

Not to be confused with the busy Loire Valley to its south, the lesser-known Le Loir offers a gentler France

- France's Loire Valley has long attracted visitors with its landscapes and chateaux
- But Mark Jones recommends heading north to the quieter, charming Le Loir
- Take a walk in the Berce Forest, sit in quiet cafes or visit eccentric French artists

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Here is a story about Le Loir, a river and region in [France](#). And if there are any geography or French teachers reading this, please don't write a furious letter. No, I don't mean La Loire.

La Loire is France's longest river. It runs from the coastal west to the mountainous south, and boasts a verdant landscape of fabulous chateaux and superb vineyards.

This is about Le Loir, a much quieter chap, happy to meander for a mere 200 miles in rural obscurity through gentle, mid-west countryside. But given a choice between La and Le, I would go with Le.



The village of La Fleche sits in a pleasant spot on the banks of Le Loir river

Le Loir is actually a tributary of the Sarthe river. But the Loir Valley - just to keep things nice and confusing - runs 25 miles to the north, seemingly trickling along in its shadow.

I found the Loir region by motoring north from Bordeaux on the A10 and A28 autoroutes just before Le Mans. And after that long, hot drive, it was a relief to pull into the main square of La Chartre-sur-le-Loir.

It's a classic of the provincial French variety: five cafés, pretty but unpretentious, three-storey, cream-coloured houses, the usual boulangeries and charcuteries, all straight out of the illustrations in a Beginner's French textbook.



The Hotel de France in La Chartre-sur-le-Loir is popular with Le Mans racegoers

An elderly Englishman strode across the square. I didn't actually ask him his nationality, but he was wearing red trousers, a Panama hat and had just stepped out of a vintage Jaguar. He was heading to the Hotel de France, which was another giveaway. If Le Loir has a small claim to fame, it's this hotel.

We are an hour from Le Mans and its day-night racetrack. The Hotel de France, with its Art Deco facade, is a place of pilgrimage for the drivers and their fans: Le Mans competitors once used to prepare their cars in the hotel courtyard. And the room names are quite a starting grid: Jacky Ickx, Jochen Rindt, Bruce McLaren, Stirling Moss, Jackie Stewart.

As for the rest of La Chartre, it's of more interest to people with a passion for old teapots than torque. There are half a dozen antiques shops straddling the main street and clustering close to the rose-festooned bridge.



The spectacular gardens of the Hotel Château du Grand-Lucé in the Loir valley

How long Le Loir will remain a 'secret bien gardé' (as its website calls it), I wonder, because something glamorous is certainly happening here.

We drove to the hilltop village of Le Grand-Lucé to find out. It's not a big village, so we got to know its narrow streets pretty well, before locating a plain-looking gate that leads to the Hotel Château du Grand-Lucé.

Château du Grand-Lucé was built in 1764 for Jacques Pineau de Viennay, Baron de Lucé, in the 18th-century heyday of French classicism. His daughter, Louise, hosted Voltaire, Mozart and Rousseau - and many townspeople took shelter there after a fire devastated the village in 1781.

Now, after service as a wartime hospital and government offices, and a highly respectful renovation by American interior designer, Timothy Corrigan, the Grand-Lucé has just been reopened as a chic resort.



The 18th-century Hotel Chateau has a pool set among the sculpted gardens

Beyond its walls, you can see the other source of what I'll call (for want of a better word) Le Loir's fame: 'trees'.

The vertiginously tall oaks of the Bercé forest were planted to make the floors at the Palace of Versailles and to provide timber for naval ships.

The 5,400 hectares are fantastic for cycling or strolling on a hot day.



Le Bercé Forest is perfect for a quiet stroll or a picnic on the banks of the river

Trees are celebrated, dissected and explained in a quirky little Carnuta forest museum in the village of Jupilles. But 'quirky' doesn't begin to describe the work of octogenarian artist Thierry Juge in his converted 14th-century priory on the outskirts of Beaumont-sur-Dême.

His garden and the steeply sloping hills beyond are full of box hedges. But these are not boxes that match. Juge's art consists of his shaping the buxus, not into the birds and balls of classic topiary art, but a bewildering variety of abstract shapes.

We spend a merry 30 minutes walking around the grounds, having cloudspotter-style disagreements: 'That one looks like a mushroom.' 'No, it's a poodle!' Dinner was a marked contrast to the Grand-Lucé. Les Mères Cocottes is a grocery shop that blends somewhat chaotically into a restaurant. On the hidden terrace, d d b fl d surrounded by sunflowers and vines, we feasted on délices de la mer and trout, and perche à la Provençale for about £18.

In case you are suffering from chateau withdrawal, the Loir does, in fact, have an outstanding one: Château du Lude. But we were just as happy to be surrounded by the natural architecture of the forests and the low-key delights of a France at its least showy.

TRAVEL FACTS

Doubles at Hotel Château du Grand-Lucé from £420 per night
(chateaugrandluce.com). More information at en.vallee-du-loir.com.