

CYCLING THE RIVER LOIRE CYCLE ROUTE

From the source in the Massif Central
to the Atlantic coast



Mike Wells

THE RIVER LOIRE CYCLE ROUTE

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FROM THE SOURCE IN THE MASSIF CENTRAL
TO THE ATLANTIC COAST

by Mike Wells

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Updates to this guide

While every effort is made by our authors to ensure the accuracy of guidebooks as they go to print, changes can occur during the lifetime of an edition, and it is possible that the COVID pandemic may give rise to more changes to routes or facilities than would usually be expected. Any updates that we know of for this guide will be on the Cicerone website (www.cicerone.co.uk/1083/updates), so please check before planning your trip. We also advise that you check information about such things as transport, accommodation and shops locally. Even rights of way can be altered over time.

The route maps in this guide are derived from publicly-available data, databases and crowd-sourced data. As such they have not been through the detailed checking procedures that would generally be applied to a published map from an official mapping agency, although naturally we have reviewed them closely in the light of local knowledge as part of the preparation of this guide.

We are always grateful for information about any discrepancies between a guidebook and the facts on the ground, sent by email to updates@cicerone.co.uk or by post to Cicerone, Juniper House, Murley Moss, Oxenholme Road, Kendal, LA9 7RL.

Front cover:

CONTENTS

Preface	8
Route summary table	9

INTRODUCTION	11
Background	14
The route	20
Natural environment	22
Preparation	24
Getting there and back	25
Navigation	28
Accommodation	31
Food and drink	32
Amenities and services	36
What to take	37
Safety and emergencies	37
About this guide	39

THE LOIRE CYCLE ROUTE	
Prologue Getting to the start	42

Upper Loire	
Stage 1 Gerbier de Jonc to Goudet	47
Stage 2 Goudet to Le Puy-en-Velay	53
Stage 3 Le Puy-en-Velay to Retournac	58
Stage 4 Retournac to Aurec-sur-Loire	64
Stage 5 Aurec-sur-Loire to Feurs	69
Stage 6 Feurs to Roanne	79
Stage 7 Roanne to Digoin	88

Middle Loire	
Stage 8 Digoin to Bourbon-Lancy	95
Stage 9 Bourbon-Lancy to Decize	100
Stage 10 Decize to Nevers	105
Stage 11 Nevers to La Charité-sur-Loire	110
Stage 12 La Charité-sur-Loire to Sancerre	116
Stage 13 Sancerre to Briare	121

Stage 14	Briare to Sully-sur-Loire	128
Stage 15	Sully-sur-Loire to Orléans	135

Lower Loire

Stage 16	Orléans to Beaugency	144
Stage 17	Beaugency to Blois	150
Stage 18	Blois to Amboise	159
Stage 19	Amboise to Tours	168
Stage 20	Tours to Bréhémont	175
Stage 21	Bréhémont to Saumur	181
Stage 22	Saumur to Angers	190
Stage 23	Angers to Montjean-sur-Loire	202
Stage 24	Montjean-sur-Loire to Ancenis	209
Stage 25	Ancenis to Nantes	214
Stage 26	Nantes to St Brevin-les-Pins (St Nazaire)	222

Appendix A	Facilities summary	233
Appendix B	Tourist information offices	242
Appendix C	Youth hostels and gîtes d'étape	246
Appendix D	Useful contacts	249
Appendix E	Language glossary	250



Notre-Dame basilica towers over La Vieux Bourg hamlet (Stage 24)

PREFACE TO THIS EDITION

In addition to a few minor changes which reflect road management schemes including new roundabouts, cycle lanes and changed signposting, this guide includes a number of significant route changes, mostly on the upper Loire before Digoin. At Le-Puy-en Velay (Stage 2) increased use is made of voie verte V73 along the trackbed of an old railway, while between Montrond-les-Bains and Digoin (Stages 5–7), the route now uses the newly waymarked ‘Véloire’ route (V71) which includes sections along the towpath of the canal de Roanne à Digoin and the trackbed of another old railway. The French authorities intend to extend V71 south from Montrond to connect with V73 in Lavoûte north of Le Puy (Stage 3). Although there is not yet a definite route, the route descriptions have been adapted to take these proposals into account.

There have been fewer route changes to EuroVelo 6 and La Loire à Vélo (Stages 8–26). A fully waymarked alternative route is now used to visit Angers via the Trélazé slate quarries

(Stage 22), while between Oudon and Mauves-sur-Loire (Stage 25) danger of rockfalls from a riverside cliff face has been circumvented by diverting the route along the opposite side of the river. From Paimbœuf–St Brevin-les-Pins (Stage 26) the previous provisional road route has been replaced by a new cycle track alongside the Loire estuary.

Increasing popularity with cyclists has led to an increase in the number of *gîtes d'étape* (cheap overnight accommodation in shared rooms) on or close to the route and these are listed in an expanded Appendix C. The regulations and provision for the carriage of cycles by train have also changed. Eurostar now charge differential prices between fully assembled bikes (two per train) and dis-assembled ones (four per train). In France, TGV services serving the Rhone Valley no longer have cycle spaces, making it necessary to use RER regional express trains from Paris Bercy to Lyon and Lyon to Valence with increased journey times.

ROUTE SUMMARY TABLE

Stage	Start	Finish	Distance (km)	Waymarking	Page
1	Gerbier de Jonc	Goudet	50	Vivez la Loire Sauvage	47
2	Goudet	Le Puy-en-Velay	33	Vivez la Loire Sauvage	53
3	Le Puy-en-Velay	Retournac	37	Vivez la Loire Sauvage	58
4	Retournac	Aurec-sur-Loire	30	Vivez la Loire Sauvage	64
5	Aurec-sur-Loire	Feurs	58.5	Véloire V71 (planned)	69
6	Feurs	Roanne	62.5	Véloire V71	79
7	Roanne	Digoin	58	Véloire V71	88
8	Digoin	Bourbon-Lancy	31	EV6	95
9	Bourbon-Lancy	Decize	46	EV6	100
10	Decize	Nevers (Verville)	34	EV6	105
11	Nevers (Verville)	La Charité-sur-Loire	40	EV6 then Loire à Vélo	110
12	La Charité-sur-Loire	Sancerre (St Thibault)	24	Loire à Vélo	116
13	Sancerre (St Thibault)	Briare	43	Loire à Vélo	121
14	Briare	Sully-sur-Loire	40.5	Loire à Vélo	128
15	Sully-sur-Loire	Orléans	50.5	Loire à Vélo	135
16	Orléans	Beaugency	28	Loire à Vélo	144
17	Beaugency	Blois	34.5	Loire à Vélo	150
18	Blois	Amboise	42	Loire à Vélo	159
19	Amboise	Tours	27	Loire à Vélo	168
20	Tours	Bréhémont	35	Loire à Vélo	175
21	Bréhémont	Saumur	47.5	Loire à Vélo	181
22	Saumur	Angers (Les Ponts-de-Cé)	50	Loire à Vélo	190
23	Angers (Les Ponts-de-Cé)	Montjean-sur-Loire	36.5	Loire à Vélo	202
24	Montjean-sur-Loire	Ancenis	28.5	Loire à Vélo	209
25	Ancenis	Nantes	39	Loire à Vélo	214
26	Nantes	St Brevin-les-Pins	55	Loire à Vélo	222
Total distance			1061		



Canal Latéral à la Loire at Chavanne (Stage 8)

INTRODUCTION

To best discover a country you need to travel to its very heart and do so in a way that exposes you to the life going on around you. The river Loire passes through the heart of France and there is no better way of experiencing life in this great country than by mounting your bicycle and following this river as it flows from the volcanic landscape of the Massif Central to the Atlantic Ocean. Its length of 1020km makes it the longest river in France. Here you will find a gentler and slower pace of life than in the great cities of Paris, Lyon or Marseille; and although there is some industry, it is less evident in the Loire Valley than alongside France's other major rivers.

Rather, this is a land of agriculture and vineyards. The Beauce, north of Orléans, has some of the most fertile arable farmland in the country, while the rolling hills of the Auvergne and Burgundy produce high-quality meat and dairy products. The plains of Anjou grow much of the fruit and vegetables found in the markets and restaurants of Paris, often consumed with wines from premier Loire wine-growing appellations like Muscadet, Pouilly Fumé, Sancerre and Vouvray. All this great food and drink can also be found in restaurants along the route.

The Loire is known to the French as the 'Royal River' – a name it gets



Most French towns have markets like this one in Vorey (Stage 3)



Château de Chaumont was the home of Catherine de Medici, Henri II's queen (Stage 18)

from the Loire Valley's long association with the kings of France after successive monarchs developed a series of ever more spectacular *châteaux* between the 15th and 17th centuries. Blois and Amboise were great palaces where the royal court resided to escape political turmoil in Paris. Chambord was a glorious hunting lodge, from where the king would spend long days hunting in the forests of the Sologne, while Chenonceau was home first for a royal mistress and later a widowed queen. The preference of the royal family for life along the Loire stimulated other members of the court to build their own châteaux in the area, with over 50 nowadays recognised as heritage sites by UNESCO. Although most of these were sequestered, damaged and looted during the French Revolution,

20th-century restoration has breathed new life into them and many can now be visited.

In addition to secular buildings, the Loire Valley holds a strong religious presence. Le Puy-en-Velay, with a church and iron Madonna each perched on top of volcanic spires and a great basalt cathedral, is a popular starting point for the pilgrimage route to Santiago in Spain. Tours has both a great cathedral that took so long to build it is in three different styles (Romanesque, Gothic and Renaissance) and also a basilica built to house the tomb of French patron saint St Martin, a Roman soldier who became an early bishop of Tours. Other French saints encountered include St Benedict (founder of the Benedictine order), buried at Fleury Abbey in St Benoît, and Ste Bernadette



Ruined castle at Trèves, said to be Sir Lancelot's birthplace (Stage 22)

of Lourdes whose preserved body is on display in Nevers. Ste Jeanne d'Arc, a French national heroine who lifted the siege of Orléans and turned the tide of the Hundred Years' War in favour of France, is widely commemorated, particularly in Orléans itself. Furthermore, the little village of Germigny-des-Prés has a church from the time of Charlemagne (AD806) that claims to be the oldest in France.

These châteaux, cathedrals, monasteries, churches and the countryside between them are linked by the Loire Cycle Route. This 1061km route starts beside the river's source on the slopes of the volcanic plug of Gerbier de Jonc and follows a waymarked route, Vivez la Loire Sauvage, through a series of gorges downhill between the wooded volcanic cones and basalt plateaux of the Auvergne. After leaving the mountains it passes the Charolais hills and at Digoin joins EuroVelo route EV6, which itself joins a French national cycle trail, La Loire à Vélo, near Nevers. This is followed, mostly on level, dedicated cycle tracks, through Orléans, Tours, Angers and Nantes to reach the Atlantic opposite the shipbuilding town of St Nazaire. This is the most popular cycle route in France, followed by thousands of cyclists every year. French regional and département governments have invested heavily in infrastructure with well-defined waymarking, asphalt-surfaced tracks, dedicated bridges over rivers and underpasses beneath roads along the route. Almost every

town and many large villages have tourist offices that can point you in the direction of (and often book for you) overnight accommodation that varies from five-star hotels to village gîtes d'étape.

BACKGROUND

The Loire passes through the heart of France. Modern France, the Fifth French Republic, is the current manifestation of a great colonial nation that developed out of Charlemagne's eighth-century Frankish kingdom, eventually spreading its power throughout Europe and beyond.

Roman France

Before the arrival of the Romans in the first century BC, central France was inhabited by Iron Age Celtic tribes like the Gauls. The Romans involved local tribal leaders in government and control of the territory. With improvements in the standard of living, the conquered tribes soon became thoroughly Romanised and Gallic settlements became Romano-Gallic towns. During the fourth century AD the Romans came under increasing pressure from Germanic tribes from the east, and by AD401 had withdrawn their legions from central France and the Loire Valley.

The Franks and the foundation of France

After the Romans left there followed a period of tribal settlement. The

Franks were a tribe that settled in northern France. From AD496, when Clovis I became their king and established a capital in Paris, the Frankish kingdom expanded by absorbing neighbouring states. Charlemagne (a Frank, AD768–814) temporarily united much of western Europe, only for his Carolingian empire to be split in 843, after which the Franks became the dominant regional force. The kingdom of France grew by defeating and absorbing neighbouring duchies. In the Loire basin, Anjou was captured in 1214 and Auvergne was absorbed in 1271.

The Hundred Years' War

One particular neighbour proved hard to defeat. Ever since Vikings settled in Normandy and around the mouth of the Loire in the ninth century, there had been a threat from the west. The Vikings became the Normans, and when in 1066 they annexed England, their power base became larger. For nearly 400 years the Norman kings of England and their Plantagenet successors sought to consolidate and expand their territory in France. The main confrontation was the Hundred Years' War (1337–1453) fought between France and an alliance of England and



Rue Jeanne d'Arc leads to Orléans cathedral (Stage 15)



La Source Géographique de la Loire is in a cowshed below Mt Gerbier de Jonc

At the top of the ridge, the route crosses the ligne de partage des eaux (watershed) between the Mediterranean and Atlantic drainage basins, indicated by a sign on the L.

The Loire rises at **three little springs** dotted along the southern slopes of Mont Gerbier de Jonc (1551m), a rocky outcrop formed from the plug of a long-extinct volcano that rises above the surrounding countryside. These three sources go by the names (from west to east) of La Source Authentique (genuine source), La Source Géographique (geographic source) and La Source Véritable (true source). There is little to choose between them and as they line the roadside with only 1km between them all it is possible to visit all three. The road between them is lined with souvenir stalls, craft shops and cafés. The most visited is the middle one (La Source Géographique), which can be found inside a cowshed, and our Loire Cycle Route starts here.

Pass La Chaumette L (accommodation) then emerge above forest to reach T-junction on top of ridge with rugged cone of Gerbier de Jonc rising R and views in all directions (31km, 1417m). ◀ Turn R (D378, sp Les Etables), passing linear car park, to reach cluster of buildings at La Source Géographique de la Loire L, opposite footpath to summit of **Mont Gerbier de Jonc**, R (accommodation, refreshments).

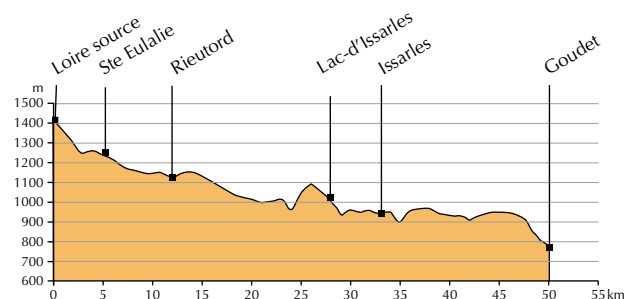
STAGE 1

Gerbier de Jonc to Goudet

Start	Gerbier de Jonc, Geographic Loire source (1409m)
Finish	Goudet bridge (772m)
Distance	50km
Waymarking	Vivez la Loire Sauvage (inconsistent)

The stage starts with a steady descent on quiet country roads through a series of remote villages. After an ascent to the popular crater-lake resort of Lac-d'Issarlès, the route continues through forest above the Loire across a plateau formed by France's last volcanic eruption before descending to the village of Goudet.

From Géographique Loire source at **Mont Gerbier de Jonc**, follow car park exit road SE downhill and turn R (D116), with three little streams that make up the infant Loire cascading down hillside parallel with route. After 2km pass fork L that leads to confluence of source streams and continue downhill with Loire running below L. Bear R (D122) at road junction, then fork L (D116) to reach **Ste Eulalie**





The infant Loire between Ste Eulalie and Rieutord



Zero km stone at the Loire source showing river distance to St Nazaire

(5.5km, 1232m) (accommodation, refreshments, camping, tourist office).

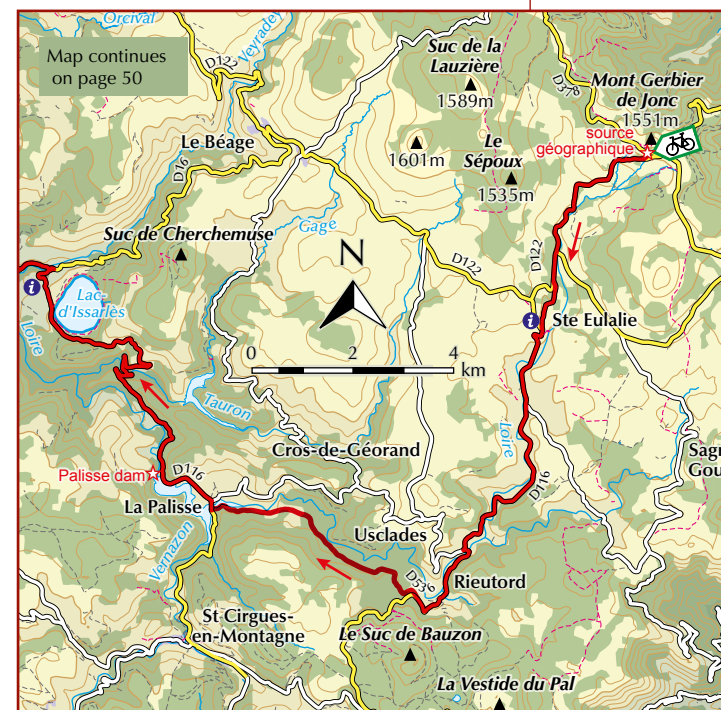
Ste Eulalie (pop 215) is the first village on the Loire and one of the highest villages in the Ardèche. Typical local buildings include the Clastres farm (next to the church), which has a large thatched barn attached to a slate-roofed house and was originally the cloister of a monastery dissolved during the Revolution.

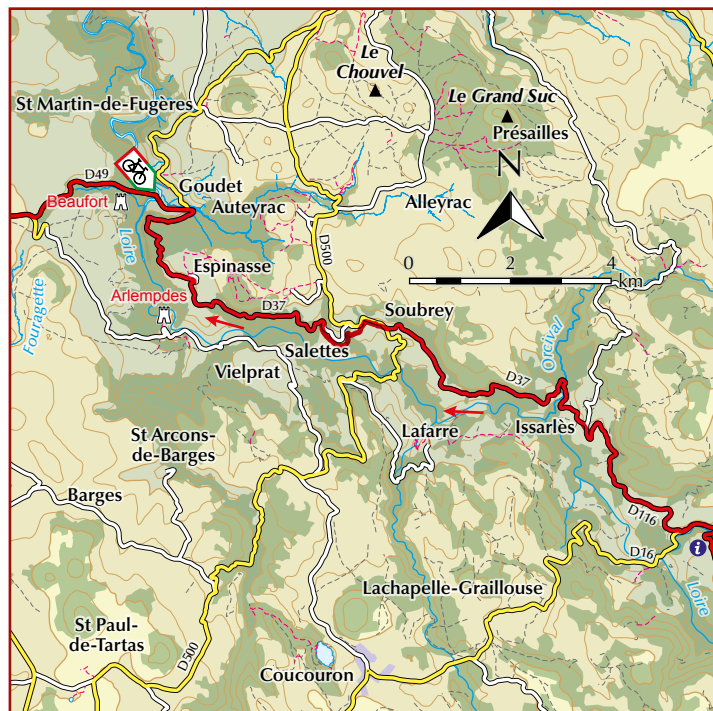
Bear L in village (D116, sp Usclades-et-Rieutord) and descend round hairpin bend to cross Loire and follow river R with cliffs rising L. Re-cross river and pass through hamlet of Sablouze. Turn L at T-junction (D536), crossing Loire again, to reach **Rieutord** (12.5km, 1126m) (refreshments, camping).

Ascend gently away from village and after 1km turn R beside electricity pylon onto quiet side road (sp La Chaplade and déchetterie (rubbish dump)). After 500m, bear L and follow road descending steadily and winding

through forest with Loire below R to reach T-junction. Turn R (D160) over river on suspension bridge into hamlet of **La Palisse** (19km, 1018m).

Bear L (D116) to pass through village, then continue alongside Lac Palisse and pass La Palisse **hydro-electric dam** (both L). Continue undulating through forest, with river now below L, then descend steeply round two hairpins to cross bridge over river Gage (949m). Steeply ascend hillside on opposite side of bridge round two more hairpins to reach Col de Gage (1098m) with extensive views. Descend past car parks R to reach beach, hotels and restaurants on shore of **Lac-d'Issarlès** (28km, 1001m) (accommodation, refreshments, camping, tourist office).





Lac-d'Issarlès (pop 270) is a resort area beside a round crater lake in the mouth of an extinct volcano. With a depth of 138m, making it one of the deepest lakes in France, the high-clarity water appears azure blue. Leisure activities include boating, kayaking, swimming and fishing for brown trout. A circular 3.5km walk goes round the lake.

Continue through older part of village and descend to reach roundabout. Turn L (D16), cross river Veyradeyre and after 1km fork R uphill (D116). Pass through Le Pio hamlet to reach **Issarlès** (34km, 946m) (accommodation, refreshments, camping).

Issarlès (pop 138) sits between the rivers Loire and Orcival on a basalt plateau formed about 10,000 years ago by the last known volcanic activity in France. Traditional granite houses and an 11th-century church are grouped around two shady squares. Dramatic population decline during the 20th century saw the number of residents decline from 2000 (in 1886) to 138 (in 2018).

At end of village, fork L to continue on D116 and descend to cross **river** Orcival, where route enters Haute-Loire département and road number changes to D37. Climb back onto plateau and pass through **Soubrey** hamlet. Cross D500 onto narrow lane that leads to La Viletelle. ▶ Continue through hamlet, then fork L (ignore road going uphill) continuing on unsurfaced winding lane to **Salettes** (42km, 909m).

Salettes (pop 136) is another village that has seen a dramatic 20th-century population decline, down from 1550 in 1901. Its principal building is St Pierre, the 12th-century Romanesque parish church.

Turn R in village then bear L past *mairie* (town hall) on L and turn immediately R uphill to reach D37 after 400m. Bear L at crossroads then follow road contouring through pine forest and cycle through **Espinasse** (46km, 945m). ▶ Descend steeply through forest round series of hairpins to reach junction with D49 on outskirts of **Goudet**. Continue ahead (D49W) downhill to reach Goudet bridge (50km, 772m) (accommodation, refreshments, camping).

Goudet (pop 58) is an attractive village where many of the properties left empty by population decline have been purchased as second homes. The village square is overlooked by the parish church with an unusual pepper-pot tower surmounted by multi-coloured tiles. The ruins of 13th-century Château Beaufort are perched on a rocky promontory on the

The track between La Viletelle and Salettes is unsurfaced for a short distance; for an alternative route avoiding the rough track, bear R onto D500 and fork L after 800m onto D37. Re-join the main route 400m beyond Salettes.

Just after Espinasse there is a view, below to the left, of ruined Arlempdes Castle, which is regarded as the first château of many passed by the Loire.



Goudet church has a distinctive pepper-pot tower

opposite side of the Loire. This saw service during both the Hundred Years' War (1337–1453) and the Wars of Religion (1562–1598) but was abandoned after the Revolution. Tourism in Goudet started in 1878 when Robert Louis Stevenson visited the town while writing *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes*. Other tourists soon followed in his footsteps and his route is nowadays waymarked as the GR70 Robert Louis Stevenson Trail.

STAGE 2

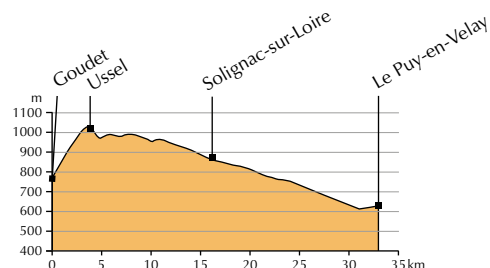
Goudet to Le Puy-en-Velay

Start	Goudet bridge (772m)
Finish	Le Puy-en-Velay, motorway bridge (632m)
Distance	33km
Waymarking	Vivez la Loire Sauvage (Goudet–Le Brignon), then véloroute V73 (Le Brignon–Le Puy-en-Velay), both inconsistent

A short stage that climbs steeply onto a plateau west of the Loire before following a voie verte descending steadily along the course of an old railway past Solignac and through a series of well-lit tunnels to reach the edge of the pilgrimage city of Le Puy-en-Velay.

From **Goudet** bridge, cross Loire and ascend steeply on road winding through woods past **Château Beaufort** L to reach junction with D54. Bear R (still D49) into hilltop village of **Ussel** (4km, 1027m) ([refreshments](#)).

Fork R in village, then turn R opposite cemetery (sp Le Brignon). Continue across basalt plateau and through **Bessarioux**. Follow road ahead to reach **Le Brignon** (10.5km, 953m) ([refreshments](#)). At beginning of village turn sharply L (sp Bizac, D541) through fields. Continue





- 2–3 week (1062km) cycle ride through central France
- incorporates Loire à Vélo cycle trail • visits famous châteaux and historic cities • Ardèche, Orléans and Tours



- through the heart of France, past extravagant royal châteaux, hillside vineyards and historic cities like Orléans and Tours. There are many places to stay along the route, from hotels to campsites, and restaurants in all price ranges.

- uses mostly traffic-free cycle tracks
- suitable for hybrid or touring cycles
- best cycled April–October

At over 1000km the Loire is France's longest river. This cycle route, suitable for touring or for family cycling, traces its length from the river's source in the Massif Central mountains to its mouth on the Atlantic opposite St Nazaire. At Nevers it joins the fully waymarked Loire à Vélo, France's most popular cycle trail. This straightforward and scenic route follows the river downstream – and mainly downhill