

This free routebook was created at
cycle.travel - the best way to plan
an awesome bike route.

cycle.travel

La Vélo Francette

Map data © OpenStreetMap.org contributors (Open Database Licence). Cartography © cycle.travel, all rights reserved. You may copy this PDF for your friends, but commercial redistribution is prohibited. Thanks!



La Vélo Francette

If you were to devise the ideal cycle route, it would look a bit like this. 50% traffic free, very little climbing, miles of smooth tarmac, beautiful river scenery... oh, and a string of picture-postcard villages and towns.

La Vélo Francette is just as good as it sounds. An inland route connecting two seas (the Channel and the Bay of Biscay), it nonetheless spends a lot of time by water – the Mayenne, the Loire, the Sèvre Niortaise. Add a handful of railway paths, and you can see why there's so little traffic and so few hills. The quiet lanes that make up the remainder are well chosen, allowing you to dawdle and daydream past cider orchards and vineyards.

A panel of travel journalists voted this Europe's number 1 cycle route in 2017. It's hard to disagree.

Ouistreham (0m)

If you're arriving by ferry, getting onto La Vélo Francette couldn't be easier: you'll see the first sign as soon as you're out of the ferry port. A wide, smooth tarmac towpath whisks you from here to Caen, along the functional freight artery of the Canal de Caen à la Mer. Shipping cranes, wharves and wide turning bays mark this out as an industrial waterway rather than a leisure one, an interesting ride rather than a scenic one.

The main landmark is Pegasus Bridge, where the Allies established a bridgehead during the Normandy Landings to prevent German forces reaching the coast. The current bridge is a 1994 replacement but there's a plaque at the site.

Caen (14km)

Caen is where the fun starts. (Navigational fun, too: it's easy to get disorientated in the maze of waterways, so keep an eye on the signs.) The route's waterside cycle tracks skirt the city centre, but it's worth parking up and taking a stroll into this magnificent medieval city, a university town with a gastronomic bent. Bikes are plentiful, as well as a wacky array of electric transport – scooters, trams and buses.

From here, we join a simply brilliant rail trail along the Orne valley. We said La Vélo Francette is close to the ideal cycling route, and here more than ever. The path is wide and smooth, picnic benches are dotted along the way, viaducts criss-cross the Orne. There are even metal frames positioned at occasional viewpoints to help you take perfect photos.

Although the mainline railway closed in 1970, you'll still see tracks beside the path here and there. This is for the local 'velorail', a pedal-powered railway carriage that runs as a curious tourist attraction and a holding operation for locals who'd like to revive the railway.

Thury Harcourt (42km)

At Thury Harcourt, the old station has been converted into a café and welcome centre for cyclists and canoeists. The *voie verte* continues its splendid way to Clécy, a useful village on the other side of the valley.

From here, the route is on-road to Flers. The undulating course is not exactly mountainous but comes as quite a surprise after the leisurely rail trail. At Pont d'Ouilly, a pleasant village with a riverside café, the route splits in two: you can follow a hillier course to the east, or the longer but gentler western route.

Assuming you're carrying luggage, we'd suggest the western route, which follows some pleasant quiet lanes to the town of Flers. (You can save yourself a bit of climbing by continuing straight on for a mile at le Grand Samoi, rather than ducking down into Condé sur Noireau.) Along the way, you'll see tantalising glimpses of the old railway trackbed, not yet

reclaimed for cycling use. Near Pont Erambourg, the station hosts a Vélorail operation and a small preserved railway base. Cerisy Belle Étoile's monastery is another historic highlight.

Flers (97km)

The route through Flers takes in the château and station, but not the town centre itself. After an exit via uninspiring suburban roads (though some handy shops), the narrow streets of la Selle la Forge bring us to a junction with the eastern route. Here we begin another fine rail trail, very different in character to the first. This one is a wide, gravelled trackbed through woodland, much more rustic in character.

The unpaved paths of La Vélo Francette are all well-kept and shouldn't pose any problems for road bikes as long as you have sensible tyres – indeed, you'll see cyclists of all types on this busy path. The barriers at road crossings are a little exasperating and require nifty steering if you're not to come to a complete halt.

Domfront en Poiraise (120km)

The medieval town of Domfront is a must-stop, even if the access from the trail to the town is a little unsatisfactory (a steep path followed by a sharp haul uphill). Its ruined château is a fine sight, but it's the narrow streets and twisting passages that are the main draw. Explore the back streets at leisure and poke your head into the many courtyards. There's a friendly, cheap municipal campsite on the outskirts of town.

Here, La Vélo Francette crosses the Véloscénie, the flagship French cycleway linking Paris to Mont Saint Michel. Our gravel path continues much the same as before, but with views opening out to the distant wind turbines. There's a brief interlude on some delightful quiet lanes at Ceaucé; it almost seems a shame to leave them.

The town of Ambrières is a useful refreshment stop, just downhill from the trail. The Mayenne département thoughtfully puts mileposts along its cycle routes so you can measure your progress. Deep cuttings ease the approach into Mayenne itself.

Mayenne (162km)

The signposted route avoids Mayenne, choosing instead to duck through the outskirts of the town on the rail trail. Though that does avoid most of the traffic, we'd suggest heading downhill (via Rue de la Madeleine / Rue Saint Martin) for the first of this route's many superb waterfronts and imposing châteaux. The town centre is on the opposite bank beyond the château for your morning coffee and croissant.

On the river, you'll see the first of the locks that make this a charming cruising navigation down to its confluence with the Loire. The Vélo Francette is a waterside route for the next 180km, more or less. You might think this would get monotonous, but the Mayenne river's twists and turns, its bridges, locks and wooded banks, all make for a blissfully enjoyable ride. Abandoned stone mills on lock islands are a particular delight.

The surface is mostly gravelled, and you'll see plenty of other cyclists. Trees have grown up between the river and the towpath, which is not so great for boat-horses but very welcome on a hot day. There are water taps and often WCs at the locks (in the Mayenne department, at least; those in Maine-et-Loire, further on, are less well appointed).

Laval (196km)

Laval's riverfront is still more imposing than Mayenne's, the

chateau flanked by imposing terraces and offset by bridges and viaducts. The often steep-sided river valley means that you'll have a haul up to the town centre, but it's worth it for the narrow streets and medieval buildings behind the chateau. There's a useful railway station on the opposite bank, less well served than it once was since the line to Chateaubriant became another fine *voie verte*.

The Vélo Francette follows the riverside road through the town which can be busy with traffic. It's soon left behind as the river sweeps out of town on its way to Château-Gontier, 35km of rural riding with barely a village to distract you. Again, mileposts mark your progress. Look out for red squirrels on the more wooded sections.

Château Gontier (232km)

Another hilly town with a picture-perfect waterfront and narrow streets – the Mayenne is making a bit of a habit of it. The grand hospital dominates the river in Château Gontier. It's actually quite a small town (population 11,000), so accommodation and services are limited though the restaurants are decent enough. There's a bike shop and information centre on the far bank.

From here the river becomes ever wider, the towpath a little rougher. There are more villages than on the last leg, all very pretty and worth exploring; a few have riverside campsites. Aside from Daon, few have many facilities. There's a short on-road diversion after Chambellay.

Le Lion d'Angers (262km)

Le Lion d'Angers itself is a small market town around 2km off the route, clearly signposted, and a useful stop-off for supplies.

The old mills in the river are achingly picturesque on this stretch. So too is the towpath after Le Lion, carved into the sandstone cliff. It's often so wooded that you can barely see the river through the trees.

Pruillé's halte nautique (river stop for boaters) has a pump and other bike servicing facilities should you need them. The towpath on the entrance to Angers is the roughest yet encountered, necessitating walking pace on occasion.

Angers (288km)

The first of the route's great cities, Angers has much to see and could easily occupy a day of your stay. It is, inevitably, clustered around another mighty chateau, but the city has much more: a fine cathedral, the outstanding Musée des Beaux Arts, countless restaurants and cafés. The Vélo Francette takes a utilitarian route along the far bank, but even if you're on a tight schedule, do venture off-piste, chain your bike up and enjoy a walk around the city.

It's one of those places which is much easier to explore on foot than by bike, not least thanks to the steep climb up from the river. That said, its position on the Vélo Francette and Loire à Vélo routes means that the hoteliers are quite accustomed to cycling patrons.

Loire, did we say...? Yes: this, more or less, is where the Mayenne empties into the Loire. For a while, the route shares its course with the Loire à Vélo, one of the most popular cycle routes in Europe. You can continue downstream to the confluence at Bouchemaine – note that, for some reason lost in the annals of history, the Mayenne is abbreviated to the Maine here. Alternatively, you can cut off a few km by taking a signposted shortcut via Trélazé to pick up the Loire at La Daguenière. The river route is more attractive and we'd recommend it if you have the time.

Les Ponts de Cé (303km)

The last few miles of the Maine are broad enough, but the Loire is something else. The longest river in France, it is wide, shallow and sandbanked, off-limits to pleasure boats but a haven for nature. Its limited navigability means that, unlike the Mayenne, there's no consistent towpath. Instead, the Loire à Vélo route pieces together riverside roads and paths with other lanes through the broad valley. In many places there's a cycle route on both banks of the river – sometimes more than one, offering excursions to the chateaux for which the valley is known.

The Vélo Francette follows the Loire for 50km to Saumur. This first section on the outskirts of Angers is its least interesting, sneaking through residential areas on anodyne streets. But after La Daguenière life starts to get interesting again, twisting and turning along appealing little farm roads until re-emerging onto the river at Saint Mathurin.

Saint Mathurin (323km)

Saint Mathurin has the air of a forgotten river port, one where you can imagine bargemen collapsing into a riverside bar after a day wrestling with the uncertain channels of the Loire. There's a useful supermarket in the town square. Here we cross the bridge onto an enjoyable, fast D road that clings to the riverside on its way to Gennes.

Gennes wins full marks for its bike station, combining repair facilities, tourist info, e-bike charging, water, picnic tables, and even a bar. Here the route splits and you can follow the road on either bank of the river, or a third option a short way 'inland' on the south bank. We prefer the riverside routes for their outstanding views, particularly at the almost-too-perfect village of Chênehutte.

On the approach to Saumur, the route takes an undulating tangent away from the main road to dodge the busy traffic. (If you want to visit the famed caves of this wine-producing area then stay on the D road.)

Saumur (350km)

At Saumur, the route leaves the Loire in favour of one of its tributaries, the Thouet. The historic town is a maze of narrow streets between the two rivers: following the Loire à Vélo route for a short while will take you there.

We might have left the Loire, but we're still very much in the Loire Valley, a flat route passing vineyards on country lanes (and the occasional well-maintained farm track) past vineyards and arable fields. Rural roads make up the majority of the rest of the route to La Rochelle: the traffic is almost always light, the surfaces by and large good.

Montreuil Bellay (368km)

It's not difficult to plan a route through France on appealing quiet roads – there are so many. But choosing the finest towns to visit is a more difficult trick, and one which this part of the Vélo Francette pulls off superbly. Montreuil-Bellay is one such: cycling through the medieval gateway, past the towering 11th century chateau, is one of the most memorable experiences of the route.

Heading south, the route follows tiny lanes and tarmac farm tracks with grass growing down the centre. The route along the Thouet valley means there are no hills to speak of: it's unhurried riding with few villages to interrupt your progress. Look out for the crumbling medieval bridge at Taizon.

Thouars (393km)

Densely wooded lanes close to the riverbank mark the approach to Thouars, a maze-like medieval town where the inevitable château is situated on a loop in the river. From here, as the Thouars valley steepens, the route becomes a little more undulating. It's still almost entirely on country lanes other than a farm track on the approach to Saint G n roux, an idyllic village where the bar opposite the church could prove too tempting on hot days. A modest climb here is rewarded by the downhill into Argentine, as the straggling village and rolling hills open out before you.

Airvault (422km)

By now you may have *ville pittoresque* fatigue – but even by the standards of this route, Airvault is something special. The Augustinian abbey, covered market and timber-framed houses around the central square are a perfect assemblage, and the route takes you right through the heart of it all. Saint Loup, a short way upstream, has a fine ch teau the equal of anything in the Loire valley, more timber-framed houses, and a pretty crossing of the river Thouet.

Shortly afterwards you'll cross a very little-used railway branch line, and it's hard not to escape the suspicion that this is being lined up for conversion to a *voie verte* rail trail before too long. Until then, the route follows the increasingly winding course of the Thouet past the Lac du C bron reservoir. There are few steep climbs but it's a fair amount hillier than anything encountered to date.

Parthenay (458km)

The bustling town of Parthenay is another for your medieval ticklist, nestling in a bend of the Thouet with all modern facilities for the hungry cyclist. The route takes a couple of enjoyable forays onto riverside paths either side of its well-chosen course through the town centre, which follows a narrow medieval street that looks like it was erected for a film set. No wonder Parthenay is known as the "Carcassonne of the West". The road is cobbled, but in true Champs Elys es fashion, there's a concrete strip which you can use for a smoother ride. The Porte Saint Jacques – an ancient gated bridge over the river – isn't formally part of the V lo Francette, but it's literally a few metres' detour and it's a crying shame not to ride it.

The country lanes from here are the hilliest of the whole route, with some longish slogs until you reach the high point of the whole route at Mazi res. It's not exactly mountainous but best tackled when you're fresh, rather than at the end of a long day in the saddle. As you cross the watershed, the Thouet is finally left behind. It's all downhill from here, as the route descends to the S vre Niortaise. Mazi res and Champdeniers can't compete with the attractions of Parthenay but offer useful stops *en route*.

Niort (510km)

Just a cursory glance at the map will reveal the unique character of the Marais ("marsh") Poitevin. It's a rural Venice, a cultivated wetland. Dozens of little creeks through woodland form a dense network that you can explore by rowboat – or, failing that, on the well-chosen (if tortuous) V lo Francette route connecting the little water villages by forest tracks and tiny roads.

Before that, there's Niort, with a particularly sturdy castle erected by (English) King Henry II and an attractive pedestrianised town centre. But better to spend your time, we think, lingering on the little lanes of the Marais Poitevin. Consider a detour to Coulon, just a few km off the route, on the main channel of the S vre Niortaise. It's considered the capital of this part of the Marais Poitevin, with a particularly charming riverside cluttered with rowboats for hire.

Damvix (546km)

The western part of the Marais Poitevin has a different character. Here, the marsh was drained to form pastureland. The resulting landscape is not a million miles away from the Low Countries or England's eastern Fenlands.

Our route traverses it by means of the S vre Niortaise, the towpath having been upgraded into tiny (and, at times, erratically surfaced) tarmac roads. Occasional canals cut out some of the more egregious meanders in the river. Damvix and Marans are both historic port villages where leisure boating is now the order of the day.

Marans (572km)

The approach to Marans follows the cobbled quayside where dozens of little motorboats are tied up to the banks. We may not quite be at the coast yet, but the town has a marked maritime air. Sitting at a canalside caf  on a sunny afternoon is a very civilised way to pause your ride!

Here, we join EuroVelo route 1, the Atlantic Coast Route, marketed in France as the V lodys e. That said, the route doesn't approach the coast until its climax at La Rochelle. Instead, it heads south following an arrow-straight canal, which finally swings towards the coast at the misleadingly named Dompierre-sur-Mer (which isn't on the sea at all). The route is part minor road, part gravel track, but the latter are in good condition throughout.

La Rochelle (599km)

600km after Ouistreham, we finally reach the Atlantic at La Rochelle. A high-quality cycleway runs alongside the canal for the final approach, from where a short passage on city streets takes us to the historic port – where two mighty stone towers stand guard over a clutter of colourful sailing craft. It's one of Europe's most imposing harbours, and as the Atlantic stretches out beyond you, a fitting end to an epic journey.

End? Did we say end? Well... you could always take an extra day to cycle the wonderful Ile de R , an offshore cycling paradise just a few miles away (see the enticing route guide at Freewheeling France). Or maybe continue down the coast towards Bordeaux, Biarritz and Spain. Too much choice...































