

Gardens of NW France: An Introduction

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For this very carefully researched tour, Australians Studying Abroad has found and contacted the owners of a number of particular private gardens and nurseries to ask if they would open their private gardens and host tour participants in person. The result is a number of very unique visits. At a number of places we shall even sample local produce or have afternoon tea or drinks with garden owners.

This is a tour promising extraordinary sensual variety, for whereas the Île de France has the highest population density in France, Normandy, and the Loire Valley (which unites Pays de la Loire and Centre) are agricultural regions with low populations, a gentle climate and verdant landscapes. Rich soil, sufficient rainfall and ample sun have allowed French gardeners to imbed in these agricultural landscapes a great variety and concentration of lovely gardens, from grand aristocratic and royal ventures to intimate private havens. The Gulf Stream and a clement climate have also nurtured an embarrassment of gastronomic riches, from Normandy's excellent seafood, wonderful cheese varieties (Camembert, Livarot, Pont l'Évêque, Pavé d'Auge) and tasty cider and calvados, to the Loire's huge variety of vegetables, delicious sausages and fine white wine. Complimenting these culinary delights is a visual feast, because these regions have produced an extraordinary variety of flowers, especially roses, and also have inspired France's great artists and writers whose painted and written landscapes have done much to create the image of France for the French and also for the rest of the world.

Rolling hills, the fertile river valleys of the Seine and the Loire, the great hunting forests of Centre and the Île de France, and fine building stone around Caen and Tours, have also provided the setting and materials to enable architects to create some of France's most important contributions to world architecture; Norman Romanesque Abbeys and Gothic Cathedrals, and Renaissance and Baroque châteaux. The great monuments of the region owe their importance to the Church and to powerful rulers: Mont St-Michel to Richard I of Normandy and the Bénédictines, and countless cathedrals, castles and châteaux to the Dukes of Normandy and Anjou, and the Capetian and Plantagenet dynasties. For this region saw such events as the Norman conquest of England, recorded in the vast tapestry of Bayeux, the contest between Henry II's 'English' Plantagenet line and the house of Capet during the Hundred Years War, the rise of great patrons like the Angevins and François Ier (who brought Leonardo da Vinci to Amboise), and the genesis of absolute monarchy in the châteaux of the Loire and Fontainebleau. The region's towns, meanwhile, allowed French kings to triumph over the nobility, leading eventually to the absolute monarchy of Louis XIV. Merchants freed monarchs from dependence upon the support of feudal aristocrats, whom they supplanted as the administrators of the realm, garnering wealth by purveying local artisan products like copper and lace work to complement the crafts of agriculture like wine- and cheese production. With their wealth these merchants patronised great Gothic cathedrals like Le Mans, and built lovely Renaissance town houses in wood and stone. The nobility, meanwhile, lost its aggressive vigour and its daunting castles to become courtiers, patrons of the fine châteaux and great formal gardens that throughout these regions replaced daunting citadels.

This tour celebrates the lovely gardens, fine agricultural landscapes and delicious local produce, great monuments and exquisite, unspoilt small villages of Central and North Western France. It balances a focus upon the horticultural delight of the region - its roses - with broader, more diverse interest in the abundance of plants that will grow here. It explores the gardens, landscapes, and the seaside that inspired Impressionist and Cubist painters like Boudin and especially Monet, at Giverny, Honfleur and

Étretat, and Braque at Varengeville-sur-Mer. It surveys the rich variety of village architecture and especially the pretty half-timbered houses of Normandy, with their intricately patterned timber frames. It visits two of the greatest masterpieces of European textile art, the Bayeux Tapestry and the Angers Apocalypse Tapestry. It has been very carefully planned to arrive in particular villages on their market days; these are not general markets seen by tourists everywhere in France, but local markets selling the traditional products of residents. It tours some of the loveliest of all châteaux, including Chenonceau, Cheverny and Villandry, as well as the grand stately establishments of Vaux-le-Vicomte and Fontainebleau. You will drive through some of France's most memorable landscapes, from the Seine Valley to the coasts and hedged meadows of Normandy, the manicured panoramas of the Loire, and France's greatest forests which owe their existence to royalty's obsession with the hunt. Against these landscapes are set visits to gardens stately and intimate, public and private.

