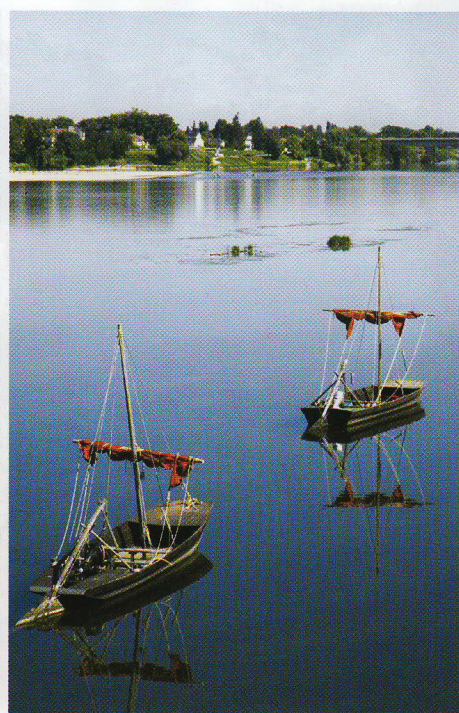
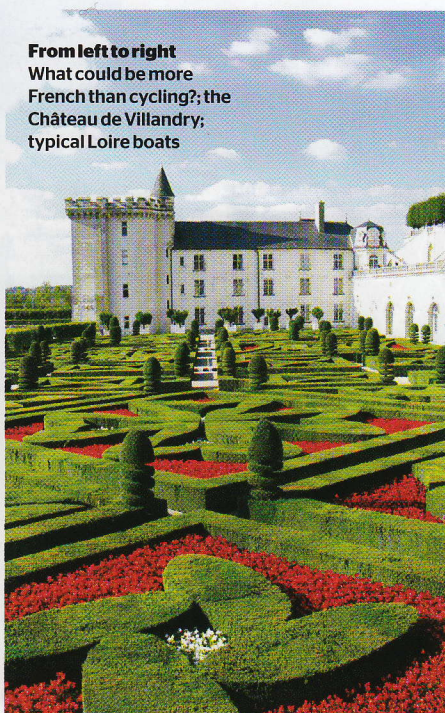




**From left to right**  
What could be more French than cycling?; the Château de Villandry; typical Loire boats



## Go now! Loire Valley

As summer masses make a beeline for the south of France, stay further north to take advantage of a regal range of cycle trails

### Why go now?

The sun is shining, the riverbanks are blooming – it's the perfect time to hit the fine, flat cycle paths of the Loire Valley. Plus French visitors won't descend en masse until mid-July so it'll be nice and quiet for a while yet. Go green on the Loire à Vélo ('Loire by bike'; [www.loireavelo.fr](http://www.loireavelo.fr)), 800km of signposted, easy-to-ride cycle paths running along and around the Loire from Nevers to the Atlantic coast. En route, stop off at Chaumont-sur-Loire, this year celebrating the 20th anniversary of its annual and arty International Garden Festival ([www.domaine-chaumont.fr](http://www.domaine-chaumont.fr)).

### A long weekend

The Loire à Vélo links up more than 800 castles, from the petite and picturesque Château de Villandry, to the imposing architectural masterpiece (and home to raspberry liquor),

the Château de Chambord. A network of 15 local cycle-hire companies means you can hire bikes from one place and return them elsewhere along the route, so you're not limited to circular itineraries.

For a short trip, the Châteaux à Vélo route is an ideal option, allowing you to visit several castles and their gardens without too much cycling in between ([www.chateauxavelo.com](http://www.chateauxavelo.com)). Set off early to avoid the crowds at the more famous sights, including the Château de Cheverny, with its resplendent interiors and 70-strong pack of baying hunting dogs.

### A week or more

Further eco-friendly diversions include navigating the River Cher in Canadian canoes: the 6km, two-hour itinerary from Chissay to Civray takes you beneath the fairytale arches of the Château de Chenonceau ([www.canoe-company.fr](http://www.canoe-company.fr)).

Or explore the Loire by kayak on excursions lasting from two hours to three days ([www.loirekayak.com](http://www.loirekayak.com)).

Many bike hire companies and accommodation options offer a luggage transfer service, allowing even those visitors on extended trips to travel light.

### Where to stay

The Hotel de Biencourt ([www.hotelbiencourt.com](http://www.hotelbiencourt.com)) in Azay-Le-Rideau is a stone's throw from the château. Hotel l'Auberge du Centre ([www.auberge-du-centre.com](http://www.auberge-du-centre.com)) in Chitenay boasts rooms whose stylish, high-spec décor belies the village's quaint feel. Both hotels have bike storage and repair facilities.

### Where to eat

Atmosphere abounds at the Restaurant Côté Cour in Azay-Le-Rideau ([www.cotecour-azay.com](http://www.cotecour-azay.com)). For a healthy lunch, try Isabeau

de Touraine in Loches ([www.isabeaudetouraine.com](http://www.isabeaudetouraine.com)). Chez Bruno, in Amboise, offers beautifully executed local dishes at reasonable prices (+33 0 2 47 57 73 49).

### Getting there

To keep it sustainable, take the train. Returns to Tours, Blois or Orléans from London on high-speed services start at £89 (transferring in Paris). Journey time is around 3.5 hours, plus a recommended hour to transfer. Book at [www.raileurope.com](http://www.raileurope.com).

### DO SAY...

*"Ce pinard est magnifique – une bouteille de plus pour tenir la route?"*

*"This plonk is superb – one more bottle for the road?"*

### DON'T SAY...

*"Allons, rattrapons ce type au maillot jaune"*

*"Come on, let's catch up with the chap in the yellow jersey"*