

For a chance to enjoy a week of stunning scenery and cuisine while keeping active at your own pace, France's Veloscenic cycle tour ticks all the boxes.

FIONA RUSSELL

French revolutions



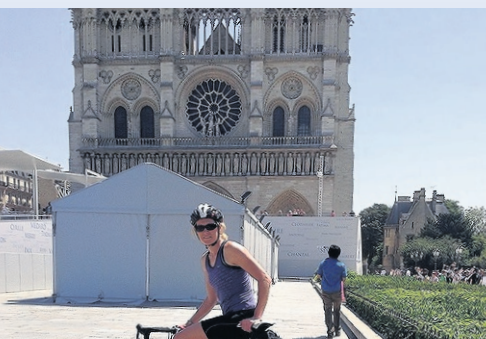
Travel info



CYCLE-FRIENDLY Well signposted route



SIGHTS The tour takes in a host of castles



STARTING POINT Fiona at Notre Dame

Flat cycling on paths and country roads, they said. A 275-mile signposted route, they reported.

Beautiful scenery, castles, churches and fabulous cuisine, they added.

Oh, and wine and cidre, too. It didn't take much to persuade me that France's new Veloscenic cycle route would be a pleasant way to pass a week.

Setting out from Paris, the cycleway passes through four regions and eight départements to reach the stunning island setting of Mont Saint-Michel.

Daily distances can be adjusted to suit energy levels and experience. Your week could include shorter days of cycling and time to visit a wealth of attractions, or you could cycle dozens of miles before refuelling on gourmet meals and wine.

The countryside is endowed with impressive castles, beautiful churches and visitor-friendly villages and towns.

Drivers are courteous to cyclists and guesthouse owners are very welcoming.

There are, however, a few things you should know about cycle touring.

Choose a hybrid bike to suit a range of terrains and remember that everything you pack in panniers will need to be transported – so ditch the hair straighteners and take two pairs of cycling shorts and lightweight shorts, T-shirts and flip-flops for evening wear.

Also, choose your cycling companion wisely. A cheerful disposition at the end of a day in the saddle and the ability to

map read when hot and tired are a bonus. A GPS device with downloaded Veloscenic route maps is also a must.

Day one: Paris to Rambouillet (34 miles)

The Eurostar arrives at Paris Nord and then it's just you and your bike in busy city traffic. On the plus side, there are lots of cafés and sights to see. Heading out of the suburbs, the cycle route finally reaches quieter country roads.

Sightseeing: Notre Dame cathedral; The Ile de France Museum at Sceaux; the Medieval village of Rochefort-en-Yvelines and Espace Rambouillet animal park.

Overnight: Hutttopia forest campsite.

<http://france.hutttopia.com/en>

Day Two: Rambouillet to Chartres (22 miles)

For nervous city cyclists, this would make a good starting point. (Take a train from Paris to Rambouillet.) With Rambouillet Castle Park, Maintenon Castle en route and the stunning cathedral city of Chartres, you could spend most of the day revelling in history.

Sightseeing: Guided tour at Rambouillet and an audio tour at UNESCO World Heritage site, Chartres Cathedral. There is a tourist train, Le Petit Chart' Train at the tourist office.

Overnight: Les Crépinières, Chartres.

Tel: 02 37 30 13 33.

Day Three: Chartres to Nogent-le-Rotrou (48 miles)

One of the longer cycling stages and also one of the most beautiful. Heading through gently rolling countryside, with fields of wheat edged by wildflowers.

Sightseeing: House of Tante Léonie; Museum of

Marcel Proust in Illiers-Combray; Fraise Castle and Nogent-le-Rotrou Castle.

Overnight: Hotel Lion D'Or, Nogent www.hotel-chartres-le-mans.com

Day Four: Nogent-le-Rotrou to Alençon (48 miles)

A flat, off-road cycling greenway follows the (very) straight line of an old railway. **Sightseeing:** A horse and carriage ride at Ferme de L'Absoudière, Corbon and the heritage city of Mortagne-au-Perche.

Overnight: Modern l'Hôtel des Ducs, Alençon. www.hotel-centre-ville.hoteldesducs-alencon.fr/

Day Five: Alençon to Bagnoles-de-l'Orne (33 miles)

With a few long-ish ascents and descents, we enjoyed some splendid views.

Sightseeing: Stop for a picnic at Carrouges Castle.

Overnight: Bo Cottage (self-catering) hotel. www.bo-cottage.com

Day Six: Bagnoles-de-l'Orne to Saint Hilaire du Harcouet (42 miles)

Mainly off-road cycling on tracks and pathways, with some busier roads closer to Saint Hilaire.

Sightseeing: Domfront castle ruins; Maison de la Pomme et de la Poire at Barenton; Waterfalls at Mortain.

Overnight: L'hôtel du Cygne.

www.hotel-le-cygne.fr

Day Seven: Saint Hilaire du Harcouet to Le Mont Saint Michel (31 miles)

An easy-going route takes you towards Le Mont Saint Michel, with breathtaking views over coastal flatlands to the sea.

Sightseeing: The village of Ducey and Montgomery Castle, as well as a guided tour of Mont St Michel Abbey.

Overnight: Les Epinettes B&B.

www.les-epinettes-normandie.fr

■ I travelled Virgin Trains from Glasgow to London Euston, having reserved a bike place. Go to www.virgintrains.co.uk

■ Rail Europe offers transport from London to Paris, returning from Pontorson (near Mont Saint-Michel) to London from £99.50 per person and from £70 per bike. Call 0844 848 4070 or go to www.rail-europe.co.uk

■ More info on the Veloscenic at www.veloscenic.com

"DAILY DISTANCES CAN BE ADJUSTED TO SUIT ALL EXPERIENCE LEVELS"