

DAY 4 – Loire Valley Landscapes & Living History

Saturday, November 8, 2025

A leisurely French start

Saturday dawned slow and sweet—proof that weekend mornings in the Loire are for savouring, not sprinting. After a late breakfast in our Art Deco dining room, we met our driver, Jérôme, and his impeccably clean coach—his very first day driving for an OAT group.

Conversations en route

- Market morning – We passed the weekly market just as stalls were waking up, a few umbrellas opening to reveal their first crates of apples and pumpkins—a scene straight out of a country painting.
- Hitting the autoroute – We glided onto the A-route network, 80% of which is run by private-public concessions such as VINCI. Cars pay about €12 per 100 km, ticket-style, and the blissfully smooth pavement rewards the toll. Cruising speed is 130 km/h—trimmed to 110 km/h if the skies drizzle.
- Wine & resilience – Gwen shared an overview of the Loire Valley's wines—Chenin Blanc, Sauvignon Blanc, and Cabernet Franc—and the phylloxera crisis that nearly wiped them out between 1863 and 1890. The tiny vine pest devastated France's vineyards, forcing growers to adapt, graft, and reinvent their craft—proof that resilience can be as deep-rooted as the vines themselves.
- Troglodytes & tradition – As we entered the limestone heartland, cliffs appeared, riddled with troglodyte dwellings—once family homes, later turned wine cellars, and eventually used for the slow oven-baking of poires et pommes tapées: apples and pears dried flat by hand in centuries-old kilns.

Arrival in Villandry – stone, gardens, and rebirth

We met our guide Sarah beneath the pristine white façade of Château de Villandry, built in 1532 for Jean le Breton, finance minister to François I. Abandoned for decades, it was lovingly revived in 1906 by Joachim Carvallo and his American wife Ann Coleman, who restored both house and gardens. Their descendants still live here today.

Inside, Sarah led us through rooms where parquet patterns shift from salon to salon—a woodworker's love letter to geometry. We admired Hispano-Moorish ceilings, portraits of former residents, and early 20th-century innovations discreetly blended into Renaissance style.

The gardens: order, color, romance

From the upper balcony, the Ornamental Kitchen Garden stretched before us like an embroidered tapestry—nine vegetable squares framed in boxwood and replanted each season.

- Edible beauty – The estate produces around 40 tons of vegetables a year, with surplus donated to local charities and green waste turned into compost.

- The Love Garden – Its four parterres symbolize tender, passionate, fickle, and tragic love—an intricate floral allegory that had us all debating which matched which.

We wandered freely through the Water Garden’s calm pools, the Herb Garden’s aromatic paths, and the quiet corners designed for contemplation before gathering for lunch at La Douce Terrasse, where we enjoyed a relaxed, local meal:

- Main course – baked cod, chicken parcels, or a hearty salad
- Dessert – sorbet or fresh fruit salad

From château chic to country charm

After lunch, we sampled local apples—crisp, fragrant, and full of that unmistakable autumn sweetness—before heading back on the road toward Bouchemaine.

Musical digestif on the road

To accompany the gentle light of late afternoon, Gwen shared a short playlist of French classics capturing the spirit of the day:

🎵 Douce France – Charles Trenet

A nostalgic hymn to “Sweet France,” echoing the softness, gratitude, and beauty in the everyday landscapes we’d just explored.

🎵 Padam Padam – Edith Piaf (Pink Martini version)

The rhythm of a beating heart, reminding us that travel memories often echo long after the journey ends.

🎵 Mistral Gagnant – Renaud

A tender ballad on childhood and fleeting joy—a reminder to savour simple pleasures, like apples, laughter, and time shared on the road.

Bouchemaine – where two rivers meet

Our day ended in Bouchemaine, where the Maine meets the Loire. Gwen explained the difference between a rivière (a river that flows into another river) and a fleuve (one that flows into the sea)—a poetic touch of French geography.

There, at the local Boule de Fort clubhouse, we were warmly welcomed by Bernard, Christophe, Bob, and Bob—four seasoned players with twinkling eyes and a competitive streak. They showed us how this UNESCO-listed indoor sport, played in socks on a curved lane, is equal parts precision, patience, and playfulness.

To everyone’s delight, Isabelle, our former OAT driver now happily retired and living nearby, joined the fun—proof that good connections never quite fade. There were cheers, teasing, and gentle “cheating,” all in the spirit of camaraderie and douceur angevine.

The evening – connection & contentment

Back in Angers, some chose brasseries, others a quiet apéro near the hotel. Conversations flowed easily, the laughter familiar now. As the lights of Angers glimmered over the Maine, we returned to our rooms, hearts light and content after another full day of discovery. Tomorrow, we turn south toward new

horizons—but tonight, we rest in the glow of a day well lived.

Bonne nuit, et à demain.