

FRANCE: THE HOME OF CYCLING

France is famous for its Tour de France cycle race, but regular visitors to France quickly realise that the nation is incredibly passionate about this sport. Best of all, it has an established network to suit riders of all ages, abilities and fitness levels.



© S Bourrier

On Sunday mornings, you'll pass groups of professional-looking, Lycra-clad cyclists whizzing along the roads, and in the afternoons they're replaced by family groups gliding more sedately in the country air.

Andrew Bernard has always been a keen cyclist and mountain biker, and since he moved to Guimper in Brittany, he averages 200km a week.

"France is generally excellent for cyclists, with lots of respect from car drivers. The

Tour de France and Sunday morning rides are sacred here, hundreds of riders go out in all sorts of groups; it's part of the culture. "It's an economical, environmental hobby with great health benefits, so naturally, we're seeing more families and groups choosing bike holidays here - with good reason. If you're hesitant about cycling around France, don't worry, you'll always get a warm welcome if you turn up on a bike!"



© Méric Lérédou

Vire Valley

CYCLE ROUTES

As you might expect for a country so keen on cycling, France has established a network of cycle paths and designated routes, some of which form part of the European cycle network.



Cycle West

If you're considering a holiday that involves western France and a bike, Cycle West is your first port of call. This European cross-channel network connects the beautiful French regions of Brittany and Normandy with their counterparts in southwest England: Dorset, Devon and Cornwall.

Offering a combined total of over 1000km, Cycle West encompasses the three key routes in northwest France, each of which is detailed below: find the one that suits you!



Velodyssey : the Atlantic Cycling Route

This is part of the European EuroVelo 1 and if you follow the entire route, Velodyssey takes you right down to the Spanish border. Here in the northwest, it leads inland from Roscoff to Pontivy, Redon and Nantes, then continues south



© PDL - J Demase

Velodyssey

along the coast.

Of the 722km from Roscoff to La Rochelle, 455km are on sheltered Green Ways (see below) with the Carhaix to Redon section almost exclusively on *Voies Vertes* - perfect for families preferring to avoid traffic.

Highlights of the route include the stunning coast between the historic towns of Roscoff and Morlaix, the tranquil waterways around Redon, the medieval atmosphere of Malestroit and Josselin, the Loire Estuary towards Saint-Nazaire, the elegant Castle of the Dukes in Nantes and the marshland area of Marais-Poitevin, known as the 'Green Venice'.



Cross-channel cycling circuits

As *La Manche* is the French name for the Channel, you might guess correctly that both the 'Manche' circuits take you across the channel. They come in two sizes: the 428km *Petit Tour de Manche* opened last year, while its big sister - the 700km *Tour de Manche* - opens this summer.



Nantes-Brest Canal



Roscoff



© Erwan Guillo

The *Petit Tour de Manche* includes the unforgettable D-Day beaches in Normandy, the picturesque Mont-Saint-Michel and the Vire Valley, not to mention the delights on the English side. As 80% of this tour is traffic-free, it's suitable for all ages and the attractions will motivate and charm any visitor.

The new *Tour de Manche* includes more roads so is 35% traffic-free, and includes part of the European EV4 route along the coast. A more challenging circuit, this tour is rewarding for more experienced cyclists taking you right across the northwest coast to the historic port of Roscoff.

Château d'Angers and the Château de Nantes. You could easily plan a cultural discovery holiday while cycling - or you could taste a few local wines along the way, such as Savennières.



Saumur

© PDL Thorsten Brömmel

Green Ways: Voies Vertes

France has an impressive network of *Véloroutes*, safe cycle trails that you can travel along uninterrupted over fair distances. They can include roads but also include some of the best networks ever for two wheels: the Green Ways (*Voies Vertes*). Green Ways are often former railway tracks, practical routes from one town to the next

There are plenty of other advantages for *Voies Vertes*: as they were used for trains, they are fairly flat, making them ideal for families, they are well-surfaced and well-maintained, and they are only for non-motorised vehicles so you can use them safely with even young children.

Voies Vertes also tend to have convenient extras such as clear signposts and regular benches for a breather or snack-stop. A great way to explore interesting places without the traffic or any steep mountains!



La Loire à Vélo

Sharing part of the EuroVelo 6 and the Velodyssey route to the Atlantic Ocean, this 880km cycle route spans across the middle of France from Nevers in central France to the western coast near Nantes.

An impressive 700 000 cyclists from all over the globe take to the trail every year, drawn by the beautiful landscapes - two thirds of the itinerary border the waters of the Loire itself.

The Loire Valley is famous for its magnificent *châteaux*, breathtaking historical residences such as the **Château de Saumur**,

VTC - suitable for everyone Bikes and trails marked VTC are essentially town-and-country, so they are suitable for most riders.

VTT - for hardcore cyclists

Trails marked VTT are mountain bike trails, so on these you can expect steep climbs, maybe rougher terrain and some drops - but you're often rewarded with some spectacular views.

VAE - Bikes with a boost!

These electrically-assisted beauties go for about 70km on one charge and there are rental points throughout the region at around 16€ for a half-day hire.

Combining train + Bike

For true mobility, you can travel by train whenever you're not cycling. Many French Intercity and high-speed TGV trains have spaces for bikes (best to book beforehand) and the regional TER trains usually allow you to bring your bike on board free of charge.

This summer, those exploring **La Loire à Vélo** can take a bike for **free** on the Interloire trains. This offer is valid in July, August and September, with no advance booking required.

Useful Websites

- www.velodyssey.com
- <http://en.tourdemanche.com>
- www.cycling-loire.com
- www.normandy-tourism.org/cycling
- www.cycle-west.com

TOP TIPS from Andrew Bernard

1. Give your bike a once-over before coming out: the better it works the more you'll enjoy it.
2. An hour of cycling practice here or there before your trip will help you to be that bit more comfortable when riding on holiday.
3. Choose a bike with a wide range of gears - you will meet some hills!
4. Ultra-light rain shells (that take up the space of an apple) are handy to have with you.
5. Get a GPS for your bike: they're inexpensive and very useful when touring.

www.frenchberry.com/cycling-holiday-brittany/

GET THE LINGO

- LOCATION DE VÉLO**
Literally means 'Bike Hire'
- VTT = Vélo Tout Terrain**
Is a mountain bike
- VTC = Vélo Tous Chemins**
Town-and-country bike
- VAE = Vélo à Assistance Electrique**
Electrically-powered bike, ideal for hilly areas



ACCUEIL VÉLO

This 'Bikes Welcome' sign shows cyclists where they can find accommodation, tourist information, bike hire and repair facilities.