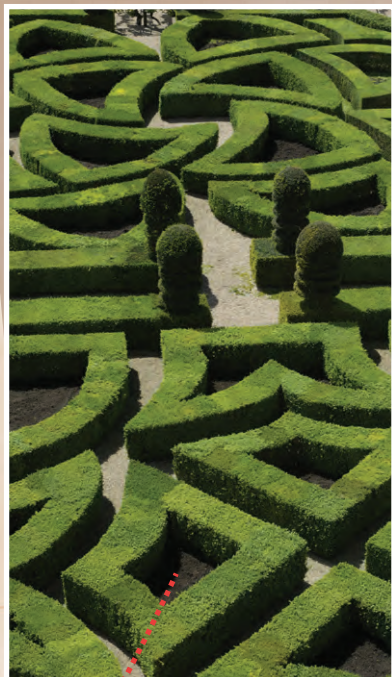
Jo Caird is a freelance arts and travel journalist who has written for Condé Nast Traveller, Wanderlust, the Independent, Sunday Telegraph, Guardian, and many more.





Where to stay

If you want to try cycling the Loire à Velo, we recommend a stay at Château des Marais, Chambord (pictured right).



Set within the spacious grounds of an old manor house, this five-star campsite is perfectly positioned for a visit to the magnificent Château de Chambord (pictured left). If you want to have a go at any part of Loire à Velo you can even hire bicycles from the campsite if you are unable to bring your own. But if you simply want a break from cycling you'll enjoy a lazy day or two by the fantastic pool complex.

See for yourself

You can find out more about this campsite by watching our Château des Marais film at www.youtube.com/canvasholidays

Book it

Prices for 14 nights at Château des Marais are from **£586** for a party of up to five people staying in a Maxi Tent, arriving on site on 21 June.

You may also be interested in

- **Les Alicourts Resorts, Pierrefitte**
A family-run campsite offering fantastic facilities in a tranquil, rural setting.
- **La Roche-Posay Vacances, La Roche-Posay**
A charming campsite set on the banks of the River Vienne, where you can hire a canoe or a small fishing boat.

