

Pays de la Loire

Overview

The region known by some as the Western Loire comprises the departments of Loire-Atlantique, Mayenne, Sarthe, Maine-et-Loire and Vendée, and is blessed with a wonderfully diverse array of visual, cultural and culinary treats. From historic cities to glorious beaches, from splendid châteaux bestriding the majestic titular river to family-friendly theme parks, from horse-drawn caravan trails to seaside spas and summertime son-et-lumière shows, there is something for everyone in Pays de la Loire. And let's not forget the local produce, which is so reputed that the area is commonly known as the Garden of France. Most crucially though, it's the region's proximity to the Channel ports makes it a perfect destination for UK visitors.

Main cities and towns

Nantes, the regional capital that was, until 1962, actually in Brittany, is a thriving cultural centre and student city with much to offer the casual visitor, including superb museums, the Château des Ducs de Bretagne and excellent shopping and dining options. Le Mans in Sarthe is the Plantagenet city whose appeal extends beyond its famous 24-hour motor race – fans of cobbled streets and half-timbered houses will love in its irresistibly pretty old quarter. Cholet has a rich textile history, while Angers – the former capital of ancient Anjou – sits proudly on the Maine River with its solid château-fortress keeping watch. La-Roche-sur-Yon is Vendée's capital, while Saumur is a city of 54 monuments, none more eye-catching or memorable than its dreamy white château.

Places to visit

For culture vultures and lovers of the art de vivre, there is much to tempt in Pays de la Loire. Both Nantes and Angers boast excellent Musées des Beaux-Arts with fine temporary and permanent exhibitions, whilst those visiting the château in Angers shouldn't miss the astonishing 100-metre, 14th-century Tapestry of the Apocalypse. And when on a day trip to the pretty seaside town of Le Croisic, stop in St-Nazaire to visit the submarines, boatyards or Airbus factory. 12th-century Fontevraud Abbey is Europe's largest set of monastic buildings, while those seeking to set the pulse slight faster, should head to the Vendée Globe or Le Mans 24-hour sailing and car races.

Things to do and see

Water – be it the Loire itself or the Atlantic that runs along the region's western edge – plays a big part in outdoor leisure activities. Surfing and windsurfing enthusiasts head to Brétignolles-sur-Mer and St-Gilles-Croix-de-Vie, while sailors flock to the beaches of Les Sables d'Olonne. Some of the region's beautiful islands lend themselves to other forms of aquatic fun, such as waterskiing on Noirmoutier and diving off the île de Yeu, while seaside favourites like St-Jean-de-Monts are great for sand-yachting and inland navigable waterways perfect for a gentle boating break with friends or family. With 100s of kilometres of bike and nature trails, biking and hiking are also popular, but for a more sedate time, indulge in some water-based treatments in one of the region's six relaxing thalassotherapy centres.

Food and drink

Muscadet wine, produced around Nantes, is the perfectly crisp accompaniment to the coast's endless bounty: quaffing a chilled glass or two in between mouthfuls of fruits de mer is pretty much a gourmet's paradise (oysters, mussels, sardines and anchovies are special here, too). The wines of Anjou and Saumur, ranging from fresh rosés to sparkling fizz, beg to be uncorked, either at dinner or on a tasting tour of the vineyards. As for local food, specialities abound thanks to the richness of the soil: don't miss out on Anjou pears or Saumur potatoes, Vendée ham or Sarthe rillettes (potted pork). Fragrant fleur de sel from the Noirmoutier or Guérande salt marshes is often used to season à table. The sweet-toothed aren't forgotten either – sable biscuits, brioches and Berlingots Nantais see to that.

Family attractions

Aside from beach-based pleasures, the dazzling and brilliant historical theme park Puy du Fou near Cholet is the undoubted highlight of any family trip to Pays de la Loire. With spectacular Cinéscénie shows, recreations of medieval villages, falconry displays, full-on jousting battles, hearty banquets, a Viking long ship and even a gladiatorial ring, it's a guaranteed show-stopper packed with adventure. The region has countless other themed parks, zoos and aquariums to keep kids happy. For instance, youngsters will love swinging through the trees, ape-style at the Monkey Forest adventure park or bombing down water slides at the Parc de l'Etang, just 20 kilometres from Angers.