

Anjou at the heart of the Loire Valley

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An introduction to intoxicating Anjou at the heart of the Loire Valley

Cradle of the **Plantagenet kings** of England, one of the most gently beautiful areas in France, Anjou is a land of plenty. Here, fruit, vegetables, **flowers and vines** are cultivated in profusion, Anjou's delicious valleys nourished by the waters of the Loire and its many tributaries.

Anjou is highly cultured too. As well as extremely smart towns and museums, countless noble **châteaux**, divine churches and unspoilt villages, the area holds some stunning surprises, like the **Cadre Noir riding school**, the **tapestries of the Apocalypse**, and the densest concentration of **cave dwellings** in Europe.

This is all a delectable area in which to lap up French culture, French culinary pleasures and a general French way of life. Relax and enjoy Anjou's celebrated *douceur de vivre*, whether staying in a château, a white-stoned cottage, a camp site, or a houseboat. Or even follow the example of that passionate French actor and bon vivant, **Gérard Depardieu**, who bought a wine-making estate here, having fallen for intoxicating Anjou.

Anjou's plethora of tourist pleasures and surprises

The splendid historic province of Anjou in northwest France is split in two by the line of the mighty Loire, declared a **UNESCO World Heritage Site** for its exceptional manmade as well as natural attractions in these parts. Right in the middle of Anjou stands its capital Angers, a majestic city straddling the river Maine just north of the Loire, which explains why the province changed name at the Revolution to the department of Maine-et-Loire. But French people still refer to the region much more affectionately as Anjou.

Anjou is an adorable *department*, with so many of the typical French charms tourists seek, such as **châteaux** by the cartload, utterly picturesque towns and villages, wonderfully peaceful churches offering calm retreats in the countryside, gentle rivers on which to go boating or by which to picnic, and seductive **vineyards** producing a great range of different wines... Along with its 30 appellations, Anjou makes **Cointreau** and several other liqueurs, while its very fertile lands yield a wonderful array of fine fruit and vegetables. Flowers proliferate too, the area around Doué-la-Fontaine teeming with roses.

Anjou also has some major hidden surprises. In particular, the areas around the glorious white-stoned town of Saumur and the more low-key Doué-la-Fontaine are absolutely peppered with **spectacular caves** and quarries. These have been put to a mass of different uses, from homes and wine cellars to mushroom-growing farms and art galleries, and even an underground zoo. It wasn't just bright limestone that was extracted from the Angevin quarries; black slate, sliced up to roof so much of the Loire, also came from here – geologically, Anjou lies in the area where the light stone of the so-called Paris Basin hits against the

more ancient granite of the Armorican, or Breton, peninsula. So eastern Anjou, which includes the Baugeois to the north of the Loire and the Saumurois to the south of it, is known as **l'Anjou Blanc**, while western Anjou, divided between the Segréen to the north of the Loire and Les Mauges to the south of it, goes by the name of **l'Anjou Noir**.

Along with all the more obvious architectural wonders of Anjou, around the quiet town of Baugé, surprising **twisted spires** rise from several country villages. A still better-concealed artistic treasure, the finest collections of tapestries lie hidden not just in castles around the region, but also in some of its churches. The Château d'Angers contains the most famous of these works, the **Apocalypse Tapestry**, one of the most ambitious decorative works in medieval art, quite eclipsing the Bayeux tapestry in grandeur. Another startling series of tapestries, created as a modern response to those of the medieval Apocalypse, are also displayed in Angers, this time in one of the oldest and most beautiful hospitals in France. This foundation was sponsored by Henri Plantagenêt, the Angevin lord who went on to become King Henry II of England – the links between Britain and Anjou are particularly strong.

You might explore Anjou by taking to one of its many rivers. Then there are hiking possibilities, for example through the Angevin valleys and vineyards. This is also good cycling and golfing territory. Horses are big in Anjou too. In fact, Le Lion d'Angers and Saumur are renowned for their **horse-breeding and horse-riding traditions**. Or take to the skies in a *montgolfière* (French for a hot-air balloon) to appreciate Anjou from on high.

Forging strong links across the Channel

In a café in southern Saumur stands one of the odd **dolmens** (the massive stone table-like structures at the centre of a Neolithic burial chamber) left in eastern Anjou, a reminder of the lightly scattered prehistoric communities that settled in the region. Angers has retained just a few remnants of Juliomagus, as the main settlement in these parts was called during the long Roman period, when Christianity was established, while the Loire-side village of Gennes conceals a surprising vestige of a Roman theatre. Not very much at all remains of the Dark Ages that followed, except for a startling underground find, a quarry for extracting much-prized sarcophagi (stone tombs) at Doué-la-Fontaine. Through the 9th century, the Vikings came up the Loire sowing terror and destruction in these parts.

Famously, however, Anjou was the cradle of a succession of **powerful medieval counts** in the early Middle Ages who left their mark not only on the region, but also on Britain, Europe and the Mediterranean. A whole line of these Angevin leaders were called Foulques, or Falcon, the bellicose Foulques III Nerra (*Black Falcon*) expanding Angevin territories at the start of the second Christian millennium, and having the earliest stone keeps in France built around his territories to guard his frontiers. In the ensuing crusading times, Foulques V of Anjou even became king of Jerusalem in the mid-12th century.

Foulques V's son and successor, Geoffroy V of Anjou, acquired the nickname Plantagenêt (*genêt* being the French for broom), perhaps, the stories go, because

he liked to plant a sprig of broom in his helmet, or because he liked dashing round broom-covered heaths on his hunting expeditions. More importantly, Geoffroy married Matilda, daughter of King Henry I of England. While their son Henri kept the nickname, he proved an immensely forceful character, putting pressure on his beleaguered cousin King Stephen of England to make sure he would inherit that throne. Thus he was crowned King **Henry II of England** in Westminster Abbey in 1154, founding the Plantagenet dynasty who ruled England to 1485. This is why Anjou has such exceptional links across the Channel.

In 1152 **Henri Plantagenêt** had married the formidable Eleanor of Aquitaine, who held many territories in southwest France, leading King Henry II to rule over a small empire stretching between Scotland and Spain. Henry II and Eleanor's kingly sons of England included Richard Coeur de Lion and John, but they spent much of their time in their French territories. Alison Weir's recent historical bestseller, *Eleanor of Aquitaine, by the Wrath of God, Queen of England*, provides a fascinating insight into the Plantagenets' ambitions and shenanigans, concentrating as much on Henry II and Richard as on Eleanor. All three would find their final resting places in Anjou, at Fontevraud, in what is now one of the very best-preserved abbeys in France. Their tomb effigies still lie in the abbey church. King John would lose his Angevin possessions to the French king Philippe II Auguste, not giving up without a violent struggle. His wife Isabelle d'Angoulême, who had come to loath her husband so much, was buried at **Fontevraud**.

When Shakespeare put Angers centre stage

Shakespeare wrote memorably of King John's battle with Philippe Auguste to retain his French territories in the play, *The Life and Death of King John*. A large part of the action takes place below the 'saucy walls' of Angers. While the Bard can't be relied on as a reliable historical source, he does describe Angers in colourful fashion. Caught between the two royal armies, the citizens of the city are portrayed cleverly playing both sides off against each other, avoiding taking sides and suffering death and destruction.

As one English fighter complains :
*'By heaven, these scroyles [scoundrels] of Angers flout you, Kings,
And stand securely on their battlements As in a theatre, whence they gape and point At
your industrious scenes and acts of death.'*

Anjou goes European

Once Anjou secured by the French crown, Angers castle became the vast citadel you now see by order of Philippe Auguste's daughter-in-law Blanche de Castille, regent for her young son, King Louis IX, to become France's famous crusading Saint Louis. Louis gave the county to his brother Charles, who founded the second lordly house of Anjou. This ambitious figure also acquired Provence through marriage, and the kingdom of **Naples** through conquest. Anjou then briefly reverted to the French crown, only for King Jean II le Bon to give it as a duchy to his son Louis, founder of the third house of Anjou. He and his successors oversaw vibrant courts. While these rulers were typically ruthless, and faced catastrophes such as the plague and the English invasions of the Hundred Years War, they proved great patrons of the arts in Anjou.

The Angevin lords' claim to Italian kingdoms lived on, and this explains why the greatest ruler in 15th-century Angevin history was known as Le Bon Roi René, although he never succeeded in taking charge of the kingdom of Naples. The story of this extraordinary chivalric figure is well told though nowadays at the **Château de Baugé**. While Good King René may have been a delightful poet and composer, he also sent reinforcements to his French king, Charles VII, to help boot the English off the continent after Joan of Arc had played her brief but crucial part, much supported by René's mother, Yolande of Aragon.

The first half of the 16th century brought **Italian Renaissance** style to the Loire Valley and Anjou, but

in the second half, the dreadful Wars of Religion divided all parts of the nation. In this bloody civil war, Catholics and the new converts to the Protestant or Huguenot branch of Christianity fought each other with increasing fanaticism. Saumur became one of the most important seats of the Huguenots, with an influential **Protestant Academy** founded there. It attracted scholars from across Europe like the Scottish polymath Mark Duncan, while William Penn, the English quaker who would found Pennsylvania, was taught by the Academy's professor of theology, Moyses Amyraut.

But Catholicism would be triumphant under the Ancien Régime. In fact, in Anjou, many even hung on doggedly to their faith and to their priests through the Revolution. In Les Mauges in particular, in southwest Anjou, large numbers joined the pro-Catholic, pro-royalist Vendéens from further south in a powerful anti-Republican uprising, the so-called **Guerres de Vendée**. After some early successes, they would be smashed by the violent Revolutionary or Republican forces, these blue-uniformed troops known as the *colonnes infernales*. Memorials and chapels dotted around Les Mauges, and the main Museum in Cholet, pay homage to the many anti-Revolutionary martyrs in these parts.

Anjou has long remained a strongly Catholic area, with a Catholic university still rivalling the state-run one in Angers, but of course Angevin society is very open nowadays, for example hosting many **multicultural festivals**. And Protestant tourists are most welcome these days !

Anjou, land of 1,003 châteaux, and more !

Officially, Anjou boasts some 1,200 châteaux and manors. An amazing **flowering of architecture** took place in the province from the early Middle Ages on. That's why medieval castles abound. There are also Renaissance and Ancien Régime châteaux... And 19th-century pastiches of all of these. There are secretive private castles. There are châteaux converted into hotels, restaurants or B&Bs, where you can stay and eat in wonderful surrounds. And then there are a couple of dozen castles open to visitors as tourist sights.

Anjou's tourist châteaux may not have as immediately well-recognized names as some others along the Loire Valley. However, many of them prove to be not just spectacular, but also very sumptuously furnished by comparison with other Loire castles. The Château de **Saumur** and the Château **d'Angers**, probably the best

known in Anjou, are hugely impressive fortifications dominating their respective towns, and displaying artistic treasures brought in from afar, including tapestries, ceramics and horse-related collections.

But some of Anjou's castles, notably **Brissac**, **Montgeoffroy** and **Serrant**, have retained surprising amounts of their fabulous original decorations. These three châteaux have long been owned by mighty lordly families with a strong sense of pride and self-preservation. The first, which claims to be the tallest castle in France, was somewhat modified in the 19th century for a rich heiress who installed a 200-seat auditorium ! The second has kept almost all its furnishings intact. The last of the three presents a show of fine interiors going from Renaissance to Napoleonic times. All three have interesting links with the British Isles.

Angevin castles with British connections

The châteaux of **Serrant**, **Montgeoffroy** and **Brissac** all have a tale to tell about British connections. Among the owners of Serrant were the Walshes, of Irish origin, who supported the exiled Catholic King James II of England and then his pretender heirs to the British throne (as well as making a killing in the slave trade).

The enchanting Montgeoffroy received the late Queen Mother as an honoured guest when she visited Anjou. As to the present Marquise de Brissac, she was a dancer at the Royal Ballet at London's Covent Garden. She has done a great deal to promote Anjou.

While the Château de **Saumur** featured in flamboyant form in the most famous of all Gothic illuminated works, the Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry, with far more towers and turrets than it has today, the Château de **Montreuil-Bellay** to the south still presents to this day an array of towers to make Disney envious. And its interiors include not just some delightful furnishings, but also a chapel ceiling painted with angels apparently singing from a Scottish musical score ! This ceiling looks angelic. So, from the outside, does the Château du **Plessis-Bourré**. But the castle's interiors contain one of the rudest painted ceilings in France, the very saucy and mysterious images possibly associated with earthy popular sayings, or even Masonic ritual. The more severe Château du **Plessis-Macé** nearby has some quirky architectural features as well as hosting exhibitions and theatre.

In the last few years, several of Anjou's most significant châteaux have been wonderfully redone, offering lively tours. Reflected in the Loire on Anjou's eastern border, the Château de **Montsoreau** is now devoted not just to some of the most illustrious and notorious nobles associated with the place (including *La Dame de Montsoreau*, fictionalised in one of Alexandre Dumas' most famous works), but also to all the trade carried out on the Loire down the centuries, and to everyday life on the river through the varied seasons.

South of Saumur, the huge Château de **Brézé** stands out on its vine-surrounded hilltop. While this castle looks magnificent enough, the main tourist surprises lie hidden down in the deepest dry moat in Europe. Off this man-made gorge, you can visit what amounts to a whole underground village, including grain silos and bakery. The most spectacular chambers present a light and sound show on extraordinary caves around the world. You can also taste the property's wine in the noble outbuildings. The Château de **Baugé**, northeast of Angers, was a favourite hunting haunt of Le Bon Roi René. His chivalric court and times are well covered in the new, comfortable tour here, English-speaking visitors well catered for.

Anjou's heavenly religious heritage

Anjou had rich patrons to sponsor the building of mighty churches and religious institutions as well as châteaux through the Middle Ages. While the Romanesque period of architecture (11th and 12th centuries) is mainly associated with cute rural churches, of which Anjou has many, huge Romanesque vessels were also built, **Cunault** by the Loire offering a staggering example. More significant still is the famed church at Fontevraud.

The formidable abbey and abbesses of Fontevraud

The abbey of Fontevraud was founded in 1101 by the charismatic Breton, Robert d'Arbrissel. Although a controversial figure, particularly because of the large number of women he attracted, in the mixed order he created, abbesses would hold the reigns of power, an exceptional situation in the medieval world.

At its height, the Fontevrist order ruled some 150 religious establishments, several in England. Fontevraud's links with the **Plantagenets** were forged when Mathilde d'Anjou, sister of Count Geoffroy V, became abbess. Henri Plantagenêt stayed at the abbey before heading to England to be crowned King Henry II, while Eleanor of Aquitaine ended her days here. A string of abbesses with French royal connections went on to control Fontevraud in the Ancien Régime.

Anjou's church builders contributed greatly to the development of the new Gothic style from the mid-12th century. At **Angers cathedral**, the especially elegant Angevin or Plantagenet vault was developed, bringing a new lightness to such buildings. You can see examples of this vaulting around Anjou, for example at Asnières, but its most phenomenal expression is back in Angers, at the hospital founded by Henri Plantagenêt. Further major Gothic churches stand out in Angers, Saumur and **Le Puy-Notre-Dame**. The last is a wine village overwhelmed by a huge edifice built in honour of a supposed piece of the Virgin Mary's girdle, which even French royals came to venerate for its purported child-giving powers. One distinctive curiosity around Baugé are clochers tors, twisted spires. Spot these at **Le Vieil-Baugé**, Pontigné, Fontaine-Guérin and Mouliherne.

Fontevraud was expanded in the 16th-century French Renaissance – for example given one of the largest cloisters in France – and again in the Ancien Régime. Formidable women from the Bourbon family ruled the place in this period of the 17th and 18th centuries, marked by the Catholic Church's campaigns to

counteract Protestantism in Anjou. Even the architecture was made to seduce people back to the fold – just visit the sensational domed Loire-side Notre-Dame-des-Ardilliers pilgrimage church at **Saumur**.

The agonizing anti-Revolutionary *Guerres de Vendée* left its mark on the churches of southwest Anjou. They act as memorials to the sufferings of the local communities, for instance at Les Pins-en-Mauges or the Chapelle des Martyrs towards Cholet. But the most famous of all *Guerres de Vendée* memorials lies in the splendid Ancien Régime church of **St-Florent-le-Vieil**, high above the Loire, looking down on the place where tens of thousands of Vendéens crossed the river, fleeing the Republicans. They had with them as hostages a large number of captured Revolutionary troops. The *Vendéens* noble leader Bonchamps, mortally wounded, called on his men to show mercy to these enemy soldiers. His wish was respected. The stunning statue of him on his tomb inside the church was made by the accomplished regional sculptor David d'Angers, whose father was apparently among those spared by the Vendéens. David d'Angers, by the way, now has a wonderful museum dedicated to him, set in a boldly converted church in the Angevin capital.

Anjou's amazing cave culture

Anjou conceals one of the most fabulous collections of caves in France. Although there may not be any prehistoric paintings in the region, the caves of Anjou present an unparalleled array of attractions. Briefly to get a bit technical, the Angevin caves divide into two types. First, there are those in the **banks of the Loire**, or other cliffsides, many expanded to huge size by centuries of quarrying. Then there are the quarrying holes and caves dug straight down into the flat plain around **Doué-la-Fontaine**. The first type is known as *troglodytisme de coteau*, the second as *troglodytisme de plaine*.

The most sensational Angevin caves along the Loire lie either side of Saumur. A couple of immense former

quarries have been converted into **mushroom farms-museums**, at *Le Saut aux Loups* in Montsoreau and at the *Musée du Champignon* in St-Hilaire-St-Florent. Continuing on the culinary theme, craft-dried apples are still bashed out in the old-fashioned way, as navies used to like them, at Turquant's *Le Troglo des Pommes Tapées*. In fact, Turquant and its neighbouring Loire cliffside villages are a joy to walk round, peering into **troglodyte dwellings** emerging from the rock.

The big producers of **Saumur sparkling wine** have adapted some of the most impressive old quarries either side of town to age their wine ; and of course the caves make for atmospheric guided tours.

Arty Anjou caves

Two startling sets of caves in the Saumurois countryside have been converted into extraordinary contemporary art galleries. At Coutures, Richard Rak displays his thought-provoking collages in a network of old tunnels at the **Manoir de la Caillère**, while at **L'Hélice Terrestre**, the late Jacques Warminski actually created artistic, even musical caves of his own with phenomenal energy. One more recent example of cave art has been opened west of Saumur, **Pierre et Lumière**, which contains scaled-down carvings in stone of some of Anjou's most charming sights, both towns, villages, castles and churches.

A good deal of the town of Doué-la-Fontaine isn't immediately obvious to visitors, as so much of it lies below ground. The most staggering subterranean sight here is the vast *Caves Cathédrales*, the ingenious curved vaults dug out so that the land above could continue to be used for agriculture after the stone below had been extracted. Several streets in Doué-la-Fontaine consist of circular craters left over from the local quarrying, with chambers carved out of the rock to the sides. These were and still are used for housing. Some **craftspeople** have also set up in these eccentric surrounds, with a rose distillery at *La Sablière* and a pottery at *La Rose Bleue*. Many fascinating little subterranean sights hide out in the countryside around Doué-la-Fontaine, a troglodyte farm at Forges, a whole **troglodyte village** at Rochemenier, and weird hidden carvings at Denezé-sous-Doué. Le Puy-Notre-Dame contains further culinary caves, the *Champignonnière St-Maur* dedicated once more to mushrooms.

Anjou's artistic gems and crafts traditions

Anjou boasts several truly exceptional artistic gems. None is greater than the **Apocalypse Tapestry in Angers castle**, a work of staggering scale and ambition, one which deserves to be far better known.

Angers' Apocalypse Tapestry more than a match for the Bayeux Tapestry

One of the most ambitious of all decorative enterprises of medieval Europe, Angers castle's Apocalypse Tapestry measures over 100 metres in length. Commissioned by Duke Louis I d'Anjou and made in Paris, it depicts a terrifying battle between good and evil as described in the biblical book of Revelation.

In the second half of the 14th century, when the tapestry was being woven, France was assailed by evil forces ; the Black Plague was causing widespread panic, and the Hundred Years War was in full swing, English armies sowing terror in the French provinces. The Apocalypse Tapestry both reflects the biblical text and acts as an allegory for its times. Some experts claim that among the bands of wicked soldiers featured, a number wear English helmets. Ironically, these English soldiers were fighting for a Plantagenêt king descended from the house of Anjou.

After the Second World War, the artist Jean Lurçat saw the Apocalypse Tapestry and was so moved, he decided to design a modern response, **Le Chant du monde**. His startling cycle creates a stir in Angers' splendid Hôpital St-Jean. Other places in Anjou featuring amazingly rich displays of tapestries include the church of Notre-Dame de Nantilly in Saumur and the enormous Château de Brissac in the Aubance valley.

Sticking with medieval gems, an unassuming convent in Baugé conceals a flabbergasting relic, **La Croix d'Anjou**, a supposed piece of Christ's True Cross, exquisitely set, the piece once again made for Louis I d'Anjou.

Angers's *Musée des Beaux-Arts*, or **Fine Arts Museum**, finds place in the palatial Logis Barrault, mansion which received the likes of Cesare Borgia and Mary Stuart among its more extraordinary guests, was shut for several years while it underwent a complete renovation until the year 2004. Now its major collections, ranging from early Italian pieces to Flemish works, but focusing particularly on the outrageous Ancien Régime, with pieces by the likes of Watteau, Van Loo, Boucher and Fragonard, as well as more calming, contemplative paintings by Chardin, are displayed in excellent contemporary surrounds. The museum also holds the odd rare late-Gothic work painted along the Loire, and fine religious objects from Anjou and beyond.

The quiet eastern Anjou village of Parçay-les-Pins has recently opened the stylish new **Musée Jules Desbois**, tracing the career of this accomplished

sculptor born here. When he moved to Paris, he was spotted and nurtured by Rodin, who became a friend.

Moving to contemporary times, artists such as Richard Rak in Coutures, have used the caves of Anjou to startling effect to present their work, while the **Modern Art Gallery** at Bouvet-Ladubay's wine-making house in Saumur puts on excellent temporary exhibitions by cutting-edge artists. In more **traditional craft** vein, follow the art of illuminated manuscripts at Fontevraud, or visit the weather vane-maker in Le Coudray-Macouard. Other Angevin craft centres to explore include Les Rairies, for centuries specializing in terracotta tiles for the Loire's châteaux, Le Fuleit, dedicated to pottery. Angers is widely known for its pewterware, Durtal for its stoneware pottery. **Windmills** and watermills once proliferated across Anjou. A handful still turn, and are open to the public ; at the Moulin de l'Épinay the restaurant even serves food using flour you can see made in the mill.

Several museums around the Anjou countryside recall **traditional rural crafts** and ways with large collections of implements and objects, notably the *Domaine de la Petite Couère* in northwestern Anjou and the *Cité des Métiers de Tradition* at St-Laurent de la Plaine. The *Musée Aux Anciens Commerces* in Doué-la-Fontaine brings back to life a wealth of old-style shops.

The town of **Cholet's textile tradition** goes a long way back, and is still going strong. Production was diverse. Now the area also manufactures shoes. Why not pay a visit to Cholet's *Textile Museum* or its cost-saving retail outlet stores ? Well-known brands made in the area include *Catimini* and *New Man*. There's even a Museum of the Shoe at St-André-de-la-Marche west of Cholet, the place name an amusing pun in French, *marcher* being the French for to walk.

Anjou's natural wonders

The Loire in Anjou a UNESCO world heritage site

At the turn of the new millennium, the Loire flowing through Anjou became a part of the first stretch of any river on the planet to be declared a *World Heritage Site* by UNESCO. The Loire looks at its very grandest along the 80 miles it takes to cross the province, its broad waters lined by golden sandy banks.

East of Angers, follow the Loire and its old ports along either bank, each offering an unforgettable route. The northern road rides the protective levee started under Henri Plantagenêt, with the **Maison de la Loire en Anjou** at St-Mathurin-sur-Loire focusing on the valley's environment in these parts. West of Angers, the *Corniche Angevine* perched high above the south bank offers breathtaking viewing points onto the river.

Board a boat to explore the Loire from close up, to feel the power and breadth of the river. Saumur and St-Clement-des-Levées (east of Angers), or Montjean-sur-Loire and Champtoceaux (west of Angers) offer boat trips. Try walking the well-established GR3 national hiking path along the south bank, or following **La Loire à Vélo**, a cycling track along the whole length of France's greatest river, and already fully under way in Anjou.

Beyond the majestic Loire, there are other **lovely Angevin rivers** on which to go boating. To the north, the trio of the Loir (without an 'e' on the end), the **Sarthe** and the **Mayenne** join forces to create Angers' River **Maine**. Explore this extensive network of waterways by taking a boat from Angers' west bank quarter, from Châteauneuf on the Sarthe, or from Chenillé-Changé or Grez-Neuville on the Mayenne. Consider hiring a house boat from one of these ports. Canoeing is a possibility along these rivers, on the Loire, and in southern Anjou too.

A large section of eastern Anjou now forms part of the **Parc Naturel Régional Loire-Anjou-Touraine**. The park aims to protect the area's environment and traditions. Learn more about it at its headquarters by the Loire, next to the Château de Montsoreau. It organizes a wide programme of activities, and has set up Sentiers d'Interprétation, trails (with English text provided) explaining characteristic types of countryside.

Several special **gardens** stand out in Anjou. By **rose-mad Doué-la-Fontaine**, which produces a large percentage of France's national output, the *Chemins de la Rose* features a vast collection. In **Chemillé**, the

public garden *Camilfolia* concentrates on **medicinal and aromatic plants**. The **Parc Oriental in Maulévrier** is Anjou's most exotic garden, set down the slope from the Château Colbert, on the region's southern border. The surprising park also experimenting with light and sound to create new, enchanting after-dark visits in the Summer, the *Jardin de nuit*.

Angers itself has several grand **public gardens**, as well as being home to internationally prestigious horticultural institutions. A handful of Anjou's more secretive castles have charming gardens to visit, for example the châteaux of Chambiers, Le Pin, Maupassant, or Montrou.

For those of you who enjoy **animal parks and zoos**, Anjou boasts an eccentric collection. The exceptionally picturesque **Bioparc-zoo near Doué-la-Fontaine** makes another sensational troglodyte sight, many of the animals kept in former quarry craters. The deer at *La Coulée du Cerf* in St-Laurent-des-Autels may be a fairly familiar sight in Europe, while by La Possonnière, *Le Jardin des Kangourous* makes you leap over to Australia.

Anjou's glorious array of fine wines and spirits

Let us crush one old misconception at the start. Anjou wines are not simply about rosé, although many excellent rosés are produced in the province. In reality, Anjou offers **the widest array of wines** of any département in the Loire Valley, with a staggering **30 appellations d'origine contrôlée** guaranteeing high quality ! These include not only reds, whites and rosés, but also excellent sparkling wines. *Chenin Blanc* is the grape variety that dominates in white production, while *Cabernet* rules in the reds and rosés.

Anjou also boasts the most vineyards of any Loire Valley department, some 20,000 hectares in total. The vast majority are to be found close to the Loire and south of Angers, around the Layon and Aubance valleys. The **vineyards of the Saumurois** produce some of the finest Anjou wines, both in **red, white and sparkling**. In the Layon, producers in a half-dozen parishes have been allowed to add their village name to their bottles to distinguish their wines from other **Coteaux du Layon**. Look out generally for **Anjou-Villages** on wine labels too. The Layon valley includes

two of the tiniest but most prestigious appellations in the region, **Bonnezeaux** and **Quarts-de-Chaume**, producing Anjou's sweet answer to the Sauternes of the Bordeaux region. Gérard Depardieu's wine-making property, the Château de Tigné, is to be found in the Layon, although that valley has countless other properties you can visit. The **Coteaux de l'Aubance** wines aren't so widely known, but the tourist office at Brissac actively encourages visitors to discover wine-making properties in the area. So does that in Le Puy-Notre-Dame further south. North of the Loire, beside Angers, the lovely old stone walls surrounding the wine properties of **Savennières** indicate an exceptional little appellation, this one producing one of the finest dry white wines in France.

Anjou's vine-covered valleys look magical. Many individual properties welcome visitors. Good places to get an overview of Anjou wines include the **Maisons du Vin**, one located in Angers and the other in Saumur, and the village of St-Lambert-du-Lattay with an extensive Wine Museum.

Exotic Anjou liqueurs

Oranges imported from Haiti and Spain are essential to the making of **Cointreau**, one of the most famous of all liqueurs, with its unmistakable heady perfume. Cointreau was invented in Angers, and is still made by the family firm. You can visit the impressive factory with its own museum in the outskirts of town, the place suffused with the most intense citrus aroma on days when production is underway. Much less well-known but worth discovering is the somewhat similar **Combiér**, made in Saumur, where you can visit the distillery. Another Angevin company, **Giffard**, produces *Guignolet d'Angers* cherry liqueur and *Menthe-Pastille*, a mint digestif. Back with Anjou's own fruit, at Thouarcé, *Poire Williams* pear liqueur is a local speciality.

For those interested in following a wine course in the region, they can undertake a period of pleasurable study at the *Académie des Vins du Val de Loire* in Angers. On a more relaxing note, numerous wine and food festivals take place across the year in Anjou.

Anjou 's gastronomic trip takes you into rivers and caves

Gastronomically speaking, Anjou offers plenty of **freshwater fish** from rivers and lakes, including perch, bream and shad. The main catch landed by the ten professional fishermen still active on the Loire consists of mullet, eel and lamprey ; these might be done in a wine sauce, such a preparation always going down well in a viticultural region. The fish most closely associated with Loire Valley cuisine is *sandre* (translated as zander or pikeperch), to be found on menus across the region, often accompanied by a *beurre blanc* sauce, made with butter, onions, vinegar and white wine.

Down on the banks of the Loire, it's fun to seek out *guinguettes*, informal restaurants on the river's edge, which serve up *friture* (small fried fish) and often put on dances on summer evenings, perhaps to the traditional sound of *accordeon* music. Fishing is a highly appreciated pastime in Anjou, many people owning a little barque to go out on the waters. In the midst of the Loire, you may even spot strange twig-covered huts, hides for duck hunters on the river. **Duck** is also specially reared in these parts, as is a **breed of cattle** called the *Maine-Anjou*. **Wild game** proves popular on autumn menus in particular.

The Angevin caves have been put to many culinary uses, as we have already mentioned. A few

troglodyte restaurants in the region serve the old speciality of *fouaces*, oven-baked dough balls which you open up and fill with a variety of ingredients. *Champignons de Paris* (the French for button mushrooms) should really be called **champignons d'Anjou**, as such a high percentage of the national production comes from the region, especially the caves of the Saumurois. More exotic mushrooms are being cultivated in these underground farms nowadays, and feature on Angevin menus. So does the wide variety of **vegetables** that thrive on the sandy plain of the Authion valley north of the Loire.

Anjou has been known for centuries for the quality of its **fruit**, exported across northern Europe. Many of its fine **apples and pears** end up on supermarket shelves in Britain. In addition, many of the first orchards in the USA and Canada were started on Angevin grafts. Anjou fruit will feature large among **puddings** in the region. As to *Crémet d'Anjou*, this is a lovely light *crème fraîche* concoction served as a dessert. Of course, *Cointreau* and other local liqueurs are used to flavour many Angevin puddings. Amusing sweet specialities include nougat *quernons* and **chocolate** blue slates from Angers, plus horse-mad *Saumur's chocolate crottins*, tasty 'droppings'!

A recipe for classic "sandre au beurre blanc" serves for

Make a court-bouillon by adding to a large saucepan filled with water : a couple of chopped onions ; a couple of chopped carrots ; several bay leaves ; sprigs of fresh thyme ; 2 tablespoons of dry Anjou wine ; 1 tablespoon of white wine vinegar ; a sprinkling of peppercorns and salt. Simmer for half an hour, then strain.

For the *beurre blanc*, soften 100g of chopped shallots in another 100ml tablespoons of Anjou dry white wine plus 2 tablespoons of vinegar. Cook until just a small amount of liquid remains. Keeping a gentle heat, whisk 200g of diced butter into the mix, adding the butter bit by bit. Season the sauce once well mixed.

At the same time as making the sauce, simmer the fish in the court-bouillon you have prepared for around 6 minutes, until the fish looks opaque. Serve with the *beurre blanc*. Et voilà, an Anjou classic !

■ Heady, horsy and sporty activities, plus entertainment in Anjou

The Cadre Noir, Anjou's answer to the Vienna riding school

Before the French Revolution, in the Ancien Régime, Anjou became home to one of the most prestigious cavalry training schools in France. This was based at Saumur, where sumptuous horse-riding facilities were built, as you can still see in the centre of town. Under the restoration of the French monarchy after the Napoleonic period, **the Cadre Noir** came into existence, an elite group of horsemen carrying the mastery of horseriding techniques to the highest level.

Now, the Cadre Noir (which today includes distinguished horsewomen as well) is overseen by the Ministry of Sport rather than Defence. In the early 1970s, it moved to a state-of-the-art equestrian centre, the **Ecole Nationale d'Equitation**, which you can visit above St-Hilaire-St-Florent west of Saumur to marvel at the horseriders putting their superb steeds through their paces, and even occasionally performing their magical jumps. Le **Lion d'Angers** north of the Angevin capital is the other spot in Anjou with an international reputation. This major **national stud farm** has produced many famous French horses, and puts on reputed equestrian events.

Anjou has a great reputation in France for its equestrian traditions. Of course there are many possibilities for visitors to go **horseriding** all around Anjou.

We have spoken of boats you can take on the Loire and other Angevin rivers, but for a closer encounter with the region's rivers, try **canoeing**. For still more exhilaration, consider an air flight over Anjou, perhaps by **hot-air balloon**, or even in a **microlight** (*ULM* in French). Coming back down to earth, Anjou boasts some excellent **golf courses** – the one at La Varenne in the very west of the region is even set on the Ile d'Or, an island on the Loire ! Although swimming in the Loire is dangerous and forbidden, you will find *bases de loisirs* dotted around Anjou, where you can often go swimming and practise all manner of **outdoor sports**. On a more peaceful note, *l'Anjou à pied* is a wonderful way of discovering the territory for **walkers**. We have mentioned *La Loire à vélo*, the cycle track being set up along the Loire, but there are wonderful possibilities for going **cycling** right across the department.

For a really typical Angevin sporting experience, look into **boule de fort**, Angevin bowls. The game is played mainly in eastern Anjou, along a concave track, with heavy, lopsided balls which wend their way drunkenly towards the jack. It is fun to watch, and sometimes you can have a go yourself.

Culturally speaking, Angers and its surrounds are famous in France for staging the **Festival d'Anjou** each June, one of the most important theatre festivals in the country (briefly run by Albert Camus before Jean-Claude Brialay and now Nicolas Briançon). Among other reputed multicultural festivals in Anjou are : the **Festival Premiers Plans** held in Angers in January to celebrate up-and-coming European filmmakers ; the hundred-year old and ever young-fashioned **Carnaval** in Cholet ; the **International Giant and Mask Festival** taking place in Saumur every second year, along with all manner of street entertainment ; the **Oriental Music Festival** around St-Florent-le-Vieil in June and July ; the **Festival Angers l'Été** in July, with a world music and dance programme and **Les Accroche-coeurs** with marvellous open-air program in September in Angers.

Anjou practical information

Anjou has one of the best climates of any department in the northern half of France, with its mixture of influences from the Atlantic ocean and the continent. From May on, the area benefits from a very good amount of sunshine, and it generally enjoys warm, but not overhot summers. The autumn season can be particularly mild.

As well as coming by ferry and car from Britain, you can take the **Eurostar train** from London to either Paris or Lille, and then change for Angers railway station. There are also flights from Southampton to **Angers Loire Aéroport** (northeast of the city). Nantes-Atlantique international airport is just 45 mins from Angers.

The Comité départemental du tourisme de l'Anjou can provide a wealth of information for the press and for planning a trip to the area. So too can local tourist offices, the larger ones known as offices du tourisme, the smaller ones as syndicats d'initiative.

As your first port of call for a trip to Anjou, contact the :

Comité départemental du tourisme de l'Anjou
Place Kennedy - BP 32147 – F 49021 Angers cedex 02
www.anjou-tourisme.com / infos@anjou-tourisme.com
Telephone from abroad : 00 33 2 41 23 51 51

To reserve a holiday via the Comité départemental du tourisme de l'Anjou's specialist service, the contact details are the same, except for the e.mail: anjou-resa@anjou-tourisme.com