

# Freewheeling in France

Indulging your senses is easy and enjoyable from the saddle of a bicycle

by **Ethan Gelber**



Bikers in a Burgundy field of rapeseed flowers

The yellow of Lance Armstrong's Tour de France winner's jersey is the same as the golden wash of springtime in Burgundy's rapeseed flower fields. Although the maillot jaune modestly took its color from the newspaper (then called *L'Auto*, now known as *L'Equipe*) that first sponsored the race, today it is a haughtily brilliant emblem of both the triumph and appeal of cycling and a country fabled for its saddle-accessible beauty.

I started freewheeling the byways of France 17 years ago. For many of the years since then, I have pedaled through France's summers as a tour guide for Blue Marble Travel, a Paris-based bicycle-tour operator for English speakers ([www.bluemarble.org](http://www.bluemarble.org)). Inexorably, and sometimes like magic, after multiple visits to some areas of the country, I began to feel at home, and the familiar-seeming regions glowed with a greater and more detailed beauty than I had perceived at first glance: the arrangements of grapes in vineyards split by the Route des Grands Crus in Burgundy and the Route Touristique du Champagne between Epernay and Reims; the farmhouses hidden in the shadows of the Loire-lapped dike-top roads through Châteaux Country; specific vistas over the patchwork forest- and field-carpeted rolling hills of Franche-

Comté and the Jura; and the wind-whipped rolling waters along the Mediterranean coast from Menton all the way to Cerbère.

Many of the locals I met along the way—young and old, sullen and spirited, inquisitive and indifferent—were farmers vending their homemade wares, or villagers of fleeting acquaintance inspired to speak to me by the sight of intrepid cyclists. These people, also including the sometimes thick-skinned professionals of the tourism industry, seemed ready to engage in conversation, especially after repeated meetings. I credit this readiness for exchange to my being on a bicycle and open to the elements and the towns' populations, not cosseted behind a windshield, blinded by speed, deafened by a roaring motor, and immune to the living details that make a place feel alive. People's willingness to talk helped me satisfy and develop my own curiosities about France—and the French about me—but also made my work as a guide much easier; I had to be a cultural interface between curious clients earnestly pursuing knowledge about France and eager-to-please locals who were passionate about sharing it.

Fortunately, long days of pedaling exertion also justified long and indulgent evenings at *la table*. Who couldn't fall in love with French food and drink? Who wouldn't be overwhelmed by the regional specialties, as unusual as they may sometimes be, bathed in groaningly good sauces and accompanied by wines and cheeses and breads and sweets that smack of sensuality

and tradition! I learned to eat slowly, savoring every bite, wiping every plate clean with my bread. Then I learned how to cook what I liked, delighting in a sensory treat that begins with fresh ingredients and ends with a crumpled sauce-smear napkin in my lap and a big grin on my face.

This is my France, the France I discovered from the seat of my bicycle—that can *only* be discovered from the seat of a bicycle, as realized by more than 15,000 North Americans per year: the color of details spied on quiet backroads, the smiles of people interested in people, and the flavors unselfishly prepared for others' pleasure. This is also the France I encourage you to discover, at your own pace and in your own way.

## Where to Go

In a country as culturally and geographically diverse as France, it can be difficult to decide where to go. Whereas the mountains—the Alps and the Pyrénées—offer the greatest challenges and rewards for cyclists, and the extensive coastline is replete with its own magic, I have always found that the river valleys offer the most of the best.

After all, river valleys are to modern Gaul what the Fertile Crescent was to Western civilization. So, for a true taste of the nation, dive into the river regions, swim through the history and culture, bathe in the gastronomy, and cleave the rolling turf on two wheels.

Along the **Loire River**, at the source end in the east, begin in Le Puy-en-Velay, the religious heart of Auvergne, and ply your way west, away from the river, through the Parc Régional des Volcans d'Auvergne, an eerie volcanic countryside spotted with rock-top fortresses and historic Romanesque churches. At the other end of the river, begin in Orléans and go west on the banks of the Loire as far as your legs will carry you. Castles will keep you company to Tours when the vineyards really become profuse.

In the attraction- and distraction-packed valley dug by the **Dordogne River**, pick and choose what's best. Start in the Southwest's Souillac, detour to medieval Sarlat-la-Canéda and the "prehistoric capital of France" (cave drawings in abundance) centered around Les Eyzies-de-Tayac, through river gorges and rolling hills of corn and wheat, and into the heart of Bordeaux wine and cuisine.

From Châlons-sur-Marne, on the edge of the Champagne vineyards, pick up the **Marne River** and move west into Epernay. Take a detour on the vineyard-bordered Route Touristique du Champagne through the Parc Régional de la Montagne de Reims as far as the city of Reims and back, and then push through the northern Brie region into Paris itself.

Although not exactly along the **Saône River**, the vineyards of Burgundy run parallel to it westward. From Dijon all the way to Mâcon, treat yourself to a casual roll (with potential challenges) down the Route des Grands Crus and through the famous *côtes* (vineyard-covered hillsides), the heart of grape-growing and wine-producing Burgundy.

Consider beginning a spin in the Rhone-Alps and heading south along the **Rhône River** into Provence. From Valence, head as far as Orange before detouring inland for a few tough but rewarding climbs in the Ventoux and Vaucluse. Back on the river, dance on the bridge at Avignon, jig in the Roman ruins of Arles, and walk with the animals (bulls, flamingos, and wild horses) in the Camargue.

## How to Go

Different strokes for different folks: Some people travel independently; others long for organized tours.

If you wish to travel alone, pick up one of the many excellent bicycling guides. One particularly commendable resource, produced by local French bicycle touring experts, is a series of 17 books (in French) called *La France à Vélo*. Published by the Fédération Française de Cyclotourisme, each book includes scores of itineraries that are one to seven days long. Should you wish to brave the land in an even more adventurous fashion, take no more than a map. The Michelin series with yellow covers (1:200,000 scale) is best for cyclists.

For visitors to France who don't want to think about all the organizational details of independent travel, more than 20 North American tour operators organize bicycle trips in every corner of the country. Backcountry adventures, theme trips (centered, for example, around gastronomy or architecture), carry-your-own-panniers hosteling excursions, luxury junkets, large groups tours, self-guided outings—organized cycling comes in all shapes and sizes. See "Great Values," pages 88–89, for a selection. ♣



From top: Bicycle tourists embracing their vineyard companions; author working as a guide and preparing to deliver bikes (by bike) to waiting clients; vacationing cyclists at the Arc de Triomphe; North American cyclists in Burgundy enjoy a moment of laughter with a local farm owner.



## Good Spokes-People



No matter how you choose to travel, the most important and useful bicycling organization in France is the Fédération Française de Cyclotourisme, regrouping the more than 3,000 local cycling clubs and associations in France, and the force behind a great many of the non-racing cycling activities throughout the country. [www.ffct.org](http://www.ffct.org)

