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Fall in Love with the Loire Valley

From mystical ancient woodlands and gastronomic delights, to glittering aristocratic palaces, Emily Williams discovers the Loire Valley as a scene for a fairy tale wedding or a memorable minimoon retreat

Words by Emily Williams





In this vale of timeless rural beauty, pass pastures of uplifting yellow sunflowers, find fragrant fields of lavender, and meander through meadows that burst with colourful wildflowers. Just an hour and twenty-minute flight from London to Tours airport, or a short train ride directly from Paris, and you will soon be entering a UNESCO World Heritage Site hidden in the heart of the French countryside. Tipped as one of the most desirable places to visit outside Paris, lodging in the Loire Valley is a truly unique experience.

A Scenic Bike Ride

Exploring the Loire Valley is effortless by rental bike, whether you would like to follow a trail or leisurely tour with no planned route. For a memorable afternoon, pack a picnic or purchase freshly baked goods from a boulangerie along the way. A wholesome afternoon feast will be even more worth it after a few hours of pedalling through winding country lanes and gentle rolling hills. From your bike, explore France's bucolic bliss – pass quaint provincial towns composed of timeworn cottages and characterful vegetable allotments, and onto vast lazy leas of grazing cattle.

The Enchanted Forest

Thirty kilometres south east of La Mans, the mystical white oak Bercé forest is a national treasure. Declared as an 'Exceptional Forest' by the French Government, it has become an established symbol of cultural and environmental richness. It was historically a Royal forest, providing timber for navy boats under the instruction of the Sun King's minister. It is now carefully preserved as an abundant sanctuary for 65 different bird species and thousands of ancient white oak and conifer trees. Hike past trickling streams, forage for wild mushrooms, picnic in secret dappled glades, or horse ride along the earthy discovery trails. It would be the perfect activity for your guests post-wedding day.



Need for Speed

The Loire Valley is illustrious for its highly attended car race that has taken place annually in the month of June since 1923. 24 Hours of La Mans attracts mechanical enthusiasts and speed fanatics from all corners of the globe. Acclaimed as the world's oldest and greatest sports car endurance race, watch the vehicles zoom round the tracks at up to 250 miles per hour by day, night, rain or shine. If you are not in the region when the spectacular event takes place, there is an informative museum dedicated to it nearby.

A Taste of the Valley

Given the exceptional growing conditions for grapes, there is a wonderful diversity of wineries speckled across the region, producing local to internationally exported labels. For the most authentic experience, I would recommend arranging a day tour to a couple of family-run estates. Located centrally in the Loire Valley at Domaine de Cézin in Marçon, the Fresneau family have been making top-notch wines on their estate for four generations. Away from the tourist hotspots, at this rustic winery you may find that the whole vineyard will be yours to roam in private. Explore the naturally chilled cellars filled from end-to-end with age-old barrels and musty carafes. The oldest bottles date back centuries and are covered in a mould that cools, preserves and matures the alcohol's structure. After an informative lesson on how to smell and taste the wine complemented by crusty bread and a divine local goats cheese, enjoy a summer's day picnic for two, with a glass of a regional Sancerre or Fresneau's light and aromatic Coteaux du Loir Rosé (fresneau.fr).



Where To Stay:

Château Du Grand-Lucé

Reopening in 2019 as a luxurious hotel and event venue, this sublime summer palace breathes neoclassical opulence and splendour. Uniquely located in the heart of a humble French village with an 11th Century church, the ornate gates open to reveal a pearlescent-faced symmetrical mansion quarried from the finest local limestone. On the site of a former ancestral castle, and originally owned by Baron Jacques Pineau De Viennay, its impressive avant-garde beauty crowns it as a prime example of 'je ne sais quoi'.

It is no wonder why the residence has become a darling of the fashion world – it was the chosen setting for a haute couture Louis Vuitton campaign. As you can imagine, the wedding day photograph opportunities here are endless; from inside the residence where the light streams in through its doll's house windows, to photo shoots amongst its eighty acres that span over an enchanting lake and an ancient white oak forest. Replicas of the statues at Versailles gifted from King Louis XV scatter the palatial grounds and extravagant chandeliers dangle from the trees. Château Du Grand-Lucé would make a magical fairy tale backdrop for your nuptial celebrations.

'Lucé', meaning light, points to the property's position as a beacon of iconic 18th Century architecture, as well as its association with the key influential thinkers, writers and nobles who resided at the château during the Age of Enlightenment. History breathes through the building, and during World War II, the residence was transformed into a hospital serving wounded British Officers. During this time, treasured paintings from the Louvre were stowed away beneath the ballroom stage!

After years of careful restoration, the property is reopening to transport you to a bygone era of romance. Each of the seventeen rooms are exquisitely preserved in classical French fashion; decorated with plush sofas, antique ornaments and lavish freestanding bathtubs in the spacious en suites. The Baron's suite would be ideal for the newly wed couple, and its adjoining Salon Chinois is lined with murals composed by Jean Baptiste Pillement, the court painter to Marie-Antoinette. Although the residence is large, it has a homely boutique feel, and guests still experience all the modern luxury comforts with its new deluxe fitness suite, and a former water fountain that has been transformed into an elegant swimming pool. The on site spa would be perfect for bridal party preparations or a last minute soothing massage before the big day ahead (chateaugrandlucé.com).





Don't Miss:**January/February:***Château De Chenonceau, Chenonceau*

Catch the last of the festive spirit whilst touring the ornately decorated Château De Chenonceau, and savour a warming cup of hot chocolate by the magnificent fireplace.

March/April:*La Fête Des Plantes, Château De Chiverny*

Roam the blooming flowerbeds, browse the stalls selling plants, seeds and outdoor furniture, and receive expert gardening advice at the Château De Chiverny on the 24th and 25th March.

May/June:*Fêtes De Jeanne D'Arc, Orleans*

For 600 years, crowds gather to celebrate the liberation of the city of Orleans by Joan of Arc during the 'Hundred Years' War'. Medieval markets and battle re-enactments, jugglers and musicians await your discovery.

July/August:*'Les Folklores du Monde', Montoire-Sur-Le-Loir*

Every year since 1973, ten or so groups from five continents gather in a celebration of diversity, to introduce traditional dancing and singing from all over the world.

September/October:*Vignes Vins Randos, Loire Valley*

Accompany the region's finest winemakers and share their passion and knowledge of viticulture, on the unmissable sensory trails across the vineyards of the Loire Valley.

November/December:*Christmas Markets, Tours*

Skate out onto the wintry ice rink at the Loire Valley's largest Christmas market, and wander down its aisles of alpine-style wooden chalets selling local artisan gifts and gourmet treats.

"Lily of the Valley flowers are exchanged between loved ones as a token of happiness, prosperity and future harvests."