



Discover the *Thouet Valley* on two wheels

by Mick Austin

Forget for a moment the hurly-burly of the Tour de France. Sometimes the world moves just a little bit too fast. Think France and its miles of beautiful countryside just waiting to be explored – but explored at a pace where you feel you’ve got all the time in the world.

There’s never been a better time to enjoy the gentle landscape of the Thouet Valley than now as the Deux-Sèvres department has a route that lets you cycle from Saumur, in the Loire Valley, through the Thouet Valley and then on to La Rochelle on the Atlantic coast.

You don’t have to be a Bradley Wiggins or an Alberto Contador to manage any of these stages. Look on it as a chance to get out and about, in perfect peace, to see places you might never have otherwise discovered.

Along the way you can visit historic towns, picnic by winding rivers and stay in some wonderfully unique accommodation. Whether you decide to follow the route in its entirety (you can even cycle from the UK to Saumur) or simply choose to enjoy some of the well signposted local loops, it’s the perfect activity for summer days.

There are nine stages through the Thouet Valley and each one has clear signposting so there’s little chance of you getting lost. There are five main places to park up your car: St-Hilaire-St-Florent near Saumur, Montreuil-Bellay, Thouars, St-Loup-Lamaire at Lake Cebren and Parthenay. There are also 30 rest areas along the route



where you can pause for a while, enjoy the views and natural monuments and perhaps take in a picnic.

You’ll encounter two types of lanes on the route. The first are small roads and agricultural tracks where the traffic is light but the pathways are also shared by hikers and those on horseback. The others are cycle paths reserved for cyclists where you can enjoy the countryside in the safest of conditions.



Stage 1: Saumur to Saint-Martin-de-Sanzay. 23.3kms. 1hr 30min. Easy going.

Plenty to see and do in Saumur, including several châteaux and churches, the national equestrian centre, troglodyte houses and the Combiar distillery, where Triple Sec is produced. Museums include the Musée des Blindés (one of the world's largest tank museums) and the Toba de Saumur galleries where three-quarters of the nation's Champignons de Paris mushrooms are grown. Visit the megalithic bridge at Artannes-sur-Thouet and the chateau at Montreuil-Bellay, dating between the 11th and 15th centuries.

Stage 2: Saint-Martin-de-Sanzay to Thouars. 21.7km. 1hr 30min. Easy.

Check out the Château du Bois de Sanzay (15th and 18th centuries). Follow the Thouet river south and don't miss the 13th century bridge at Taizon. Enjoy cycling through the vineyards of the famous Anjou region.

Stage 3: Thouars to St Généroux. 18.5km. 1hr 15min. Intermediate.

Explore Thouars, a town known for its art and history, before embarking on this slightly more hilly stage. Stop at the bridge of Chouans to admire the château of the Dukes of Trémoille and, if you have the energy, take a detour to nearby Château d'Oiron, built in the 16th century and now a museum for contemporary art.

Stage 4: St Généroux to Airvault. 11km. 45min. Intermediate.

Having marvelled at the pre-Roman church and Roman bridge at St-Généroux, this shorter stage passes through the 'vallées sèches', dry valleys created in the Ice Age where Mediterranean plants are now grown.

Stage 5: Airvault to St Loup-sur-Thouet. 8.5km. 35min. Intermediate.

At Airvault, don't miss the beautiful Romanesque abbey, St-Pierre d'Airvault, with its underground spring and the medieval town centre before setting out for St-Loup with its fantastic 17th century château and its gardens

Stage 6: St Loup-sur-Thouet to Gourgé. 8.5km. 35min. Easy.

Stop at the lake at Cébron to see the local wildlife and fauna before continuing back towards the Thouet river and into the pretty town of Gourgé with its ancient church (Eglise de Saint-Hilaire) and watermill.

Stage 7: Gourgé to Parthenay. 22.6km. 1hr 30min. Intermediate.

Admire the 11th century bridge before crossing the river and pedalling to La Peyratte, passing the nearby 17th century forge, a Romanesque church, the Place des Marronniers central square and a monument dating, like the church, from the 12th century. Then enter the historic town of Parthenay – said to have been created by the wave of the fairy Melusine's magic wand – with its beautiful St Jacques quarter, an important stopping point on the pilgrims' route to Santiago de Compostela in Spain. Don't miss the Saint-Jacques Bridge and fortified gate where the pilgrims would enter the town.

Stage 8: Parthenay to Secondigny. 18km. 1hr 15min. Intermediate.

Having explored Parthenay, follow the route as it winds across country to Secondigny, known as the apple capital of France with its 1000 hectares of orchards and around 45,000 tons of fruit harvested every year.

Stage 9: Secondigny to the source of the Thouet river at Le Beugnon. 11.5km. 45min. Intermediate.

In the heart of Gâtine country, you arrive at the source of the river, where it's time to take a well-earned breather and enjoy the local scenery.

Le Thouet à vélo



légende générale des cartes

- Parcours cyclable
- Cours d'eau
- Route départementale
- Zone forestière
- Chemin de fer
- Thouars Ville étape
- Rivière
- Commune / Lieu-dits
- Aires de service
- Parking
- Point de vue
- Patrimoine
- Églises et accueil de la Vallée

Durée estimative du parcours* Niveau de difficulté du parcours

* Calculée sur la base de 15 km/h, sans halte.



More Info

www.valleeduthouet.fr/cote-velo/la-carte
 The full route in detail, including where to hire your bikes, rest areas and places of interest along the way.

Office de Tourisme du Saumurois, Place de la Bilange, 49400 Saumur.
 Tel: 02 41 40 20 60. E: infos@ot-saumur.fr
www.saumur-tourisme.com

Place du Concorde, 49260 Montreuil-Bellay.
 Tel: 02 41 52 32 39.
 E: tourisme@ville-montreuil-bellay.fr

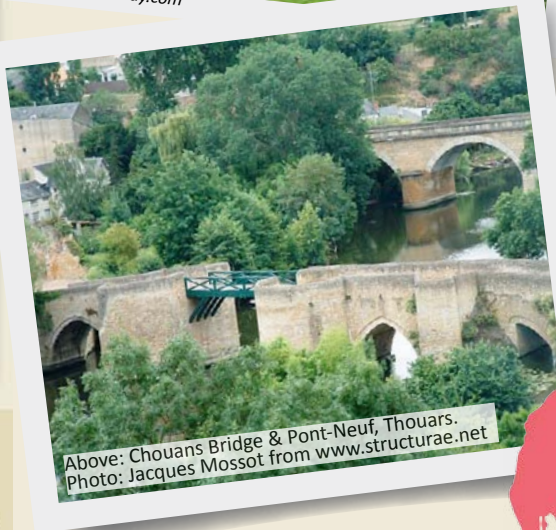
Office de Tourisme de Pays Thouarsais, 32 place Saint Médard, 79100 Thouars.
 Tel: 05 49 66 17 65.
 E: accueil@tourisme-pays-thouarsais.fr
www.tourisme-pays-thouarsais.fr

Tourisme en Gatine, 8 rue de la Vau St Jacques, 79200 Parthenay.
 Tel: 05 49 64 24 24. E: tourisme@gatine.org
www.gatine.org

Below: The town of Saumur.
 Photo: Wikimedia, Martin Falbisoner



Images © pixabay.com



Above: Chouans Bridge & Pont-Neuf, Thouars.
 Photo: Jacques Mossot from www.structurae.net



And now for something a little more difficult...

Having tried the near-150kms of the Thouet Valley cycle route you might be tempted into something a little more strenuous. If so, how about the *Vélodyssée*?

Covering more than 1400kms from Roscoff in Brittany and down the Atlantic Coast to Biarritz and the Spanish border, this route has something for everyone. Never too far from the sea this, the longest waymarked cycle route in France, allows you to mount up and experience the outstanding natural beauty the French countryside has to offer.

Split into 15 sections – each with its own downloadable route map and GPS tracklog – you can even jump aboard a ferry to England and pedal the *Velodyssée Devon*, or cross into Spain on the EV1 route.

In Poitou-Charentes the route enters the northern Charente Maritime from the Vendée through the beautiful Marais Poitevin. Rest a while in La Rochelle to visit the sights and do some shopping before heading down to Royan via the golden beaches of Châtelailon Plage and the city of Rochefort. From there the route moves inland following old steam train tracks towards Marennes, the centre of oyster farming.

Families might like a quick detour to the Zoo de La Palmyre before moving into Royan and its fabulous beaches and art deco architecture.

Visit: www.velodysssey.com

- Point Information
 - Loueur de vélos
 - Hébergement + accueil Vélos
 - Point d'eau potable
 - Toilettes publiques
- Distance du parcours

Mick Austin is a freelance journalist based in the Pays-de-la-Loire. He has had his work published in several expat magazines and newspapers and has also written the Mayenne Tourist Board's only English-language brochure. He also runs a gîte business at www.gitfortwo.com.

