

Champagne-Ardenne

Overview

Nestled in Northeast France and comprising of four departments – Ardennes, Marne, Aube and Haute-Marne – the Champagne-Ardenne region is all about rolling hills massed with ordered ranks of vines, the countryside liberally sprinkled with ancient towns that played key roles in France's history. This is the home of bubbly, of course – nowhere else in the world has the right to name their fizz "Champagne" – and so much of the appeal is in visiting the big name houses to soak up the charm and atmosphere before sampling and buying tipples to bring home. But there is much more to the region besides, with some fantastic museums, heritage sites, châteaux and artisanship to explore and celebrate.

Main cities and towns

Most people visiting Champagne – either those travelling to other parts of France south or eastbound, or especially to immerse themselves in the world of fine wine, must visit Reims (pronounced "Rance"), the undisputed Champagne capital of the world. Other attractive towns to be explored include Epernay, around 20 miles to the south and a great place to set up base for tasting tours of the surrounding vineyard-clad areas; Troyes – former capital of Champagne and full of period charm (half-timbered houses, a dreamy Gothic cathedral); Chaumont and Langres (birthplace of Diderot) with their striking hilltop settings in the Langres Plateau; and Sedan and Chalons-en-Champagne.

Places to visit

The major players in the Champagne world can be visited in situ with guided tours of their grand maisons perfectly set up for group of willing sniffers, swillers and swallowers! For Taittinger, Mumm and Pommery head to Reims, while Epernay is home to Moët et Chandon. Check websites of each company for opening times and visit prices and details. With the boom in organised wine tasting tours, the regional tourism authorities are well placed to make arrangements for your stay on the Champagne Route, while several tour operators also offer dedicated packages. For more cerebral stimulation, some museums in the region make essential viewing, such as Epernay's Modern Art Museum and the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Reims, while for sheer gasp-factor the Gothic Cathédrale Notre-Dame in Reims, site of French coronations for centuries, is hard to beat.

Things to do and see

It's not all bubbles and booze in these parts. Miraculously, water replaces wine when you get to grips with the great outdoors – and the many activities it offers – in Champagne-Ardenne. With lakes and rivers dotting the region, there's ample opportunity to indulge in a spot of sailing, waterskiing and fishing or to simply idle along the River Marne in a cruise boat. Keep your eyes peeled, too, for the abundant lakeside wildlife, including cranes and storks. For those looking to promenade on foot, horseback or two wheels, there are over 5,000 marked trails to choose from (with itineraries available) and there is even accrobranche (tree-climbing) and parachuting available to the bravest outdoor pursuiterers.

Food and drink

The ubiquitous titular drink of the region demands to be sampled at any opportunity but don't forget to try some of the foodie goodies on offer. The Ardennes hills are noted for their charcuterie (cured meats) and pâtés, while the forests provide a rich source of tasty mushrooms such as morels, cèpes and chanterelles, which make their way into sauces. The rustic nature of the cuisine means game comes to the fore, with wild boar stew, rabbit and venison found on many a menu. As for cheese, Meaux in Seine-et-Marne is the capital of the world-famous creamy delight that is Brie – other local favourites are Langres and the prize-winning stinker, Maroilles.

Family attractions

Located east of Troyes in the Forêt d'Orient, Nigloland is the third most popular amusement park in the country, and is perfect for keeping younger children entertained. The family fun includes rides, rollercoasters, haunted houses, pirate ships and more. The name comes from the French for hedgehog, so expect to see real life prickly friends being looked after in their own special area. Other adventure parcs worth investigating are Ardennes Terre d'Aventures, with its rope slides and climbing walls, and Cap Aventures (paintball, mountain biking and parcours).