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MAGAZINE OF THE YEAR

# THE WEEK

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## This week's dream: cycling the Loir Valley

When in France, "you can guarantee that wine will play a leading role", says Lizzie Matthews in *Wanderlust* magazine. And on a cycling tour of the Loir Valley, "wine, food and decadence in general" feature heavily. This is the Loir without an "e" which, confusingly, lies within the larger Loire Valley area. It is "quieter, more unspoilt", than other parts of its almost-namesake, with "villages where flowers drip from every windowsill", gently sloping hills and relatively few tourists even in peak season. The only way to explore "at a suitably relaxed pace" is by bicycle – which is handy since cycling provides "just the right amount of exercise" to offset the gluttony at every stop.

There's a "wonderfully civilised" cycling scheme run by the local tourist board. They give you a map and a bike, and transport your luggage between hotels; the rest is up to you. Setting off from the charming town of Vendôme, you quickly find yourself in bucolic heaven "pedalling peacefully" through sunny



Vendôme: the tour's charming starting point

pastures, stopping at farm shops to sample delectable jams and jars of "animal body parts". This is the "real France" – and there's little traffic to disturb your progress.

Trô – your first overnight stop – is "the most extraordinary of villages", with a "vast network of caves and troglodyte dwellings" behind a chalky cliff: tiny doorways and windows in the limestone are the only outward sign – it's "like something out of Tolkien". Further down the valley, you can trade in your bicycle for a mountain bike and kayak, and head off into the Bercé Forest, where, hidden amid the oaks, sits a restaurant in which a 400-year-old pear tree "sprouts up through the floorboards and disappears into the ceiling". Here, you'll eat some of the "finest food of your life" in the "prettiest" setting; before spending the rest of the day in quiet contemplation, paddling on the river. *Loir Valley Tourist Board* ([www.vallee-du-loir.com](http://www.vallee-du-loir.com)) has five nights from €514pp, based on two sharing.

### Hotel of the week



#### Chapel House, Penzance

This is a "gem of a hotel", says Chris Moss in *The Guardian*. Set in a fine Georgian house that was formerly the Penzance Arts Club, Chapel House opened recently after a two-year refurbishment – and the results are "stunning". The six guest rooms are large and airy, and elegantly furnished with both antique and contemporary pieces. There are fine sea views and beds are "immense". Breakfast, served in the basement, includes a "splendid full Cornish", as well as a variety of pastries and smoothies. If you only have a weekend to spare, "there's almost too much to do in Penzance": Land's End is a 15-minute drive away; the nearby Tate St Ives gallery is also worth a visit.

Doubles from £150 b&b. 01736-362024, [www.chapelhousepz.co.uk](http://www.chapelhousepz.co.uk).

### Getting the flavour of...

#### Molecular cookery in Madrid

Down "a scruffy street in an anonymous corner of the Spanish capital" is an experience that's part *MasterChef*, part *Heston's Feasts*, says Chris Haslam in *The Sunday Times*. It's a molecular cookery class, run by "Mallorcan superchef" Javier Bonet at the *Academia del Despiece* ("Exploded Academy"). Workstations are kitted out with "knives, tongs, something surgical and a blowtorch", and overhead projectors beam a video onto each bench top. You "watch, learn", then replicate with real ingredients. "Easy." For ten "fabulous courses", you'll make your own "ham-fisted versions" of the tapas served in Bonet's restaurant. "The final course is a free-form design your own dessert." The class is neither "po-faced nor intimidating" – but there's a shock at the end when you learn you've been on "secret camera" all along. "Then he presses play." *Classes (three hours) from €65pp. +34 91 752 6106, www.academiadeldespiece.com*

#### Detroit's budding recovery

For most Americans, Detroit is a "horror show of crime, depopulation, corruption, and urban blight", says Marcel Theroux in *The Daily Telegraph*. Barely 50 years ago, it was the "richest city in America"; now its once sumptuous monuments are crumbling, and surrounded by abandoned homes and derelict factories. "Shut off behind a fence of

razor wire", the grandiose Michigan Central Station looks "as dystopian as the exclusion zone around Chernobyl". But there are "intimations of hope": downtown is being revitalised, artists have moved in, and the "calm and spacious" Detroit Institute of Art has been spared closure. You can take a tour of the city's art projects and industrial heritage – including the still-operational Ford River Rouge car plant, where assembly-line workers are now vastly outnumbered by "slightly sinister" robots. *Chauffeur-driven Show Me Detroit Tours* ([www.showmedetroittours.com](http://www.showmedetroittours.com)) cost \$59pp.

#### Vintage arcade games in Tokyo

The Nakano district offers "a glimpse of a Tokyo that's fast fading away", says Nick Boulos in the *London Evening Standard*. There's a "sense of yesteryear" in its narrow alleys and "eccentric eateries". This part of the city is also known as the "Holy Land of Otaku" – with *otaku* referring to people who are "obsessed with Japanese animation" – and Nakano is "at the epicentre of anime and manga". Hunched figures sit in rows in "quirky cafés", "barely blinking", as their fingers "feverishly work the controls of old video gaming machines" that today look like museum pieces. These are not teenagers – they are "middle-aged men" for whom "otaku is almost a religion" and arcade games have "never gone out of fashion".

### Last-minute offers from top travel companies

#### Lake Garda and Venice

Book by 30 July for a 4-night stay at Hotel Delfino, Venice, and Hotel Riva Del Sole, Lake Garda. Prices from £199pp b&b, including flights & train. 0808-178 5868, [www.dealchecker.co.uk](http://www.dealchecker.co.uk). October dates.

#### December in New York

Three nights at the Wellington Hotel, in Midtown Manhattan, cost from £455pp room only, including Heathrow flights. 020-8290 9797, [www.myamericaholiday.co.uk](http://www.myamericaholiday.co.uk). Book by 31 July for December dates.

#### John O'Groats break

Enjoy a 25% discount on a 7-night stay in a luxury 1-bed apartment within the iconic Inn at John O'Groats. From £473, with welcome hamper. 0844-384 3166, [www.naturalretreats.com](http://www.naturalretreats.com). Until end of Sept.

#### Active Greek break

Waterskiing, wakeboarding and fitness classes abound at the Neilson Messini Beachclub, Analipsi. A 7-night stay is from £1,159pp, "club board", with flights. 0333-014 3350, [www.neilson.co.uk](http://www.neilson.co.uk). Depart 23 Aug.