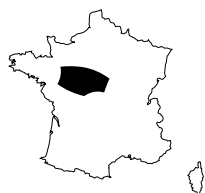


# The Loire Valley

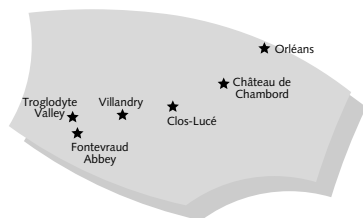


Flowing for over 1000km from its trickling source in the Massif Central west towards the Atlantic Ocean, the regal Loire is often dubbed one of the last *fleuves sauvages* (wild rivers) in France. It's a fickle and unruly body of water that frequently breaks its banks and floods the flat pastureland on either side of the river. For centuries before the Industrial Revolution, this huge waterway was one of France's great commercial highways, but these days most of the river traffic has long since sailed into the sunset, and the freight barges and steamers that once plied the waters have been replaced by occasional canoes and flat-bottomed *futreaux* (barges).

In centuries past, the Loire River was a key strategic area, one step removed from the French capital and poised on the crucial frontier between northern and southern France. Throughout the centuries kings, queens, dukes and nobles established their feudal strongholds and country seats along the Loire, and the valley is littered with some of the most extravagant architecture this side of Versailles. From sky-topping turrets and glittering banquet halls to slate-crowned cupolas, lavish chapels and crenellated towers, the hundreds of châteaux dotted around the Loire Valley provide a comprehensive cross-section of the changing architectural tastes over 1000 years of French high society. The result is an astonishingly rich collection of architectural treasures, ranging from the medieval fortresses of Chinon, Angers and Loches through to the extravagant pleasure palaces of Azay-le-Rideau, Chenonceau and Chambord. If it's aristocratic pomp and architectural splendour you're looking for, the Loire Valley is a place to linger.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Join the Joan of Arc trail in the historic city of **Orléans** (p418)
- Explore the cloisters and chapels of the Loire Valley's greatest ecclesiastical complex, **Abbaye Royale de Fontevraud** (p447)
- Climb up the fabulous double-helix staircase to the turret-covered rooftop of **Chambord** (p429), the Loire Valley's most over-the-top château
- Visit the retirement home of the original Renaissance Man, Leonardo da Vinci, at **Clos Lucé** (p439)
- Admire the fabulous kitchen gardens and floral displays of **Villandry** (p440)
- Wander around the hobbit houses and mushroom museums of the **Troglodyte Valley** (p448)



■ POPULATION: 2,589,000

■ AREA: 33,646 SQ KM



## History

The Loire River was one of Roman Gaul's most important transport arteries. Its earliest châteaux were medieval fortresses established in the 9th century to fend off marauding Vikings. By the 11th century massive walls topped with battlements, fortified keeps and moats were all the rage.

During the Hundred Years War (1337–1453) the Loire marked the boundary between French and English forces and the area was ravaged by fierce fighting. After Charles VII regained his crown with the help of Joan of Arc, the Loire Valley emerged as the centre of French court life. Charles took up residence in Loches with his mistress, Agnes Sorèl, and the French nobility and bourgeois elite established their own extravagant châteaux as an expression of wealth and power.

Defensive fortresses were superseded by ornate palaces as the Renaissance – introduced to France from Italy at the end of the 1400s – ushered in an era of aesthetic pleasure and more comfortable living. From the 17th century, grand country houses built in the neoclassical style and set amid formal gardens took centre stage.

## Getting There & Away

The Loire Valley has two main airports: Tours (with Ryanair connections to London Stansted and Dublin) and Angers (linked by Flybe to regional UK airports). Both have frequent flights to other French cities.

The TGV Atlantique connects St-Pierres-des-Corps, near Tours, with Paris' Gare Montparnasse and Charles de Gaulle Airport in around an hour. The Loire's other cities (including Orléans, Blois, Amboise and Tours) are served by high-speed trains to Paris.

By car, the A10 links Paris with Orléans, Blois and Tours and continues southwest to Poitiers and Bordeaux. West of Tours, the A85 to Angers was being upgraded at the time of writing.

## Getting Around

Most main towns and châteaux are accessible by train or bus, but if you're working to a timetable, having your own wheels allows more flexibility and freedom. There are organised minibus tours to many châteaux, see p430 and p423.

The Loire Valley is mostly flat, which makes for excellent cycling country. The **Loire à Vélo**

([www.loire-a-velo.fr](http://www.loire-a-velo.fr), in French, [www.loireradweg.org](http://www.loireradweg.org), in English) scheme maintains a total of 120km of signposted routes: you can pick up a free guide from tourist offices, or download material (including route maps, audioguides and bike-hire details) from the website.

**Détours de Loire** (📍 in Tours 02 47 66 22 23; [www.locationdevelos.com](http://www.locationdevelos.com)) has three bike-rental shops, in Tours (p436), Blois (p429) and Saumur (p447), allowing you to pick up and drop off bikes along the route for a small surcharge. Prices include a lock, helmet, repair kit and pump; classic bikes cost €14, with €7 for extra days; weekly rentals cost €57 with extra days at €5. Tandems are €38 per day.

# ORLÉANAIS

Taking its name from the historic city of Orléans, famous for its Joan of Arc connections, the Orléanais is the northern gateway to the Loire Valley. In the east are the ecclesiastical treasures of St-Benoît-sur-Loire and Germigny-des-Prés, while to the south is the marshy Sologne, historically a favourite hunting ground for some of France's most prestigious kings and princes.

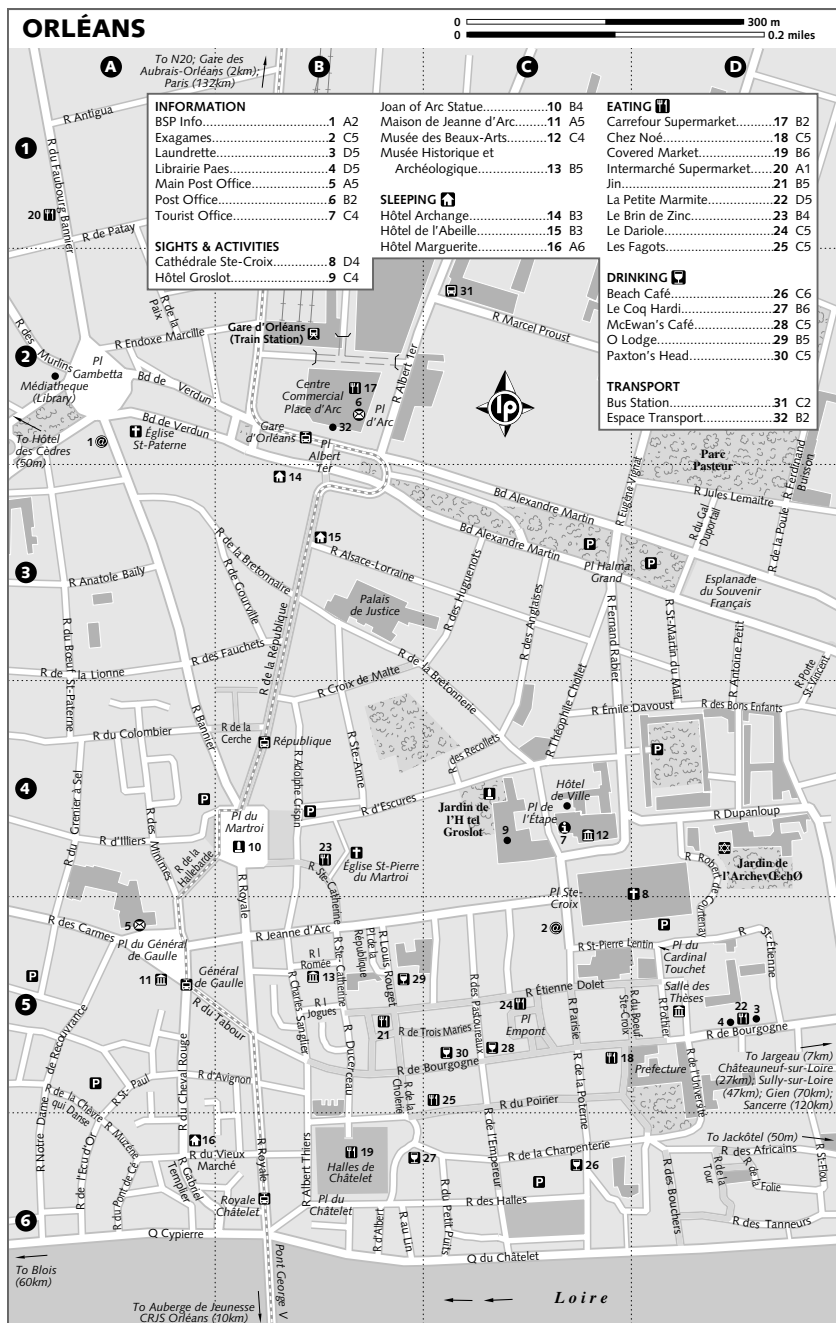
## ORLÉANS

pop 113,000

There's a definite big-city buzz around the boulevards, flashy boutiques and elegant buildings of Orléans, 100km to the south of Paris. It's a city with a long and chequered history: already an important settlement by the time of the Romans' arrival, Orléans sealed its place in history in 1429, when a young peasant girl by the name of Jeanne d'Arc (Joan of Arc) rallied the armies of Charles VII and staged a spectacular rout against the besieging English forces, a key turning point in the Hundred Years War. Seven centuries later, the Maid of Orléans still exerts a powerful hold on the French imagination, and you'll discover plenty of statues, plaques and museums dedicated to her around town, not to mention a charming cobbled medieval quarter and a top-notch fine-arts museum.

## Orientation

The mostly pedestrianised old city, whose main thoroughfares are east-west rue de Bourgogne and perpendicular rue Louis Rouget, stretches from the River Loire north to rue Jeanne d'Arc. North, around the



northern end of rue Royale, is the commercial centre. High-speed trams run along rue de la République, linking place du Martroi, the city's main square, with Gare d'Orléans. Gare des Aubrais-Orléans, the city's other train station, is on the tram line 2km further north.

## Information

Banks line place du Martroi.

**BSP Info** (125 rue Banner; per 15/60min €1/4; ☎ 10am-8pm Tue-Sat, 2-8pm Sun & Mon) Internet access.

**Exagames** (5 rue Parisie; per hr €5; ☎ 2-7pm Sun-Tue, 11am-7pm Wed & Thu, 11am-10pm Fri, 2-10pm Sat) Internet access.

**Laundrettes** (176 rue de Bourgogne; ☎ 7am-9pm)

**Lavo 2000** (place du Grand Marché; ☎ 7am-8.30pm)

**Librairie Paes** (184 rue de Bourgogne; ☎ 10am-12.30pm & 1.30-7pm Tue-Sat) Bookshop with foreign-language titles.

**Main Post Office** (place du Général de Gaulle) Currency exchange and internet access.

**Post Office** (place d'Arc) Post-office branch by the station.

**Tourist Office** (☎ 02 38 24 05 05; www.tourisme-orleans.com; 2 place de l'Étape; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm Sun Jul & Aug, 9am-1pm & 2-7pm Mon-Sat Jun & Sep, 9.30am-1pm & 2-6.30pm Mon-Sat Apr-May, 10am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat Oct-Mar)

## Sights

### MUSEUMS

Orléans' five-storeyed **Musée des Beaux-Arts** (Fine Arts Museum; ☎ 02 38 79 21 55; 1 rue Fernand Rabier; adult/student €3/1.50; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) is a treat, with a huge collection of Italian, Flemish and Dutch paintings (including works by Coreggio, Velázquez and Antigna), as well as an excellent selection by French artists. Among the treasures are a rare set of 18th-century pastel portraits, Claude Dervet's *Les Quatre Éléments* (mid-1600s) illustrating air, fire, earth and (frozen) water, and a couple of choice works by Gauguin and Picasso.

A ticket to Musée des Beaux-Arts also grants entry to the **Musée Historique et Archéologique** (☎ 02 38 79 25 60; sq Abbé Desnoyers; ☎ 9.30am-12.15pm & 1.30-5.45pm Tue-Sat, 2-6pm Sun Jul & Aug, 1.30-5.45pm Tue-Sat, 2-6pm Sun May, Jun & Sep, 1.30-5.45pm Wed, 2-6pm Sun Oct-Apr), worth visiting for several imaginative representations of the Maid of Orléans, as well as Gallo-Roman sculptures unearthed in nearby Neuvy-en-Sullias.

### HÔTEL GROSLOT

Opposite the Fine Arts Museum is the Renaissance **Hôtel Groslot** (☎ 02 38 79 22 30; place

de l'Étape; admission free; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-6pm Sun-Fri Oct-Jun, 9am-7pm Sun-Fri, 5-8pm Sat Jul-Sep), built in the 15th century as a private mansion for Jacques Groslot, a city bailiff, and later used as Orléans' town hall during the Revolution. The neomedieval interior is worth a look, especially for the ornate bedroom in which the 17-year-old King François II died in 1560 (now used as a marriage hall). Look out for the bronze statue of Joan of Arc on your way out.

### CATHÉDRALE STE-CROIX

Towering above place Ste-Croix, Orléans' Flamboyant Gothic **cathedral** (place Ste-Croix; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-5.30pm, till 6pm or later in summer) is the result of collective tinkering by successive monarchs, including Henri IV, who started construction in 1601, Louis XIII (r 1610-43) who restored the choir and nave, Louis XIV (r 1643-1715) responsible for the transept, and Louis XV (r 1715-74) and Louis XVI (r 1774-92), who rebuilt the western facade, including its huge arches and wedding-cake towers. Inside, slender columns soar skywards towards the vaulted ceiling and spire, completed in 1895, while a series of vividly coloured stained-glass windows relate the life of St Joan, who was canonised in 1920.

### MAISON DE JEANNE D'ARC

The timber-fronted **Maison de Jeanne d'Arc** (☎ 02 38 52 99 89; 3 place du Général de Gaulle; adult/student & over 65yr €2/1; ☎ 10am-12.30pm & 1.30-6.30pm Tue-Sun May-Oct, 1.30-6pm Tue-Sun Nov-Apr), overlooking place Général de Gaulle, is a reconstruction of a 15th-century house that hosted the Maid between April and May 1429 (the original was destroyed by British bombing in 1940, something the locals politely avoid mentioning). The displays are pretty underwhelming – a few manuscripts, flags and vintage swords, plus a scale model recreating the siege of Orléans using flashing lights and a rather overenthusiastic commentary.

### PLACE DU MARTROI

Three of Orléans' main boulevards (rue Banner, rue de la République and rue Royale) converge on place du Martroi, where you'll find the city's most stirring representation of St Joan – a huge bronze **statue** of the martial Maid atop a prancing steed, completed by the sculptor Denis Foyatier in 1855.

## Activities

### WALKING TOURS

In July and August the tourist office runs guided tours (generally in French, but sometimes with an English commentary) of the old city and Orléans' monuments, buildings and historical sites. There are occasional tours during the rest of the year, as well as walking tours combined with a riverboat cruise and picnic lunch (€19 to €52) – contact the office to see what's on offer.

### Festivals & Events

Since 1430 the Orléanais have celebrated the annual **Fêtes de Jeanne d'Arc** in early May, commemorating the liberation of the city from the occupying English. A week of street parties, medieval costume parades and concerts ends with a solemn morning Mass at the cathedral on 8 May.

### Sleeping

**Auberge de Jeunesse CRJS Orléans** (☎ 02 38 53 60 06; [auberge.crjs45@wanadoo.fr](http://auberge.crjs45@wanadoo.fr); 7 av de Beaumarchais; dm with member's card under 26yr €10.70, over 26yr €15.25; ♿ reception 8am-7pm) A bare-bones municipal hostel at the Stade Omnisports (sports stadium) 10km south of Orleans. Sixty beds spread out over 16 spartan modern rooms (expect cardboard mattresses, standard-issue furnishings and one bathroom between two rooms). Perks include a restaurant and DVD room with video projector. Reception is often closed on weekends, so phone ahead. Jump off the tram or Bus 20 at Université L'Indien.

**Jackôtel** (☎ 02 38 54 48 48; [www.jackotel.com](http://www.jackotel.com); 18 Cloître St-Aignan; d €40-70) Cute little two-star place tucked in a former cloister shaded with chestnut trees. Beams, bricks and slate are dotted around the old house, with floral patterns and catalogue furniture in the rooms; a few are jazzed up with skylights and original fireplaces, and it's whisper-quiet.

**Hôtel Archange** (☎ 02 38 54 42 42; [www.hotelarchange.com](http://www.hotelarchange.com); 1 bd de Verdun; s €39-43, d €47-53.50) Gilded mirrors, cherub murals and sofas shaped like giant hands greet you at this peculiar station hotel. Indian-style wallpapers and citrus colour schemes spice up some rooms, but most err towards standard beiges and off-whites, with en-suite bathrooms and shuttered windows throughout. Tram noise might be a problem for late sleepers.

**Hôtel Marguerite** (☎ 02 38 53 74 32; [www.hotel-orleans.fr](http://www.hotel-orleans.fr); 14 place du Vieux Marché, s €52-63, d €61-72, tr

€66-77) Solid, basic and worth recommending for its central spot and wallet-friendly prices. Expect floral-print bedrooms and neutral colours in a town house atmosphere – opt for a superior room if you like your bathroom sparkling and your shower powerful.

**Hôtel de l'Abeille** (☎ 02 38 53 54 87; [www.hotelde-labeille.com](http://www.hotelde-labeille.com); 64 rue Alsace-Lorraine; s €42-51, d €45-89) Bees buzz, floorboards creak and vintage Orléans posters adorn the walls at this gorgeous turn-of-the-century pile off rue de la République. It's deliciously old-fashioned, from the scuffed pine floors and wildly floral wallpapers to the hefty dressers and bee-print curtains, and for breakfast there's a choice of coffees, teas, pâtisseries and exotic jams.

**Hotel des Cèdres** (☎ 02 38 62 22 92; [www.hotel-descedres.com](http://www.hotel-descedres.com); 17 rue du Maréchal Foch; s €59, d €66-78; ♿) Modern, efficient and cosy, in a red-brick building in downtown Orléans. The rooms are short on character, decked out in peach-and-creams, pine desks and generic bathrooms, but travellers *en famille* will appreciate the interconnecting rooms. Free wi-fi and eco-friendly bath goodies are a bonus.

### Eating

**Le Brin de Zinc** (☎ 02 38 53 38 77; 62 Rue St-Catherine; mains €9-18) Battered signs, old telephones and even a vintage scooter decorate this old-world bistro, serving up lashings of mussels and oysters at lunchtime and platters of rich bistro food till late. The daily blackboard *plat du jour* at €7.60 is about the best value in the city.

**Chez Noël** (☎ 02 38 53 44 09; 195 rue de Bourgogne; lunch menus €11, €13.50 & €50, dinner menus €15.80, €21 & €32; ♿ closed Sat lunch, Sun & Mon) Characterful, cheery and crammed at lunchtime, this lively brasserie is about uncomplicated food at a decent price, from garlic snails to chilli con carne and salmon steak.

**Les Fagots** (☎ 02 38 62 22 79; 32 rue du Poirier; mains €11.50-16.50) Covered with ancient pots and antique bric-a-brac, this charming place feels like a cross between a junk shop and a country kitchen, specialising in granny's traditional recipes – *brochette de lotte* (monkfish kebabs), *andouillette artisanale* (tripe sausage), and even *pavé d'ane* (donkey steak) for the seriously heartless.

**Jun** (☎ 02 38 53 80 95; 13 rue Louis Roguet; mains €12.50-18) Zingy Japanese restaurant serving authentic sushi, *yakitori* and *maki* in a metro setting, all puce-and-mauve bucket seats, scarlet lanterns and shiny chrome.

**Le Dariole** (☎ 02 38 77 26 67; 25 rue Étienne Dolet; menus €16.50-21; ☎ lunch Mon-Fri, dinner Fri, salon de thé 2.30-7pm Mon-Sat) This rustic *salon de thé* (tea house) is a fine place for afternoon tea, with loads of types from rare Jasmine to Georgian and Chinese Dragon, as well as home-made cakes, pâtisseries and *fine tarte aux pommes* (apple tart). After nightfall it transforms into a smart restaurant specialising in regional food.

**La Petite Marmite** (☎ 02 38 54 23 83; 178 rue de Bourgogne; menus €20-34; ☎ closed Tue & Wed) Sheltering behind awnings and clipped conifers, this higger-mugger restaurant is a riot of wonky beams, terracotta tiles and low ceilings: the perfect place to tuck into portions of provincial French food, from rabbit stew to wild Sologne mushrooms and stonking pork steaks.

### SELF-CATERING

Places for picnic supplies:

**Carrefour supermarket** (Centre Commercial Place d'Arc; ☎ 8.30am-9pm Mon-Sat)

**Covered market** (place du Châtelet; ☎ 7.30am-7.30pm Tue-Sat, 8am-1pm Sun) Inside the Halles de Châtelet shopping centre.

**Intermarché supermarket** (49 rue du Faubourg Banier; ☎ 8.45am-7.30pm Mon-Sat, 9am-12.30pm Sun)

### Drinking & Entertainment

The free **Orléans Poche** ([www.orleanspoche.com](http://www.orleanspoche.com), in French) details cultural hot spots and happenings in Orléans. Rue de Bourgogne and rue du Poirier are chock-a-block with drinking holes.

**O Lodge** (☎ 02 38 77 70 15; place de la République; ☎ lunch & dinner daily) Bar, diner and gig spot at the same time; local bands and DJs provide the tunes while you tuck into steak sandwiches, burgers, cocktails and cold beers.

**Le Coq Hardi** (☎ 02 38 53 04 35; 12 place du Chatelet; ☎ all day till midnight daily) This old neighbourhood bar has been pulling *demi-bières* (half-beers) for donkey's years, and it's a gorgeously Gallic place to sink a few brews, surrounded by old signs and scruffy seats.

**McEwan's Café** (☎ 02 38 54 65 70; 254 rue de Bourgogne; ☎ 4pm-3am Mon-Sat) A Scottish-themed bar favoured by beer and whisky drinkers, as well as barflies watching sports on the big screen.

**Paxton's Head** (☎ 02 38 81 23 29; 264-266 rue de Bourgogne; ☎ 3pm-3am Tue-Sat) Traditional Brit-style boozier with a murky cellar-bar that hosts jazz combos and bands on weekends.

**Beach Café** (☎ 02 38 81 04 55; 45 rue de la Charpenterie; ☎ 5pm-3am) A lively student hang-out with

cocktails and beers on the blackboard and a surfy vibe, just the ticket on warm summer nights.

### Getting There & Away

#### BUS

The catch-all municipal transport service **Ulys** ([www.uly-s-loiret.com](http://www.uly-s-loiret.com)) brings together information for local bus companies serving the Orléans area. There's a flat-rate €2 tariff for journeys. Bus 7, run by **Les Rapides du Val de Loire** ([www.rvl-info.com](http://www.rvl-info.com)), travels to Jargeau (40 minutes) and Sully-sur-Loire (1¼ hours, three daily Monday to Friday). Bus 3 travels to Châteauneuf-sur-Loire (40 minutes, four to six daily, two on Sunday). Tickets can be bought on board or from Orléans' **bus station** (☎ 02 38 53 94 75; 2 rue Marcel Proust).

#### TRAIN

The city's two stations, Gare d'Orléans and Gare des Aubrais-Orléans (the latter is 2km to the north), are linked by tram and frequent shuttle trains. Most Loire Valley destinations stop at both stations, but trains to/from Paris' Gare d'Austerlitz (€17.10, one hour 10 minutes, hourly) use Gare des Aubrais-Orléans. Orléans has frequent services to Blois (€9.40, 40 minutes) and Tours (€16.80, one to 1½ hours).

### Getting Around

#### BUS & TRAM

Orléans buses and trams are run by Semtao. Information and tickets are available from **Espace Transport** (☎ 08 00 01 20 00; [www.semtao.fr](http://www.semtao.fr); Gare d'Orléans; ☎ 6.45am-7.15pm Mon-Fri, 8am-6.30pm Sat). Fares are €1.30/11.90 for a single ticket/10-ticket *carnet*; trams run until around 12.30am, buses till 8pm or 9pm.

#### BICYCLE

Orléans operates an on-street bike-hire system, **Vélo+** (☎ 0 80 00 83 56; [www.agglo-veloplus.fr](http://www.agglo-veloplus.fr); deposit €3, first 30min free, next 30min €0.50, per subsequent hr €2) with drop-off stations all over town (including the train station, place du Martroi, place du Général de Gaulle and outside the cathedral).

### ORLÉANS TO SULLY-SUR-LOIRE

North of Orléans stretches the 350-sq-km Forêt d'Orléans (one of the few remaining places in France where you can spot wild ospreys), while east of Orléans towards the

Burgundy border are intriguing churches and little-known châteaux.

Châteauneuf-sur-Loire's **château** explores the history of river shipping on the Loire, with a collection of model boats and riverine artefacts displayed in the castle's former stables, now the **Musée de la Marine** (☎ 02 38 46 84 46; 1 place Aristide Briand; adult/7-18yr €3.50/2; ☎ 10am-6pm Wed-Mon Apr-Oct, 2-6pm Wed-Mon Nov-Mar).

Another 6km southeast is the **Église de Germigny-des-Prés**, one of France's few Carolingian churches, renowned for its unusual Maltese-cross layout and gilt-and-silver 9th-century mosaic. Twelve kilometres upstream is St-Benoît-sur-Loire and the Romanesque **Abbaye de Fleury** (☎ 02 38 35 72 43; www.abbaye-fleury.com; ☎ 6.30am-10pm), still home to a practising Benedictine brotherhood, who conduct summertime abbey tours. Look out for the famous decorated portal and the relics of St Benedict (480-547) in the abbey basilica.

Nine kilometres southeast of St-Benoît, the **Château de Sully-sur-Loire** (☎ 02 38 36 36 86) is a grand example of a fairy-tale castle, with machicolated ramparts and turrets rising from a glassy moat. Built from 1395 to defend one of the Loire's crucial crossings, the castle underwent major refurbishment in 2007-08; contact the Sully **tourist office** (☎ 02 38 36 23 70; http://ot.sully-sur.loire@wanadoo.fr; 21 bd Jeanne d'Arc; ☎ 9.45am-12.15pm & 2.30-6.30pm Mon-Sat, 10.30am-1pm Sun May-Sep, 10am-noon & 2-6pm Wed-Sat, 10am-noon Mon, 2-6pm Tue Oct-Apr) for the latest news. The château also hosts an annual outdoor **music festival** (www.festival-sully.com) every June.

For buses see opposite.

## LA SOLOGNE

For centuries, the boggy wetland and murky woods of La Sologne have formed one of France's great hunting grounds, with deer, boars, pheasants and stags roaming the woodland, and eels, carp and pike filling its deep ponds and rivers. François I (r 1515-47) established it as a royal playground, but years of war, disease and floods turned it into malaria-infested swamp; only in the mid-19th century, after it was drained under Napoléon III, did La Sologne regain its hunting prestige.

In winter it can be a desolate place, with drizzle and thick fog blanketing the landscape, but in summer it's a riot of wildflowers

and blooming foliage, and makes for great country to explore on foot, bike or horseback. Paths and trails criss-cross the area, including the GR31 and the GR3C, but stick to the signposted routes if you're visiting during hunting season, unless you fancy getting some buckshot up your backside.

**La Malle aux Raboliots** (☎ 02 54 88 43 75; 8 rue de la Paix, St-Viâtre; adult/child €25/18) offers a guided bike trip around the Sologne area, including a home-made picnic, or you can hire bikes for €7.50/15 per half-/full day.

For further info on hikes and walks in the Sologne, contact the **tourist office** (☎ 02 54 76 43 89; www.tourisme-romorantin.com; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon & 1.30-6pm Sat) in **Romorantin-Lanthenay**, 41km southeast of Blois.

The best time to visit is the last weekend in October, when the annual **Journées Gastronomiques de Sologne** fills the streets of Romorantin with local delicacies such as stuffed trout, wild-boar pâté and Sauvignon cheese, as well as freshly baked *tarte Tatin*, the upside-down apple tart accidentally created in 1888 by two sisters in the village of Lamotte-Beuvron.

You can catch trains from Romorantin-Lanthenay to Tours (via Gièvres; €13.30, 1¼ to 1½ hours, four to eight daily).

## BLÉSOIS

The countryside around the former royal seat of Blois is surrounded by some of the country's finest châteaux, including graceful Cheverny, little-visited Beauregard, and the turret-topped supertanker château to end them all, Chambord.

### Château Tours

The *départementale* bus company **TLC** (☎ 02 54 58 55 44; www.tlcinfo.net; adult/child excl admission fees €11.20/8.96; ☎ departures at 9.10am & 1.45pm mid-May-early Sep) runs châteaux tours from Blois to Chambord and Cheverny; tickets can be bought on the bus, or preferably in advance at the Blois tourist office.

**Transport Touristique de Voyageurs** (☎ 06 08 14 71 41; deveaux.pierre@wanadoo.fr; Chissay-en-Touraine; per bus for up to 6 people per day €230) offers tailored trips to local châteaux in air-conditioned minibuses.



## BLOIS

pop 49,200

Looming on a rocky escarpment, Blois' historic château (formerly the feudal seat of the powerful counts of Blois) has been repeatedly redeveloped over the last seven centuries, and its grand halls, spiral staircases and sweeping courtyards provide a whistle-stop tour through the key periods of French architecture. Blois suffered heavy bombardment during WWII, and the modern-day town is mostly the result of speedy postwar reconstruction. Inland from the river the twisting streets of the old town give you some idea of how Blois might have looked to its medieval inhabitants; and if you're suffering from château fatigue, there are some intriguing diversions to explore, including a museum of magic and a mischievous gallery of modern art. Sadly for chocoholics, Blois' historic chocolate factory, Poulain, is strictly off-limits to visitors.

### Orientation

Blois, on the northern bank of the Loire, is fairly compact. The train station is at the top of the hill along av Jean Laigret, which travels east downhill towards the château and the river. The old city is to the east of the château, while the commercial district centres on pedestrianised rue du Commerce, rue Porte Chartraine, and rue Denis Papin connected to rue du Palais by the 19th-century Escalier Denis Papin.

### Information

**Laundrettes** 1 rue Jeanne d'Arc (☎ 7am-9pm); 4 rue St-Lubin (☎ 7am-9pm)

**Post Office** (rue Gallois) Changes money.

**Tourist Office** (☎ 02 54 90 41 41; www.bloispaysdechambord.com; 23 place du Château; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-7pm Sun Apr-Sep, 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-4pm Sun Oct-Mar)

### Sights & Activities

#### CHÂTEAU ROYAL DE BLOIS

Blois' **château** (☎ 02 54 90 33 32; place du Château; adult/student/6-17yr €7.50/5/3; ☎ 9am-7pm Jul & Aug, 9am-6.30pm Apr-Jun & Sep, 9am-12.30pm & 1.30-5.30pm Oct-Mar) was intended more as an architectural showpiece than a military stronghold, and successive French kings have left their creative mark over the centuries. From the château's huge **central courtyard** you can view

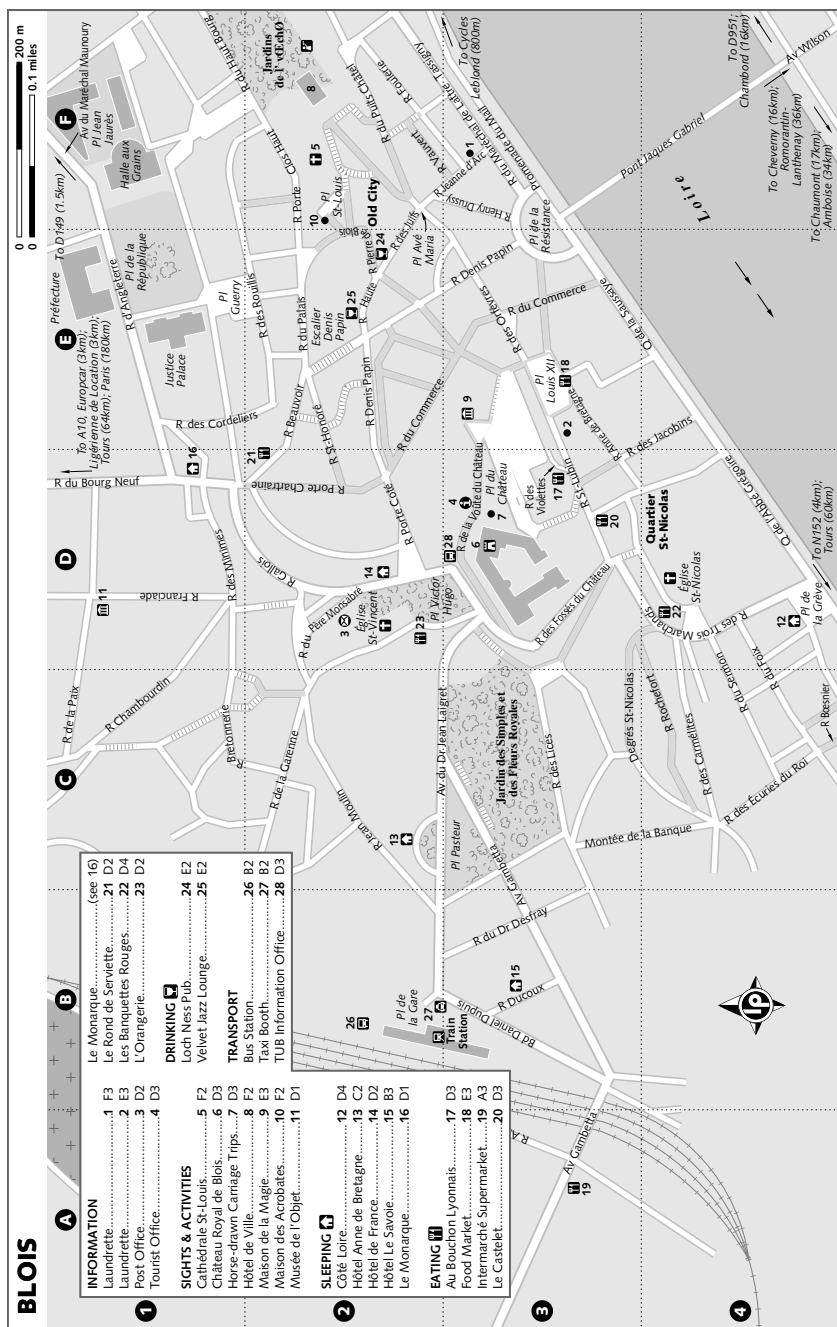
four distinct periods of French architecture: the Gothic Salle des États and original medieval castle; François I's Renaissance north wing (1515-24) with its spiral loggia staircase; the classical west wing (1635-38), constructed by the architect François Mansart under Gaston d'Orléans, brother to Louis XIII; and the Flamboyant Gothic east wing (1498-1503), constructed in the Italianate style by Louis XII using red brick and creamy stone (a horseback statue of Louis can be seen above the ticket office).

First stop is the cavernous **Salle des États Généraux** (Estates General Hall), with its soaring double barrel-vaulted roof decorated in royal blues and golden *fleurs-de-lys*. Blois' medieval lords meted out justice here in the Middle Ages, and Luc Besson used the hall for the dramatic trial scene in his 1999 biopic *Jeanne d'Arc* (1999).

The **Renaissance wing** was remodelled in the early 16th century as royal apartments for François I and his wife Queen Claude. Its most famous feature is the loggia staircase, decorated with salamanders and curly 'F's (heraldic symbols of François I). The wing suffered heavily during the Revolution and served as a military barracks from 1788 to 1861, before being painstakingly restored by the architect Felix Duban in the 19th century. Highlights include the guards' hall and the bedchamber in which Catherine de Médicis (Henri II's machiavellian wife) died on 5 January 1589 aged 69. According to Alexandre Dumas, the queen supposedly stashed her poisons in secret cupboards behind the elaborately panelled walls of the *studiolo* (domestic chamber).

On the 2nd floor are the king's apartments, housing a council room, private study, and the king's gallery and bedchamber – the setting for one of the bloodiest episodes in the château's history, when Henri III had his arch-rival, the Duke de Guise, murdered by royal bodyguards (the king himself courageously hid behind a tapestry). Period paintings and portraits recreate the gruesome event in the **Halles des Guises**. Ironically, Henri III was himself murdered just eight months later by a vengeful monk.

The Renaissance kitchens have been converted into a **sculpture gallery** of columns, statues and friezes torn down during the Revolution. Look out for lots of salamanders, mythological scenes and plenty of leering gargoyles.



## CHOOSING YOUR CHÂTEAU

Loire Valley châteaux are a bit like buses: you wait ages for one to come along, then suddenly five show up together. There's no doubt that for dramatic castles, the Loire Valley is definitely the place – but with so many glorious mansions to choose from, how on earth do you go about selecting which one to visit? Here's our whistle-stop guide to help you decide...

For sheer, unadulterated architectural splendour, you can't top the big three: François I's country getaway **Chambord** (p429), Renaissance **Chenonceau** (p436) and the supremely graceful **Cheverny** (p430), which provided the inspiration for Captain Haddock's stately home in Hergé's Tintin. Unsurprisingly, these are also by far and away the three most visited châteaux – turn up early or late to dodge the hordes.

If it's the medieval, serf-and-seigneur, Monty Python and the Holy Grail kind of castle you're after, head for the imposing fortress of **Langeais** (p442), complete with its original battlements and drawbridge; the cylindrical towers of **Chaumont** (p430), once owned by Catherine de Medici; or the walled stronghold of **Loches** (p442).

For historical significance, top of the list are the royal residences of **Blois** (p424), which spans four distinct periods of French architectural history; stately **Amboise** (p437), home to a succession of French monarchs including Charles VIII and Louis XI; and **Clos Lucé** (p439) in Amboise, where Leonardo da Vinci whiled away his final years.

For literary connections, try the inspiration for *Sleeping Beauty*, **Ussé** (p442) or **Montsoreau** (p447), the setting for a classic Alexandre Dumas novel.

Looking for the picture-perfect setting? Our choices are the moat-ringed **Azay-le-Rideau** (p441), the formal gardens of **Villandry** (p440) and the little-visited château of **Beaugregard** (p431), famous for its astonishing portrait gallery of medieval celebrities and its peaceful landscaped grounds. Or maybe it's atmospheric ruins you're after – then go for the tumbledown fortress of **Chinon** (p444).

And lastly, if you're looking to enjoy the architecture in peace, go for any of the châteaux we haven't listed here – chances are the lesser-known places will be much, much quieter than their bigger, better-known and better-looking cousins elsewhere in the valley.

The brick-and-stone **Louis XII wing** houses the **Musée des Beaux-Arts** on the 1st floor, where the most grotesque (and popular) work is a portrait of an alarmingly hairy little girl (apparently the result of a rare genetic disease) by the Italian painter Lavinia Fontana.

The most recent section of the château is the **Gaston d'Orléans wing**, with another richly carved staircase and a small historical exhibition. Duck into the **St-Calais chapel** on your way out, built by Louis XII and consecrated in 1508. The stained-glass windows were installed by the artist Max Ingrand in 1957.

In summer the château courtyard hosts a 45-minute **son et lumière** (sound-and-light show; ☎ 02 54 55 26 31; adult/student/child €7.50/5.50/3, incl château €11.50/8.50/5.50; 🎫 mid-Apr–late Sep) featuring huge projections on the castle walls. There's an English version on Wednesdays.

## MAISON DE LA MAGIE

Opposite the château is the former home of watchmaker, inventor and conjurer Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin (1805–71), after

whom the great Houdini named himself. This town house now forms the **Maison de la Magie** (House of Magic; ☎ 02 54 55 26 26; www.maisondelamagie.fr, in French; 1 place du Château; adult/student/6-17yr €7.50/6.50/5, incl château €12.50/8.50/5.50; 🎫 10am–12.30pm & 2–6.30pm Mar–late Sep & late Oct–early Nov), with daily magic shows and optical trickery ranging from a hall of mirrors to a mysterious 'Hallucinoscope'. It's a bit cheesy, but good fun.

## MUSÉE DE L'OBJET

This brilliant (and very French) **modern arts museum** (☎ 02 54 55 37 45; www.museedelobjet.org; 6 rue Franciade; adult/student €4/2; 🎫 1.30–6.30pm Wed–Sun late June–Aug, 1.30–6.30pm Fri–Sun late Feb–late June & Sep–Dec) is based on the collection of the artist Eric Fabre, and concentrates on artworks made using everyday materials. Among the best pieces are a sculpture of coat-hangers by Man Ray, an *objet scatologique* (involving a large high-heeled shoe) by Salvador Dalí, and a weird *TV Buddha* by the Korean artist Nam June Paik.

## OLD CITY

Despite serious damage by German attacks in 1940, Blois' old city is worth exploring, especially around the 17th-century **Cathédrale St-Louis** (place St-Louis; ☎ 9am-6pm), with its lovely multi-storeyed bell tower, dramatically floodlit after dark. Most of the stained glass inside was installed by Dutch artist Jan Dibberts in 2000.

Across is the **Maison des Acrobates** (3bis rue Pierre de Blois), decorated with wooden sculptures taken from medieval farces, and one of the few 15th-century houses to survive the WWII bombardment. There's another example at No 13 known as the **Hôtel de Villebrême**.

Lovely panoramas unfold across town from the peaceful **Jardins de l'Évêché** and the top of the **Escalier Denis Papin**.

## CARRIAGE RIDES

**Horse-drawn carriage trips** (☎ adult/child €6/4; ☎ 9am-7pm Jul & Aug, 2-6pm Apr-Jun & Sep) clop around town from the château's main gate. Book at the tourist office, or just wait outside the château for the next carriage.

## Sleeping

**Le Monarque** (☎ 02 54 78 02 35; lemonarque@free.fr; 61 rue Porte Chartraine; s €38, d €55-57) The Anne de Bretagne's sister hotel sits at the edge of the old city, and offers similar levels of colour and comfort, with the added bonus of a downstairs restaurant (*menus* €18 to €28).

**Hôtel Le Savoie** (☎ 02 54 74 32 21; hotel.le.savoie@wanadoo.fr; 6 rue Ducoux; s/d €45/54, with shower only €41/48) Straightforward station hotel, decorated with multinational flags and a whitewashed facade. The modern chain-style rooms are hardly award-winning: expect prefab furniture and easy-to-clean fabrics. It's handy for train travellers and there's a useful bike shed for cyclists.

**Hôtel de France** (☎ 02 54 78 00 53; www.franceetguise.com; 3 rue Gallois; s €45, d 49-53) Chandeliers, glass and brass left from this hotel's belle-époque heyday still decorate the lobby, but some of the musty rooms are looking pretty tired: ask for one of the balcony rooms overlooking the Église St-Vincent.

**Côté Loire** (☎ 02 54 78 07 86; www.coteloire.com; 2 place de la Grève; d early Nov-Mar €48-67, Apr-early Nov €53-72) If it's charm and colours you want, head for the homely Loire Coast, with haphazard rooms decked out in cheery checks,

bright pastels and the odd bit of exposed brick. There's free wi-fi and a wooden-decked breakfast patio.

**Hôtel Anne de Bretagne** (☎ 02 54 78 05 38; http://annedebretagne.free.fr; 31 av du Dr Jean Laigret; d €54-58) At the top of town overlooking a crescent, this creeper-covered hotel is a more traditional option, with a bar full of polished wood, soft lighting and vintage pictures, and modern rooms finished in flowery wallpaper and stripy bedspreads. Parking is available.

## Eating

**Au Bouchon Lyonnais** (☎ 02 54 74 12 87; 25 rue des Violettes; mains €12-14) Classic neighbourhood bistro with a flavour of bygone days, where ancient net curtains sit alongside battered tables and rustic rafters, and the food is straight out of the Lyonnaise cookbook: snails, duck steaks and *la véritable andouillette* (true tripe sausage). Peasant food done to perfection.

**Le Castelet** (☎ 02 54 74 66 09; 40 rue St-Lubin; menus €17-28.20; ☎ closed Wed & Sun) Rusticana and rural frescoes cover the walls of this country restaurant, while piped medieval music fills the air: the perfect setting for more filling Touraine food, with a heavy emphasis on seasonal ingredients.

**Les Banquettes Rouges** (☎ 02 54 78 74 92; 16 rue des Trois Marchands; menus €22.50 & €28.50; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat) Handwritten slate menus and homely food distinguish the Red Benches: rabbit with marmalade, duck with lentils and pike with red cabbage, all done with a spicy twist and a smile.

## LE PASS'-CHÂTEAUX

Many of the châteaux in the Blésois are covered by the **Pass'-Châteaux**, which offers savings of between €1.20 and €5.30 depending on which châteaux you visit; contact the tourist offices in Blois, Cheverny and Chambord. There are also additional formulas which include the smaller châteaux at Villesavin, Troussay and Talcy.

**Chambord-Cheverny-Blois:** €19

**Chambord-Cheverny-Beauregard:** €19

**Chambord-Blois-Chaumont:** €18.70

**Blois-Chambord-Cheverny-Beauregard:** €24.80

**Blois-Cheverny-Chaumont-Chambord:** €25.20

## RIVER CRUISING

Unlike many of France's other rivers, the Loire offers relatively few opportunities to get out on the water: it's often too unstable and unpredictable to navigate safely, so you won't see too many holiday barges or canal boats cruising around. But the river's not completely off-limits...

**Croisières de Loire** (☎ 02 47 23 98 64; www.labelandre.com) offers cruises on the Loire and Cher, departing from Amboise (€8.50/5.50 per adult/child, running May to September) and Chenonceaux (€9.25/6 per adult/child, from April to October), with great views of both châteaux; hop aboard the flat-bottomed *gabarre* (barge; adult/child €8.50/5.50) in Chenonceaux for the authentic boatman's experience.

**Ligérienne de Navigation** (☎ 02 47 52 68 88; www.naviloire.com; adult/under 12yr €9/6; ☞ Apr–Nov) runs one of the few river cruises on the Loire proper, in a 66-seat boat departing from Rochecorbon to some of the Loire's wild islets and nature reserves.

**Promenades en Futreau** (Blois Tourist Office ☎ 02 54 90 41 41; adult/under 12yr €8.50/6.50; ☞ Mon–Sat Jul & Aug, Tue–Sat May, Jun & Sep) sets out from the Blois quayside aboard a traditional *futreau* (flat-bottomed barge).

**La Margaretifera et la Candaise** (☎ 02 47 95 93 15; Candes-sur-Martin; adult/under 12yr €7.50/5.50) provides atmospheric boat trips in traditional high-cabined Loire vessels known as *toues*, departing from Candes-sur-Martin.

**ourpick L'Orangerie** (☎ 02 54 78 05 36; 1 av du Dr Jean Laigret; menus €32–74) Polish up those pumps and dust off that evening dress – the Orangerie is Blois' most respected table. Tucked behind wrought-iron gates in a timber-storeyed building opposite the château, it's cloud nine for connoisseurs of *haute cuisine* – plates are artfully stacked with ingredients, from duck liver to langoustine and foie gras (fatted liver), and the sparkling *salon* would make Louis XIV green with envy. On summer nights, opt for a courtyard table and prepare to be pampered.

## SELF-CATERING

**Food market** (rue Anne de Bretagne; ☞ 7.30am or 8am–1pm Tue, Thu & Sat)

**Intermarché supermarket** (16 av Gambetta)

## Drinking

The best bars are in the old town, particularly in the small alleys off rue Foulerie.

**Velvet Jazz Lounge** (☎ 02 54 78 36 32; www.velvetjazz.fr; 15bis rue Haute; ☞ 6pm–2am Mon, 3pm–2am Tue–Sat; ☞) Lodged under artful lights, 13th-century vaults and contemplative Buddhas, Blois' funkier bar hosts regular jazz acts after dark, and offers a selection of 32 (count 'em) hot chocolates in its alternative guise as an afternoon *salon de thé*.

**Loch Ness Pub** (☎ 02 54 56 08 67; cnr rue des Juifs & rue Pierre de Blois; ☞ 3pm–3am) The Scottish theme isn't convincing, but the boozing students

and late-night drinkers at this ever-popular drinking hole don't seem to mind. Big-screen sports, karaoke and occasional gigs pack in the punters.

## Getting There & Away

### BUS

**TLC** (☎ 02 54 58 55 44; www.tlinfo.net) handles buses to and from Blois, with destinations including Chambord (line 2, €3.99; 40 minutes, four Monday to Saturday, one on Sunday), Beaugency (line 1, €10.55; 55 minutes, four Monday to Friday, two on Saturday) and Cheverny (line 4, €1.10; 45 minutes, six to eight Monday to Friday, three on Saturday, two on Sunday). TLC also runs château tours in summer (see p423).

### CAR

To rent a vehicle:

**Avis** (☎ 02 54 45 10 61; train station; ☞ 8am–noon & 2–6pm Mon–Fri)

**Europcar** (☎ 02 54 43 22 20; 4 rue Gutenberg; ☞ 8am–noon & 2–6.30pm Mon–Fri, 8am–noon & 2–5pm Sat)

**Ligérienne de Location** (☎ 02 54 78 25 45; 96–100 av de Vendôme; ☞ 8am–noon & 2–6.30pm Mon–Fri, 8am–noon & 3–6pm Sat)

### TRAIN

There are regular trains to Amboise (€6, 20 minutes, at least 10 daily), Orléans (€9.30, 45 minutes, at least hourly) and Tours (€9.10, 40 minutes, hourly), plus Paris' Gare d'Austerlitz (€23.30, two hours, eight to 13 daily).

## Getting Around

### BICYCLE

The **Châteaux à Vélo** ([www.chateauxavelo.com](http://www.chateauxavelo.com)) network offers 11 waymarked cycling routes in the Blois area. You can download a free route map from the website or pick up a copy from the tourist office; there are also 40 downloadable guides for your MP3 player. For bike hire:

**Cycles Leblond** (☎ 02 54 74 30 13; 44 Levée des Tuileries; per half-/full day €9/12; 🕒 9am-9pm)

**Randovélo** (☎ 02 54 78 62 52; [www.randovelo.fr](http://www.randovelo.fr); 29 rue du Puits Neuf; per day €14; 🕒 9am-6pm Mon-Fri Apr-Oct)

### TUB

**TUB** (☎ 02 54 78 15 66; [www.tub-blois.fr](http://www.tub-blois.fr); 2 place Victor Hugo; 🕒 1.30-6pm Mon, 8am-noon & 1.30-6pm Tue-Fri, 9am-noon & 1.30-4.30pm Sat) operates local buses in Blois. A one-way ticket costs €1.10; buses run until about 8pm Monday to Saturday, with hardly any on Sunday.

### TAXI

**Taxi Radio** (☎ 02 54 78 07 65; place de la Gare; 🕒 24hr) Can be found at the train station.

## CHÂTEAU DE CHAMBORD

For full-blown château splendour, you can't top **Chambord** (☎ 02 54 50 50 20; [www.chambord.org](http://www.chambord.org); adult/18-25yr/under 18yr €9.50/7.50/free, €1 reduction Jan-Mar & Oct-Dec; 🕒 9am-7.30pm mid-Jul-mid-Aug, 9am-6.15pm mid-Mar-mid-Jul & mid-Aug-Sep, 9am-5.15pm, Jan-mid-Mar & Oct-Dec), one of the crowning examples of French Renaissance architecture, and by far the largest, grandest and most visited château in the Loire Valley.

Begun in 1519 as a weekend hunting lodge by François I, it quickly snowballed into one of the most ambitious (and expensive) architectural projects ever attempted by any French monarch. Though construction was repeatedly halted by financial problems, design setbacks and military commitments (not to mention the kidnapping of the king's two sons in Spain), by the time Chambord was finally finished 30-odd years later, the castle boasted some 440 rooms, 365 fireplaces, and 84 staircases, not to mention a cityscape of turrets, chimneys and lanterns crowning its rooftop, and a famous **double-helix staircase**, supposedly designed by the king's chum, Leonardo da Vinci. Ironically, François ultimately found his elaborate palace too draughty, preferring the royal apartments in Amboise and Blois – he only

stayed here for 42 days during his entire reign from 1515 to 1547.

Despite its apparent complexity, Chambord is laid out according to simple mathematical rules. Each section is arranged on a system of symmetrical grid squares around a Maltese cross. At the centre stands the rectangular keep, crossed by four great hallways, and at each corner stands one of the castle's four circular bastions. Through the centre of the keep winds the great staircase, with two intertwining flights of stairs leading up to the great **lantern tower** and the castle's **rooftop**, from where you can gaze out across the landscaped grounds and marvel at the Tolkienesque jumble of cupolas, domes, chimneys and lightning rods.

It's worth picking up the multilingual audioguide (€4) to explore the rest of the château, if only to avoid getting lost around the endless rooms and corridors. The most interesting rooms are on the 1st floor, including the king's and queen's chambers (complete with interconnecting passages to enable late-night nooky) and a wing devoted to the thwarted attempts of the Comte de Chambord to be crowned Henri V after the fall of the Second Empire. On the 2nd floor is the eerie **Museum of Hunting**, with an endless display of weapons and macabre hunting trophies, and there's an interesting multilanguage film on the history of the castle's construction, screened on the ground floor. In a place of such ostentatious grandeur, it's often the smallest things that are most interesting – look out for a fascinating display of hundreds of cast-iron keys (one for each door in the château) and an equally fascinating display case containing broken pottery, tableware and goblets found in the castle's latrine.

Several times daily there are 1½-hour **guided tours** (€4) in English, and during school holidays there are **costumed tours** to entertain the kids. Free son et lumière shows, known as **Les Clairs de Lune**, are projected onto the château's facade nightly from July to mid-September, and there are outdoor concerts held throughout summer, including a daily **spectacle équestre** (dressage show; adult/child €8.50/6.50; 🕒 Tue-Sun May, Jun & Sep).

## Domaine National de Chambord

This huge hunting reserve (the largest in Europe) stretches for 54 sq km around the château, and is reserved solely for the use of

## CHÂTEAU TOURS

Hard-core indie travellers might balk at the idea of a minibus tour, but don't dismiss it out of hand. Most companies offer a choice of well-organised itineraries, taking in various combinations of Azay-le-Rideau, Villandry, Cheverny, Chambord and Chenonceau (plus wine-tasting tours): entry to the châteaux isn't included, although you'll get a discount on the standard price. Half-day trips cost between €18 and €33; full-day trips range from €40 to €50 including lunch. You can reserve places via the Tours tourist office.

**Acco-Dispo** (☎ 06 82 00 64 51; www.accodispo-tours.com)

**Alienor** (☎ 02 47 61 22 23, 06 10 85 35 39; www.locationdevelos.com)

**Quart de Tours** (☎ 06 85 72 16 22; www.quartdetours.com)

**St-Eloi Excursions** (☎ 02 47 37 08 04; www.saint-eloi.com)

high-ranking French government personalities (though somehow it's difficult to imagine Sarkozy astride a galloping stallion). About 10 sq km of the park is publicly accessible, with trails open to walkers, mountain bikers and horse riders.

It's great for wildlife-spotting, especially in September and October during the stag mating season. There are **aires de vision** (observation towers) around the park; set out at dawn or dusk to spot stags, boars and red deer.

Bikes can be hired from a **rental kiosk** (☎ 02 54 33 37 54; per half-/full day €10/13; ☞ Apr–early Nov) near the *embarcadère* (jetty) on the River Cosson, where you can also rent boats. There are guided **evasions à vélo** (bike trips; adult/child €10/6 plus bike hire) from mid-August to September, and half-day horse rides (€70) in July and August.

To see the rest of the reserve, jump aboard a **Land Rover Safari** (☎ 02 54 50 50 06; adult €18; ☞ Apr–Sep), conducted by French-speaking guides with an intimate knowledge of where and when to see the best wildlife.

## Getting There & Away

Chambord is 16km east of Blois, 45km southwest of Orléans and 17km northeast of Cheverny. For details on public transport options see p428.

## CHÂTEAU DE CHEVERNY

Thought by many to be the most perfectly proportioned château of all, **Cheverny** (☎ 02 54 79 96 29; www.chateau-cheverny.fr; adult/7–14yr €7/3.40; ☞ 9.15am–6.45pm Jul & Aug, 9.15am–6.15pm Apr–Jun & Sep, 9.45am–5.30pm Oct, 9.45am–5pm Nov–Mar) represents the zenith of French classical architecture, the perfect blend of symmetry, geometry and aesthetic order.

Built from gleaming stone from the nearby Bourré quarries and surrounded by lush park-

land, Cheverny is one of the few châteaux whose original architectural vision has survived the centuries practically unscathed. Since its construction between 1625 and 1634 by Jacques Hurault, an intendant to Louis XII, the castle has hardly been altered, and its interior decoration includes some of the most sumptuous furnishings, tapestries and objets d'art anywhere in the Loire Valley. Owned by the Hurault family for the last six centuries, the apartments include a formal dining room, bridal chamber and children's playroom (complete with Napoléon III–era toys), as well as a guards' room full of pike-staffs, claymores and suits of armour. Behind the main château is the 18th-century **Orangerie**, where many priceless artworks (including the *Mona Lisa*) were stashed during WWII.

Tintin fans might find the château's facade oddly familiar: Hergé used it as a model (minus the two end towers) for Moulinsart (Marlinspike) Hall, the ancestral home of Tintin's irascible sidekick, Captain Haddock. A small exhibition, **Les Secrets de Moulinsart** (combined ticket with château adult/7–14yr €11.80/6.80), explores the Tintin connections.

Near the château's gateway are the **kennels**, home to the pedigree hunting dogs still used by the owners of Cheverny: feeding time, known as the **Soupe des Chiens**, takes place daily at 5pm from April to September.

Cheverny is 16km southeast of Blois and 17km southwest of Chambord. For information on the bus from Blois see p428.

## CHÂTEAU DE CHAUMONT

Set on a defensible bluff behind the Loire, **Chaumont-sur-Loire** (☎ 02 54 51 26 26; adult/12–18yr/6–12yr €7.50/5/free; ☞ 10am–6pm mid-May–mid-Sep, 10.30am–5.30pm Apr–mid-May & mid-Sep–end Sep, 10am–5pm Oct–Mar) presents a resolutely medieval face,

with its cylindrical corner turrets and sturdy drawbridge, but the interior mostly dates from the 19th century. At least two earlier fortresses occupied the site (whose name derives from Chauve Mont 'Bald Hill'), but the main phase of construction for the present château began sometime around 1465 under Pierre d'Amboise. Originally a strictly defensive fortress, the castle became a short-lived residence for Catherine de Médicis following the death of Henry II in 1560, and later passed into the hands of Diane de Poitiers (Henry II's mistress), who was forced to swap the altogether grander surroundings of Chenonceau for Chaumont by the ruthless Catherine.

The château was thoroughly renovated by Princess de Broglie, heiress to the Say sugar fortune, who bought it in 1875 (and knocked down one entire wing to provide a better view of the river). The most impressive room is the Council Chamber, with its original maiolica-tiled floor, plundered from a palace in Palermo, but the château's finest architecture is arguably reserved for the **Écuries** (stables), built in 1877 to house the Broglie's horses in truly sumptuous style (the thoroughbreds all had their own personal padded stalls). A collection of vintage horse-drawn carriages is now displayed inside the stables; buzz on the gate to be let in.

Chaumont's English-style park hosts the annual **Festival International des Jardins** (International Garden Festival; ☎ 02 54 20 99 22; www.chaumont-jardins.com; adult/12-18yr/6-12yr €9/6.50/3; 🕒 9.30am-nightfall) between April and October.

### Getting There & Away

Chaumont-sur-Loire is 17km southwest of Blois and 20km northeast of Amboise. Onzain, an easyish walk from Chaumont across the Loire, has trains to Blois (€3, 10 minutes, 10 to 14 daily) and Tours (€7.20, 35 minutes).

### CHÂTEAU DE BEAUREGARD

Less visited than its sister châteaux, **Beauregard** (☎ 02 54 70 40 05; adult/8-18yr €6.50/4.50; 🕒 9.30am-6.30pm Jul & Aug, 9.30am-noon & 2-6.30pm Apr-Jun, Sep & Oct, 9.30am-noon & 2-5pm Nov, Feb & Mar, closed Dec & Jan & Wed Oct-Mar) has some special charms all of its own. Built as yet another hunting lodge by François I, the castle's highlight is an amazing portrait gallery depicting 327 notables of European aristocratic society. Spot famous faces including Christopher Columbus, Cardinal Richelieu,

Catherine de Médicis, Anne de Bretagne, Henry VIII of England and his doomed wife Anne Boleyn, and every French king since Philippe VI: underfoot, the porcelain floor is decorated with handmade Delft tiles.

## TOURAINE

Often dubbed the 'Garden of France', the Touraine region is famous for its rich food, tasty cheeses and notoriously pure French accent, as well as a smattering of glorious châteaux: some Renaissance (Azay-le-Rideau, Villandry and Chenonceau), others medieval (Chinon and Loches). The historical capital, Tours, makes a good base, with regular bus and train links.

### Getting Around

Châteaux accessible by train or SNCF bus from Tours include Chenonceau, Villandry, Azay-le-Rideau, Langeais, Amboise, Chaumont, Chinon and Loches – see each château listing for details.

### TOURS

pop 298,000

Though not quite as cosmopolitan as its sister city of Orléans, Tours has long been considered one of the principal cities of the Loire Valley. It's a smart, solidly bourgeois kind of place, filled with wide 18th-century boulevards, parks and imposing public buildings, as well as a busy university of some 25,000 students. Hovering somewhere between the style of Paris and the conservative sturdiness of central France, Tours makes a useful staging post for exploring the Touraine, with Azay-le-Rideau, Villandry and Langeais all a short drive away.

### Orientation

Tours' 18th-century planners laid out the city in efficient fashion, with the central hub of place Jean-Jaurès connecting the main thoroughfares – west–east bd Béranger and bd Heurteloup, and north–south rue Nationale and av de Grammont. About 300m east of place Jean-Jaurès is the train station, while the city centre and commercial district stretches northwards towards the Loire River. The old city encircles place Plumereau (locally known as Place Plum), about 400m west of rue Nationale.



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## Information

There are commercial banks around place Jean Jaurès.

**Bureau de Change** (☎ 8.45am–6pm Mon–Sat Feb–May & Oct–Dec, to 6.30pm Jun–Sep, closed Jan) Inside the train station. The commission is €4.50.

**Emega Cyberstation** (43 rue du Grand Marché; per hr €2; ☎ noon–midnight Mon–Sat, 2–11pm Sun) Internet access.

**La Boîte à Livres de l'Étranger** (☎ 02 47 05 67 29; 2 rue du Commerce; ☎ Mon–Sat) Multilingual bookshop with English titles.

**Laundrettes** 22 rue Bernard Palissy (☎ 7am–8pm); 149 rue Colbert (☎ 7am–7.45pm); cnr rue Bretonneau & rue du Mûrier (☎ 7am–8.30pm)

**Police Station** (☎ 02 47 33 80 69; 70–72 rue Marceau; ☎ 24hr)

**Post Office** (1 bd Béranger) Currency exchange.

**Top Communication** (68–70 rue Colbert; per hr €2; ☎ 10am–midnight Mon–Sat, 3–10pm Sun) Internet access.

**Tourist Office** (☎ 02 47 70 37 37; www.ligeris.com; 78–82 rue Bernard Palissy; ☎ 8.30am–7pm Mon–Sat, 10am–12.30pm & 2.30–5pm Sun mid–Apr–mid–Oct; 9am–12.30pm & 1.30–6pm Mon–Sat, 10am–1pm Sun mid–Oct–mid–Apr)

## Sights

### MUSÉE DES BEAUX-ARTS

Arranged around the courtyard of the former archbishop's palace, the **Musée des Beaux-Arts** (☎ 02 47 05 68 73; 18 place François Sicard; adult/student/under 13yr €4/2/free; ☎ 9am–12.45pm & 2–6pm Wed–Mon) is a fine example of a French provincial arts museum, with palatial rooms decorated to reflect the period of the artworks on display – look out for works by Delacroix, Degas and Monet, as well as a rare Rembrandt miniature and a Rubens portrait of the Virgin Mary. The massive 1804 Lebanese cedar in front of the museum measures a whopping 7.5m around the base. Wheelchair access is available.

### CATHÉDRALE ST-GATIEN

In a country of jaw-dropping churches, the **Cathédrale St-Gatien** (place de la Cathédrale; ☎ 9am–7pm) still raises a gasp. With its twin west towers, stretching skyward through a lattice-work of Gothic decorations, arches, flying buttresses and gargoyles, it's a show-stopper. The cathedral is especially known for its intricate stained glass, particularly the rose windows above the organ; the interior dates from the 13th to 16th centuries, and the domed tops of the two 70m-high towers date from the Renaissance. On the north side is the **Cloître de la Psallette** (☎ 02 47 47 05 19; adult/under 18yr €2.50/free; ☎ 9.30am–12.30pm & 2–6pm Mon–Sat, 2–6pm Sun Apr–Sep,

9.30am–12.30pm & 2–5pm Wed–Sat & 2–5pm Sun Oct–Mar), a cloister built from 1442 to 1524.

### MUSÉE DU GEMMAIL

The fashion for *gemmail* (pronounced zheh-mai) – pieces of backlit stained glass embedded in enamel – flourished briefly during the 1950s, but it never quite caught on in the way its inventors had hoped. You can see examples of this odd art form at the **Musée du Gemmail** (☎ 02 47 61 01 19; rue du Mûrier; adult/student €5.40/3.90; ☎ 2–6.30pm Tue–Sun Easter–mid–Oct).

### MUSÉE DU COMPAGNONNAGE

France has long prided itself on the work of its 20,000-odd *compagnons* (craftsmen), whose skills have been in demand since the first showpiece cathedrals started appearing in the early Middle Ages (when the Statue of Liberty was restored in the mid-1980s, French *compagnons* were responsible for the intricate metalwork). In addition to traditional professions such as stonemasonry, carpentry and ironmongery, the *compagnonnages* (guild organisations) welcome in many skilled labourers, including pastry chefs, coopers and locksmiths. You can view their work at the **Musée du Compagnonnage** (☎ 02 47 61 07 93; 8 rue Nationale; adult/student/under 12yr €5/3/free; ☎ 9am–12.30pm & 2–6pm daily mid–Jun–mid–Sep, 9am–noon & 2–6pm Wed–Mon mid–Sep–mid–Jun), where displays range from handmade clogs to booby-trapped locks, vintage barrels and enormous cakes.

### MUSÉE DE L'HÔTEL GOÛIN

The city's **archaeological museum** (☎ 02 47 66 22 32; 25 rue du Commerce) had been closed since January 2008 for restoration works at the time of writing, but you can still admire the Italianate exterior of the building, originally a Renaissance residence built for a wealthy merchant around 1510.

### BASILIQUE ST-MARTIN

Tours was once an important pilgrimage city thanks to the soldier-turned-evangelist St Martin (c 317–97), bishop of Tours in the 4th century. After his death a Romanesque basilica was constructed above his tomb, but today only the north tower, the **Tour Charlemagne**, remains (the rest was torn down during the Wars of Religion and the French Revolution). A replacement basilica was built in 1862 on a new site a short distance south along rue Descartes to house his relics, while

the small **Musée St-Martin** (☎ 02 47 64 48 87; 3 rue Rapin; adult/concession €2/1; 🕒 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-5.30pm Wed-Sun mid-Mar-mid-Nov) displays various artefacts relating to the lost church.

### JARDIN BOTANIQUE

Tours has several public parks, including the 19th-century **botanic garden** (bd Tonnelie; admission free; 🕒 7.45am-sunset) a 5-hectare landscaped park with a tropical greenhouse, medicinal herb garden and petting zoo. The park is 1.6km west of place Jean Jaurès; bus 4 along bd Béranger stops nearby.

### WINE TOURS

The tourist office organises two wine tours around local vineyards: a half-day White Tour (€35) through the Vouvray area, or a full-day Red Tour (€58) through Chinon and Bourgueil, both including lunch.

### Sleeping

**Auberge de Jeunesse du Vieux Tours** (☎ 02 47 37 81 58; www.ajtours.org; 5 rue Bretonneau; dm €17.40; 🕒 reception 8am-noon & 6-11pm; 🍷) Friendly, bustling hostel with a large foreign-student and young-worker contingent; there are lots of kitchens (mostly small) and lounges to hang out in, but no en-suite bathrooms. Bike hire is available on-site.

**Hôtel Régina** (☎ 02 47 05 25 36; fax 02 47 66 08 72; 2 rue Pimbert; d with shower €26.60-44, d with shower & toilet €31.60-50) Budget cheapie with a bedsit vibe, offering simple rooms with mix-and-match furniture and second-hand wall prints in a choice of pinks, blues and pale whites. Curfew is 1am, and the matronly *madame* stands for no nonsense.

**Hôtel Val de Loire** (☎ 02 47 05 37 86; hotel.val.de.loire@club-internet.fr; 33 bd Heurteloup; s €30-40, d €40-50) Higgledy-piggledy rooms spread around an 1870 town house, with period features including parquet floors, faded rugs and scruffy furniture, as well as wi-fi and double glazing to shut out the road noise. The top-floor rooms are jammed into the rafters; ask for one lower down for more space (and be prepared for weird push-button showers).

**ourpick L'Adresse** (☎ 02 47 20 85 76; www.hotel-ladresse.com; 12 rue de la Rôtisserie; s €50, d €70-90) Looking for Parisian style in provincial Tours? Then you're in luck – 'The Address' is a boutique bonanza, with rooms finished in sleek slates, creams and ochres, topped off with wi-fi, flat-screen TVs, designer sinks, wicker

bathchairs and reclaimed rafters: best are the ones with sexy shuttered balconies over the bustling alley. Drop-dead cool.

**Hôtel du Théâtre** (☎ 02 47 05 31 29; www.hotel-du-theatre37.com; 57 rue de la Scellerie; s €51-56, d €56-62) As its name suggests, this characterful hotel is down the street from the city theatre. Inside a spiral staircase reaches up a tiny timber-framed courtyard to the 1st-floor lobby; the rooms are comfortably old-fashioned, with wi-fi and a beamed dining room for breakfast.

**Hôtel Mondial** (☎ 02 47 05 62 68; www.hotelmondialtours.com; 3 place de la Résistance; s €52-62, d €56-72) Overlooking place de la Résistance, this hotel boasts a fantastic city-centre position: the modernised, metropolitan attic rooms in funky greys, browns and scarlets are the nicest, but even the older-style ones are decent. Breakfast is served in-room or in the 1st-floor lounge diner. Wi-fi available.

**Hôtel du Cygne** (☎ 02 47 66 66 41; www.hotel-cygne-tours.com; 6 rue du Cygne; d €53-96) One of Tours' oldest hotels, and showing its age in places, but still a charming place if you like your rooms old world. Slatted shutters on the exterior, chandeliers, terracotta pots and a bustling *madame* in the lobby: rooms range from small and poky to large and grand with gilded mirrors and floor-to-ceiling drapes.

**Hôtel de l'Univers** (☎ 02 47 05 37 12; www.hotel-univers.fr; 5 bd Heurteloup; d €137-272; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Everyone from Ernest Hemingway to Édith Piaf has kipped at the Universe over its 150-year history, and it's still a prestigious address. Previous guests gaze down from the frescoed balcony above the lobby (look out for Churchill and Edward VII), and the rooms are appropriately glitzy, if corporate: beds are huge, bathrooms are gleaming, and some have odd interconnecting windows between bedroom and bathroom. Wheelchair access is available.

### Eating

Place Plum is crammed with cheap eats, but the quality can be variable.

**Tartines & Co** (☎ 02 47 20 50 60; 6 rue des Fusillés; mains from €8.50, lunch menu €13.20; 🕒 10am-5pm) Snazzy little bistro that reinvents the traditional *croque* (toasted sandwich). Choose your topping – gourmet chicken, roasted veg, carpaccio beef – and it's served up quick as a flash on toasted artisan bread. Our tip is the Paysan, featuring roasted goat's cheese, walnuts and ham.

**Comme Autre Fouée** (☎ 02 47 05 94 78; 11 rue de la Monnaie; lunch menu €10, other menus €16–19.50; ☺ lunch Sat & Sun, dinner Tue–Sat, also lunch Tue–Thu mid–May–mid–Sep) For local flavour, you can't top this place, which churns out the house speciality of *fouées*, a pitta-like disc of dough stuffed with pork rillettes, *haricots blancs* (white beans) or goat's cheese.

**La Table d'Emilie** (☎ 02 47 05 05 30; 1 rue Lobin; mains €10.50–13.30; ☺ closed Sat & Aug) Giant poppies and crimson tablecloths brighten up the *salon* of this much-recommended local's restaurant, run by a friendly team passionate about honest, straightforward cooking – go for the St-Jacques scallops or the market-fresh *poisson du jour* (fish of the day).

**Les Maris Morgans** (☎ 02 47 64 95 34; 6 rue de la Rôtisserie; menus €16–35; ☺ dinner Wed–Mon) *Avast, me hearties* – this ship-shape place (named after naughty water fairies) is all about the fruits of the sea, from just-cooked crab to sea bass and fresh oysters. The chef's special is *bisquines* (a seafood platter of mussels, langoustines, fish and prawns), and the dining room is draped in nautical knick-knacks and fishing tackle.

**L'Atelier Gourmand** (☎ 02 47 38 59 87; 37 rue Étienne Marcel; menu €20; ☺ closed Mon) Another one for the foodies, but you'll need your dark glasses – the puce-and-silver colour scheme is straight out of a Brett Easton Ellis novel. You might not love the interior decor, but there's no quibbling with the food – hunks of roast lamb, green-pepper duck and authentic bouillabaisse, delivered with a modern spin.

**Le Zinc** (☎ 02 47 20 29 00; 27 place du Grand Marché; menus €20.50–25.50; ☺ closed Wed & lunch Sun) One of the new breed of French bistros, more concerned with simple, classic staples and market-fresh ingredients (sourced direct from the local Halles) than Michelin stars and *haute cuisine* cachet. Country dishes – duck breast, beef fillet, river fish – served up in a buzzy terracotta-floored dining room. Attractive and authentic.

## SELF-CATERING

For all your picnicking needs:

**Atac supermarket** 5 place du Général Leclerc (☺ 7.30am–8pm Mon–Sat); 19 place Jean Jaurès (☺ 9am–7.30pm Mon–Sat) The place Jean Jaurès branch is inside the shopping centre.

**Les Halles** (covered market; place Gaston Pailhou; ☺ 7am–7pm)

## Drinking

Place Plum and the surrounding streets are plastered in grungy bars and drinking dens, all of which get stuffed to bursting on hot summer nights.

**Bistro 64** (64 rue du Grand Marché; ☺ 11am–2am Mon–Sat) Cosy neighbourhood that's one step removed from the place Plum hustle. Scuffed-up decor, jazz combos and plenty of house beers keep the local crowd happy.

**L'Alexandra** (☎ 02 47 61 48 30; 106 rue du Commerce; ☺ noon–2am Mon–Fri, 3pm–2am Sat & Sun) Popular Anglo-Saxon bar crammed with students and late-night boozers, with attractions including house-special cocktails and internet access (€2).

**La Canteen** (☎ 02 34 74 10 30; 10 rue de la Grosse Tour; ☺ noon–2.30pm & 7.30–11pm Mon–Sat) For something smoother and sexier, swing by this designer wine bar, where rough stone walls sit alongside leather sofas, chrome artworks, razor-sharp tables and a neon-lit bar. Loads of wines by the glass, including Loire vintages.

## Entertainment

Get the low-down from the free monthly *Tours.infos* ([www.tours.fr](http://www.tours.fr), in French), available all over town. Tickets are sold at **Fnac billeterie** (☎ 08 92 68 36 22; 72 rue Nationale).

**Cinéma Les Studios** (☎ for recorded information 08 92 68 37 01; [www.studiocine.com](http://www.studiocine.com), in French; 2 rue des Ursulines) Screens nondubbed films.

**Excalibur** (☎ 02 47 64 76 78; 35 rue Briçonnet; admission from €8; ☺ 11pm–6am Tue–Sat) Hot-and-heavy club lodged in a converted ecclesiastical building not far from the Basilique St-Martin. Varied music – from pop tunes to house and drum-and-bass – pack in plenty of Tourangeaux clubbers.

**Grand Théâtre** (☎ 02 47 60 20 20; 34 rue de la Scellerie; ☺ box office 9.30am–12.30pm & 1.30–5.45pm Mon–Sat & 30min before performances) Hosts opera and symphonic music.

**Le Paradis Vert** (☎ 02 47 66 00 94; 9 rue Michelet; adult/student billiard table per hr €10/8; ☺ 10am–2am) Fast Eddie eat your heart out – France's biggest pool hall is right here in Tours, with 36 tables and a weekly pool contest open to all comers. If you get knocked out, you can always surf the net instead.

**Les Trois Orfèvres** (☎ 02 47 64 02 73; 6 rue des Orfèvres; admission €3–10; ☺ 11pm–5am Wed–Sat) Grungy night-spot and gig venue in the heart of the medieval quarter, where the DJs lean towards rock

classics, alternative and indie, and the students hang out in force in the vaulted-roof bar.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

**Tours-Val de Loire Airport** (☎ 02 47 49 37 00; www.tours-aeroport.com), about 5km northeast of central Tours, is linked to London's Stansted and Dublin by Ryanair.

### BUS

**Touraine Fil Vert** (☎ 02 47 47 17 18; www.touraine-filvert.com, in French) serves destinations in the Indre-et-Loire *département*, including Line C to Amboise (35 minutes, 12 daily Monday to Saturday) and onward to Chenonceaux (1¼ hours, two daily). Single-journey tickets in the surrounding area cost a flat-rate €1.50. There is an **information desk** at the bus station (☎ 02 47 05 30 49; place du Général Leclerc; ☹ 7am-7pm Mon-Sat).

### CAR

Tours' one-way system and hectic traffic make driving a real headache, so you'll be glad not to bring a car. If you need to hire, there are rental agencies around the station, including **Avis** (☎ 02 47 20 53 27; in the train station; ☹ 8am-12.30pm & 1.30-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Sat) and **Ecoto** (☎ 02 47 66 75 00; www.ecoto.fr; 8 rue Marcel Tribut; ☹ 8am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri).

### TRAIN

Tours is the Loire Valley's main rail hub. The train station is linked to St-Pierre-des-Corps, Tours' TGV train station, by frequent shuttle trains.

Trains run at least hourly between Tours and Orléans (€16.60, one to 1½ hours, some change at Vierzon or St-Pierre-des-Corps), stopping at Amboise (€4.60, 20 minutes) and Blois (€9.10, 40 minutes).

SNCF lines go west to Saumur (€10, 35 minutes, eight to 12 daily) and Angers (€15.30, one hour, eight to 12 direct daily); southwest to Chinon (€8.10, 45 minutes, 10 daily on weekdays, five daily on weekends); southeast to Loches (€7.80, 50 minutes, 10 to 15 daily) by train or coach; and east to Chenonceaux (€5.70, 30 minutes, six daily).

High-speed TGVs rocket to Paris-Gare Montparnasse (€39.10 to €55.10, 1¼ hours, around 15 daily); slow-coach Corails run to Gare d'Austerlitz (€28.70, two to 2¾ hours, nine to 15 daily).

TGVs also serve Bordeaux (€45, 2¾ hours), La Rochelle (€31 to €36.40, 2½ to 3¼ hours), Poitiers (€18.50 to €20.40, one hour) and Nantes (€25 to €26.90, 1½ hours).

## Getting Around

### TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

A shuttle bus (€5) leaves the bus station two hours before and half an hour after each Ryanair flight.

### BICYCLE

**Détours de Loire** (☎ 02 47 61 22 22; www.locationvelos.com; 31 bd Heurteloup; 1 day €14, subsequent days per day €7, 1 week €57; ☹ 9am-1pm & 2-7pm Mon-Sat, 9.30am-12.30pm & 6-7pm Sun Easter-early Oct, 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat early Oct-Easter) is part of the Loire à Vélo network (p418).

**Vélomania** (☎ 02 47 05 10 11; 109 rue Colbert; ☹ 10.30am-1.30pm & 3.30-7.30pm Mon-Sat) also rents bikes (per day/week €14.50/50.50).

### BUS

Local buses are operated by **Fil Bleu** (☎ 02 47 66 70 70; www.filbleu.fr, in French; information office 5bis rue de la Dolve; ☹ closed Sat afternoon & Sun). Most lines stop near place Jean-Jaurès. Tickets cost €1.20 and remain valid for an hour. Most lines run until about 8.30pm; hourly Bleu de Nuit night buses run until about 1am.

## AROUND TOURS

Vineyards carpet the area around Vouvray (population 3100) and Montlouis-sur-Loire (population 8000), 10km east of Tours, and there are many *caves* (wine cellars) dotted around the area where you can taste and buy wine. Contact the **Vouvray tourist office** (☎ 02 47 52 68 73; 12 rue Rabelais; ☹ 9.30am-1pm & 2-6.30pm daily May-Oct, 9.30am-1pm & 2-5.30pm Tue-Sat Nov-Apr) for a list of local wine sellers, or book into the organised wine trip offered by the Tours tourist office.

Fil Bleu bus 61 links Tours' train station with Vouvray (€1.20, 20 minutes) while Fil Vert Line C (€1.50, 10 minutes, hourly) travels to Montlouis-sur-Loire.

## CHÂTEAU DE CHENONCEAU

Spanning the languid Cher River via a series of supremely graceful arches, and encircled by formal gardens and landscaped parkland, **Chenonceau** (☎ 02 47 23 90 07; www.chenonceau.com; adult/student & 7-18yr €10/7.50, with audioguide €14/11.50; ☹ 9am-8pm Jul & Aug, 9am-7.30pm Jun & Sep, 9am-7pm Apr

& May, 9.30am-5pm or 6pm rest of year), not to be confused with the village spelled Chenonceaux, is one of the most elegant and unusual of the Loire Valley châteaux. In stark contrast to the ostentatious drama of Chambord and Blois, or the martial posturing of Chaumont and Loches, Chenonceau feels curiously serene and superior, delighting purely in the aesthetic quality of its architecture and its glorious surroundings.

So it's perhaps unsurprising to find that this architectural fantasy land is largely the work of several remarkable women (hence its alternative name, Le Château des Dames 'Ladies' Chateau'). The initial phase of construction started in 1515 on the orders of Thomas Bohier, a court minister of King Charles VIII, although much of the work and design was actually overseen by his wife, Katherine Briçonnet. The château's distinctive arches and one of the formal gardens were added by Diane de Poitiers, mistress of King Henri II. Following Henri's death, Diane was forced to exchange Chenonceau for the rather less grand château of Chaumont by the king's scheming widow, Catherine de Médicis, who completed the construction and added the huge yew-tree *labyrinth* (maze) and the western rose garden. But Chenonceau's heyday was under the aristocratic Madame Dupin, who made the château a centre of fashionable 18th-century society and attracted guests including Voltaire and Rousseau (the latter tutored the Madame's son). Legend also has it that it was she who single-handedly saved the château from destruction during the Revolution, thanks to her popularity with the local populace.

The château's interior is crammed with wonderful furniture, tapestries and paintings, as well as several stunning original tiled floors; the *pièce de la résistance* is the black-and-white chessboard floor of the 60m-long **Grande Galerie** spanning the Cher, scene of many a wild party under the auspices of Catherine de Médicis and Madame Dupin. During WWII, the Cher apparently marked the boundary between free and occupied France; local legend has it that the Grand Gallery was used as the escape route for many refugees fleeing the Nazi occupation.

## Getting There & Away

The château is 34km east of Tours, 10km southeast of Amboise and 40km southwest of Blois. There are trains and buses from

all three towns, and you can take boat trips from the château in summer (see p428).

## AMBOISE

pop 11,500

The childhood home of Charles VIII and the final resting place of the great Leonardo da Vinci, upmarket Amboise is an elegant provincial town, pleasantly perched along the southern bank of the Loire and overlooked by its fortified 15th-century château. With some seriously posh hotels and a wonderful weekend market, Amboise makes a less hectic base for exploring the nearby châteaux than Blois or Tours, except in summer, when the coach tours arrive *en masse* to visit da Vinci's mansion home at Clos Lucé, where the great man whiled away his last three years under the patronage of François I.

## Orientation

The train station, across the river from the town centre, is about 800m north of the Château Royal d'Amboise. Le Clos Lucé is 500m southeast of the château along rue Victor Hugo. The island in the middle of the Loire is called Ile d'Or.

Place Michel Debré, sometimes called place du Château, stretches west from rue de la Tour to pedestrianised rue Nationale, Amboise's main commercial street.

## Information

Several banks dot rue Nationale.

**Laundrette** (7 allée du Sergent Turpin; ☎ 7am-8pm)

**Playconnect** (119 rue Nationale; per hr €3; ☎ 3-10pm Sun & Mon, 10am-10pm Tue-Sat) Internet access.

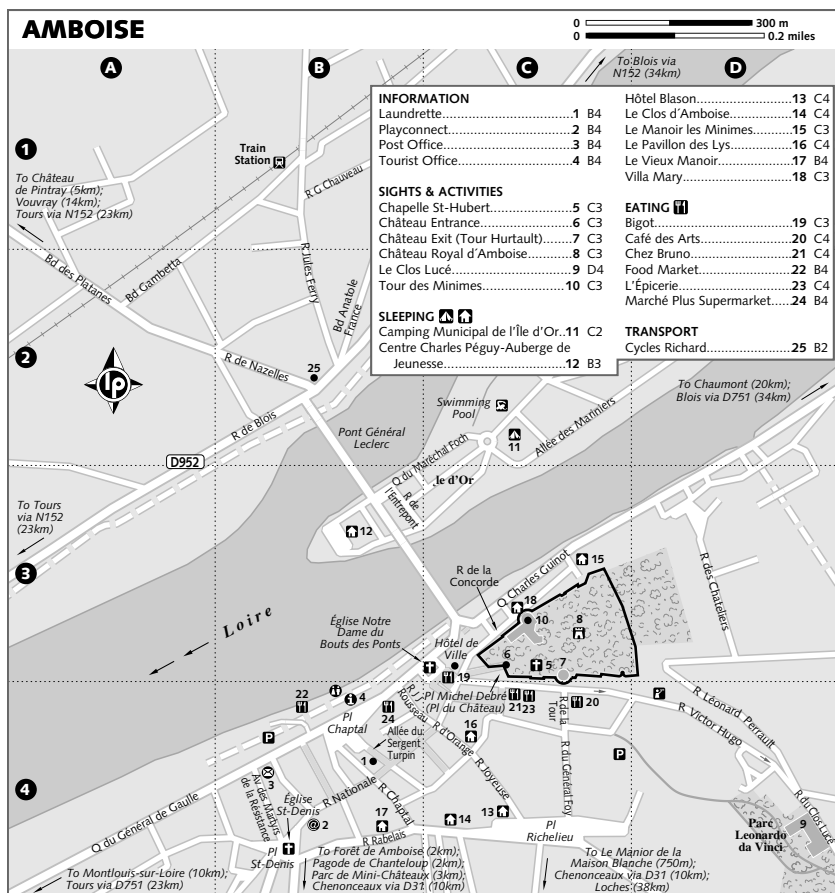
**Post Office** (20 quai du Général de Gaulle)

**Tourist Office** (☎ 02 47 57 09 28; www.amboise-valde Loire.com; ☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Sat & 10am-6pm Sun Jul & Aug, 10am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm Sun Apr-Jun & Sep, 10am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat Oct-Mar) In a detached riverside building opposite 7 quai du Général de Gaulle. Sells walking and cycling maps and a discount ticket for the château, Clos Lucé and the Pagode de Chanteloup.

## Sights & Activities

### CHÂTEAU ROYAL D'AMBOISE

Like many of the older Loire Valley castles, the **Château Royal d'Amboise** (☎ 02 47 57 00 98; place Michel Debré; adult/15-25yr/7-14yr €9/7.50/5.30; ☎ 9am-7pm Jul & Aug, 9am-6.30pm Apr-Jun, 9am-6pm Sep & Oct, 9am-5.30pm Mar & early Nov, 9am-12.30pm Jan, Feb & mid-Nov-Dec) uses



the natural terrain to maximise its defensive potential. Sprawling across a rocky escarpment with panoramic views of the river and surrounding countryside, it presented a formidable prospect to would-be attackers, but in fact saw little military action; it was more often used as a weekend getaway from the official royal seat at nearby Blois. Charles VIII (r 1483–98), was born and brought up here, and was responsible for the château's Italianate remodelling in 1492. François I (r 1515–47), who constructed Chambord (p429), also grew up here alongside his sister Margaret of Angoulême, and later invited da Vinci to work at nearby Clos-Lucé under his patronage.

The château entrance is at the top of the ramp at place Michel Debré. Today, just a few

of the original 15th- and 16th-century structures survive, notably the **Flamboyant Gothic wing** and the **Chapelle St-Hubert**, a small chapel dedicated to the patron saint of hunting (note the carved stag horns and hunting friezes outside) and believed to be the final resting place of da Vinci. The interior highlights include a **guards' room**, a lovely **belvedere** overlooking the river, and a vaulted **Council Chamber** decorated with the initials of Charles VIII and his wife, Anne de Bretagne. Charles died suddenly in 1498 after hitting his head on a lintel while playing *jeu de paume* (an early form of tennis); the widowed Anne was later forced to remarry the new king, Louis XII.

From 1848 to 1852, Abd el-Kader, the leader of the Algerian resistance against

French colonialism, was imprisoned here with his family and entourage; a monument in the château's landscaped grounds commemorates the event.

The exit from the château is through the circular **Tour Hurtault**, with an ingenious sloping spiral ramp designed to allow carriages and horses to easily ascend to the château from the town below.

## LE CLOS LUCÉ

Leonardo da Vinci (pronounced van-see in French) installed himself in the grand manor house at **Le Clos Lucé** (☎ 02 47 57 00 73; www.vinci-dos-luce.com; 2 rue du Clos Lucé; adult/student/6-15yr Mar–mid-Nov €12.50/9.50/7, mid-Nov–Mar €9.50/7/6; ☎ 9am–8pm Jul & Aug, 9am–7pm Feb–Jun, Sep & Oct, 9am–6pm Nov–Jan) in 1516 on the invitation of François I, who was greatly enamoured with the Italian Renaissance. Already 64 by the time he arrived, da Vinci seems to have spent his time at Clos Lucé sketching, tinkering and dreaming up new contraptions: the house and landscaped grounds house scale models of many of his inventions, including a protoautomobile, tank, parachute, hydraulic turbine and even a primitive helicopter.

## PAGODE DECHANTELOUP

Two kilometres south of Amboise is the curious **Pagode de Chanteloup** (☎ 02 47 57 20 97; www.pagode-chanteloup.com; adult/7-15yr/student €7/6/5; ☎ 9.30am–7.30pm Jul & Aug, 10am–7pm Jun, 10am–6.30pm May & Sep, 10am–6pm Mar & Apr, 2–4.30pm Mon–Fri Feb, plus 10am–noon & 2–5pm Sat & Sun Feb, Oct & Nov bank holidays & school holidays), the only remains of a demolished château. Built between 1775 and 1778, the pagoda is an odd blend of classical French architecture and Chinese motifs, which were all the rage at the time of the pagoda's construction; clamber to the top and you'll be rewarded with glorious views of the surrounding park and the forested Loire Valley. Gourmet picnic hampers (€11 to €25) are on sale in summer, and you can while away the afternoon larking about in a rowboat or playing free outdoor games.

Nearby, the **Parc de Mini-Château** (☎ 08 25 08 25 22; www.mini-chateau.com; adult/child €12.75/8.75; ☎ 10am–8pm mid-Jul–mid-Aug, 10am–7pm Jun–mid-Jul & late August, 10.30am–6pm Sep–mid-Nov, 10.30am–7pm Apr & May, closed mid-Nov–Mar) collects intricate scale models of 44 of the Loire Valley's most famous châteaux – squint a bit and it's just as good as a hot-air balloon trip over the Loire for a fraction of the price. Well, almost.

## Sleeping

Amboise has some of the smartest places to stay in the Loire Valley, but you'll need deep pockets unless you're camping.

## BUDGET

**Camping Municipal de l'Île d'Or** (☎ 02 47 57 23 37; Île d'Or; adult €2.45–2.50, tent €3.25–3.30; ☎ mid-Mar–early Oct; ☎) Pleasant campsite on a peaceful river island, with facilities including tennis courts, ping pong and canoe hire.

**Centre Charles Péguy-Auberge de Jeunesse** (☎ 02 47 30 60 90; www.mjcamboise.fr; Île d'Or; dm €12; ☎ reception 2–8pm Mon–Fri, 5–8pm Sat & Sun; ☎) Efficient boarding school-style hostel on the Île d'Or, with 72 beds mostly in three- or four-bed dorms, and treats including ping pong, table football and bike hire.

**Hotel Blason** (☎ 02 47 23 22 41; www.leblason.fr; 11 place Richelieu; d €44–58, r €66–68; ☎) Quirky, creaky budget hotel, on a quiet square in a wood-fronted building that previously served as a convent school, laundry and blacksmith's. The 25 higgledy-piggledy rooms are wedged in around the corridors: most are titchy, flowery and timber-beamed. Parking available.

## MIDRANGE

**Villa Mary** (☎ 02 47 23 03 31; www.villa-mary.fr; 14 rue de la Concorde; d €60–120; ☎) Four tip-top rooms in an impeccably furnished 18th-century town house, crammed with beeswaxed antiques, glittering chandeliers and antique rugs. Choose from Red, Violet, Pink and Blue, all with period pieces and patterned wallpaper – a couple have separate bathrooms across the corridor. Parking is also available.

**Le Clos d'Amboise** (☎ 02 47 30 10 20; www.leclos-amboise.com; 27 rue Rabelais; r €75–170; ☎) Another posh pad finished with oodles of style and lashings of luxurious fabrics. Features range from wood-panelling to timber joints and antique beds; some rooms have separate sitting areas, others original fireplaces and toile de Jouy-style fabrics, and the best give views over the lovingly manicured grounds and pool. There's even a sauna and gym in the old stables, and parking is available.

**La Pavillon des Lys** (☎ 02 47 30 01 01; www.pavillon-deslys.com; 9 rue d'Orange; d €90–140, ste €180–210; ☎) Beautiful hotel drenched with the kind of chichi style more suited to the Côte d'Azur. Take a cappuccino-coloured 18th-century town house and fill it with designer lamps, just-so furniture, roll-top baths, hi-fis and



deep sofas, and you're halfway there; chuck in a locally renowned restaurant, an elegant patio garden and boutiquey treats and you're getting there. Parking is also available.

**Le Vieux Manoir** (☎ 02 47 30 41 27; 13 rue Rabelais; r €140-190, ste €275-305; ☒) Run by expat Americans who cut their teeth at an award-winning Boston B&B, this shuttered mansion (with parking available) is stuffed floor to ceiling with period charm – vintage dressers, reclaimed sinks, old portraits, chintzy rugs. Rooms are named after French notables (from Colette to George Sand) – our choice is Madame de Lafayette with its burnished 19th-century dresser and cupboard bathroom. Cosy, inviting, but a little pricey.

Other options:

**Le Manoir de la Maison Blanche** (☎ 02 47 23 16 14; www.lamaisonblanche-fr.com; 18 rue de l'Épinerterie; d €80-90) Another sweet mansion B&B, with four rooms in a converted outbuilding, a lovely garden setting, and parking.

**Le Manoir Les Minimes** (☎ 02 47 30 40 40; www.manoirlesminimes.com; 34 quai Charles Guinot; d €115-170, ste €270-460) Check into the prestige suites at this pricey pamper-palace, set around a private courtyard that would put most châteaux to shame. Parking available.

## Eating & Drinking

**Café des Arts** (☎/fax 02 47 57 25 04; 32 rue Victor Hugo; meals €4-12) Spit-and-sawdust local's bar, dishing up beer and bar snacks steps from the château's old gate. Local *chanteurs* occasionally croon away while you sip your aperitif.

**Bigot** (☎ 02 47 57 59 32; 2 rue Nationale; ☒ 9am-7.30pm Tue-Fri, 8.30am-7.30pm Sat & Sun) Since 1913 this award-winning chocolatier and pâtisserie has been whipping up some of the Loire's creamiest cakes and gooiest treats: multicoloured *macarrons*, buttery biscuits and handmade chocolates, éclairs and *petits fours*, best appreciated at the fabulously frilly *salon de thé*.

**Chez Bruno** (☎ 02 47 57 73 49; place Michel Debré; 2-/3-course menu €11/15; ☒ lunch Wed-Sun, dinner Fri & Sat) Amboise's new boy uncorks a host of local vintages in a coolly contemporary setting (white tablecloths, big gleaming glasses, snazzy artwork), accompanied by honest, inexpensive regional cooking. If you're after Loire Valley wine tips or oenological instruction, this is the place.

**L'Épicerie** (☎ 02 47 57 08 94; 46 place Michel Debré; menus €20.90, €25.60 & €30.90; ☒ Wed-Sun) For a more time-honoured atmosphere head along the street from Chez Bruno to the Grocery,

where rich wood and neo-Renaissance decor is matched by filling fare such as *cuisse de lapin* (rabbit leg) and *tournedos de canard* (duck fillet).

## SELF-CATERING

For self-catering supplies, Amboise's excellent outdoor **food market** (☒ 8am-1pm Fri & Sun) fills the river-bank car parks west of the tourist office. For general supplies there's a **Marché Plus supermarket** (5 quai du Général de Gaulle; ☒ 7am-9pm Mon-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun).

## Getting There & Around

Amboise is 34km downstream from Blois and 23km upstream from Tours.

## BICYCLE

Hire mountain bikes at **Cycles Richard** (☎ 02 47 57 01 79; 2 rue de Nazelles; per day €15; ☒ 9am-noon & 2.30-7pm Tue-Sat).

## BUS

Touraine Fil Vert's (p436) line C1 links Amboise's post office with Tours' bus terminal (€1.50, 45 minutes, nine daily Monday to Saturday). One bus daily continues on to Chenonceaux (15 minutes) from Monday to Saturday, with an extra afternoon bus in the summer.

## TRAIN

The **train station** (bd Gambetta), across the river from the centre of town, is served by trains from Paris' Gare d'Austerlitz (€24.20, 2¼ to three hours, 11 daily), Blois (€5.60, 20 minutes, 10 to 20 daily) and Tours (€4.50, 15 minutes, 10 to 20 daily).

## CHÂTEAU DE VILLANDRY

Completed in 1756, one of the last major Renaissance châteaux to be built in the Loire Valley, **Villandry** (☎ 02 47 50 02 09; www.chateauvillandry.com; château & gardens adult/8-18yr & student €9/5, gardens only €6/3.50; ☒ château 9am-6.30pm Jul & Aug, 9am-6pm Apr-Jun, Sep & Oct, 9am-5.30pm Mar, 9am-5pm Feb & early Nov, gardens 9am-btwn 5pm & 7.30pm year-round) is more famous for what lies outside the château's walls than what lies within. Sheltered by enclosing walls, the château's glorious landscaped gardens are some of the finest in France, occupying over 6 hectares filled with impeccably manicured lime trees, tinkling fountains, ornamental vines and razor-sharp box hedges.

The original gardens and château were built by Jean le Breton, who served François I as finance minister and Italian ambassador (as well as supervisor for the construction of Chambord). During his time as ambassador, le Breton became enamoured by the art of Italian Renaissance gardening, and determined to create his own ornamental masterpiece at his newly constructed château at Villandry.

Some sections are purely aesthetic, others profoundly practical: wandering around the pebbled walkways you'll see formal **water gardens**, a **maze**, **vineyards** and the **Jardin d'Ornement** (Ornamental Garden), which depicts various aspects of love (fickle, passionate, tender and tragic) using geometrically pruned hedges and coloured flowerbeds. But the highlight is the 16th-century **potager** (kitchen garden), where even the vegetables are laid out in regimental colour-coordinated fashion. Sadly, the original gardens were destroyed in the 19th century to make way for a more fashionable English-style park, but over recent years they have been painstakingly restored to resemble the original Renaissance layout. Once inside the gardens you can stay as long as you like; the after-hours exit is next to the village church.

Make sure you time your visit when the gardens are in bloom between April and October – midsummer is the most spectacular season.

While the gardens steal the show, it's worth visiting the château's interior, mostly finished in luxurious 18th-century style by the Marquis de Castellane, who owned the château after le Breton. Highlights include a stunning gallery of Spanish art and an over-the-top Oriental Room, complete with a gilded ceiling plundered from a 15th-century Moorish palace in Toledo. From the corner **tower** (the only remnant from the original medieval château) and the **belvedere**, there are bird's-eye views across the gardens and the nearby Loire and Cher rivers.

### Getting There & Away

Villandry is 17km southwest of Tours, 31km northeast of Chinon and 11km northeast of Azay-le-Rideau. Bikes are a great way to get around between the nearby châteaux; the D88 and D288 are more roundabout but much less trafficky than the main D7.

Touraine Fil Vert's (p436) Bus V travels between Tours and Azay-le-Rideau (€1.50, 50 minutes), stopping at Villandry (30 minutes from Tours), twice daily in July and August, and on Wednesdays and Saturdays in June, September and October. There's space at the back to carry a few bikes.

The nearest trains stop in Savonnières, 4km northeast of Villandry. Destinations include Tours (€2.90, 10 minutes, three Monday to Saturday, one on Sunday) and Saumur (€8.20, 35 minutes).

### CHÂTEAU D'AZAY-LE-RIDEAU

Conjure up a classic French château and chances are it will be close to **Azay-le-Rideau** (☎ 02 47 45 42 04; adult/18-25yr €7.50/4.80; ☎ 9.30am-7pm Jul & Aug, 9.30am-6pm Apr-Jun & Sep, 10am-12.30pm & 2-5.30pm Oct-Mar), a wonderful moat-ringed mansion decorated with geometric windows, ordered turrets and decorative stonework, wrapped up within a shady landscaped park. Built in the 1500s on a natural island in the River Indre, the château is one of the Loire's loveliest – Honoré de Balzac called it a 'multi-faceted diamond set in the River Indre'. The most famous feature is its open loggia staircase, overlooking the central courtyard and decorated with the salamanders and ermines of François I and Queen Claude; the interior is mostly 19th century, remodelled by the Marquis de Biencourt from the original 16th-century château built by Gilles Berthelot, a tax collector and chief treasurer for François I. The elegant billiard room and enormous castle kitchens are impressive, but the château's most photogenic side is its elegant exterior, especially when it's reflected in the still waters of the moat encircling the castle's walls. In summer, a son et lumière (one of the Loire's oldest and best) is projected onto the castle walls every evening. Audioguides (€4) are available in several languages.

### Getting There & Away

Château d'Azay-le-Rideau is 26km southwest of Tours. The D84 and D17, on either side of the Indre, are a delight to cycle along.

Touraine Fil Vert's (p436) Bus V travels from Tours to Azay-le-Rideau (€1.50, 50 minutes) twice daily from July to August, and on Wednesdays and Saturdays in June, September and October. The train station is 2.5km from the château: connections include Tours (€4.80, 20 to 50 minutes, six to eight daily) and Chinon (€4.30, 20 minutes).

## CHÂTEAU D'USSE

This main claim to fame of this grand **château** (☎ 02 47 95 54 05; www.chateaudusse.fr; adult/8-16yr/under 8yr €12/4/free; 🕒 9.30am-7pm daily Jul & Aug, 10am-7pm daily Apr-Jun, 10am-6pm daily Sep-mid-Nov & mid-Feb-mid-Mar) is as the inspiration for Charles Perrault's classic fairy tale, *La Belle au Bois Dormant* (better-known to English-speakers as *Sleeping Beauty*).

Ussé's creamy white towers and slate roofs jut out from the edge of the glowering forest of Chinon, offering sweeping views across the flat Loire countryside and the flood-prone River Indre. The castle mainly dates from the 15th and 16th centuries, built on top of a much earlier 11th-century fortress; its most notable features are the wonderful formal gardens designed by Le Nôtre, architect of Versailles, and a warren of twisting corridors, crackling hearths and refurbished rooms (some of which are starting to show their age).

You can even climb up inside one of the castle towers, where a series of dodgy wax models recount the tale of *Sleeping Beauty*, or descend into the cellar for a glimpse at the massive boiler that once piped heat around the castle's chilly hallways. Rather fittingly, there's also a popular local rumour that Ussé was one of the main inspirations Walt Disney had in mind when he was dreaming up his magic kingdom (check out the Disney logo and you might be inclined to agree).

Ussé is on the edge of the small riverside village of Rigny-Ussé, about 14km north of Chinon.

## CHÂTEAU DE LANGEAIS

In contrast to the showy splendour of many châteaux, **Langeais** (☎ 02 47 96 72 60; adult/10-17yr €8/5; 🕒 9am-7pm Jul & Aug, 9.30am-6.30pm Apr-Jun & Sep-mid-Nov, 10am-5pm mid-Nov-Jan, 9.30am-5.30pm Feb & Mar) was constructed first and foremost as a fortress, built in the 1460s to cut off the likely invasion route from Brittany. It's every inch the medieval stronghold: crenellated ramparts and defensive towers jut out from the jumbled rooftops of the surrounding village, presenting a forbidding proposition to any would-be attacker and reminding any disgruntled local serfs of the enduring power of the castle's seigneur.

Langeais is one of the few châteaux to have preserved much of its medieval interior. Inside the castle (reached via a creaky drawbridge), you'll find original 15th-century

furniture (including chairs, four-poster beds and a famous gilded chest) dotted around the castle's flag-stoned rooms, as well as many fine Flemish and Aubusson tapestries: look out for a famous one depicting nine 'worthy' knights, representing the epitome of medieval courtly honour. In one room, a waxwork display illustrates the marriage of Charles VIII and Anne of Brittany, which was held here on 6 December 1491 and brought about the historic union of France and Brittany. Up top you can stroll around the castle's ramparts for a soldier's-eye view of the town: gaps underfoot enabled boiling oil, rocks and ordure to be dumped on attackers. Across the château's interior courtyard is a ruined **keep**, constructed by the 10th-century warlord, Count Foulques Nerra: built in 944, it's the oldest such structure in France.

## Getting There & Away

Langeais is 14km west of Villandry and about 31km southwest of Tours. Its train station, 400m from the château, is on the line linking Tours (€5.20, 15 minutes, six to 10 daily) and Saumur (€6.80, 25 minutes).

## LOCHES

pop 6300

Billed as the capital of southern Touraine, the historic town of Loches spirals around the base of its medieval citadel, another forbidding stronghold begun by Foulques Nerra in the 10th century, and later enlarged by Charles VII. Loches earned a lasting footnote in the history books in 1429, when Joan of Arc persuaded Charles VII to march north from here to belatedly claim the French crown, but these days the town is a sleepy kind of place, best known for its lively Saturday morning market.

## Orientation & Information

The Ville Haute (Citadelle or Cité Médiévale) is above the Ville Basse (lower town or Vieille Ville), still accessible via two medieval gates (Porte Picois and Porte des Cordeliers). The main commercial street, rue de la République, is just outside the citadel walls.

**Éspace Public Numérique** (☎ 02 47 59 49 85; 24 av des Bas-Clos; per hr €2.15; 🕒 2-8pm Tue, Thu & Fri, 10am-1pm & 2-7pm Wed, 1-5.30pm Sat May-Sep) Internet access.

**Tourist Office** (☎ 02 47 91 82 82; www.loches-tourainecotesud.com; place de la Marne; 🕒 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 9.45am-12.30pm & 2.15-6pm Sun Jul & Aug, 9am-12.30pm & 2-6.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-12.30pm &

2.30-6pm Sun May, Jun & Sep, 9am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat Mar & Apr, 10am-12.30pm & 2.30-6pm Mon, Tue, Thu & Fri, 9.30-12.30pm & 2.30-6pm Wed & Sat Oct-Feb)  
Beside the river near the end of rue de la République.

## Sights

From rue de la République, the old gateway of Porte Picois leads through the cobbled Vieille Ville towards the **Porte Royale** (Royal Gate), the citadel's sole entrance, flanked by two forbidding 13th-century towers. As you climb uphill you'll pass the **Maison Lansyer** (adult/child €3/2; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-6pm Wed-Mon Jun-Sep, 2-5pm Wed-Fri, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Sat & Sun Apr, May & Oct), the former home of the landscape painter Emmanuel Lansyer (1838-93), featuring his original canvases alongside works by Canaletto, Millet, Piranese and Delacroix.

Inside the church, the **Collegiale St-Ours**, lies the tomb of Agnès Sorel, Charles VII's mistress, who lived in the château during her illicit affair with the king. Notoriously beautiful and fiercely intelligent, Agnès earned many courtly enemies due to her powerful influence over Charles' decisions; having borne three daughters, she died in mysterious circumstances while pregnant with their fourth child. The official cause was dysentery, although some scientists have speculated that elevated levels of mercury in her body indicate she may have been poisoned by persons unknown.

At the northern end of the Citadelle is the **Logis Royal** (☎ 02 47 59 01 32; www.chateau-loches.fr; adult/12-18yr €7/4.50; ☎ 9am-7pm mid-Mar-Sep, 9.30am-5pm Oct-mid-Mar), built as a royal residence for Charles VII and his successors, and later used as a prison until the 1920s. In the basement is a circular chamber where the unfortunate Cardinal Balue was supposedly kept suspended from the ceiling in a wooden cage for betraying Louis XI. In fact, it was more likely used as a grain store, although you can see a replica of the cardinal's actual cage elsewhere in the castle, as well as a chilling Salle des Questions (otherwise known as a torture chamber). Louis XI also constructed the notorious **Tour Ronde** (Round Tower) and **Tour Martelet**, both of which incarcerated prisoners during the Revolution (you can still read some of their graffiti etched on the walls).

At the southern end of the promontory is the 36m-high **Donjon** (keep) built in the 11th century by Foulques Nerra. Though the interior floors have fallen away, dizzying catwalks

allow you to climb right to the top for fantastic (and rather unsteady) views across town.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Hôtel de France** (☎ 02 47 59 00 32; www.hoteldefrance.loches.com; 6 rue Picois & 11 rue de la République; d €40-80) An arched gateway leads into the paved courtyard of this old *relais de poste* (post house), now a trim if rather tired Logis de France. The best rooms are above the traditionally themed restaurant (*menus* €18 to €50) in the main building; rather frilly and dated, they're a darn sight more attractive than the battered duplex rooms in the courtyard annex.

**Le Moulin L'Étang** (☎ 02 47 59 15 10; d €70-80, meals from €30; ☎) A better option is this lovingly converted mill 3.2km from Loches along the N143, with thick-beamed rooms peeking out through titchy blue shutters onto a private millpond and 2.8-hectare garden, and home-cooked food dripping with local ingredients. Parking is available.

## SELF-CATERING

If you fancy your own feast, head for Loches' **market** (☎ 7am-3pm Wed, 7am-1pm Sat), which takes over rue de la République and the surrounding streets every Wednesday and Saturday and attracts punters from far and wide.

## Getting There & Around

Loches is 67km southwest of Blois and 41km southeast of Tours. Trains and SNCF buses link the train station, across the River Indre from the tourist office, with Tours (€7.80, 55 minutes, 12 daily, six on weekends).

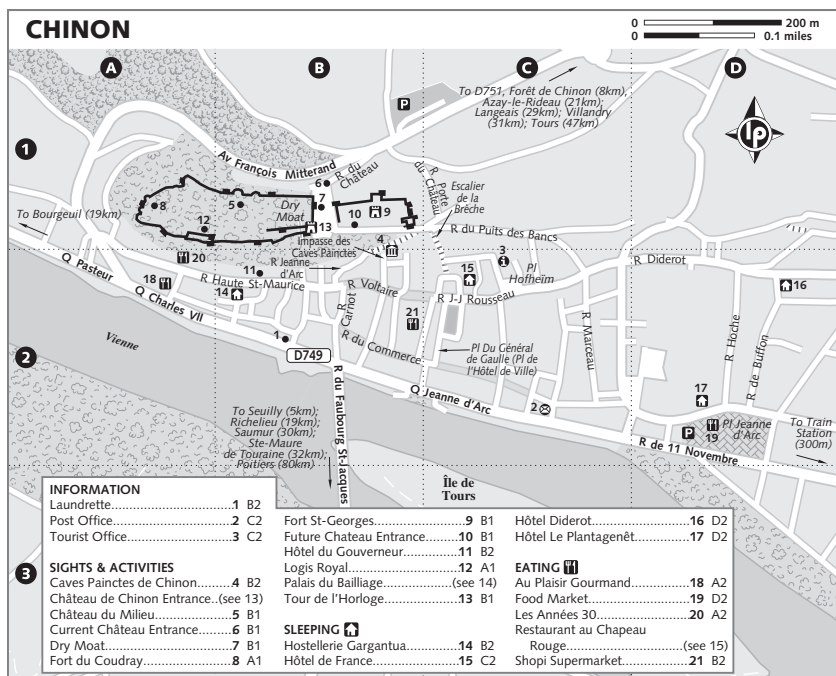
## CHINON

pop 8700

Peacefully placed along the northern bank of the Vienne and dominated by its hulking hillside château, Chinon is best known as one of the Loire's main wine-producing areas. Vineyards stretch along both sides of the river; within the muddle of white tufa houses and black slate rooftops of the town centre you'll discover an interesting medieval quarter, although the château itself is largely ruined and is currently the focus of a major restoration project.

## Orientation & Information

Rue Haute St-Maurice, the main street of the hillside medieval quarter, becomes rue Voltaire as you move east. The train station



is 1km east of the commercial hub, place du Général de Gaulle (also called place de l'Hôtel de Ville).

**Laundrette** (40 quai Jeanne d'Arc; ☎ 7am-9pm)

**Post Office** (80 quai Jeanne d'Arc)

**Tourist Office** (☎ 02 47 93 17 85; www.chinon.com; place Hofheim; ☎ 10am-7pm May-Sep, 10am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat Oct-Apr)

## Sights

### CHÂTEAU DE CHINON

Since 2005 – no doubt spurred along by the sudden and disastrous collapse of the ramparts at Saumur (p446) – Chinon's **Forteresse Royale** (☎ 02 47 93 13 45; during restoration works adult/under 12yr €3/free; ☎ 9am-7pm Apr-Sep, 9.30am-5pm Oct-Mar) is engaged in one of the region's largest restoration projects, costing €14.5 million and originally scheduled to finish in 2008, but still well under way at the time of writing. The château is split into three sections separated by dry moats. The 12th-century **Fort St-Georges** and the **Logis Royal** (Royal Lodgings) are bearing the brunt of the restoration work and are currently off-limits to the public, but the rest of the castle is still open. The most interesting

sights are the 14th-century **Tour de l'Horloge** (Clock Tower), which houses a collection of Joan of Arc memorabilia, and the wonderful valley panorama from the top of the 13th-century **Fort du Coudray**; there's also a small historical exhibition in the **Château du Milieu** (the Middle Castle).

Entry to the castle is currently via a tunnel behind the castle, accessed from av François Mitterrand; look out for the replica trebuchet beside the main road.

### OLD TOWN

The author François Rabelais (1483-1553), whose works include *Gargantua and Pantagruel* grew up in Chinon; you'll see Rabelais-related names dotted all around Chinon's old town, which offers a fine cross-section of medieval architecture, best seen along **rue Haute St-Maurice** and **rue Voltaire**. Look out for the remarkable **Hôtel du Gouverneur** (rue Haute St-Maurice), an impressive town house with a double-flighted staircase ensconced behind a carved gateway, and the nearby Gothic **Palais du Bailliage**, the former residence of Chinon's bailiwick (now occupied by the Hostellerie

Gargantua). The tourist office has a free walking-tour leaflet and offers **guided tours** (adult/under 18yr €4.50/2.50).

Hidden at the end of a cobbled alleyway off rue Voltaire are the **Caves Painctes de Chinon** (☎ 02 47 93 30 44; impasse des Caves Painctes; admission €3; 🗺️ guided tours 11am-3pm & 4.30-6pm, Tue-Sun Jul-mid-Sep), former quarries converted into wine cellars during the 15th century. Tours of the *caves* are run by the Confrérie des Bons Entonneurs Rabelaisiens (www.entonneursrabelaisiens.com), a brotherhood of local wine growers.

## Sleeping

**Hôtel Le Plantagenêt** (☎ 02 47 93 36 92; www.hotel-plantagenet.com; 12 place Jeanne d'Arc; s €40-60, d €48-75, tr €54-85; 🗺️ 🚰 🚰) Basic, dated but perfectly serviceable hotel halfway between centre and station, with rooms spread over three buildings – a 19th-century house, a garden annexe, and a separate *maison bourgeoise*.

**Hôtel Diderot** (☎ 02 47 93 18 87; www.hoteldiderot.com; 4 rue de Buffon; s €43-53, d €53-75) Can this really be a two-starrer? A gorgeous shady town house on the edge of Chinon (parking available), crammed with polished antiques and rose-filled gardens, run with the kind of tip-top charm you'd expect of a hotel twice the price. It's creaky and squeaky in places, but full of charm: rooms are all individually styled, from over-the-top Napoleonic to stripped-back art deco.

**Hostellerie Gargantua** (☎ 02 47 93 04 71; www.hotel-gargantua.com; 73 rue Voltaire; r €49-77) Harry Potter would feel right at home at this turret-topped, soaring medieval mansion, once occupied by the town bailiwick, and now a simple, endearingly offbeat period hotel. Spiral staircases, pitch-dark wood and solid stone conjure the Middle Ages atmosphere: all the rooms are named after Rabelais characters, but the Superior rooms are worth the cash, including Grangousier with its fireplace and four-poster, and Badebec with its oak beams and château views. Rather incongruously, there are also mod-cons including flat-screen TVs and wi-fi. Verily good fun.

**Hôtel de France** (☎ 02 47 93 33 91, www.bestwestern.com/fr/hoteldefrancechinon; 47 place du Général de Gaulle; d from €84, tr from €120) Yes, it's a Best Western, but there's nary a corporate connotation in sight at this lovely place overlooking the town's prettiest square. It's full of Gallic allure – old carpets, mismatched furniture, rich wall-papers – and the rooms are quaint and cosy (try and bag one of the front-facing balconies).

## Eating & Drinking

**Restaurant au Chapeau Rouge** (☎ 02 47 98 08 08; place du Général de Gaulle; menus €21, €37 & €56, mains €21-24) There's an air of a Left Bank brasserie hanging around the Red Hat, sheltered behind red and gold awnings and net curtains; hare fondant, smoked fish and other countrified dishes fill the chalkboards.

**our pick Au Plaisir Gourmand** (☎ 02 47 93 20 48; 2 rue Parmentier; menu €39, mains €26-38; 🗺️ closed dinner Sun & Mon) Some of the Loire's finest cuisine is served in a delightful 17th-century Chinon town house under the Michelin-starred eye of owner-chef Jean-Claude Rigollet. Rich and sophisticated recipes revolve around top-quality produce – perch, beef fillet, pike, langoustine, scallops – and the setting is heart-meltingly lovely, especially if you can secure one of the highly sought-after courtyard tables on a sultry summer's evening. If you're going to splash out anywhere in the Loire, this is definitely the place to do it.

**Les Années 30** (☎ 02 47 93 37 18; 78 rue Voltaire; menus €27, €34 & €40; 🗺️ closed Tue & Wed) Diners eat elbow-to-elbow in this diminutive bistro in the medieval quarter, regardless of whether you choose to dine in the bric-a-brac *salle* or the streetside pergola-topped patio. The menu ranges from traditional coq au vin and sea bream to unusual choices such as wild boar.

## SELF-CATERING

**Food market** (place Jeanne d'Arc; 🗺️ Thu morning)

**Shopi supermarket** (22 place du Général de Gaulle;

🗺️ 7.30am-1pm & 2.30-7.30pm Mon-Sat, 8.30am-12.30pm Sun)

## Getting There & Around

Chinon is 47km southwest of Tours, 21km southwest of Azay-le-Rideau and 80km north of Poitiers.

Trains or SNCF buses (12 daily, six on week-ends) go to Tours (€8.50, 45 to 70 minutes) and Azay-le-Rideau (€4.30, 25 minutes).

# ANJOU

In Anjou, Renaissance châteaux give way to chalky white tufa cliffs concealing an astonishing underworld of wine cellars, mushroom farms and monumental art sculptures. Above ground, black slate roofs pepper the vine-rich land.

Angers, the historic capital of Anjou, is famous for its fortified hilltop château and a stunning medieval tapestry. Architectural gems in Anjou's crown include the city's cathedral and, to the southeast, the Romanesque Abbaye de Fontevraud. Europe's highest concentration of troglodyte dwellings dot the banks of the Loire around Saumur.

The area along the Rivers Loire, Authion and Vienne from Angers southeast to Azay-le-Rideau form the **Parc Naturel Régional Loire-Anjou-Touraine** ([www.parc-loire-anjou-touraine.fr](http://www.parc-loire-anjou-touraine.fr), in French), a 2530-sq-km regional park whose mission is to protect both the landscape and the area's extraordinary architectural *patrimoine* (patrimony).

## SAUMUR & TROGLODYTE VALLEY

pop 30,000

Like many of the Loire's riverside towns, there's an air of Parisian sophistication around Saumur: stately, solidly bourgeois, and just a touch snooty, the town is renowned for its *École Nationale d'Équitation*, a national cavalry school that's been home to the crack horsemen of the Cadre Noir since 1828. Soft white tufa cliffs stretch along the riverbanks east and west of Saumur, pock-marked by the unusual man-made caves known as *habitations troglodytes*.

### Orientation & Information

Saumur's main commercial streets are rue Franklin Roosevelt and its southeastern continuation, rue d'Orléans, which lead inland from Pont Cessart; and perpendicular rue St-Jean, which is pedestrianised.

The **Saumur Tourist Office** (☎ 02 41 40 20 60; [www.saumur-tourisme.com](http://www.saumur-tourisme.com); ☹ 9.15am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-noon Sun) is in the theatre building, facing the river.

### Sights & Activities

Lording above the town's rooftops, Saumur's fairy-tale **château** (☎ 02 41 40 24 40; adult/under 11yr €3/free; ☹ gardens 10am-1pm & 2-5.30pm Wed-Mon Apr-Sep) was largely built during the 13th century by Louis XI, and has variously served as a dungeon, fortress and country residence, but its defensive heritage took a hefty knock in 2001 when a large chunk of the western ramparts collapsed without warning, triggering an enormous restoration project that has already lasted seven years and still shows no sign of being completed. While the interior remains

closed, you can still wander around the outside grounds and take a guided tour exploring the castle's history (ask at the tourist office).

Three kilometres west of the town in St-Hilaire-St-Florent, the **École Nationale d'Équitation** (National Equestrian School; ☎ 02 41 53 50 60; [www.cadrenoir.fr](http://www.cadrenoir.fr); rte de Marson; adult/3-12yr €7.50/4.50; ☹ 9am-6pm Tue-Fri, 9am-12.30pm Sat, 2-6pm Mon Apr-mid-Oct) is one of France's foremost riding academies, responsible for training the country's Olympic teams and members of the elite Cadre Noir display team. Famous for their acrobatic manoeuvres and astonishing discipline, Cadre Noir horses take around 5½ years to train to display standard; their riders are distinguished by a special black jacket, cap, gold spurs and three golden wings on their whips.

There are guided tours every half-hour during opening hours until 4pm; morning tours usually include a Cadre Noir training session. Advance reservations are essential, and enquire about the availability of English-language tours.

Saumur's many mushroom farms provide a useful outlet for the 10 tonnes of droppings dumped daily by the school's 400-odd horses: you can get acquainted with the fabulous fungus at the **Musée du Champignon** (Mushroom Museum; ☎ 02 41 50 31 55; [www.musee-du-champignon.com](http://www.musee-du-champignon.com); rte de Gennes; adult/student/child €7/5.50/4.50; ☹ 10am-7pm Feb-mid-Nov), tucked into a cave at the western edge of St-Hilaire-St-Florent. Further on 300m is **Pierre et Lumière** (☎ 02 41 50 70 04; ☹ 10am-7pm Feb-mid-Nov), an underground miniature park featuring many local landmarks crafted from tufa stone.

### Sleeping

**Camping l'Île d'Offard** (☎ 02 41 40 30 00; [www.cvtloisirs.com](http://www.cvtloisirs.com); rue de Verden; sites for 2 people €16-25.50; ☹ Mar-Oct) Well-equipped and very pretty campsite on a natural river island, about 1.5km from town.

**Hôtel de Londres** (☎ 02 41 51 23 98; [www.lelondres.com](http://www.lelondres.com); 48 rue d'Orléans; s €40, d €45-65; ☹) Small-town hotel run with big-city efficiency: refurbished rooms in jolly checks, crisp blues and sunshine yellows, all with gleaming bathrooms and thoughtful spoils including wi-fi, afternoon tea and a well-stocked comic library for kids (big and little). Parking available.

**Hôtel Saint-Pierre** (☎ 02 41 50 33 00; [www.saintpierresaumur.com](http://www.saintpierresaumur.com); 8 rue Haute St-Pierre; r €70-155) Squeezed down a minuscule alleyway op-

### STÉPHANE MICHON, CURATOR AT THE MUSHROOM MUSEUM

'I never really planned on venturing into the weird and wonderful world of the mushroom... it was just one of those things that happened really! I originally studied History of Art and Archeology, and became involved with various tourism projects around Saumur after completing my studies – including managing the Musée du Champignon (see opposite).

There are more than 1500km of subterranean caves around Saumur which provide the perfect environment for cultivating mushrooms: a constant year-round temperature (of 13°C to 14°C) and very high humidity (more than 90%). Thanks to Saumur's equestrian connections, we also have ready access to plenty of top-quality fertiliser for our mushroom crops! The caves keep us sheltered from the rain, but they can be quite chilly and damp to work in – I've also nearly lost myself on several occasions, hardly surprising really since there are dozens of kilometres of caves around Saumur, and no maps!

'In addition to the *champignon de Paris* (button mushroom), some of our other famous fungi include the *piéd bleu* (blue foot), the shiitake and the *pleurote* (oyster mushroom). For me, the best way to eat them is simply either fried with parsley and oil, or in the local speciality, *Galipette*: a large *champignon de Paris*, grilled and then stuffed with goat's cheese, parsley butter or *rillettes* (potted meat). I try to eat mushrooms at least once a week – they're really healthy, and naturally I'm lucky enough to be able to pick a fresh crop every day!'

posite the cathedral, this effortlessly smart hideaway mixes up heritage architecture with modern-day comforts: pale stone, thick rugs and vintage lamps sit happily alongside wi-fi, minibars and satellite TV (smallish rooms range from Tradition to Prestige). It's one of those places where every nook and cranny seems to hide a secret: tiled mosaics in the bathrooms; black-and-white dressage photos in the lobby; flagstones, character-packed furniture and twisted beams throughout.

**ourpick** **Château de Verrières** (☎ 02 41 38 05 15; <http://chateau-verrieres.com>; 53 rue d'Alsace; r €120-290; 📍) Despite its stonking size, there are actually only 10 rooms at this wonderful 1890 château, ensconced within the woods and ponds of a 1.6-hectare English park (parking is available). As you might expect, the feel's classic and kingly: luxurious rooms feature free-standing roll-top baths, floor-to-ceiling curtains, antique writing desks, wood panelling and heritage wallpaper (not to mention views over the Cadre Noir training ground); the top-of-the-line Rising Sun suite even boasts a dash of modish Japanese minimalism. Regal with a capital R.

### Getting There & Around

See p453 for details on bus options from Angers.

Trains from Saumur travel to Tours (€10 to €13.10, 35 to 55 minutes, 10 to 16 daily) and Angers (€7.40, 20 minutes, 12 daily, six on Sunday).

**Détours de Loire** (☎ 02 41 53 01 01; 1 rue David d'Angers; 📍 9am-12.30pm & 4.30-6.30pm) rents out bikes (see p418).

### EAST OF SAUMUR

The tufa bluffs east of Saumur are home to some of the area's main wine producers: you'll see notable *vignobles* (vineyards) and *viticulteurs* (wine growers) dotted all along the riverside D947, most offering free *dégustation* (tasting) sessions from around 10am to 6pm between spring and autumn (the French-language website [www.producteurs-de-saumur-champigny.fr](http://www.producteurs-de-saumur-champigny.fr) has useful background information).

The smart château of **Montsoreau** (☎ 02 41 67 12 60; adult/student 15-17yr/5-14yr €8.30/6.60/5.20; 📍 10am-7pm May-Sep, 2-6pm Apr & Oct-mid-Nov, 2-6pm weekend Mar) houses an interesting museum exploring the river trade that once sustained the Loire Valley. The castle itself was built in 1455 by one of Charles VII's advisers, and later became famous thanks to an Alexandre Dumas novel, *La Dame de Monsoreau*. The nearby village of **Candes-sur-Martin** occupies an idyllic spot at the confluence of the Vienne and the Loire.

The most interesting attraction east of Saumur is the **Abbaye Royale de Fontevraud** (☎ 02 41 51 71 41; [www.abbaye-fontevraud.com](http://www.abbaye-fontevraud.com); adult/18-25yr/under 18yr €7.90/5.90/free, €1.40 discount Nov-Apr; 📍 9am-6.30pm Jun-Sep, 10am-6pm Oct, Apr & May, 10am-5.30pm Nov-Mar), 4km south of Montsoreau in Fontevraud l'Abbaye.



## VALLEY OF THE TROGLODYTES

For centuries, the creamy white tufa cliffs around Saumur have provided a key source of local building materials; in fact, many of the Loire's grandest châteaux were constructed from the distinctive stone quarried around Saumur and the surrounding area. But the cliffs weren't only used for their stone; as in the Vézère Valley in the Dordogne (p630), the rocky bluffs also provided shelter and storage for the local inhabitants, leading to the development of a unique *culture troglodyte* (cave culture). Originally used as human dwellings, the cool, dank caves now provide the perfect natural cellars for everyone from wine growers to mushroom farmers. Eat your heart out, Bilbo Baggins.

You'll see *habitations troglodytes* dotted all around the valley east and west of Saumur, but a good base is the small village of Doué-la-Fontaine. About 6km north of Doué is one of the best examples of troglodytic culture, the abandoned village of **Rochemenier** (☎ 02 41 59 18 15; www.troglodyte.info; adult/7-18yr €4.90/2.50; 🕒 9.30am-7pm Apr-Oct, 2-6pm Sat, Sun and bank holidays Nov, Feb & Mar), inhabited right up until the 1930s. You can wander around the remains of two farmsteads (complete with houses, stables, outbuildings and even an underground chapel). More hobbit-style houses can be seen at **Les Maisons Troglodytes** (☎ 02 41 59 00 32; adult/10-18yr €5.50/3; 🕒 9.30am-7pm Jun-Sep, 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-6.30pm Mar-May & Oct) in La Fosse, where the only trace of the underground dwellings are the chimneys poking up from the ground. Other sites include the former stone quarries of **Les Perrières** (☎ 02 41 59 71 29; Doué-la-Fontaine; adult/child €5/3; 🕒 10.30am-7pm daily mid-Jun-mid-Sep, 2.30-7pm, Tue-Sun mid-Sep-Oct & mid-Apr-mid-Jun), sometimes called the 'cathedral caves' due to their lofty caverns, and the **Troglodytes et Sarcophages** (☎ 02 41 59 24 95; www.troglodytes-sarcophages.fr; Doué-la-Fontaine; adult/6-11yr €4.50/3; 🕒 2.30-7pm daily Jun-Aug, Sat & Sun May), a Merovingian mine where sarcophagi were produced from the 6th to the 9th centuries. Atmospheric lantern-lit tours of the caves take place on Tuesdays and Fridays at 8.30pm (by reservation only) in July and August (adult/child costs €7/5).

You'll also find some strange pieces of artwork dotted around the valley, including the **Hélice Terrestre de l'Orbière** (☎ 02 41 57 95 92; adult/child €4/2; 🕒 11am-8pm May-Sep, 2-6pm Wed-Sun Oct-Apr), in St-Georges des Sept Voies, 23km northwest of Saumur – a startling piece of symbolic rock art sculpted by local artist Jacques Warminski (1946-96). Even weirder is the grotesque sculpture gallery at **La Cave aux Sculptures** (☎ 02 41 59 15 40; Dénézé-sous-Doué; adult/6-13yr €4/2.50; 🕒 10.30am-1pm & 2-6.30pm Tue-Sun Apr-Oct), full of leering faces, contorted figures and bestial gargoyles carved sometime between the 16th and 17th century. No one's quite sure whether the sculptures are the work of early cartoonists, political protestors, or just local artists with a penchant for the peculiar.

But perhaps oddest of all is the **Troglodytes des Pommes Tapées** (☎ 02 41 51 48 30; adult/8-16yr €5.50/3.50; 🕒 10am-6.30pm Wed-Sun, 2-6.30pm Tue mid-Mar-Oct) near Turquant, one of the last places in France to produce the traditional dried apples known as *pommes tapées*. Once dried and cored, each apple is skilfully 'tapped' to ensure its readiness, and the powerfully flavoured fruits can be used in all kinds of recipes, from apple sauce to *tarte aux pommes*.

Until its closure in 1793, this huge complex was one of the largest ecclesiastical centres in Europe; unusually, both nuns and monks were governed by an abbess (generally a lady of noble birth retiring from public life). Around the enormous complex you can visit the former dormitories, workrooms and prayer halls, as well as the spooky underground sewer system and a wonderful barrel-vaulted refectory, where the monks and nuns would eat in silence while being read to from the scriptures.

Look out too for the space rocket-shaped kitchens, built entirely from stone to make them fireproof.

The highlight is undoubtedly the massive, movingly simple **abbey church**, notable for its soaring pillars, Romanesque domes, and the polychrome tombs of four illustrious Plantagenets: Henry II, king of England from 1154 to 1189; his wife Eleanor of Aquitaine (who retired to Fontevraud following Henry's death); their son Richard the Lion-Heart; and his wife Isabelle of Angoulême.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Chez Teresa** (☎ 02 41 51 21 24; 6 av Rochechouart; d €49-55, mains €6.50-8.50) Keeping up Fontevraud's English connections, this frilly little teashop is run by an expat Englishwoman with a passion for traditional teatime fare: tea for two with sandwiches, scones and cakes is just €8.50, and there are cute upstairs rooms if you fancy staying overnight.

**Hôtel Abbaye Royale de Fontevraud** (☎ 02 41 51 73 16; [www.hotelfp-fontevraud.com](http://www.hotelfp-fontevraud.com); menus €23, €32, €38, & €47; ☎ dinner Mar-Nov) For something altogether more upmarket, try this gastronomic god-send at the base of the valley below the abbey, serving seriously *haute cuisine* (pigeon, duck, lobster, foie gras) under the arches of the old priory cloisters. The rooms (€55 to €115 for a double) are a bit corporate in comparison to the stellar food, but comfy nonetheless.

## ANGERS

pop 151,000

Often dubbed 'Black Angers' due to the murky stone and dark slate used in its buildings, the riverside city is the eastern gateway to the Loire Valley. It's best known for its public parks and famous tapestries: the 14th-century *Tenture de l'Apocalypse* is housed in the city's old château, while its modern-day counterpart, the *Chant du Monde*, is housed at the intriguing Jean Lurcat museum.

## Orientation

Angers is split into two halves by the River Maine: the largely modern district of La Doutre occupies the western bank, while the historic old quarter occupies the eastern bank, bordered by bd Ayrault, bd du Maréchal Foch and bd du Roi René. The commercial centre is southeast of the cathedral, with the train station about 800m south of central place du Président Kennedy.

## Information

There are commercial banks on bd du Maréchal Foch.

**Ambiances Multimedia** (10 rue Bodinier; per hr €3; ☎ 10.30am-8pm Mon-Sat, 3-8pm Sun) Internet access.

**Cyber Espace** (25 rue de la Roë; per hr €3; ☎ 10am-10pm Mon-Thu, 10am-midnight Fri & Sat, 2-8pm Sun) Internet access.

**Laundrettes** rue St-Laud (2 rue St-Laud; ☎ 7am-9pm); rue Talot (rue Talot; ☎ 7am-10pm); rue Val de Maine (rue Val de Maine; ☎ 7am-10pm)

**Post Office** (1 rue Franklin Roosevelt) Exchanges currency.

**Tourist Office** (☎ 02 41 23 50 00; [www.angersloire-tourisme.com](http://www.angersloire-tourisme.com); 7 place du Président Kennedy; ☎ 10am-

7pm Mon, 9am-7pm Tue-Sat, 10am-6pm Sun May-Sep, 2-6pm Mon, 9am-6pm Tue-Sat, 10am-1pm Sun Oct-Apr) Currency exchange for €, also sells a joint ticket to the city's château and museums for €15.

## Sights & Activities

### CHÂTEAU D'ANGERS

Angers' brooding black-stone **château** (☎ 02 41 86 48 77; 2 promenade du Bout du Monde; adult/under 18yr €7.50/free; ☎ 9.30am-6.30pm May-Aug, 10am-5.30pm Sep-Apr) looms behind quai de Ligny, ringed by battlements and 17 watchtowers. Formerly the seat of power for the counts of Anjou, the principal reason to visit these days is the **Tenture de l'Apocalypse** (Apocalypse tapestry), a 101m-long series of tapestries commissioned by Louis I, duke of Anjou around 1375 to illustrate the Book of Revelation. It recounts the story of the Day of Judgment from start to finish, complete with the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, the Battle of Armageddon and the coming of the Beast: look out for graphic depictions of St Michael battling a satanic seven-headed dragon and the fall of Babylon. Free multilingual audioguides provide useful context, and there are guided tours in French, English, German and Italian in July and August.

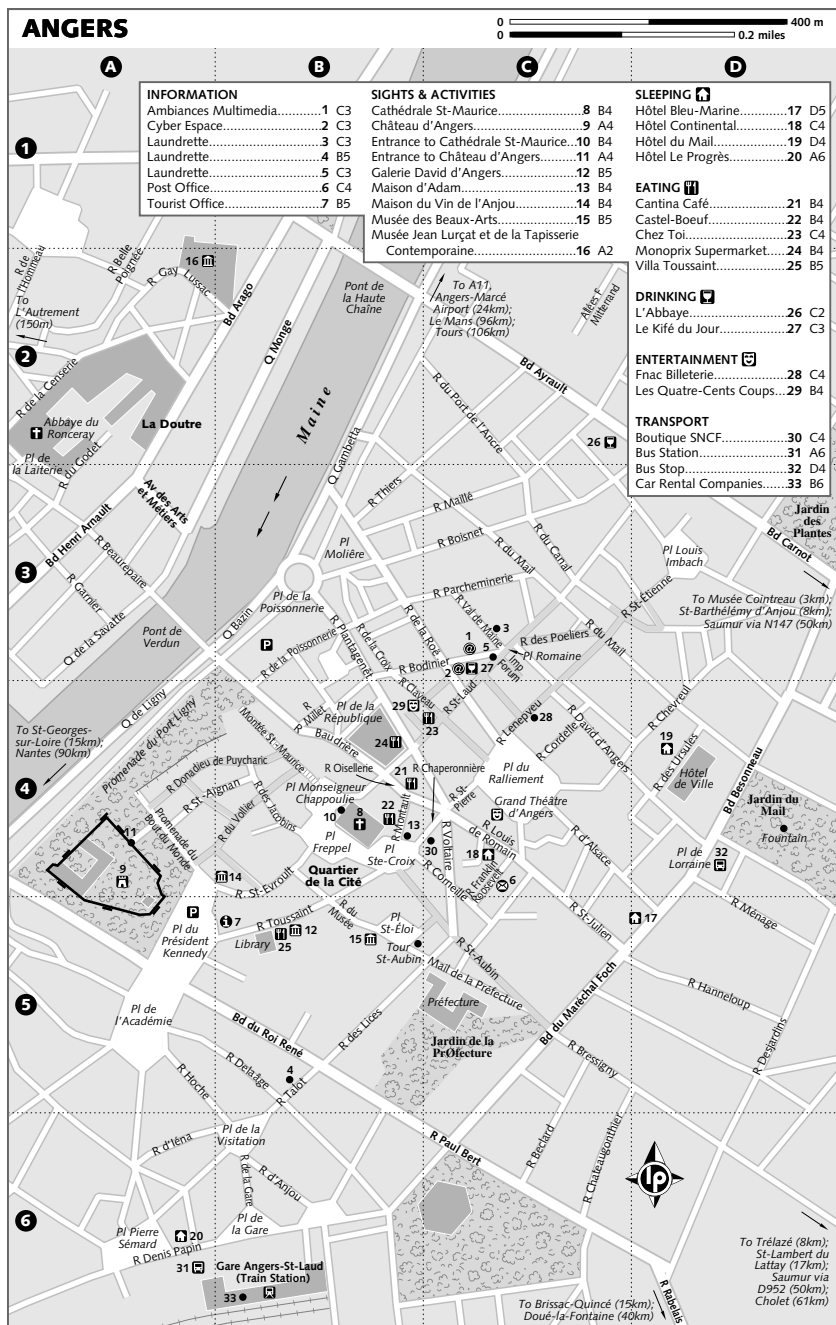
### CATHÉDRALE ST-MAURICE

In the heart of the Quartier de la Cité is **Cathédrale St-Maurice** (☎ 8.30am-7pm Apr-Nov, 8.30am-5.30pm Dec-Mar), one of the earliest examples of Plantagenet or Angevin architecture in France, distinguished by its rounded ribbed vaulting, 15th-century stained glass and a 12th-century portal depicting the Day of Judgment.

Across the square from the cathedral on place Ste-Croix is the **Maison d'Adam** (c 1500), one of the city's best-preserved medieval houses, decorated with a riot of carved (and often rather bawdy) figurines. From the square in front of the cathedral a monumental staircase, the **Montée St-Maurice**, leads down to the river.

### GALERIE DAVID D'ANGERS

Angers' most famous son is the sculptor Pierre-Jean David (1788-1856), often just known as David d'Angers. Renowned for lifelike busts and sculptures, his work adorns public monuments all over France, notably at the Panthéon, the Louvre and Père Lachaise cemetery (where he carved many tombstones, including Honoré de Balzac's). His work forms the cornerstone of the **Galerie David d'Angers** (☎ 02 41 05 38 90; 33bis rue Toussaint;



adult/student/under 18yr €4/3/free; ☎ 10am-7pm daily mid-Jun-mid-Sep, 10am-noon & 2-6pm Tue-Sun mid-Sep-mid-Jun), housed in the converted 12th-century Toussaint Abbey, flooded with light through a striking glass-and-girder roof.

### MUSÉE JEAN LURÇAT ET DE LA TAPISSERIE CONTEMPORAINE

Providing an interesting counterpoint to Angers' other famous piece of needlework, the **Musée Jean Lurçat et de la Tapisserie Contemporaine** (☎ 02 41 24 18 45; 6 bd Arago; adult/under 18yr €4/free; ☎ 10am-7pm daily Jun-Sep, 10am-noon & 2-6pm Tue-Sun Oct-May) collects major 20th-century tapestries by Jean Lurçat, Thomas Gleb and others inside the Hôpital St-Jean, a 12th-century hospital founded by Henry Plantagenet. The centrepiece is the *Chant du Monde* (Song of the World), an amazing tapestry sequence depicting the trials and triumphs of modern humanity, from nuclear holocaust and space exploration to the delights of drinking champagne. Odd and unmissable.

### MUSÉE DES BEAUX-ARTS

Angers' heavily restored **Musée des Beaux-Arts** (Fine Arts Museum; ☎ 02 41 05 38 00; 14 rue du Musée; adult/student/under 18yr €4/3/free, during special exhibitions €6/5/free; ☎ 10am-7pm daily Jun-Sep, noon or 1-6pm Tue-Sun Oct-May) sits on the lovely paved place St-Éloi, surrounded by polished-up, pale stone buildings. Mixing plate glass and steel with the fine lines of the typical Angevin *maison particulier* (aristocratic house), the Logis Barrault, the museum has a collection of 18th- to 20th-century works, as well as a section on the history of Angers.

### WINE TASTING

Still thirsty? Head for the **Maison du Vin de l'Anjou** (☎ 02 41 88 81 13; mdesvins-angers@vinsvaldeloire.fr; 5bis place du Président Kennedy; ☎ 9am-1pm & 3-6.30pm Tue-Sun Apr-Sep, 9.30am-1pm & 3-6.30pm Tue-Sat Oct-Mar) for the lowdown on local vintages and tips on where to buy Anjou and Loire wines.

### Sleeping

**Hôtel du Mail** (☎ 02 41 25 05 25; www.hotel-du-mail.com; 8-10 rue des Ursules; s €39-65, d €55-75, tr €85) Converted convent with an old-world atmosphere. The funky lobby, with its parquet flooring, arty lights and curvy desk, is more exciting than the rather dated rooms, reached via a creaky spiral staircase; but the quiet courtyard location, huge buffet breakfast and thoughtful

touches (daily newspapers, free umbrellas, wi-fi) make this a peaceful Angers base. Parking is also available.

**Hôtel Le Progrès** (☎ 02 41 88 10 14; www.hotelprogres.com; 26 rue Denis Papin; s/tr €42/66, d €54-64; ☎) It's nothing fancy, but this reliable station hotel is solid, friendly and squeaky clean, decked out in plain style with free extras including air-con and wi-fi.

**Hôtel Continental** (☎ 02 41 86 94 94; www.hotelcontinental.com; 12-14 rue Louis de Romain; s €57-66, d €68; ☎ ☎) Wedged into a weird wafer-shaped building in the city centre, this is a great metro-style hotel, with 25 rooms decked out in cosy checks and sunny colours, plus plenty of mod-cons (wi-fi, satellite TV, and a good downstairs café, Le Green). Street noise is a drawback.

**Hôtel Bleu-Marine** (☎ 02 41 87 37 20; www.marinehotel-angers.com; bd du Maréchal Foch; ☎) The choice for the design-conscious. Clean lines, minimalist decor, businessy styling and wall-mounted LCD TVs conjure up Angers' sharpest rooms, though the look occasionally borders on the spartan. It has free wi-fi, and parking is also available.

### Eating

**Castel-Boeuf** (☎ 02 41 87 11 44; 14 rue Montault; menus €12.50 & €18.50; ☎ closed Sun, dinner Mon & Tue) Homely little restaurant near the cathedral specialising in unpretentious country food – it's especially popular for its *carpaccio* beef (with Roquefort, shallots or Italian dressing).

**Cantina Café** (☎ 02 41 87 36 34; 9 rue Oisellerie; mains €15-25; ☎ closed Mon & lunch Sun) Southern flavours with Spanish accents are the mainstays at this pleasant diner, recommended for its mussels, salads and steaks.

**Villa Toussaint** (☎ 02 41 88 15 64; 43 rue Toussaint; mains €16.80-26.80) With its sliding doors, plate-glass and decked patio (complete with an overarching tree), you know you're in for a treat at this fusion place, combining pan-Asian flavours with classic French ingredients. The *combinaisons* bring together several dishes onto one plate, from sushi to Thai chicken and tapas.

**Chez Toi** (☎ 02 41 87 85 58; 44 rue St-Laud; mains €12.90-20.90; ☎ 9am-1.30am Mon-Sat) Minimalist furniture and technicolour trappings meet head-to-head in this zippy little lounge-bar, much favoured by the trendy young Angevin set. All the *menus* are named after *amis* (friends) to emphasise the chummy vibe, and you're positively encouraged to share.

## ORANGE PEEL & ANISEED

Some of France's most distinctive **liqueurs** are distilled in the Loire Valley, including bitter orange Cointreau and the aniseedy (and allegedly hallucinogenic) brew known as absinthe, the tippie of choice for every self-respecting artist during the Belle Époque.

**Cointreau** has its origins in the experiments of two enterprising brothers: Adolphe Cointreau, a sweet-maker, and his brother Édouard-Jean Cointreau, who founded a factory in Angers in 1849 to produce fruit-flavoured liqueurs. Having toyed around with various flavours, in 1875 Édouard-Jean's son (also called Édouard) hit upon the winning concoction of sweet and bitter oranges, flavoured with intensely orangey peel, which formed the basis for their new world-beating brew. The liqueur was a massive success; by the early 1900s over 800,000 bottles of Cointreau were being produced to the brothers' top-secret recipe, and a century later every single one of the 13 million bottles is still distilled to the same formula at the original factory site in Angers. You can visit **Le Musée Cointreau** (☎ 02 41 31 50 50; www.cointreau.fr; bd des Bretonnières; adult/concession €6/5.40; 🕒 tours 11am-6pm Mon-Sat May-Oct, 11am-6pm Tue-Sat Nov-Apr) on a guided tour, which includes a visit to the distillery and entry to the Cointreau archive: look out for some fascinating early advertising posters featuring the company's trademark clown, Pierrot, and a cinema advert produced by none other than the Lumière brothers. The museum is off the ring road east of Angers. By bus, take No 7 from the train station. By contrast, **absinthe** has had a more chequered history. Brewed from a heady concoction of natural herbs, true absinthe includes three crucial components: green anise, fennel and the foliage of *Artemisia absinthium* (wormwood), which has been used as a traditional remedy since the time of the ancient Egyptians. Legend has it that modern-day absinthe was concocted by a French doctor (rather wonderfully called Dr Pierre Ordinaire) in the late 1790s, before being acquired by a father-and-son team who established the first major absinthe factory, Maison Pernod-Fils, in 1805.

The popularity of the drink exploded in the 19th century, when it became the tippie of choice for bohemian poets and painters (as well as French troops, who were given the drink as an antimalarial drug). Seriously potent (usually between 45% and 90% proof), absinthe's traditional green colour and supposedly psychoactive effects led to its popular nickname of 'the green fairy'; everyone from Rimbaud to Vincent van Gogh sang its praises (Ernest Hemingway even invented his own absinthe cocktail, ominously dubbed *Death in the Afternoon*). Some scholars even believe that by the late 19th century there was more absinthe being drunk in France than wine.

But the drink's fearsome reputation was ultimately its own downfall: fearing widespread psychic degeneration, governments around the globe banned it in the early 20th century (including France in 1915), leading directly to the growth of other aperitifs such as pastis and ouzo. Faced with dwindling sales, the last absinthe factory closed down in the 1960s, but in the 1990s a group of dedicated *absintheurs* reverse-engineered the vivid green liqueur, chemically analysing century-old bottles that had escaped the ban. One of the modern distilleries to resurrect this famous firewater is the **Distillerie Combier** (☎ 02 41 40 23 00; www.combier.fr; 48 rue Beaurepaire; adult €3; 🕒 10am-noon & 2-6pm Jul & Aug, closed Tue Sep, closed Tue-Thu May & Oct) near Saumur, where you can taste authentic absinthe alongside other liqueurs including Royal Combier, Triple Sec and Pastis d'Antan.

## SELF-CATERING

The **Monoprix supermarket** (across from 59 rue Plantagenêt; 🕒 8.30am-9pm Mon-Sat) has a food hall.

## Drinking & Entertainment

The free *Angers Poche* details local listings, and tickets are sold at **Fnac billetterie** (☎ 08 92 68 36 22; 25-29 rue Lenepveu; 🕒 10am-7pm Mon-Sat).

**Le Kifé du Jour** (☎ 02 41 86 80 70; 10am-2.30pm Mon-Sat, 5.30pm-2.30am Wed-Sat) A laid-back little wine bar with lots of local wines (pink, red and white) by the glass or the *pichet* (€2.70 to €3.80).

**L'Autrement** (☎ 02 41 87 61 95; www.lautrement.cafe.com; 90 rue Lionnaise; 🕒 6.30pm-2am Wed-Sat) Jazz troupes, roots bands and local acts grace the stage at Angers' smoothest cabaret bar, about 100m west of Abbaye du Ronceray.

**L'Abbaye** (☎ 02 41 88 47 92; www.abbayecafe.fr; 40 bd Ayrault; 🕒 3pm-2am Mon-Sat, 5pm-1am Sun) This old abbey, now a popular cocktail and beer bar, is crammed with students in term-time.

**Les Quatre-Cents Coups** (☎ 02 41 88 70 95; www.les400coups.org; 12 rue Claveau) Good little multi-screen arts cinema showing art-house films from home and abroad (some nondubbed).

## Getting There & Away

Angers is 107km west of Tours and 90km east of Nantes.

### AIR

**Angers-Marcé Airport** (☎ 02 41 33 50 00; www.angers.aeroport.fr), 24km northeast of the centre in Marcé (off the A11), has flights to Southampton, Belfast, Dublin, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Leeds, Manchester and Newcastle with **Flybe** (www.flybe.com).

### BUS

**Anjou Bus** (☎ 08 20 16 00 49; www.cg49.fr/themes/transports/anjobus/default\_v3.asp; 🕒 6.15am-7pm Mon-Sat) handles local buses from its base next to the new train station.

Buses 5 and 11 travel to Saumur (€7.30, 1½ hours, two daily Monday to Saturday). Bus 9 travels to Brissac-Quincé (€1.50, 25 minutes, three or four Monday to Saturday) and Doué-La-Fontaine (€5.60, one hour).

### TRAIN

Angers' train station, Gare Angers-St-Laud, has connections to Saumur (€7.40, 20 minutes, 12 daily, six on Sunday) and Tours (€16, eight to 14 daily). TGVs travel to Paris' Gare Montparnasse (€46.10 to €61.60, 1½ hours, hourly).

Buy tickets at the city-centre **Boutique SNCF** (5 rue Chaperonnière; 🕒 1.30-7pm Mon, 9.30am-7pm Tue-Fri, to 6.30pm Sat).

## Getting Around

At the time of writing, work was still continuing on Angers' much-vaunted (and hugely expensive) tram system – look out for updates.

### BICYCLE

The tourist office rents bikes as part of the Détours de Loire network.

### BUS

Local buses are run by **Keolis Angers** (☎ 02 41 33 64 64; www.cotra.fr). Tickets cost €1.20/10 for a single/10-ticket carnet.

### CAR

All the major car-rental companies (including Avis, Hertz, Europcar and National) have **kiosks** (🕒 6.30am-7.30pm Mon-Sat) inside the train station.

## AROUND ANGERS

South of Angers, the River Maine joins the Loire for the final leg of its journey to the Atlantic. The river banks immediately west of this confluence remain the source of some of the valley's most notable wines, including Savennières and Coteaux du Layon.

### Château de Serrant

Built from cream-and-fawn tufa stone and topped by bell-shaped, slate-topped towers, the grand **Château de Serrant** (☎ 02 41 39 13 01; www.chateau-serrant.net; adult/child €9.50/6; 🕒 9.45am-5.45pm mid-May-mid-Sep, 9.45am-noon & 2-5.15pm mid-Mar-mid-May & mid-Sep-mid-Nov) is a wonderful slice of Renaissance style, reminiscent of Cheverny but on a more modest scale. Begun by the aristocrat Charles de Brie in the 16th century and later completed by a wealthy bureaucrat Guillaume de Bautru, the château is notable for its 12,000-tome library, huge kitchens and an extravagant domed bedroom known as the **Chambre Empire**, designed to host an overnight stay by the Emperor Napoléon (who actually only hung around for about two hours).

The château is near St-Georges-sur-Loire, 15km southwest of Angers on the N23. Anjou bus 18 travels from Angers (€1.50, 40 minutes, four to six Monday to Saturday).

### Château de Brissac

The tallest castle in France, the **Château de Brissac** (☎ 02 41 91 22 21; www.chateau-brissac.fr; adult/15-18yr/7-14yr incl tour €8.50/7.50/4.50, grounds only €3.50; 🕒 10am-6.30pm daily Jul & Aug, 10.15am-12.15pm & 2-6pm Wed-Mon Apr-Jun, Sep & Oct) is 15km south of Angers in Brissac-Quincé. Spread over seven storeys and 204 rooms, this chocolate-box mansion was built by the duke of Brissac in 1502, and is one of the most luxuriously furnished in the valley, with a riot of posh furniture, ornate tapestries, twinkling chandeliers and luxurious bedrooms – even a private theatre. Around the house are 8 sq km of grounds filled with cedar trees, 19th-century stables and a vineyard, boasting no less than three AOC (Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée) vintages.

Four of the château's bedrooms are offered as ridiculously extravagant **chambres d'hôtes** (d €390, dinner €90; 🍷), perfect if you've always dreamt of sleeping on an antique four-poster under priceless tapestries and ancestral portraits.

Anjou Bus 9 links Angers with Brissac-Quincé (€1.50, 25 minutes, six daily).

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