

Chateaux of the Loire Trail

Horsetrekking through French History



Steeped in history and blessed with beautiful rolling countryside as well as spectacular architecture the Loire Valley in central France transports you to another age and seeing it from the back of a horse is guaranteed to enhance this experience.

The region is said to be the Cradle of the French Language as well as the Garden of France due to the wealth of vineyards, fruit orchards and asparagus fields that line the mighty Loire river.

The Loire itself is a legendary river listed as World Heritage by UNESCO and known as Europe's last untamed river. Flowing 634 miles it is the longest river in the country and one of the most unspoilt and capricious.

The region is famous for its historic towns, architecture and wines, and archaeological evidence suggests it has been inhabited since the Middle Palaeolithic period .

The chateaux are closely related to the kings of France and as such have been skillfully maintained. Riding through this 'département' is like riding into a fairytale landscape; high turrets, intricate gables, over-hanging lanterns, bold buttresses and towering pinnacles.

As you clatter through the cobbled streets atop your trusty steed the resonance of this era in French history is quite tangible. Over the course of the week-long ride guests visit several chateaux dating from the 15th to the 17th century, all with a fascinating past as well as impressive facades and grounds.



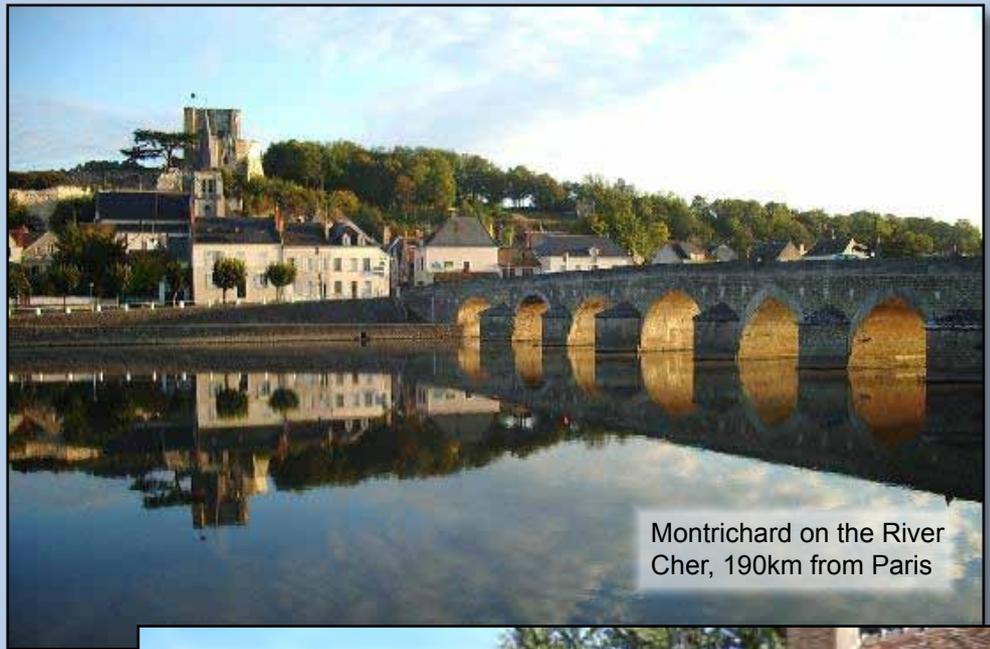
The Loire Valley is rich in history through the ages.

Run by the well known, worldwide horse trekking company, Unicorn Trails (www.unicorntrails.com) this trek is one of many available throughout France and Europe.

The meeting point for this six days of riding trek over seven nights, through the Loire Valley is Montrichard, a bustling medieval market town dominated by a lofty keep. Guests arrive and overnight at the Château de Vallagon, a charming three star hotel with a restaurant offering authentic French cuisine. Here riders meet with the guide and the rest of the group to discuss the trail ahead before a comfortable night's sleep.

The next morning riders are introduced to their horses and the trail begins!

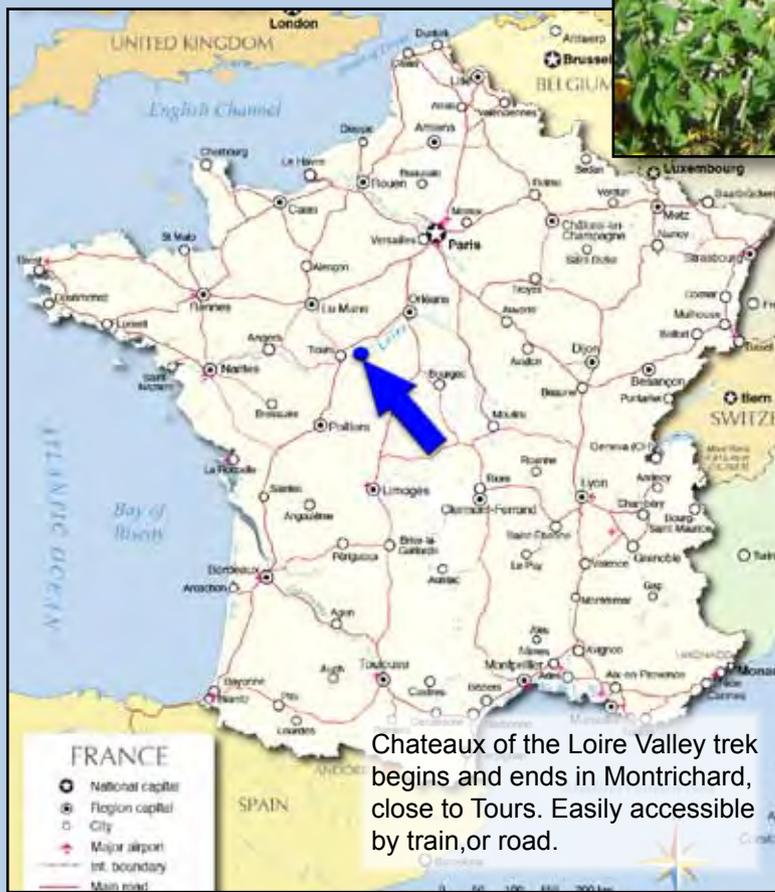
There are approx 15 Selle Francais and Anglo-Arab horses available for riding varying in height from 15.2hh to 17hh. They are calm and experienced and ridden in English tack and English style with a relaxed, long rein when walking but a contact when moving at a faster pace. Riders can participate as much or as little as they wish with saddling, grooming



Montrichard on the River Cher, 190km from Paris



Riding through ancient villages in the Loire Valley



Chateaux of the Loire Valley trek begins and ends in Montrichard, close to Tours. Easily accessible by train, or road.

and otherwise caring for the horses; it is not obligatory, but sometimes it is a good way to connect with your four legged trek companion and can enhance the experience.

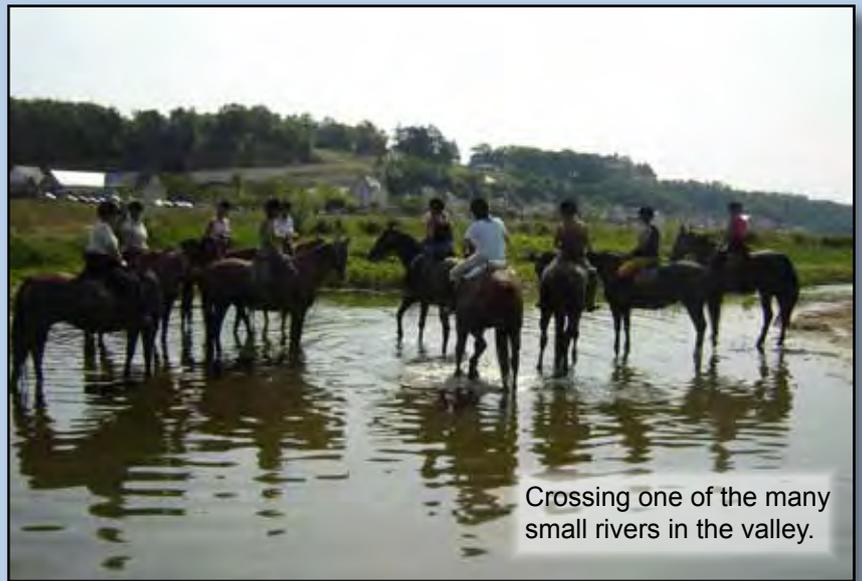
The morning is dedicated to getting to know the horses, riding out into the countryside across to a little troglodyte village called Bourré, then following the river Cher up to Thésée with its roman vestiges. Moving onwards through hills covered with vineyards the group makes a stop at a wine producer's estate for a picnic and wine tasting. After a siesta the group, now familiar with the horses, have the opportunity to enjoy a quick gallop through the softly undulating hills before arriving at the medieval castle of Chémery, the base for the night.

The following morning is a lengthy ride through forests and rural settlements en route to Cheverny, a 17th century chateau that displays both a Henry IV and Louis XIII style façade; for this reason Cheverny demonstrates a rare architectural unity of style, having been commissioned and completed within a 30-year period. This chateau is also renowned for its famous hounds; a pack of 70 dogs is kept on its grounds. The same family has owned this property for over 700 years and it has been handed down from generation to generation.

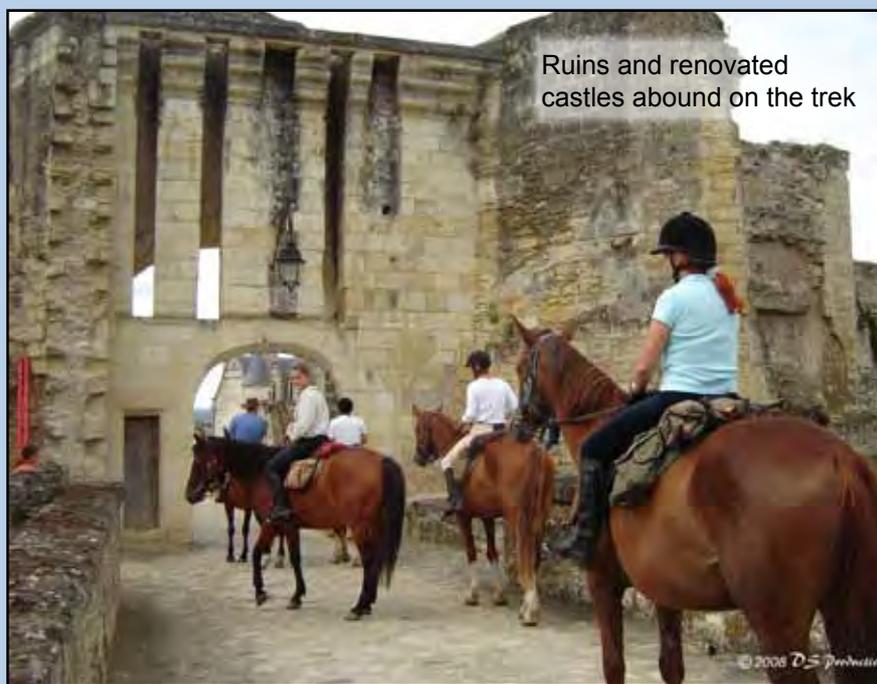
After a picnic lunch and a tour of the interior there's a further couple of hours'

riding to the overnight accommodation at Bracieux, travelling through flat land with forests dotted along the course of the trail.

It's back in the saddle next morning and onto the trail heading north towards Chambord, one of the most



Crossing one of the many small rivers in the valley.



Ruins and renovated castles abound on the trek

unique constructions of the period combining French Medieval architecture with Italian Renaissance. What makes this strange dual inspiration even more interesting is that the artist behind its creation remains a mystery. At the start of the 20th century Leonardo Di Vinci was considered the designer but, while he could have assisted in the inspiration, he died before it was completed so could not have directed its construction. Still, there are certain tell-tale motifs that strongly suggest he had influence over the design. Chambord

is the largest of the chateau visited on this trip and a picnic in the grounds as well as a tour of the castle is scheduled before riding on to Blois, taking in river views and forested tracks.

Next morning's ride is through a flatter, more rural

landscape across open, fertile fields and grasslands with the opportunity to enjoy some lively trots and canters on the level terrain en route to the Loire riverbanks near Candé sur Beuvron. A picnic lunch is enjoyed at the castle of Chaumont-sur-Loire, where guests stop and relax before touring the chateau. This ancient fortress, reconstructed in the 15th century, was the subject of an argument between queen Catherine de Médici, widow of Henry II, and her rival Diane de Poitiers, his mistress (the end result of which is discovered on visiting the stunning chateau Chenonceau later on the trail). A short ride brings guests to a meadow for the horses at Rilly sur Loire while the riders spend the night in a hotel at Chaumont.

After breakfast guests are returned to their horses to ride south following the river Loire near the beach and then into the hills through a rolling landscape, passing renowned vineyards of the Touraine appellation and cereal fields. Arriving in Amboise early afternoon riders stop for a picnic lunch before visiting the castle. The 15th century was a wealthy period for Amboise, when the kings Louis XI, Charles VIII, and Francis 1st put funds into expanding its environs as well as embellishing the already ornate architecture of the

Chenonceau Castle, the Chateau of the Ladies.



town. In the afternoon, riders cross the Amboise forest up to Herserie castle, which offers bed and breakfast accommodation.

Following the Cher river, today's ride is to the stunning Chenonceau castle, also known as 'the chateau of the Ladies' since throughout its history it has been loved, governed and protected by women. Built in 1513 by Katherine Briçonnet, and successively improved upon by Diane de Poitiers (who ordered the construction of the famous arched bridge over the river) then Catherine de Medici. Chenonceau was also protected from the revolution by Madame Dupin. After the death of Henry II, in a true act of revenge against her rival, Catherine de Medici forced Diane de Poitiers to exchange it for the less striking Chaumont-sur-Loire as she knew how much the mistress loved Chenonceau.

After a tour of this chateau's stunning interior it is time for the last ride of the trip. This will continue to follow the Cher river, riding along its banks in the afternoon sunlight and through the town of Montrichard. Here riders say goodbye to their horses before returning to the Château de Vallagon, for a sumptuous farewell dinner.

This is the perfect ride for those wishing to submerge themselves in French culture and history whilst enjoying riding. The fit, forward going horses are suitable for intermediate riders spending 4-6hrs in the saddle per day (even after wine tasting!). The hosts are very knowledgeable and passionate about their country and have thought through every last detail of this trail in order that they might provide you with an all-encompassing French adventure. 🐾



Lunch stop at the support vehicle cafe.



Ride in for a tour of castles and chateaux.