

EXCURSIONS

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Strike out into the Île de France (literally ‘Island of France’), the romantically named 12,000-sq-km area around Paris. Framed by five rivers and rich in fairytale chateaux, breathtaking cathedrals and forest rife with game, it was here that the seed of the kingdom of France was sown in 1100.

Some day trips are obvious: **Versailles** (below), with its palace and equestrian academy, and **Fontainebleau** (p368), the other fabled chateau, are little more than half an hour away. Those who hate crowds should consider art-rich **Chantilly** (p373) with its heavenly stables, gardens and woodlands, or lesser-known **Vaux-le-Vicomte** (p372), created by the same architect who designed Versailles.

The other quick-flit heavyweight is **Chartres** (p377) and its cathedral, one of Western architecture’s greatest achievements with its mesmerising medieval stained glass. Art lovers will find **Giverny** (p381), with the pink-and-green house and flower-filled garden lived in and painted by Monet from 1883 to 1926, equally inspiring. Strangely moving is **Auvers-sur-Oise** (p382), the place where van Gogh painted like mad for two months before dying in the bedroom of a cheap inn from a self-inflicted bullet wound: both painter shrines take little over an hour to get to. Then there’s Champagne’s gourmet tipple, **Reims** (p386).

Light relief (from serious art and architecture, not crowds) comes in the frenetic form of **Disneyland Resort Paris** (p384). The pricey theme park with painfully long queues might not be everyone’s *tasse de thé* (cup of tea), but the fact that twice as many people visit Disneyland Paris – 14.5 million in 2007 – as visit the Eiffel Tower says something. Nearer Paris, **Parc Astérix** (p385) is a fractionally quieter, home-grown alternative to the American theme park.

INFORMATION

In Paris visit a tourist office (p411) or the **Espace du Tourisme d’Île de France** (Map pp2–3; ☎ 01 44 50 19 98; www.pidf.com; Galerie du Carrousel du Louvre; 99 rue de Rivoli, 1er; ☎ 10am–6pm; M Palais Royal-Musée du Louvre).

Gem up on exactly where you’re going with IGN’s *Île de France* (1:25,000; €5.20) or its more compact *Paris et Ses Environs* (1:100,000; €3.90), sold at book and map shops (p198).

ORGANISED TOURS

Pressed for time or don’t want to do it alone? Hop on an air-conditioned coach:

Cityrama (Map pp2–3; ☎ 01 44 55 61 00; www.pariscityrama.com; 2 rue des Pyramides, 1er; M Tuileries) Half-day trips to Versailles (€45 to €62) or Chartres (€56); day trips combining Reims and Champagne vineyards (€147),

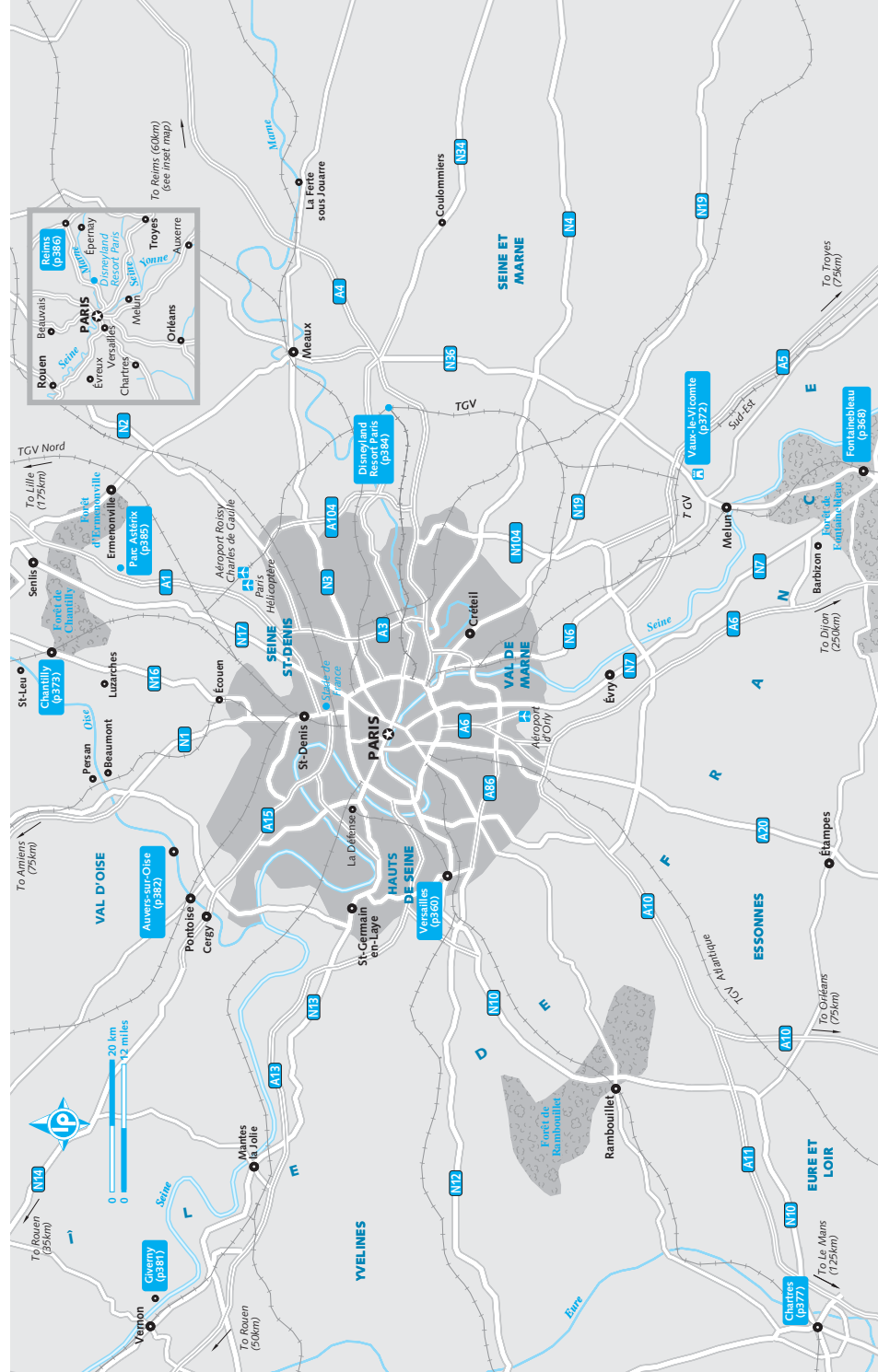
Versailles apartments with Chartres (€99) or Fontainebleau (€105), and Giverny with Auvers-sur-Oise (€109).

Paris Vision (Map pp2–3; ☎ 01 42 60 30 01; www.parisvision.com; 214 rue de Rivoli, 1er, M Tuileries) Half-/day trips to Versailles or Giverny (€42/102 to €116), or Giverny and Versailles combined (€64/119). Many more including Champagne (€162), Disneyland (€79) and Astérix (€64). Coaches depart from its rue de Rivoli branch.

VERSAILLES

Seven hundred rooms, 67 staircases, 352 chimneys, 2153 windows, 6300 paintings, 2100 sculptures and statues, 15,000 engravings, 5000 decorative art objects and furnishings, 4.7 million chateau visitors annually: no wonder visiting France’s most famous, grandest palace can be overwhelming. Six days a week (the chateau is shut Monday) tourist madness consumes the prosperous, leafy and bourgeois suburb of Versailles (population 85,300), political capital and seat of the royal court from 1682 until 1789, when Revolutionary mobs massacred the palace guard and dragged Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette back to Paris to eventually lop off their heads.

It was during the reign of Sun King Louis XIV (1643–1715) that **Château de Versailles** (☎ 0 810 811 614; www.chateauversailles.fr; palace ticket adult/under 18yr €13.50/free, from 4pm/3pm in low/high season €10/



DAY TRIP PLANNER

In true French fashion, even the biggest of sights shut one day a week. Note the following when planning your week:

- Monday – Château de Versailles (right), Auvers-sur-Oise’s van Gogh sights (p382) and Monet’s house in Giverny (p381) all shut.
- Tuesday – Château de Fontainebleau (p368) and Château d’Auvers (p382) both shut.

free, Passeport sold until 3pm adult/under 18yr €20/free Tue-Fri & €25/free Sat & Sun Apr-Oct, €16/free Nov-Mar; ☎ 9am-6.30pm Tue-Sun Apr-Oct, 9am-5.30pm Tue-Sun Nov-Mar) was built. The basic palace ticket and more elaborate Passeport both include an English-language audioguide and allow visitors to freely visit the palace's state apartments, chapel, the Dauphin's apartments and various galleries. The Passeport additionally gets you into the Grand Trianon and, in high season, the Grandes Eaux Musicales fountain displays. Enter the palace through Entrée A with a palace ticket; Entrée C with a Passeport.

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TGV CITY ESCAPES

It costs, but if you're prepared to pay the pricey fare (the only downside of France's otherwise impeccable, super-speedy rail service; see p395), France is your oyster as far as fitting elsewhere for a day or weekend goes. Our top five urban flits:

- **Lille** (www.lille-tourism.com; €75-105 return; 1hr from Paris Gare du Nord) Lively Lille with its strong Flemish flavour, stylish shopping and student-driven nightlife, abuts Belgium. Hot date: first weekend in September during the mussel extravaganza, Braderie de Lille.
- **Lyon** (www.lyon-france.com; €122-126 return, 2hr from Paris Gare de Lyon) Don't tell Parisians, but France's second-largest city is its true gastronomic capital. Wonderful museums, Roman relics, a thriving cultural scene, magnificent markets and fabulous dining make Lyon a cultured must. Avoid August, when everything is shut.
- **Marseille** (www.marseille-tourisme.com; €191-266 return, 3hr from Paris Gare de Montparnasse) Raining in Paris, *again*? To cheer soggy spirits nothing beats watching the Mediterranean sun sink for another day over *pastis* (the local aniseed-flavoured aperitif) and *bouillabaisse* at Marseille's Vieux Port.
- **Rennes** (www.ville-rennes.fr; €104 return, 2hr from Paris Gare de Montparnasse) *Crêperies*, churches and half-timbered houses are the sweet lure of this picturesque old city, a university town and capital of Brittany.
- **Tours** (www.ligeris.com; €80 return, 1¼hr from Paris Gare de Montparnasse & Gare d'Austerlitz) It's not so much Tours – great cafés, buzzing bar life – as the mighty Loire Valley chateaux that can be reached from it. Essential viewing: Chenonceau and Chambord.

Intended to house his court of 6000 people, the sheer scale and décor of Versailles reflected not only the absolute power of the French monarchy but also Louis XIV's taste for profligate luxury and appetite for self-glorification. He hired four talented men to take on the gargantuan task: architect Louis Le Vau; Jules Hardouin-Mansart, who took over from Le Vau in the mid-1670s; painter and interior designer Charles Le Brun; and landscape designer André Le Nôtre, under whom entire hills were flattened, marshes drained and forests moved to create the seemingly endless gardens, ponds and fountains for which Versailles is so well known.

The vast chateau complex – get a map from the tourist office – divides into four main sections: the 580m-long palace building with its innumerable wings, halls and bedchambers and the King's and Queen's State Apartments; the vast gardens, canals and pools to the west of the palace; two smaller palaces known as the Grand Trianon and the Petit Trianon; and the Hameau de la Reine (Queen's Hamlet). Few alterations have been made to the chateau since its construction, bar most of the interior furnishings disappearing during the Revolution and many of the rooms being rebuilt by Louis-Philippe (r 1830-48), who opened part of the chateau to the public in 1837. The current €370 million restoration programme is the most ambitious yet and until it's completed in 2020 a part of the palace is likely to be clad in scaffolding when you visit. Families with babies and young children should note that pushchairs (prams), even folded, are not allowed inside the palace and tots under one must be contained in a sling.

Luxurious and ostentatious appointments – frescoes, marble, gilt and woodcarvings, with themes and symbols drawn from Greek and Roman mythology – ooze from every last moulding, cornice, ceiling and door in the palace's **Grands Appartements du Roi et de la Reine** (King's and Queen's State Apartments). But the opulence peaks in its shimmering, sparkling, amazing (insufficient superlatives for this one) recently restored **Galerie des Glaces** (Hall of Mirrors). This 75m-long ballroom with 17 giant mirrors one side and an equal number of windows the other has to be seen to be believed.

History and/or art buffs keen to delve deeper into life at court, music, Louis XV and XI's private apartments and so on can sign up for an informative **lecture tour** (☎ 0 810 811 614; adult with/without palace ticket, Passeport or ticket

to the **Domaine de Marie-Antoinette** €7.50/14.50, under 18yr €5.50; ☎ 9.45am-3.45pm Tue-Sun), some in English, at the main ticket office.

Château de Versailles gardens & park (Château de Versailles; admission free except Sat & Sun Apr-Oct during the Grandes Eaux Musicales; ☎ 8.30am-8.30pm Apr-Oct, 8am-6pm Nov-Mar) are vast and the only way to see it all is to hire a four-person **electric car** (per hr €28; drivers must be over 23 and show their driver's licence); hop aboard the **train shuttle** (☎ 01 39 54 22 00; www.train-versailles.com; adult/11-18yr €6/4.50), which stops at the Petit Trianon, Grand Trianon and Grand Canal; or **rent a bike** (per hr €6, half-/full day €13.50/15) from the kiosk at the eastern end of the Grand Canal or next to the Grille de la Reine garden entrance.

The Hall of Mirrors peeps over part of the palace **gardens**, laid out in the formal French style between 1661 and 1700. Famed for their geometrically aligned terraces, flowerbeds, tree-lined paths, ponds and fountains, they are studded with 400 marble, bronze and lead statues sculpted by the most talented sculptors of the period – winter visitors won't get to see them, as these are covered at this time of year. Meandering, sheltered paths snake through the more pastoral English-style **Jardins du Petit Trianon**.

The gardens' largest fountains are the 17th-century **Bassin de Neptune** (Neptune's Fountain), a dazzling mirage of 99 spouting fountains 300m north of the palace, and the **Bassin d'Apollon** (Apollo's Fountain), built in 1668 at the eastern end of the Grand Canal. The straight side of the Bassin de Neptune abuts a small, round pond graced by a winged dragon. Emerging from the water in the centre of the Bassin d'Apollon is Apollo's chariot, pulled by rearing horses. A truly magical, must-experience are the **Grandes Eaux Musicales** (Château de Versailles; adult/11-18yr/under 10yr €7/5.50/free; ☎ 11am-noon & 3.30-5.30pm Sat & Sun Apr-Sep) and **Grandes Eaux Nocturnes** (Château de Versailles; adult/11-18yr/under 10yr €7/5.50/free; ☎ 9.30-11.30pm Sat & Sun Jul & Aug) fountain displays set to the sweet tones of baroque and classical composers throughout the grounds in summer. The grand finale of these fabulous fountain dances to soul-stirring classical music sees the Bassin de Neptune flow for 10 minutes from 5.20pm. Set the soul stirring still further with the fountains' fabulous summertime performances at night! Brilliantly lit, it is a performance to remember. Reserve tickets in advance at the **Billetterie Spectacle** (☎ 01 30 83 78 89; www.chateauversaillespectacles.fr; place d'Armes; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun Apr–mid-Sep) in front of the

TRANSPORT: VERSAILLES

Distance from Paris 21km

Direction Southwest

Travel time 35 minutes by RER/train

Car A13 from Porte de St-Cloud, exit 'Versailles Château'

Bus 171 (€1.40 or one metro/bus ticket) from the Pont de Sèvres (15e) metro station to place d'Armes every six to nine minutes 5am to midnight

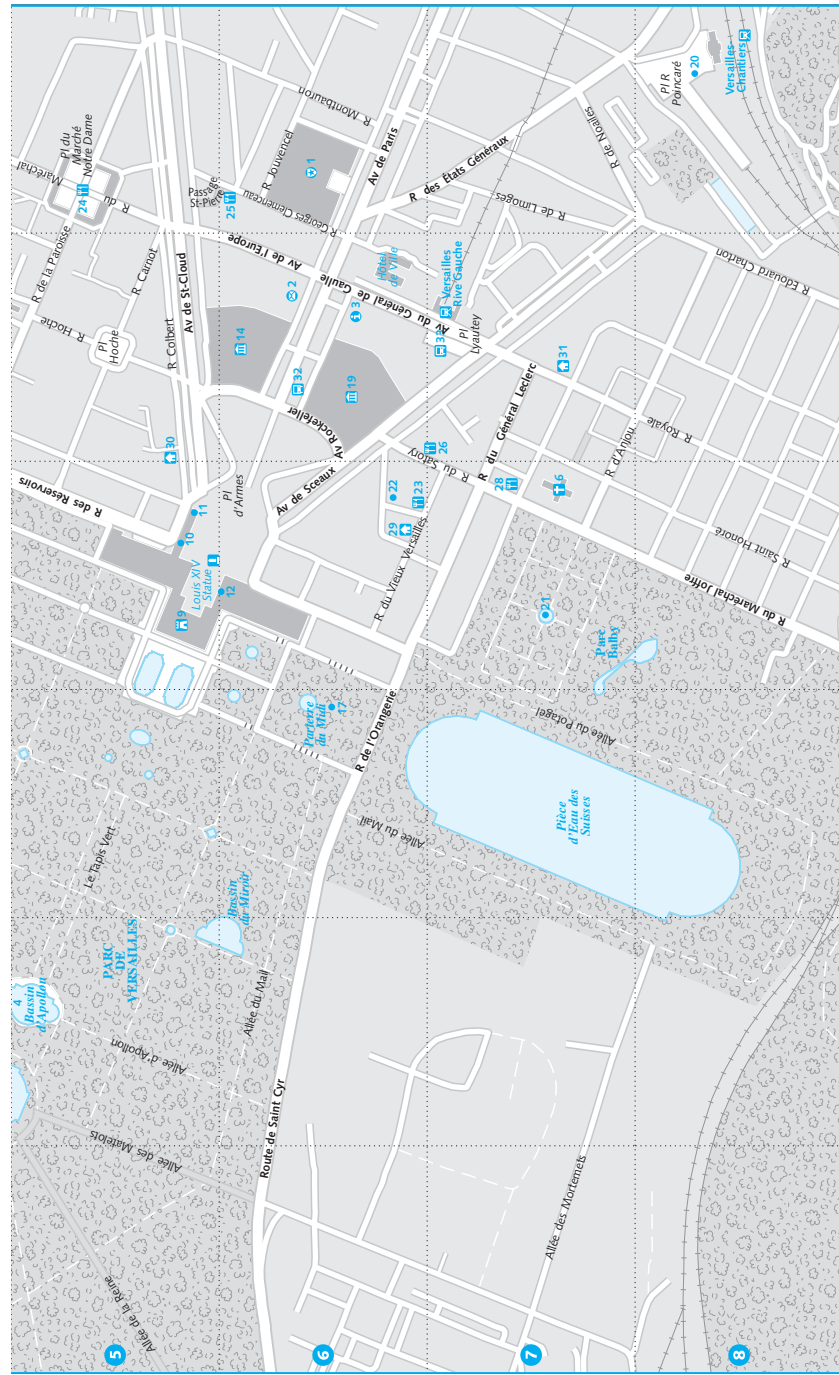
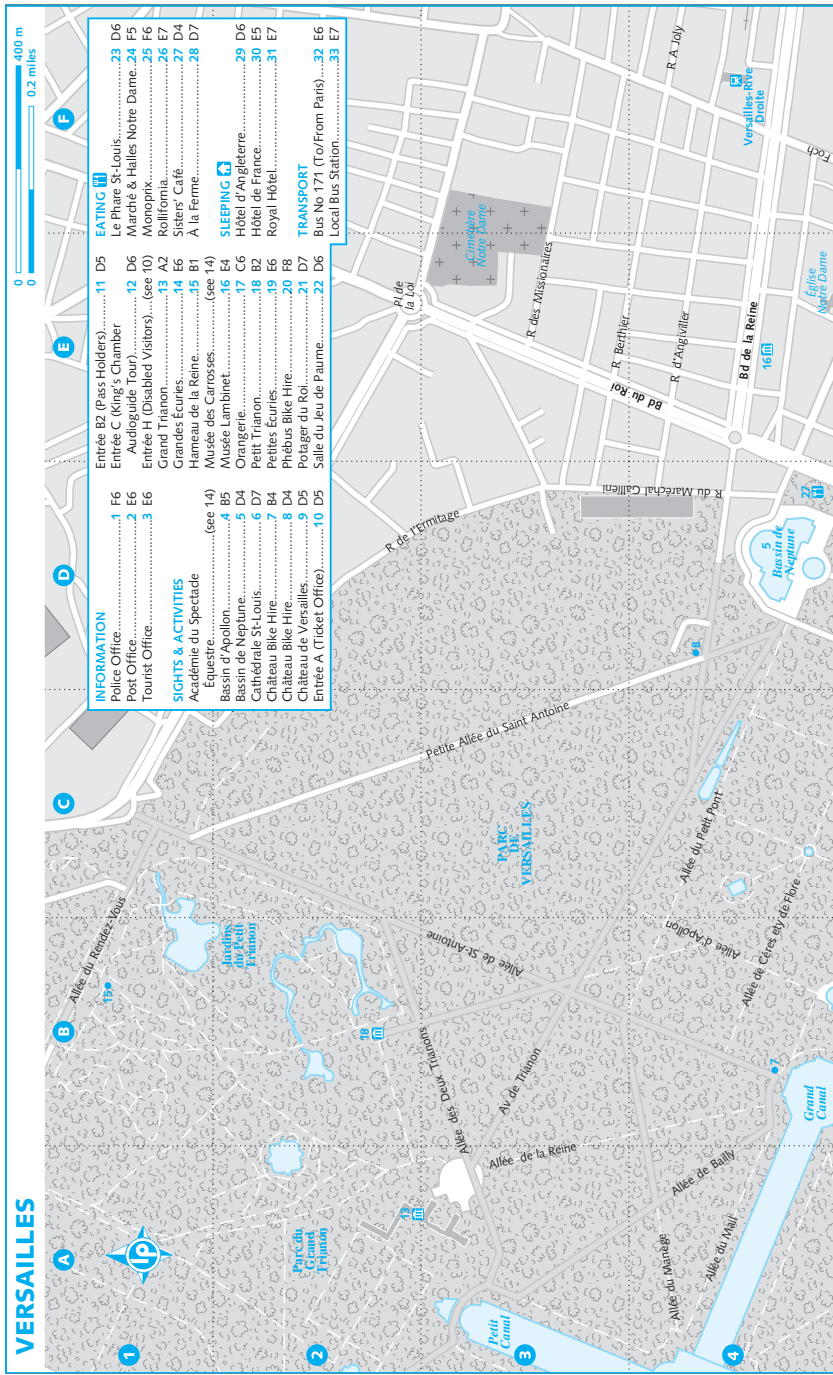
RER train Fastest way: the RER line C5 (€2.80) from Paris' Left Bank RER stations to Versailles-Rive Gauche station is 700m southeast of the chateau; trains run every 15 minutes until shortly before midnight. Less convenient: RER line C8 (€2.80) stops at Versailles-Chantiers station, a 1.3km walk from the chateau.

SNCF train From Paris' Gare St-Lazare (€2.80) SNCF operates 70-odd trains a day to Versailles-Rive Droite, 1.2km from the chateau. Versailles-Chantiers is likewise served by half-hourly SNCF trains daily from Gare Montparnasse (€2.80); trains on this line continue to Chartres (€10.90, 45 to 60 minutes). An SNCF package (*forfait loisir*) covering Paris metro, return train journey to/from Versailles and chateau admission costs €19.20.

chateau or on the same day directly at garden entrances.

The **Grand Canal**, 1.6km long and 62m wide, is oriented to reflect the setting sun and is traversed by the 1km-long **Petit Canal**, thus forming a cross-shaped body of water with a perimeter of over 5.5km. Louis XIV used to hold boating parties here. In summer you can paddle around the Grand Canal in four-person **rowing boats**; the dock is at the canal's eastern end. The **Orangerie**, built below the Parterre du Midi (a flowerbed) on the southwestern side of the palace, houses exotic plants in winter.

In the middle of the vast 90-hectare park, about 1.5km northwest of the main palace, is the **Domaine de Marie-Antoinette** (Marie-Antoinette's Estate; Château de Versailles; adult/adult after 5pm/under 18yr €9/5/free Apr-Oct, adult/under 18yr €5/free Nov-Mar; ☎ noon-6.30pm Apr-Oct, noon-5.30pm Nov-Mar). High-season tickets cover admission to the Grand Trianon, the Hameau de la Reine, Marie-Antoinette's dairy, theatre, English garden and so on; low-season tickets only cover the Grand Trianon and Petit Trianon gardens, which, notably, are both free on the first Sunday of the month from November to March. The



pink-colonnaded **Grand Trianon** was built here in 1687 for Louis XIV and his family as a place of escape from the rigid etiquette of the court. Napoleon I had it renovated in the Empire style. The ochre-coloured **Petit Trianon** (closed until summer 2008), dating to the 1760s, was redecorated in 1867 by consort of Napoleon III, Empress Eugénie, who added Louis XVI-style furnishings. A little further north on the estate is the **Hameau de la Reine**, a mock village of thatched cottages constructed from 1775 to 1784 for the amusement of Marie-Antoinette, who played milkmaid here.

Given the park is so vast, the only way of seeing it all to hire a four-person **electric car** (per hr €28); drivers must be over 23 and show their driver's licence); hop aboard the **train shuttle** (☎ 01 39 54 22 00; www.train-versailles.com; adult/11-18yr €6/4.50), which stops at the Petit Trianon, Grand Trianon and Grand Canal; or rent a **bike**

top picks

TO MAKE VERSAILLES VISITS LESS HELLISH

- To avoid disappointment, resign yourself to queuing for everything, be it tickets for the chateau and getting into it (two vastly different things), renting an electric car or taking a pee in the public toilets.
- It can't be stressed enough: buy your chateau ticket in advance of stepping foot in Versailles – online (www.chateauversailles.fr), from a branch of FNAC (p302) or any SNCF train station/office (see p395).
- Should you arrive in Versailles ticket-less, bulldoze straight to the tourist office to buy a **Passoport** (p360), which allows you to enter the palace through Entrée C (rather than Entrée A, where queues are always longer).
- By noon both queues spiral out of control: visit the palace first thing in the morning or after 4pm; avoid Tuesday and Sunday, its busiest days.
- Save money by downloading **Château de Versailles** podcasts and other digital content before departure from www.podcast.chateauversailles.fr.
- Don't miss the show! Tickets for the **Grandes Eaux Musicales** (p363) and **Grandes Eaux Nocturnes** (p363) can be like gold dust in high season. Gem up on what's on and reserve your seat by telephone or online (☎ 01 30 83 78 89; www.chateauversaillespectacles.fr). Advance reservations are even more imperative for Bartabas' masterful equestrian displays (right).

(per hr €6, half-full day €13.50/15) from the kiosk at the eastern end of the Grand Canal or next to the Grille de la Reine garden entrance.

The attractive town of Versailles criss-crossed by wide boulevards is another Louis XIV creation. In the late 17th century the three wide thoroughfares that fan out eastwards from place d'Armes in front of the chateau – av de St-Cloud, av de Paris and av de Sceaux – were separated by two vast stable blocks. Versailles' celebrated school of architecture fills the **Petites Écuries** (Little Stables) today; but it is to the **Grandes Écuries** (Big Stables) – stage to the prestigious **Académie du Spectacle Équestre** (Academy of Equestrian Arts; ☎ 01 39 02 07 14, advance ticket reservations 08 92 68 191; www.acadequestre.fr, online tickets http://acadequestre.fnac.spectacles.com, in French; Grandes Écuries, 1 av Rockefeller; Les Matinales (morning training sessions) adult/under 18yr €9.50/6.50; ☎ 10.30am & 11.15am Sat & Sun, additional days during school holidays) – that the crowds dash. In addition to its 45-minute morning training sessions, the academy presents spectacular **Reprises Musicales** (musical equestrian shows; adult/12-18yr/under 12yr €25/21/16; ☎ 6pm Sat, 3pm Sun & 3pm some Thu), for which tickets sell out weeks in advance; call for information and reservations. Training sessions and shows include a stable visit. For more information, see the boxed text, opposite.

Nearby, the **Salle du Jeu de Paume** (Royal Tennis Court Room; ☎ 01 30 83 77 88; 1 rue du Jeu de Paume; admission free; ☎ 12.30-6.30pm Sat & Sun Apr-Oct) was built in 1686 and played a pivotal role in the Revolution a century later. It was in Versailles that Louis XVI convened the États-Généraux made up of over 1000 deputies representing the nobility, clergy and the so-called third estate (ie the middle classes) in May 1789 in a bid to deal with national debt and to moderate dissent by reforming the tax system. But when the third estate's reps were denied entry, they met separately on the tennis court, formed a National Assembly and took the famous **Serment du Jeu de Paume** (Tennis Court Oath), swearing not to dissolve it until Louis XVI had accepted a new constitution. This act of defiance sparked demonstrations of support and, less than a month later, a mob in Paris stormed the prison at Bastille.

South, behind a stone wall, slumbers the **Potager du Roi** (King's Kitchen Garden; ☎ 01 39 24 62 62; www.potager-du-roi.fr, in French; 10 rue du Maréchal Joffre; adult weekday/weekend €4.50/6.50, 6-18yr €3 Apr-Oct, admission all Nov-Mar €3; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun Apr-Oct, 10am-6pm Tue & Thu, 10am-1pm Sat Nov-Mar), laid out

MASTER OF CEREMONY

The press might well portray him as an impulsive bad boy when it comes to rampaging local government offices, demanding increased subsidies for his equestrian school (as was the case in December 2007). But in the ring Bartabas – passionate, highly respected horse trainer, choreographer and film director of world renown – is the master of his own exquisitely orchestrated ceremony.

'Bartabas is the founder, artistic director and teacher of the Academy. His philosophy is to develop a great artistic direction in all its forms in each rider, to give that rider sufficient autonomy to train, care and respect the horses,' explains academy equerry and teaching assistant Laure Guillaume. 'He is the heart of the academy – nothing is undertaken without his support.'

Each day in the red-brick vaulted stables at Versailles (built in 1693 to house King Louis XIV's 600 horses), some 15 *équeries* of Bartabas' Academy of Equestrian Art (*Académie du Spectacle Équestre*) are put through their paces. Students train for three years in song, dance, artistic fencing, plastic arts and *kyudo* (Japanese archery) before becoming an *écuyer titulaire* (qualified rider) – of which there are currently just five. Indeed, in the chandelier-lit ring during Les Matinales, Laure (b 1970), with the academy since 1991, looks like she's stepped right out of an equestrian painting. Wearing a pale-green riding jacket with ornately trimmed cuff beneath a dark-green wool cape with fur collar, this poised horsewoman with perfect chignon and enviably high cheekbones cuts a dashing figure.

'The hardest thing at the academy is to go from a course in riding to singing, then *kyudo* – it requires an enormous amount of concentration, but you quickly adapt,' Laure says, adding that riders work six days a week, with weekends being devoted to Bartabas' signature spellbinding *spectacles* (shows).

Most of the 40 mounts – Pas de Deux, Treize et Trois, Kimono, Nord and Dali to name a few – are of the same chalk-coloured, blue-eyed Lusitanian breed kept by Louis XIV. The stubbier zebra-styled horses who gallop dramatically towards audiences during the morning training sessions to the sound of baroque music are Argentine Criollos – the hardy traditional mount of the South American cowboy and polo player. Champagne is a short stocky Quarter Horse, Edwin a thoroughbred Arab, and the six in the well-bred cavalry named after solar system planets are Sorayas.

'Horses are selected according to their race, colour and aptitudes: Lusitanians are excellent in dressage, and Criollos, very handy and fast, are used for artistic fencing,' explains Laure. 'Certain horses are also selected sur *un coup de cœur* (on love at first sight),' she adds. For riders, the academy must be more than just a school or a job: 'Riders are recruited on equestrian ability, which must be very high, and also for their desire to make the Academy their life's philosophy.'

Bartabas was first noticed during his teens in the late 1970s at Avignon's fringe theatre festival, Off. He went on to form his own equestrian theatre, aptly called Zingaro ('gitan' or 'gypsy' in Italian), and established the academy at Versailles in 2003 to both safeguard and dispel his art.

on 9 hectares of land in the late 17th century to meet the enormous catering requirements of the court. It retains its original patch divisions and many old apple and pear orchards, producing 70 tonnes of vegetables and fruit a year.

In the same *quartier*, one of Versailles' prettiest, is the neoclassical **Cathédrale St-Louis** (☎ 01 39 50 40 65; 4 place St-Louis; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 2-7.45pm), a harmonious if austere work built between 1743 and 1754, and made a cathedral in 1802. It is known for its 3636-pipe Cliquot organ and is decorated with some interesting paintings and stained-glass panels. To the northeast of the chateau just around the corner from the Versailles-Rive Droite train station, and housed in a lovely 18th-century residence, the **Musée Lambinet** (Lambinet Museum; ☎ 01 39 50 32; www.musee-lambinet.fr; 54 Blvd de la Reine; adult/child €5.30/2.50, 1st Sun of the month free; ☎ 2-6pm Tue, Thu, Sat & Sun, 1-6pm Wed, 2-5pm Fri) displays 18th-century furnishings (ceramics, sculpture, paintings

and furniture) and objects connected with the history of Versailles, including the all-important Revolutionary period.

INFORMATION

Post Office (av de Paris)

Tourist Office (☎ 01 39 24 88 88; www.versailles-tourisme.com; 2bis av de Paris, Versailles; ☎ 9am-7pm Tue-Sun, 10am-6pm Mon Apr-Sep, 9am-6pm Tue-Sat, 11am-5pm Sun & Mon Oct-Mar) Sells the **Passoport** (p360) to Château de Versailles, a detailed visitor's guide (€8.50) and also an IGN walking map of the area (€9.50).

EATING

Rue Satory is lined with restaurants serving cuisine from everywhere, including Indian, Chinese, Lebanese, Tunisian and Japanese included.

Rollifornia (☎ 01 39 50 67 61; rollifornia@hotmail.fr; 9 rue du Satory; lunch menus €10; ☎ lunch & dinner to 10.30pm) The dynamic choice of Versailles' sometimes stuffy dining scene: this young funky Korean

quick-eat joint with designer pea-green and white interior cooks up California rolls stuffed with imaginative combos.

Sisters' Café (☎ 01 30 21 21 22; 15 rue des Réservoirs; menus €10-15; 🍴 lunch & dinner to 11pm Mon-Sat, noon-11pm Sun) Another break with French tradition, this relaxed 1950s-styled space cooks up club sandwiches, chicken fajitas, spinach salads and great weekend brunches. Mustard and ketchup (tomato sauce) are table standards.

Le Phare St-Louis (☎ 01 39 53 40 12; 33 rue du Vieux Versailles; menus €11-16; 🍴 lunch & dinner to 11pm) This cosy Breton place heaves. Pick from 15 savoury *galettes* (buckwheat pancakes; €6.70 to €8) and 40-odd different sweet *crêpes*, including the Vieux Versailles (€5.60) topped with redcurrant jelly, pear and ice cream then set ablaze with Grand Marnier.

À La Ferme (☎ 01 39 53 10 81; 3 rue du Maréchal Joffre; starters/mains €6/14, menus €17.50 & €21.80; 🍴 lunch & dinner to 11pm Wed-Sun) Cow-hind seeds and rustic garlands strung from old wood beams add a country air to 'At the Farm', temple to grilled meats and cuisine from southwest France.

For picnic supplies:

Marché & Halles Notre Dame (place du Marché Notre Dame; inside 🍴 7am-1pm & 3.30-7pm Tue-Sat, outside 🍴 7.30am-2pm Tue, Fri & Sun) Indoor and outdoor food market.

Monoprix (9 rue Georges Clemenceau)

SLEEPING

Hôtel De France (☎ 01 30 83 92 23; www.hotel-france-versailles.com; 5 rue Colbert; s/d/tr €137/141/174) If you're going to stay in this regal town, you may as well go the whole hog and plump for a canopied bed and floral bedspread in a three-star 18th-century townhouse. It's old, old-fashioned and across from the chateau.

Royal Hôtel (☎ 01 39 50 67 31; www.royalhotelversailles.com; 23 rue Royale; d €58-69, tr/q €92/110) In the delightful St-Louis neighbourhood, this 35-room hotel displays character and a fondness for patterned wallpaper. The smallest rooms mix bulk furnishings with old-fashioned touches and there are self-catering studios for keen cooks.

Hôtel d'Angleterre (☎ 01 39 51 43 50; www.hotel-angleterre-versailles.com; 2bis rue de Fontenay; d €50-88, ste €120) On a quiet street away from the chateau mayhem sits this good-value 18-room hotel – look for the burnt-copper canopy above the entrance. The cheapest rooms only have a shower; rooms 15 and 23 are family friendly.

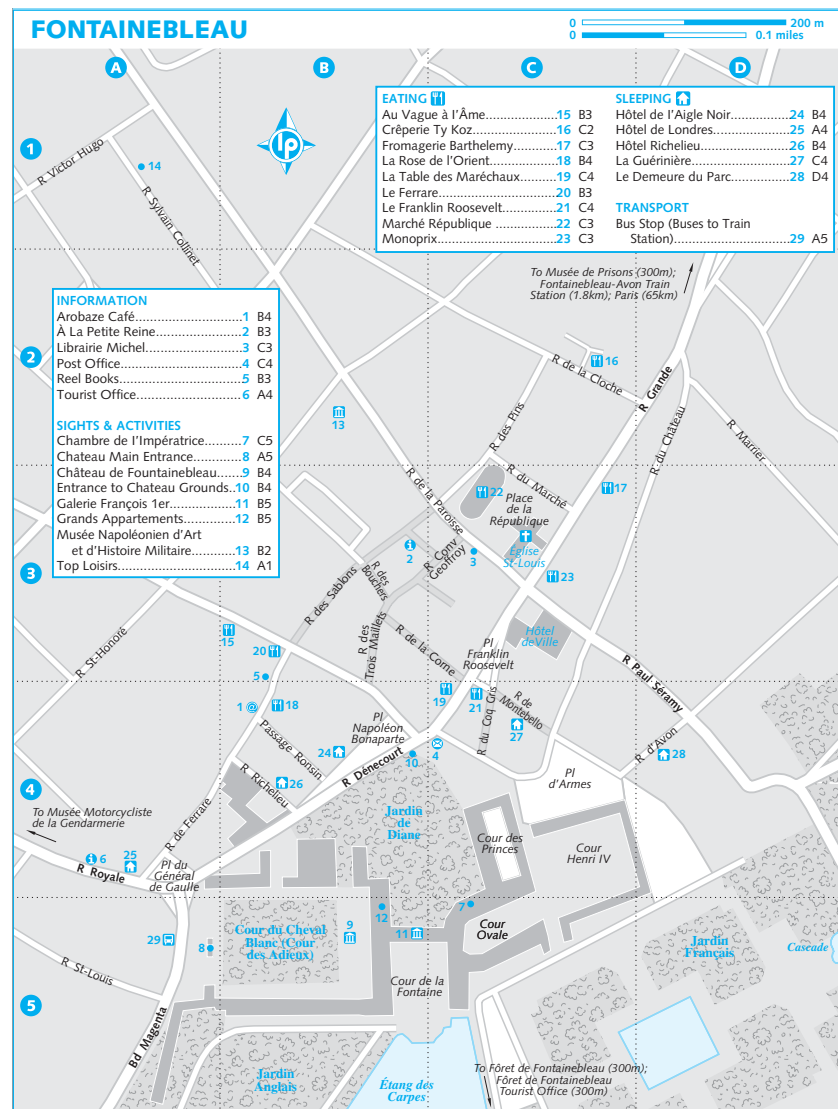
FONTAINEBLEAU

The smart town of Fontainebleau (population 17,811) grew up around its elegant Renaissance chateau, one of France's largest royal residences, around which the beautiful Forêt de Fontainebleau (p371) fans out. The chateau is less crowded and pressured than Versailles and its forest – rich in walking, cycling, rock climbing, horse-riding opportunities and game – is as big a playground as it was in the 16th century.

The town's lifeblood is international graduate business school **Insead** (www.insead.edu), which brings in some 2000 students a year and seals Fontainebleau's reputation as a nice respectable middle-class place to be – for the French and expats alike. The town has an Anglican church, its own Wednesday-morning English school and a dynamic pick of swish cafés, bars and cultural happenings. No wonder so many work in Paris but choose to live in this safe, healthy living space oozing, as many a local will tell you, 'a certain Swiss ambience'.

Château de Fontainebleau (☎ 01 60 71 50 70; www.musee-chateau-fontainebleau.fr, in French; place Général de Gaulle; adult/18-25yr/under 18yr €8/6/free, 1st Sun of the month free for all; 🍴 9.30am-6pm Wed-Mon Jun-Sep, 9.30am-5pm Wed-Mon Oct-May), with its 1900 rooms, is one of France's most beautifully decorated and furnished chateaux. Walls and ceilings are richly coated with wood panelling, gilded carvings, frescoes, tapestries and paintings. The parquet floors are of the finest woods, the fireplaces are decorated with exceptional carvings, and many of the pieces of furniture are originals dating back to the Renaissance. An informative 1½-hour audioguide leads visitors around the main areas of the palace (whose list of former tenants or visitors is like a who's who of French royalty) and two guided tours (adult/18-25 years €12.50/11; 1¼ hours) take visitors to the Petits Appartements and Musée Napoléon 1er (10.30am and 3.30pm daily) and the Second-Empire salon and Musée Chinois de l'Impératrice Eugénie (11.30am and 2.30pm daily). Sign up for both tours (€19/16) and you get into the main part of the chateau for free. You can access the **chateau gardens & courtyards** (🍴 9am-7pm May-Sep, 9am-6pm Mar, Apr & Oct, 9am-5pm Nov-Feb) for free.

The first chateau on this site was built in the early 12th century and enlarged by Louis IX a century later. Only a single medieval tower survived the energetic Renaissance-style reconstruction undertaken by François I



(r 1515-47), whose superb artisans, many of them brought over from Italy, blended Italian and French styles to create what is known as the First School of Fontainebleau. The *Mona Lisa* once hung here amid other fine artworks of the royal collection.

During the latter half of the 16th century, the chateau was further enlarged by Henri II (r 1547-59), Catherine de Médicis and Henri IV (r 1589-1610), whose Flemish and

French artists created the Second School of Fontainebleau. Even Louis XIV got in on the act: it was he who hired Le Nôtre to redesign the gardens.

Fontainebleau, which was not damaged during the Revolution (though its furniture was stolen or destroyed), was beloved and much restored by Napoleon Bonaparte. Napoleon III was another frequent visitor. During WWII the chateau was turned into a German

TRANSPORT: FONTAINEBLEAU

Distance from Paris 67km

Direction Southeast

Travel time 35 to 60 minutes by SNCF train

Car Take route A6 from Porte d'Orléans, direction Lyon, exit Fontainebleau.

Bus Line A links the train station with the chateau (€1.50), 2km southwest, every 10 minutes from 5.30am to 9.30pm; get off the train and cross under the tracks through 'Sortie Place de la Gare' to reach the bus. The last train back to Paris leaves Fontainebleau around 9.45pm (10pm Saturday, 10.30pm Sunday).

SNCF train Up to 30 daily SNCF commuter trains link Paris' Gare de Lyon with Fontainebleau-Avon station (€7.60). A package (adult/10-17yr/4-9yr €23/16.70/8.10) includes return transport from Paris, bus transfers and chateau admission.

headquarters. After it was liberated by US General George Patton in 1944, part of the complex served as Allied and then NATO headquarters from 1945 to 1965.

Visits take in the **state apartments** (Grands Appartements), which embrace several outstanding rooms. Louis XV wed Marie Leczinska in 1725 and the future Napoleon III was christened in 1810 in the spectacular **Chapelle de la Trinité** (Trinity Chapel), with ornamentation dating from the first half of the 17th century. The **Galerie François 1er** (François I Gallery), a jewel of Renaissance architecture, was decorated from 1533 to 1540 by Il Rosso, a Florentine follower of Michelangelo. In the wood panelling, François I's monogram appears repeatedly, along with his emblem, a dragonlike salamander.

The **Salle de Bal** (Ballroom), a 30m-long room dating from the mid-16th century that was also used for receptions and banquets, is renowned for its mythological frescoes, marquee-

try floor and Italian-inspired coffered ceiling. The large windows afford views of the Cour Ovale (Oval Courtyard) and the gardens. The gilded bed in the 17th- and 18th-century **Chambre de l'Impératrice** (Empress' Bedroom) was never used by Marie-Antoinette, for whom it was built in 1787. The gilding in the **Salle du Trône** (Throne Room), the royal bedroom before the Napoleonic period, is in three shades: gold, green and yellow.

The **Petits Appartements** (Small Apartments) were the private apartments of the emperor and empress and contain uniforms, hats, coats, ornamental swords and knick-knacks that belonged to Napoleon and his relatives. True buffs can get a second dose of him at Fontainebleau's **Musée Napoléonien d'art et d'histoire Militaire** (Napoleonic Museum of Art & Military History; ☎ 01 60 74 64 89; 88 rue St-Honoré; adult/under 12yr €4/free; ☎ museum 2-5.30pm Tue-Sat, garden 10am-6pm or 7pm Tue-Sat), six rooms of military uniforms and weapons in the 19th-century Villa Lavaurs in town.

In 1863 a set of four drawing rooms were created for the Empress Eugénie, Napoleon III's wife, whose collection of oriental art forms the **Musée Chinois de l'Impératrice Eugénie**, accessible only by guided tours.

As successive monarchs added their own wings to the chateau, five irregularly shaped courtyards were created. The oldest and most interesting is the **Cour Ovale**, no longer oval but U-shaped due to Henri IV's construction work. It incorporates the keep, the sole remnant of the medieval chateau. The largest courtyard is the **Cour du Cheval Blanc** (Courtyard of the White Horse), from where you enter the chateau. Napoleon, about to be exiled to Elba in 1814, bid farewell to his guards from the magnificent 17th-century **double-horseshoe staircase** here. For that reason the courtyard is also called the Cour des Adieux (Farewell Courtyard).

On the northern side of the chateau is the **Jardin de Diane**, a formal garden created by Cath-

PICNIC IN THE GROUNDS

The chateau begs to be greedily ogled at long and hard. Shop for fresh fruit at the outdoor food market, **Marché République** (rue des Pins; ☎ 8am-1pm Tue, Fri & Sat); create your own cheeseboard at Odile and Gilles Goursat's **Romergerie Barthelemy** (☎ 01 64 22 21 64; 92 rue Grande; ☎ 7.30am-12.30pm & 3.30-7.30pm Mon, Fri & Sat, 8.30am-12.30pm & 3.30-7.30pm Wed, 8.30am-12.30pm & 4-7.30pm Thu, 8am-1pm Sun), one of Île de France's finest cheese shops; and buy something to drink from supermarket **Monoprix** (58 rue Grande; ☎ 8.45am-7.45pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun). Then head to the lawns for a picnic in paradise. Those with kids who can't sit still might prefer the playground-equipped garden of the **Musée Napoléonien d'Art et d'Histoire Militaire** (above).

THE FOREST OF FONTAINEBLEAU

The **Forêt de Fontainebleau**, a 20,000-hectare wood surrounding the town, is among the region's loveliest. National walking trails **GR1** and **GR11** are excellent for jogging, walking, cycling and horse riding, and for climbers the forest is a veritable paradise. Rock climbing enthusiasts have long come to its sandstone ridges, rich in cliffs and overhangs, to hone their skills before setting off for the Alps. There are different grades marked by colours, with white representing easy climbs (suitable for children) and black representing climbs up and over death-defying boulders. The website <http://bleau.info> has stacks of information on climbing in Fontainebleau.

To give it a go, contact **Top Loisirs** (☎ 01 60 74 08 50; www.toploisirs.fr in French; 16 rue du Sylvain Collinet) about equipment hire and instruction. Two gorges worth visiting are the **Gorges d'Aprémont**, 7km northwest near Barbizon, and the **Gorges de Franchard**, a few kilometres south of Gorges d'Aprémont. The tourist office sells **Fontainebleau Climbs** (€25), translated into English.

The area is covered by IGN's 1:25,000 scale **Forêt de Fontainebleau** map (No 24170T; €9.70). The tourist office sells the **Guide des Sentiers de Promenades dans le Massif Forestier de Fontainebleau** (€12), whose maps and French text cover 19 forest walks, and Librairie Michel (below) sells **À Pied en Famille – Autour de Fontainebleau** (FFRP), which maps 18 family walks, 2.5km to 5km long.

erine de Médicis. Le Nôtre's formal, 17th-century **Jardin Français** (French Garden), also known as the Grand Parterre, is east of the **Cour de la Fontaine** (Fountain Courtyard) and the **Étang des Carpes** (Carp Pond). The informal **Jardin Anglais** (English Garden), laid out in 1812, is west of the pond. The **Grand Canal** was excavated in 1609 and predates the canals at Versailles by over half a century.

Should you be around longer than a day, you might catch one of the monthly guided visits the tourist office organises of an eclectic trio of lesser-known sights: Fontainebleau's **Musée National des Prisons** (National Museum of Prisons; ☎ 01 60 74 99 99; adult/child €8.60/6.50; ☎ guided tour 3pm last Fri of month), a gruesome portrait of French prisons from the 17th century to the present in a magnificent 19th-century prison with 30 cells; its **Musée Motocycliste de la Gendarmerie** (Police Motorcycle Museum; ☎ 01 60 74 99 99; Camp Guymener; adult/child €8.60/6.50; ☎ guided tour quarterly); and the **Centre Sportif d'Équitation Militaire** (Sporting & Military Horseriding Centre; ☎ 01 60 74 99 99; allée Maintenon; adult/child €8.60/6.50; ☎ guided tour 10.30am last Wed of month), where mounted French army officers and 50 military horses are trained each year.

INFORMATION

À La Petite Reine (☎ 01 60 74 57 57; 32 rue des Sablons; hire per half-full day €13/16; ☎ 9am-7.30pm Tue-Sat) Bike hire for adults and kids; a helmet or a child's seat each costs €3.

Arobaze Café (☎ 01 60 72 24 52; www.arobazecafe.com, in French; 5 rue de Ferrare; per hr €3; ☎ 10am-10pm Mon-Sat, 2-8pm Sun) Internet café with 30 machines.

Forêt de Fontainebleau Tourist Office (Antenne Forestière; ☎ 01 60 74 99 99; Carrefour du Coq, La Faisanderie; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 1.30-6.30pm Fri, Sat & Sun May-Oct) Seasonal tourist office in the forest to assist walkers, cyclists and other forest rambblers.

Librairie Michel (☎ 01 64 22 27 21; 15 rue de la Paroisse; ☎ 9.30am-1pm & 2.30-7pm Mon-Sat, 10.30am-1pm Sun) Maps, travel and walking guides, including ones for the forest (above).

Post Office (2 rue de la Chancellerie)

Reel Books (☎ 1 64 22 85 85; 9 rue de Ferrare; ☎ 11am-7pm Tue-Sat) English bookshop with new and secondhand titles, and a great noticeboard crammed with ads aimed at the large local Anglophone community.

Tourist Office (☎ 01 60 74 99 99; www.fontainebleau-tourisme.com; 4 rue Royale; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm & 2-5.30pm Sun May-Oct, 10am-1pm Sun Nov-Apr) A converted petrol station west of the chateau. It sells loads of walking guides and maps; offers 30-minute self-paced audioguide tours (€4.60, 30 minutes) of the chateau interior, its parks and gardens or of the Forêt de Fontainebleau (2km); and takes prepaid bookings for monthly visits of the National Prison Museum, Police Motorcycle Museum and Sporting and Military Horseriding Centre. It also has a limited number of bikes for hire (€5/15/19 per hour/half-day/day); reserve in advance.

EATING

There are lovely café terraces on which to soak up the sun across from the chateau on place Napoléon Bonaparte, behind the old-fashioned merry-go-round, and there are a couple of drinking options on rue de la Corne. Rue de Montebello tours the world

with Indian, Lebanese and other international cuisine.

La Rose de l'Orient (☎ 06 08 88 36 49; 20 rue de Ferrare; mezzes per piece €1, sandwiches €4, grills €7.50; 🕒 10.30am-8pm Tue-Sat) This Lebanese eatery is the spot for a fast cheap lunch courtesy of two sisters, one of whom cooked for diplomats in Paris before launching into business alone. Five plastic tables inside or take away a mezzes-and-pita-bread picnic.

Au Vague à l'Âme (☎ 01 60 72 10 32; 39 rue de France; lunch menus €11.50 & €16, dinner menus €25; 🕒 lunch Tue-Sun, dinner to 1am Tue-Sat) This cheerful café-restaurant with a vague nautical theme is the place for Breton specialities, including mussels, fresh oysters and an oyster terrine to die for.

Le Ferrare (☎ 01 60 72 37 04; 23 rue de France; starters €5-7.50, mains €13-17; 🕒 10am-1am Mon-Sat) If you want to know where locals lunch, pile into this quintessential brasserie with typical fare and a blackboard full of Auvergne specialities. Tripe anyone?

Le Franklin Roosevelt (☎ 01 64 22 28 73; 20 rue Grande; starters €5-8, mains €13-19; 🕒 10am-1am Mon-Sat) If the Fontainebleau regular is not in Le Ferrare, it's a dead cert you'll find him here. Another great brasserie, with wooden panelling, red banquet seating and oodles of atmosphere, the Franklin keeps weekday punters happy with a good-value €10 *plat du jour* (daily special).

La Table des Maréchaux (☎ 01 60 39 55 50; 9 rue Grande; starters €15-20, mains €23-30, menu lunch Mon-Fri €32, dinner €40; 🕒 lunch & dinner to 11pm) Tucked in fancy Hôtel Napoléon, this romantic restaurant with its flowery interior-courtyard garden is a must in summer. Cuisine is inventive: traditional French inspired by foreign flavours and exotic spices.

Crêperie Ty Koz (☎ 01 64 22 00 55; 18 rue de la Cloche; small/large crêpes & galettes €3-7/5.80-10.20, 1L pichet cider €9.40; 🕒 lunch & dinner to 10pm or 10.30pm Tue-Sun) Tucked in an attractive courtyard, this Breton hidey-hole cooks up sweet *crêpes* and savoury *galettes* whipped up with traditional black wheat. Order a regular *simple* or double-thickness *pourleth* and wash it down with some traditional Val de Rance cider.

SLEEPING

La Guérinière (☎ 01 60 71 97 57; ballestier.gerard@wanadoo.fr; 10-12 rue de Montebello; d incl breakfast €60, extra bed €20; 🛏) This charming B&B provides some of the best-value accommodation in town. Owner Monsieur Ballestier speaks English

and has five rooms, each named after a different flower and dressed in white linens and period wooden furniture. Coquelicot (meaning 'poppy'), with its white walls and exposed beams, is particularly charming.

Hôtel de l'Aigle Noir (☎ 01 60 74 00 00; www.hotel.aigle noir.fr; 27 place Napoléon Bonaparte; s/d €160/170; 🛏 🚰 🚿 🚰) Rich elegance and smart service with a gorgeous pool, grand Empire-style furnishings, and plush suites are the trademarks of this sparkling-white 17th-century mansion, across from the chateau.

Hôtel de Londres (☎ 01 64 22 20 21; www.hotel.delondres.com; 1 place du Général de Gaulle; d €90-120) Classy, cosy and beautifully kept, the London is charmingly furnished in warm reds and royal blues and has been in the same family for 70-odd years. The priciest rooms have balconies with dreamy chateau view.

Le Demeure du Parc (☎ 01 64 22 24 24; www.hotel.fontainebleau.fr; 6 rue Avon; d €90-120; 🛏) Adjacent to the chateau park, this hotel languishes in a 17th-century residence where Jean Racine once laid his head. The swimming pool overlooked by its excellent restaurant, Le Village Café, is magical.

Hôtel Richelieu (☎ 01 64 22 26 46; richelieu.bacchus@wanadoo.fr; 4 rue Richelieu; d €48-65) The rooms without windows are best avoided at this clean and welcoming but bland, 18-room hotel. Bacchus swigs wine next door and has a sterling reputation.

VAUX-LE-VICOMTE

Privately owned **Château de Vaux-le-Vicomte** (☎ 01 64 14 41 90; www.vaux-le-vicomte.com; adult/child 6-16yr €12.50/9.90, family ticket €39, candlelight visit €15.50/13.70; 🕒 10am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Fri & 10am-6pm Sat & Sun mid-Mar-early Nov, candlelight visits 8pm-midnight Fri Jul & Aug, 8pm-midnight Sat May-mid-Oct) and its magnificent French-styled gardens, 20km north of Fontainebleau, were designed and built as a precursor to Versailles by Le Brun, Le Vau and Le Nôtre between 1656 and 1661.

Unfortunately, Vaux-le-Vicomte's beauty turned out to be the undoing of its owner, Louis XIV's minister of finance Nicolas Fouquet: Louis, seething with jealousy that he had been upstaged at the chateau's official opening, had Fouquet thrown into prison, where he died in 1680.

Today visitors swoon over the beautifully furnished chateau interior, including its fabulous dome. In the vaulted cellars an exhibition looks at Le Nôtre's landscaping of the formal

TRANSPORT: VAUX-LE-VICOMTE

Distance from Paris 60km

Direction Southeast

Travel time An hour by car or by RER and taxi.

Car N6 from Paris and then A5a (direction Melun and exit 'Voisenon'); from Fontainebleau N6 and N36.

RER train Line D2 from Paris (€7) to Melun, 6km southwest, then taxi (€15 to €20) or chateaubus shuttle three to five times daily Saturday and Sunday April to October (single/return €3.50/7).

gardens, complete with elaborate fountain displays (🕒 3-6pm 2nd & last Sat of month Apr-Oct) and lit by thousands of candles after dark. The collection of 18th- and 19th-century carriages in the chateau stables, included in the chateau visit, forms the **Musée des Équipages** (Carriage Museum). While the chateau interior shuts for lunch weekdays, the French-styled gardens remain open and can be strolled. Weekends and school holidays, rent prince, princess or musketeer costumes for the kids to prance around in. Fun seasonal events include Easter-egg hunts.

CHANTILLY

Don't come Tuesday, when Chantilly's beautiful chateau bathed in parkland and its grandiose stables fit for a king are closed.

Enviably situated 48km north of Paris, this elegant old town (population 11,200) is small, select and spoilt. Its chateau sits in a sea of parkland, gardens, lakes and forest packed with walking opportunities; its race track is one of those prestigious hat-and-frock addresses in Europe; and that deliciously sweetened thick *crème* called Chantilly was created here. Given its large and lively English community (the town has its own Anglican church, vicar, tearoom, cricket club etc), it's thoroughly apt that Chantilly is twinned with the horse-racing town of Epsom in Surrey.

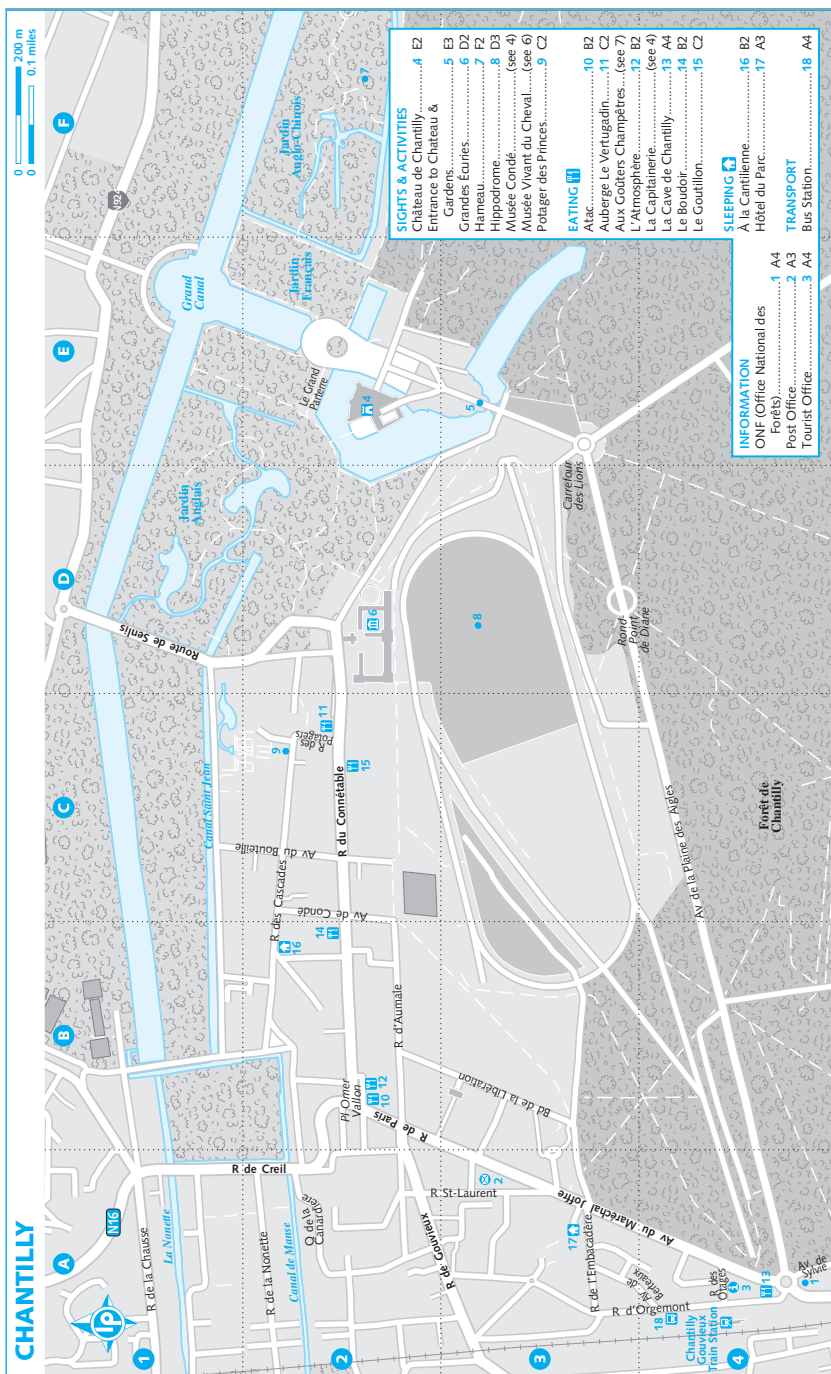
Château de Chantilly (☎ 03 44 27 31 80; www.chateauduchantilly.com; adult/under 18yr €9/free; 🕒 chateau 10am-6pm Wed-Mon Mar-Oct, 10.30am-5pm Wed-Mon Nov-Mar, park 10am-6pm Wed-Mon), left in a shambles after the Revolution, is of interest mainly because of its beautiful gardens and collection of superb paintings. It consists of two attached buildings, entered through the same vestibule. Admission includes

unlimited strolling around the chateau's vast gardens and a visit of the chateau interior, richly adorned with paintings (look out for the Raphaël and Delacroix), 16th-century stained glass, porcelain, lace and tapestries. Pricier combination tickets, available April to November, include a boat or mini-train ride adult/under 18 years (€14/3) or both (€19/6); a ticket covering just park and ride costs adult/under 18 years €10/3.

The **Petit Château** was built around 1560 for Anne de Montmorency (1493-1567), who served six French kings as *connétable* (high constable), diplomat and soldier and died while fighting Protestants during the Counter-Reformation. The highlight of a visit is the **Cabinet des Livres** in the **Appartements des Princes** (Princes' Suites), a repository of 700 manuscripts and over 30,000 volumes, including a Gutenberg Bible and a facsimile of the *Tres Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, an illuminated manuscript dating from the 15th century that illustrates the calendar year for both the peasantry and the nobility. The **chapel**, to the left as you walk into the vestibule, has woodwork and stained-glass windows dating from the mid-16th century and was assembled by the duke of Aumale in 1882.

The attached Renaissance-style **Grand Château**, completely demolished during the Revolution, was rebuilt by the duke of Aumale, son of King Louis-Philippe, from 1875 to 1885. It forms the **Musée Condé**, a series of unremarkable 19th-century rooms adorned with paintings and sculptures haphazardly arranged according to the whims of the duke - he donated the chateau to the Institut de France on the condition the exhibits were not reorganised and would be open to the public. The most remarkable works, hidden in the **Sanctuaire**, include paintings by Raphael, Filippino Lippi and Jean Fouquet.

The chateau's stunning but long-neglected **gardens** were once among France's most spectacular. The formal **Jardin Français** (French Garden), whose flowerbeds, lakes and Grand Canal were laid out by Le Nôtre in the mid-17th century, is northeast of the main building. To the west, the 'wilder' **Jardin Anglais** (English Garden) was begun in 1817. East of the Jardin Français is the rustic **Jardin Anglo-Chinois** (Anglo-Chinese Garden), created in the 1770s. Its foliage and silted-up waterways surround the **Hameau**, a mock village dating from 1774 whose mill and half-timbered buildings inspired the Hameau de la Reine at Versailles.



The chateau's **Grandes Écuries** (Grand Stables), built between 1719 and 1740 to house 240 horses and over 400 hounds, are next to Chantilly's famous **Hippodrome** (racecourse), inaugurated in 1834. Today the stables house the **Musée Vivant du Cheval** (☎ 03 44 27 31 80; www.museevivantducheval.fr; Grandes Écuries, rue du Connétable; adult/4-17yr €9/7; 🕒 10.30am-6.30pm Mon & Wed-Fri, 10.30am-7pm Sat & Sun Apr-Oct, 2-6pm Mon & Wed-Fri, 10.30am-6.30pm Sat & Sun Nov-Mar), whose 30 pampered and spoiled equines live in luxurious wooden stalls built by Louis-Henri de Bourbon, the seventh Prince de Condé, who was convinced he would be reincarnated as a horse (hence the extraordinary grandeur!). Displays cover everything from riding equipment to horse toys to portraits, drawings and sculptures of famous nags. The last tickets for the museum are sold one hour before it closes. Every visitor, big and small, will be mesmerised by the 30-minute **Présentation Équestre Pédagogique** (Introduction to Dressage) – a Chantilly must-do included in the admission price. Presentation times are: 11.30am, 3.30pm and 5.15pm Wednesday to Monday from April to October; 11.30am Monday and Wednesday to Friday, and 11.30am, 3.30pm and 5.15pm Saturday and Sunday from November to March. Even more magical and highly sought-after are the handful of **equestrian shows** performed in the stables each year; tickets are like gold dust and can be reserved online.

Less in demand but equally entertaining are the plays and theatrical pieces staged during July and August in the open-air **Theatre de la Faisanderie** (www.theatredelafaisanderie.com) of the **Potager des Princes** (☎ 03 44 57 39 66; www.potagerdesprinces.com; 17 rue de la Faisanderie; adult/under 18yr €7.50/4; 🕒 2-7pm Wed-Mon Mar-Nov). Arrive before 5.30pm, when the last tickets of the day are sold. Hidden behind an old stone wall, these lovely little-known gardens embrace a watery and romantic **Jardin Fantastique** crossed with bridges and grottoes; an exotic **Jardin Japonais**, a flower-filled

CHÂTEAU DE WHIPPED CREAM

Like every other self-respecting French chateau three centuries ago, the palace at Chantilly had its own **hameau** (hamlet), complete with **laitier** (dairy) where the lady of the household and her guests could play milkmaids. But the cows at Chantilly's dairy took their job rather more seriously than their fellow bovine actors at other faux dairies, and news of the **crème Chantilly** (sweetened whipped cream) served at the hamlet's teas became the talk of aristocratic 18th-century Europe. The future Habsburg Emperor Joseph II clandestinely visited this '**temple de marbre**' (marble temple), as he called it, to taste the stuff in 1777, and when the Baroness of Oberkirch tasted the goods she cried: 'Never have I eaten such good cream, so appetising, so well prepared.' Sample it in any **café** or restaurant in town.

TRANSPORT: CHANTILLY

Distance from Paris 48km

Direction North

Travel time 25 minutes by train

Car By motorway, Autoroute du Nord (A1/E19), exit No 7 'Survilliers-Chantilly'; by national road, N1 then N16 from Porte de la Chapelle/St-Denis.

SNCF train Paris' Gare du Nord is linked to Chantilly (€7) by SNCF trains, departing almost hourly between 6.30am and 10.30pm.

Verger (vegetable garden), several Italianate waterfalls, a 19th-century rose garden and puppet theatre (shows Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday). The rabbit obstacle-course races held in the **Lapinodrome** – a rabbit village with church, town hall etc – will raise a smile, be it one of amusement or sheer disbelief.

South of the chateau is the 6300-hectare **Forêt de Chantilly** (Chantilly Forest), once a royal hunting estate and now crisscrossed by a variety of walking and riding trails. In some areas, straight paths laid out centuries ago meet at multi-angled **carrefours** (crossroads). Long-distance trails that pass through the Forêt de Chantilly include the **GR11**, which links the chateau with **Senlis** 10km northeast, an attractive medieval town of winding cobblestone streets, Gallo-Roman ramparts and towers and a lovely cathedral; the **GR1**, which goes from Luzarches (famed for its cathedral, parts of which date from the 12th century) to Ermenonville; and the **GR12**, which goes north-eastward from four lakes known as the Étangs de Commelles, to the Forêt d'Halatte.

The tourist office sells IGN's indispensable walking map *Forêts de Chantilly, d'Halatte and d'Ermenonville* (No 2412OT; 1:25,000; €9.50) and the ONF (Office National des Forêts; National Forests Office) has information on walks and mountain-bike trails in the forest.

INFORMATION & ORIENTATION

The chateau is just over 2km northeast of the train station; cut along av de la Plaine des Aigles through a section of the Forêt de Chantilly or take the longer route through town along Chantilly's principal thoroughfare, av du Maréchal Joffre.

ONF (Office National des Forêts; ☎ 03 44 57 03 88; www.onf.fr, in French; 1 av de Sylvie) The National Forests Office is almost always shut, given its guardian practically lives in the forest; call ahead to find out about its organised forest walks.

Post Office (26 av du Maréchal Joffre)

Tourist Office (☎ 03 44 67 37 37; www.chantilly-tourisme.com; 60 av du Maréchal Joffre; ☎ 9.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-5.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1.30pm Sun May-Sep, 9.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-5.30pm Mon-Sat Oct-Apr) Ample information on Chantilly, including accommodation lists and a trio of *promenades* leaflets outlining walks through town, along Chantilly's two canals and around the racecourse.

EATING

Aux Goutiers Champêtres (☎ 03 44 57 46 21; Château de Chantilly; lunch menus €19.50, €32 & €41.50; ☎ 11am-7pm Wed-Mon Apr-Nov) A wonderful spot for a summery lunch in the sun, this fine restaurant sits in the windmill of the park's *hameau* (hamlet). Its chief claim to fame: its *crème Chantilly* whipped up for the past 20 years by prized local chef Jean-Michel Duda.

Le Goutillon (☎ 03 44 58 01 00; 61 rue du Connétable; starters €8-10, mains €15-25; ☎ lunch & dinner to 11pm Mon-Sat) With its red-and-white checked tablecloths, simple wooden tables and classic bistro fare, Le Goutillon is a cosy French affair much loved by local expats. It's as much wine bar as munch hole.

Auberge Le Vertugadin (☎ 03 44 57 03 19; www.restaurantvertugadin.fr; 44 rue du Connétable; starters €14-38, mains €20-32, menus €28; ☎ lunch & dinner to 11pm Mon-Sat, lunch Sun) Old-style and elegant, this ode to regional cuisine – think meat, game and terrines accompanied by sweet onion chutney – fills a white-shuttered townhouse. A warming fire roars in the hearth in winter, and summer welcomes diners to its walled garden.

Le Boudoir (☎ 03 44 55 44 49; 100 rue du Connétable; lunch menus €7.50-16; ☎ 11am-6pm Mon, 10am-7pm Tue-Sat, 11am-7pm Sun) This relaxed *salon de thé* (tea-room) with sofas to lounge on and magazines to read is the place to sample *crème Chantilly*

in all its decadence: go for one of several hot chocolate types topped with the lashings of the stuff, a *chococcino* (a cream-topped mix of coffee and chocolate) or chocolate fondue served just for two. Le Boudoir also serves perfect light lunches – salads, savoury tarts, gourmet savoury platters and wok-cooked dishes.

L'Atmosphère (☎ 03 44 60 58 75; 5 rue de Paris; starters €5-8, mains €10-14, menus €12.20, €16 & €24; ☎ lunch & dinner to 11.30pm Mon-Sat) A refreshingly youthful spirit pervades this contemporary eating space, the restaurant of Café Noir around the corner on place Omer Vallon. Interior décor is funky and Mediterranean dining is beneath a glass roof or in a cobbled courtyard.

La Capitainerie (☎ 03 44 57 15 89; www.restaurantfp-chantilly.com; Château de Chantilly; lunch menus €15.50-29.50; ☎ lunch Wed-Mon) Enviably nestled beneath the vaulted stone ceiling of the chateau kitchens, La Capitainerie captures history's grandeur and romance. Fare is traditional and includes *crème Chantilly* at every opportunity. Its week-end *formule buffet à volonté* (help-yourself-to-as-much-as-you want buffet deal; €19.50) is good value. Afternoon tea from 3pm.

For picnic supplies:

Atac (5 place Omer Vallon; ☎ 9am-6pm)

La Cave de Chantilly (69 av du Maréchal Joffre)

Weekly food market (place Omer Vallon; ☎ 8.30am-12.30pm Wed & Sat)

SLEEPING

The tourist office has a list of uninspired chain hotels in town.

À la Cantillienne (☎ 03 44 58 05 76; www.chantilly-chambres-dhotes.fr, in French; 15 rue des Cascades; d €95-125, extra bed €25; P) A five-minute stroll from the high wall of the princes' kitchen garden sits this delightful B&B, the family home of Monsieur and Madame Vergne-Hytenhove aplomb a grassy hillock. Its two spacious rooms both peep out on the pretty garden that languishes out back.

La Ferme de la Canardière (☎ 03 44 62 00 96, 06 20 96 43 89; www.fermecanardiere.com, in French; 20 rue du Viaduc; s/d €130/150; P) Delicately embroidered cushions, country-style furnishings and a colour scheme of soft creams and beiges cast a romantic air over the country home of Sabine and Thierry – everything one would hope for in a French B&B. In summer allow plenty of time for breakfast on the terrace before plunging in for a quick dip.

CHARTRES

Step off the train in Chartres (population 42,000) and the two very different spires – one Gothic, the other Romanesque – of its magnificent 13th-century cathedral instantly beckon. Rising from rich farmland to dominate this charming medieval town, Chartres' **Cathédrale Notre Dame** (☎ 02 37 21 22 07; www.diocese-chartres.com; place de la Cathédrale; ☎ 8.30am-7.30pm, Sunday mass 9.15am, 11am & 6pm) is a must-see. Its brilliant-blue stained glass and collection of relics, including the Sainte Voile (holy veil) said to have been worn by the Virgin Mary when she gave birth to Jesus, have lured pilgrims since the Middle Ages. Up until 4pm daily, the shop below the North Tower inside the cathedral rents informative, 25-/45-/70-minute English-language audioguide headsets costing €3.20/4.20/6.20 – you'll need to leave your passport or other ID as a deposit. Guided tours in French (adult/10 to 18 years €6.20/4.20) and English also depart from the shop.

One of the crowning architectural achievements of Western civilisation, this 130m-long cathedral was built in the Gothic style during the early 13th century to replace a Romanesque cathedral devastated by fire in 1194. Construction took only 30 years, resulting in a high degree of architectural unity. It is France's best-preserved medieval cathedral, having been spared postmedieval modifications, the ravages of war and the Reign of Terror.

Its three entrances all have superbly ornamented triple **portals**, but the western **Portail Royal** is the only one that predates the fire. Carved between 1145 and 1155, its superb statuary, whose features are elongated in the Romanesque style, represents the glory of Christ in the centre, and the Nativity and Ascension to the right and left, respectively. The structure's other main Romanesque feature is the 105m-high **Clocher Vieux** (Old Bell Tower; South Tower), begun in the 1140s. It is the tallest Romanesque steeple still standing.

A visit to the 112m-high **Clocher Neuf** (New Bell Tower; Cathédrale Notre Dame, North Tower; adult/18-25yr/under 18yr €6.50/4.50/free, admission free on 1st Sun of some months; ☎ 9.30am-noon & 2-5.30pm Sun May-Aug, 9.30am-noon & 2-4.30pm Sun Sep-Apr) is worth the ticket price and steep climb up the spiral stairway. Access is just behind the cathedral bookshop. A 70m-high platform on the flamboyant Gothic spire, built from 1507 to 1513 by Jehan de Beauce

after an earlier wooden spire burned down, affords superb views of the three-tiered flying buttresses and the 19th-century copper roof, turned green by verdigris.

Extraordinary are the cathedral's 172 **stained-glass windows**, mostly 13th-century originals, covering 2.6 sq km and forming one of Europe's most important medieval stained-glass collections. The three most important, dating to 1150, cast a magical light over the west entrance, below the rose window. Survivors of the 1194 fire, they are renowned for the depth and intensity of their blue tones, famously called 'Chartres blue'. To see stained glass close up, nip into the **Centre International du Vitrail** (International Stained-Glass Centre; ☎ 02 37 21 65 72; www.centre-vitrail.org; 5 rue du Cardinal Pie; adult/16-18yr/under 15yr €4/3/free; ☎ 9.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-12.30pm & 2.30-6pm Sat & Sun), in a half-timbered former granary.

The cathedral's 110m-long **crypt** (Cathédrale Notre Dame; guided tour adult/7-18yr €2.70/2.10; ☎ tours 11am Mon-Sat & 2.15pm, 3.30pm, 4.30pm & 5.15pm daily late Jun-late Sep, 11am Mon-Sat & 2.15pm, 3.30pm & 4.30pm daily Apr-late Jun & late Sep-Oct, 11am Mon-Sat & 4.15pm Nov-Mar), a tombless Romanesque structure built in 1024 around a 13th-century predecessor, is the largest crypt in France. Guided tours in French (with written English translation) lasting 30 minutes are available year-round. Summertime guided tours of the crypt (in French with written English translation) depart from **La Crypte** (☎ 02 37 21 56 33; 18 Cloître Notre Dame, Chartres; ☎ Apr-Oct), the cathedral-run souvenir shop. From November to March, tours depart from the shop inside the cathedral.

TRANSPORT: CHARTRES

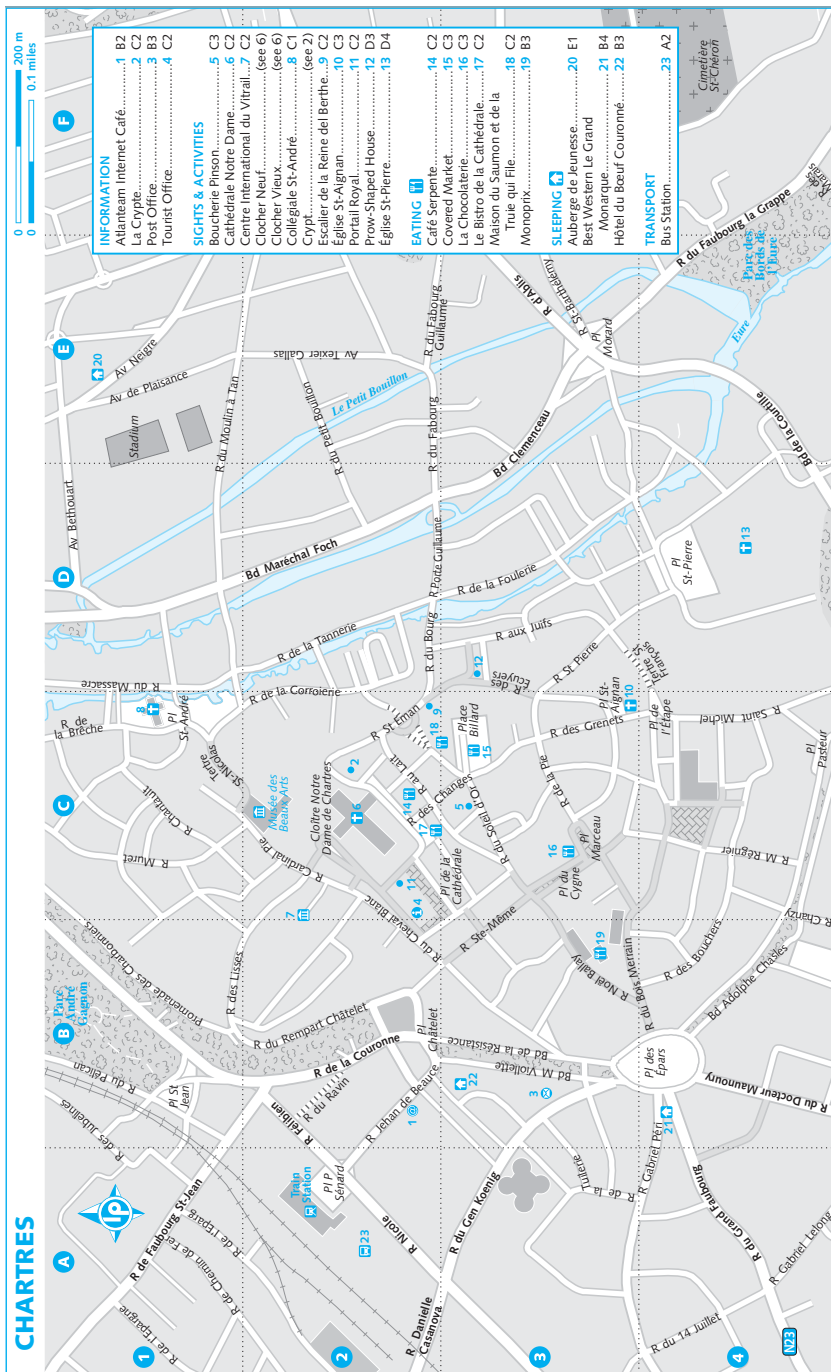
Distance from Paris 88km

Direction Southwest

Travel time 55 to 70 minutes by train

Car A6 from Paris' Porte d'Orléans (direction Bordeaux-Nantes), then A10 and A11 (direction Nantes), exit 'Chartres'.

SNCF train More than 30 SNCF trains a day (20 on Sunday) link Paris' Gare Montparnasse (€12.90) with Chartres, all of which pass through Versailles-Chartres (€10.90, 45 to 60 minutes). The last train back to Paris leaves Chartres a bit after 9pm weekdays, just before 9pm on Saturday and sometime after 10pm on Sunday.



The most venerated object in the cathedral is the *Sainte Voile* (Holy Veil) relic, originally part of the imperial treasury of Constantinople but offered to Charlemagne by the Empress Irene when the Holy Roman Emperor proposed marriage to her in 802. It has been in Chartres since 876, when Charles the Bald presented it to the town. Indeed, the cathedral was built because the veil survived the 1194 fire. It is contained in a cathedral-shaped reliquary and is currently displayed in a small side chapel off the eastern aisle.

Chartres' **Musée des Beaux-Arts** (Fine Arts Museum; ☎ 02 37 90 45 80; 29 Cloître Notre Dame, Chartres; adult/12-18yr/under 12yr €4.20/2.80/free; 🕒 10am-noon & 2-6pm Mon & Wed-Sat, 2-6pm Sun May-Oct, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Mon & Wed-Sat, 2-5pm Sun Nov-Apr), accessed via the gate next to the cathedral's north portal, is in the former Palais Épiscopal (Bishop's Palace), built in the 17th and 18th centuries. Its collections include 16th-century enamels of the Apostles made for François I, paintings from the 16th to 19th centuries and polychromatic wooden sculptures from the Middle Ages.

Chartres' carefully preserved **old town** is northeast and east of the cathedral along the narrow western channel of the River Eure, spanned by a number of footbridges. From rue Cardinal Pie, the stairways called **Terte St-Nicolas** and **rue Chantault**, the latter lined with medieval houses, lead down to the empty shell of the 12th-century **Collégiale St-André**, a Romanesque collegiate church that closed in 1791 and was damaged in the early 19th century and again during WWII.

Along the river's eastern bank, **rue de la Tannerie** and its extension **rue de la Foulerie** are lined with flower gardens, millraces and the restored remnants of riverside trades: wash houses, tanneries and the like. **Rue aux Juifs** (Street of the Jews) on the western bank has been extensively renovated. Half a block down the hill there's a riverside promenade. Up the hill, **rue des Écuvers** has many structures dating from around the 16th century, including a half-timbered, **pro-w-shaped house** at No 26 with its upper section supported by beams. At No 35 is the **Escalier de la Reine Berthe** (Queen Bertha's Staircase), a towerlike covered stairwell clinging to a half-timbered house that dates back to the early 16th century.

There are some lovely half-timbered houses north of here on **rue du Bourg** and to the west on **rue de la Poissonnerie**; look for the magnificent **Maison du Saumon** (Salmon House) at Nos 10 to 14, with its carved consoles of the eponymous

SAVED BY RED TAPE

Anyone who has tried to live or work legally in France will know that bureaucracy *à la française* is at best perfect material for a comedy sketch, and at worst a recipe for madness. Yet were it not for administrative bumbling, the magnificent cathedral at Chartres would probably have been destroyed during the French Revolution.

While antireligious fervour was reaching fever pitch in 1791, the Revolutionaries decided that the cathedral deserved something more radical than mere desecration: demolition. The question was how to accomplish that. To find an answer, they appointed a committee, whose admirably thorough members deliberated for four or five years. By that time the Revolution's fury had been spent, and – to history's great fortune – the plan was shelved.

salmon, the Archangel Gabriel and Mary and Archangel Michael slaying the dragon.

From **place St-Pierre** you get a good view of the flying buttresses holding up the 12th- and 13th-century **Église St-Pierre**. Once part of a Benedictine monastery founded in the 7th century, it was outside the city walls and thus vulnerable to attack; the fortresslike, pre-Romanesque **bell tower** attached to it was used as a refuge by monks, and dates from around 1000. The fine, brightly coloured **derestory windows** in the nave, choir and apse date from the early 14th century.

To the northwest on place St-Aignan, **Église St-Aignan** is interesting for its wooden barrel-vault roof (1625), arcaded nave and painted interior of faded blue and gold floral motifs (c 1870). The stained glass and the Renaissance Chapelle de St-Michel date from the 16th century.

Le Petit Chart Train (☎ 02 37 25 88 50; lepetitcharttrain@wanadoo.fr; adult/3-10yr €5.50/3; 🕒 10.30am-6pm Apr-Oct), Chartres' electric tourist train, covers the main sights in 35 minutes; it departs from in front of the tourist office.

INFORMATION

Atlanteam (☎ 02 37 36 62 15; 13bis rue Jehan de Beauce; €1/2/3.60 per 15/30/60min; 🕒 10.30am-midnight Mon-Sat, 2pm-midnight Sun) Internet café.

Post Office (3 Blvd Maurice Violette)

Tourist Office (☎ 02 37 18 26 26; www.chartres-tourisme.com; place de la Cathédrale; 🕒 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 9.30am-5.30pm Sun Apr-Sep, 10am-6pm Mon-Sat,

THE BUTCHER OF CHARTRES

There's nothing sinister about the butcher of Chartres. **Boucherie Pinson**, the medieval town's oldest *boucherie*, tucked behind cherry-red and chocolate ironwork at 4 rue du Soleil d'Or, is all about good, honest, old-fashioned charm.

The shop has been in business since 1892, and Roland Pinson has wielded the proprietor's knife with precision since 1958. He might well be in his late 70s, but it's clear from the ferocious passion with which he discusses his cuts that he is here to stay.

'It's my life,' he says with a wry smile, as if it could possibly be anything but. A historic relic, this butcher's shop is a blast to the past. There is no cash register (just a paper ledger), no digital scales, no meat behind glass or hiding the nasty bits in a back room (fat trimmed from Pinson's legendary *entrecôte* and other joints are popped in a wooden drawer). Hunks of meat hang on hooks above a long wooden chopping block, chopped so much it's U-shaped. White marble clads all four walls bar one in which a 1930s refrigerated larder – the nearest thing to modernity – is embedded. The patterned mosaic floor is original.

Customers, fiercely loyal, have grown up with this shop. Each is greeted first by Madame Pinson, well wrapped in winter coat, hat and scarf (there doesn't appear to be heating in the shop) – kiss, kiss, one on each cheek – followed by Monsieur Pinson between chops. He wears a shirt and tie underneath his bloodied apron and service is endearingly slow.

'Do you have any calf kidneys today Roland?' 'No, only lamb.' It's not all about an attentive personal service. As EU regulations (to which this butcher's shop, being a protected historical monument, appears immune) are fast seeing certain meat cuts disappear, this butcher of Chartres is one of France's last bastions of *une bouffe d'autrefois* (cuisine of yesteryears).

10am-1pm & 2.30-4.30pm Sun Oct-Mar) Rents 1½-hour English-language audioguide tours (€5.50/8.50 for one/two) of the medieval city and has info on binocular rental, cathedral lectures in English etc.

EATING

Maison du Saumon et de la Truie qui File (☎ 02 37 36 28 00; 10-14 rue de la Poissonnerie; menus €29.80, €31.60 & €32.90; ☎ lunch Tue-Sun, dinner to 11.30pm Tue-Sat) Inhabiting Chartres' most photographed half-timbered building, this medieval landmark cooks up a bit of everything, ranging from Polish stuffed cabbage rolls and Hungarian goulash to Alsatian sauerkraut and Moroccan *tajines* (€18.50). Kids get roast chicken and veg in their *menu* (€9).

Le Bistro de la Cathédrale (☎ 02 37 36 59 60; 1 Cloître Notre Dame; starters €10-15, mains €15-20; ☎ lunch & dinner to 10.30pm, closed Sun Sep-Easter) Our favourite in the shadow of the cathedral, this stylish wine bar is the place for a long lazy lunch over a glass or three of wine. Tasty morsels to soak it up are chalked on the boards inside and out.

Café Serpente (☎ 02 37 21 68 81; 2 Cloître Notre Dame; starters €6-14.80, mains €15-20; ☎ 10am-11pm) Its location slap-bang opposite the cathedral ensures this brasserie and *salon de thé* is always full. Cuisine is traditional and its chef also constructs well-filled sandwiches (€3.80 to €5.80).

La Chocolaterie (☎ 02 37 21 86 92; 14 place du Cygne; ☎ 8am-7.30pm Tue-Sat, 10am-7.30pm Mon & Sun) Leave the tourists behind. Revel instead in local life at this bar-cum-chocolate-shop overlooking

the open-air flower market in place du Cygne. Its coloured macarons – orange, apricot, pistachio, pineapple and so on in flavour – are to die for, as are its sweet homemade *crêpes*, brownies and Madeleine sponge cakes.

Self-Catering

Covered Market (place Billard; ☎ 7am-1pm Wed & Sat)

Monoprix (21 rue Noël Ballay & 10 rue du Bois Merrain; ☎ 9am-7.30pm Mon-Sat) Department store with ground-floor supermarket.

SLEEPING

The tourist office has a list of guesthouses and B&Bs in town.

Best Western Le Grand Monarque (☎ 02 37 18 15 15; www.bw-grand-monarque.com; 22 place des Épars; s €101-175, d €121-175, tr €175, ste €206-249; 📍) With its sage-green shutters piercing a façade dating to 1779, lovely stained-glass ceiling and treasure-trove of period furnishings, old B&W photos and knick-knacks, the Grand Monarch is a historical gem – well worn but charming nonetheless. Dining is fine in its gourmet restaurant, George (starters €12 to €23, mains €30 to €35, menus €47 and €65).

Hôtel du Bœuf Couronné (☎ 02 37 18 06 06; 15 place Châtelet; s/d with washbasin €30/35, s/d with bathroom €46/57; ☎ mid-Jan–mid-Dec) The red-curtained entrance lends a vaguely theatrical air to this two-star Logis de France guesthouse in the centre of everything. Its summertime terrace

restaurant cooks up cathedral-view dining (half-board €64 per person) and the Dicken's Blues bar is right next door.

Auberge de Jeunesse (☎ 02 37 34 27 64; www.auberge-jeunesse-chartres.com; 23 av Neigre; dm incl breakfast €13; reception ☎ 2-10pm) An easy 1.5km stroll north-east from the train station via blvd Charles Péguy and blvd Jean Jaurès or a trip aboard bus 5 (direction Mare aux Moines) to the Rouliers stop brings you to Chartres' well-run hostel. Rates include breakfast with cathedral view, but sheets are €2.

GIVERNY

The prized drawcard of this tiny village (population 544), northwest of Paris en route to Rouen, is the **Maison de Claude Monet** (House of Claude Monet; ☎ 02 32 51 28 21; www.fondation-monet.com; 84 rue Claude Monet, Giverny; adult/7-12yr/under 7yr €5.50/4/free, ☎ 9.30am-6pm Tue-Sun Apr-Oct), the home and flower-filled garden of one of the leading impressionist painters and his family from 1883 to 1926. Here Monet painted some of his most famous series of works, including *Décorations des Nymphéas* (Water Lilies). Unfortunately, the hectare of land that Monet owned here has become two distinct areas, cut by the Chemin du Roy, a small railway line that has been converted into the D5 road.

The northern area of the property is **Clos Normand**, where Monet's famous pastel pink-and-green house and the **Atelier des Nymphéas** (Water Lilies Studio) stand. These days the studio is the entrance hall, adorned with precise reproductions of his works and ringing with cash-register bells from busy souvenir stands. Outside are the symmetrically laid-out gardens. Visiting the house and gardens is a treat in any season. From early to late spring, daffodils, tulips, rhododendrons, wisteria and irises appear, followed by poppies and lilies. By June, nasturtiums, roses and sweet peas are in blossom. Around September, there are dahlias, sunflowers and hollyhocks.

From the Clos Normand's far corner a tunnel leads under the D5 to the **Jardin d'Eau** (Water Garden). Having bought this piece of land in 1895 after his reputation had been established (and his bank account had swelled), Monet dug a pool, planted water lilies and constructed the famous **Japanese bridge**, since rebuilt. Draped with purple wisteria, the bridge blends into the asymmetrical foreground and background, creating the intimate atmosphere for which the 'Painter of Light' was famous.

About 100m northwest of the Maison de Claude Monet is the **Musée d'Art Américain** (American Art Museum; ☎ 02 32 51 94 65; www.maag.org; 99 rue Claude Monet, Giverny; adult/12-18yr/under 12yr €5.50/4/free; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun Apr-Oct), a modern building displaying a fine collection of the works of many of the American impressionist painters who flocked to France in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

INFORMATION

For online information, see www.giverny-art.com and www.ville-vernon27.fr for information on Vernon, 7km northwest of Giverny.

Vernon Tourist Office (☎ 02 32 51 39 60; tourisme.vernon@wanadoo.fr; 36 rue Carnot; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-noon Sun May-Oct, 9am-12.30pm & 2-5.30pm Tue-Sat Nov-Apr) The closest tourist office is in Vernon; travelling by train, stop here before continuing to Giverny.

EATING & SLEEPING

Many Giverny restaurants and hotels are only open in season.

Auberge du Vieux Moulin (☎ 02 32 51 46 15; www.vieuxmoulingiverny.com; 21 rue de la Falaise, Giverny; salads €12, lunch Mon-Fri €15; ☎ lunch Tue-Sun Sat Apr-Oct) The lovely little 'Old Mill Inn', a couple of hundred metres east of the Maison de Claude Monet, is an excellent place for lunch and has a lovely terrace.

TRANSPORT: GIVERNY

Distance from Paris 76km

Direction Northwest

Travel time 45 minutes by train to Vernon, then 20 by bus or bicycle

Car Route A13 from Paris' Port de St-Cloud (direction Rouen), exit No 14 to route N15 (direction Vernon & Giverny)

SNCF train From Paris' Gare St-Lazare there are two early-morning SNCF trains to Vernon (€11.90), from where seasonal **shuttle buses** (☎ 02 32 71 06 39; €4 return; ☎ Apr-Oct) continue from the station to Giverny, 7km northwest. Miles more fun is to hire a bike for €12 a day from the café facing the station on place de la Gare, **Bar-Restaurant du Chemin de Fer** (☎ 02 32 21 16 01; ☎ 6.30am-11pm); take your passport as a deposit. Between 5pm and 9pm there's roughly one train an hour back to Paris.

Hôtel La Musardière (☎ 02 32 21 03 18; 123 rue Claude Monet; s/d/tr/q €67/79/100/110) This two-star 10-room hotel evocatively called the 'Idler' is set amid a lovely garden less than 100m northeast of the Maison de Claude Monet. Dining in its summer restaurant (*menus* €26 and €36) is a pleasure.

AUVERS-SUR-OISE

On 20 May 1890 the painter Vincent Van Gogh left a mental asylum in Provence and moved to this small village (population 6940) north of Paris. He came here to reacquire himself with the light with which he was so familiar in his native Holland, and to be closer to his friend and benefactor Dr Paul Ferdinand Gachet (1828–1909), whose house, the **Maison du Docteur Gachet** (☎ 01 30 36 81 27; rue du Docteur Gachet; adult/18–25yr/under 18yr €4/3.50/free; ☎ 10.30am–6.30pm Wed–Sun Apr–Oct), can be visited. He set to work immediately, producing at least one painting or sketch every day until his death on 29 July, two months after his arrival.

Today Auvers-sur-Oise is predominantly a shrine to the great impressionist painter. Foremost is the **Maison de Van Gogh** (☎ 01 30 36 60 60; info@vangoghfrance.com; rue de la Sansonne; adult/12–18yr/under 12yr €5/3/free; ☎ 10am–6pm Tue–Sun Mar–Oct), actually the Auberge Ravoux, where the artist stayed during his 70 days here. Bar the seasonal restaurant on the ground floor, for the most part it's empty. However, there's an excellent video on Van Gogh's life and work, and the bedroom in which he fatally wounded himself is strangely moving.

Northwest is the **Maison-Atelier de Daubigny** (☎ 01 34 48 03 03; 61 rue Daubigny; adult/under 12yr €5/free; ☎ 2–6.30pm Thu–Sun Easter–early Nov), the house

studio of artist Charles-François Daubigny (1818–78), who began the practice of painting *en plein air* (outside), pre-empting the impressionists. He decorated the walls of his studio from top to bottom with help from painters Camille Corot (1796–1875) and Honoré Daumier (1808–79), and the result is stunning. To learn more about the forays and frolics of Daubigny, his friends and pupils, visit the small **Musée Daubigny** (☎ 01 30 36 80 20; rue de la Sansonne; adult/under 18yr €4/free; ☎ 2–6pm Wed–Fri, 10.30am–1pm & 2–6pm Sat & Sun Apr–Oct, 2–5pm Wed–Fri, 10.30am–1pm & 2–6pm Sat & Sun Nov & mid–Jan–Mar), above the tourist office in the delightful Manoir des Colombières.

Heading west is the sprawling 17th-century **Château d'Auvers** (☎ 01 34 48 48 45; www.chateau-auvers.fr; rue de Léry; adult/6–18yr €11.50/7.50; ☎ 10.30am–6pm Tue–Fri & 10.30am–6.30pm Sat & Sun Apr–Sep, 10.30am–4.30pm Tue–Fri & 10.30am–5.30pm Sat & Sun Oct–Dec & mid–Jan–Mar), whose inspired, enormously informative audiovisual presentation on Van Gogh and other impressionists who found their way to Auvers is essential for anyone wanting to truly immerse themselves in the Van Gogh era. En route nip into the **Musée de l'Absinthe** (☎ 01 30 36 83 26; 44 rue Callé; adult/15–18yr/under 15yr €4.50/3.80/free; ☎ 1.30–6pm Wed–Fri, 11am–6pm Sat & Sun mid–Jun–mid–Sep, 11am–6pm Sat & Sun mid–Sep–Nov & Mar–mid–Jun) to discover the history of the liqueur that possibly contributed to Van Gogh's downfall (below).

Finally, there's the **Église Notre Dame** (rue Daubigny; ☎ 9.30am–6pm), subject of Van Gogh's *L'Église d'Auvers* (1890), and the **cemetery** (Chemin des Vallées) where he and his brother Théo are buried.

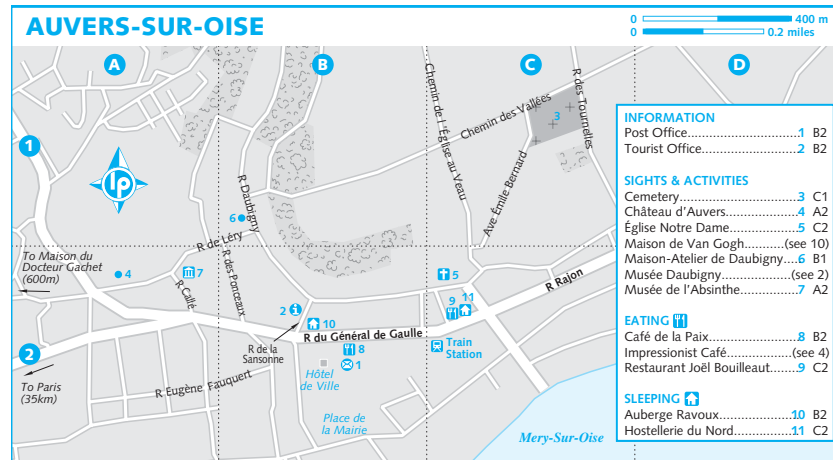
Chateau aside, practically everywhere is shut in winter.

ABSINTHE: SPIRIT OF THE AGE

In its heyday absinthe was akin to the marijuana of the 1960s or the cocaine of the '80s. But until it became the drink of choice among artists, artistes and the underclasses (and thus gained in notoriety), absinthe had been a bourgeois favourite, sipped quietly and innocuously in cafés around the land. It was only when the creative world discovered the wormwood-based liqueur and its hallucinogenic qualities that it took off, and everyone from Paul Verlaine, Arthur Rimbaud, Oscar Wilde, Édouard Manet, Edgar Degas, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and, of course, Vincent Van Gogh wrote about it, painted it and/or drank it. Whether or not it was the *fée verte* (green fairy), as absinthe was known during the *belle époque*, that pushed Van Gogh off the edge is not known; some say he was so poor he couldn't even afford this relatively cheap libation and instead sometimes ate paint containing lead, which may have driven him mad.

More than anything else, the easy availability and low cost of the spirit led to widespread alcoholism and in 1915, having just entered into war against Germany and its allies, France found it prudent to ban the drink altogether. Incredibly, it wasn't until 1998 that absinthe became legal again in France (and the EU).

Try it for €3.70 a 2cl shot at Auvers' **Café de la Paix** (opposite).



INFORMATION

Post Office (place de la Mairie)

Tourist Office (☎ 01 30 36 10 06; www.auvers-sur-oise.com; rue de la Sansonne; ☎ 9.30am–12.30pm & 2–6pm Tue–Sun Apr–Oct, to 5pm or 5.30pm Nov–Mar) Ask for its excellent free brochure, *Parcours des Peintres de la Vallée de l'Oise*, which maps out the spots where Van Gogh, Daubigny and others painted. Mid–March to October it runs guided Van Gogh tours around the village, departing at 3pm on Sunday (€5.50).

EATING & SLEEPING

There's a Moroccan place opposite the station, Thai at the chateau end of the village and a *crêperie* neighbouring Café de la Paix, all open year-round.

Auberge Ravoux (☎ 01 30 36 60 60; 52 rue du Général de Gaulle; 2–/3-course menu €29/37; ☎ lunch Wed–Sun & dinner to 9.30pm Fri & Sat Mar–early–Nov) What could be a more appropriate way to celebrate the life of Vincent Van Gogh than by having lunch or dinner in the house in which he died? Auberge Ravoux has been a *café d'artistes* (artists' café; or so it claims) since 1876, so it predates Van Gogh's fateful sojourn by more than a dozen years. Reservations essential.

Café de la Paix (☎ 01 30 36 73 23; 11 rue du Général de Gaulle; starters €8–10, mains €8.50–15, lunch menus €12.80 & €18.90; ☎ 7am–8.30pm Wed–Sun, 7am–3pm Mon) Across the road from Auberge Ravoux, locals pile into the 1950s village cinema, now a café-restaurant with stage and wooden floor where jazz concerts take centre stage at weekends. Food covers the whole gamut, from brasserie-

style grills to more-refined restaurant dishes, and it has a few hotel rooms up top.

Impressionist Café (☎ 01 30 36 71 31; Château d'Auvers; starters €10–12, mains €14.50–20, lunch menus €16 & €20; ☎ lunch Tue–Sun) A delightful spot to eat and

TRANSPORT: AUVERS-SUR-OISE

Distance from Paris 35km

Direction North

Travel time 60 to 70 minutes by train, bus or RER/bus

Car Route A15 from Paris' Porte de Clichy, exit 7 to route N184 (direction Beauvais), exit 'Méry-sur-Oise'

Bus From mid-April to mid-October **Les Cars Air France** (☎ 01 74 25 08 12) operates a direct bus several times a week from place de la Porte Maillot (Map pp144–5) to Auvers-sur-Oise.

RER train Line A3 from Gare de Lyon or Châtelet-Les Halles (€5.40) to Cergy Préfecture station, then Val d'Oise bus 95-07 (destination Butry) to rue du Général de Gaulle. The last bus (☎ 01 34 25 30 81) back to Paris leaves Auvers around 8pm weekdays (7pm weekends).

SNCF train Suburban train from Gare du Nord or Gare St-Lazare to Pontoise or Persan Beaumont then a connecting train to Auvers-sur-Oise; the last train to Paris leaves just after 9pm weekdays (10.30pm weekends). April to October, the SNCF runs a direct train (30 minutes) on Sunday departing from Gare du Nord at 9.56am and leaving Auvers at 6.15pm; the SNCF package (adult/10–17yr/6–9yr €16.10/14.20/10.20) including return transport from Paris and chateau admission is available year-round.

drink *à la ch teau*, be it a light lunch (its *plat du jour* with a glass of wine costs €15) or a sweet something in the afternoon. Seating is beneath stone vaults or in the shade of the chateau outside; don't miss the 17th-century grotto adorned with thousands of tiny shells next to the restaurant entrance.

Restaurant Jo l Bouilleaut (☎ 01 30 36 70 74; 6 rue du G n ral de Gaulle; menus €49 & €79; 🍷 lunch & dinner Tue-Fri, dinner Sat, lunch Sun; ♿ ♿) The racing-green canopied entrance sets the tone for Auvers' stiff, fine-dining restaurant, best in summer when tables spill into the walled garden with church view.

Hostellerie du Nord (☎ 01 30 36 70 74; www.hostellerie-dunord.fr; 6 rue du G n ral de Gaulle; d €95-125; 🍷 Mon-Sat; ♿ ♿) The 17th-century townhouse in which this eight-room inn slumbers was one of France's first post offices. Each room evokes a different artist: sloping-ceilinged Van Gogh faces the church the artist so famously painted; Ferri re showcases flowery watercolours for sale by the local artist; and Ferr  – the only room to have a terrace – is for sculpture lovers. No rooms available on Sunday evening, when the entire place closes. Free wi-fi.

DISNEYLAND RESORT PARIS

It took almost €4.6 billion and five years of hard graft to turn the beet fields east of the capital into Europe's first Disney theme park, which opened amid much fanfare and controversy in 1992. Rocky start now a million moons away, what started out as Euro-Disney sees visitors (mostly families) pour into the park to scare themselves silly in the blood-curdling Tower of Terror, dance in a High School Musical, dive with Nemo, hit 70km/h in a Space Mountain rocket, shake Winnie the Pooh's paw and share a fiesta of other magical moments with Mickey and his Disney mates. The park celebrated its 15th anniversary in 2007, but as its marketing bumph boasts, 'the party never stops...'

One-day admission fees at **Disneyland Resort Paris** (☎ 01 60 30 60 60 53; www.disneylandparis.com; adult/3-11yr €46/38; 🍷 Disneyland Park 10am-8pm Mon-Fri early May-mid-Jun & Sep-Mar, 9am-11pm early Jul-Aug; Walt Disney Studios Park 9am-6pm late Jun-early Sep, 10am-6pm Mon-Fri & 9am-6pm Sat & Sun early Sep-late Jun) include unlimited access to all rides and activities in either Disneyland Park or Walt Disney Studios Park. Those who opt for the latter can enter

TRANSPORT: DISNEYLAND RESORT PARIS

Distance from Paris 32km

Direction East

Travel time 35 to 40 minutes by RER train

Car Route A4 from Porte de Bercy, direction Metz-Nancy, exit No 14

RER train Line A4 to Marne-la-Vall e/Chessy, Disneyland's RER station, from central Paris (€7.50, adult/3 to 11 years €47/39 incl park admission). Trains run every 15 minutes or so, with the last train back to Paris just after midnight.

Disneyland Park three hours before it closes. Multiple-day passes are also available: a one-day Passe-Partout (adult/child €56/48) allows entry to both parks for a day and its multi-day equivalents (two days €103/84, three days €128/105) allow you to enter and leave both parks as often as you like over nonconsecutive days used within one year. Some shows and activities such as breakfast, lunch or dinner with the Disney characters (from €22/15 per adult/child) cost extra. Admission fees change season to season and a multitude of special offers and accommodation/transport packages are always available.

Anyone who abhors long queues, go elsewhere: queues here are hideous and can make it hard going for those with younger children in tow. Buy your tickets at tourist offices or train stations in Paris beforehand to avoid at least one queue (for tickets); once in, reserve your slot on the busiest rides using FastPass, the park's ride reservation system (limited to one reservation at a time).

Disneyland comprises three areas plus a golf course: **Disney Village**, with its hotels, shops, restaurants and clubs; **Disneyland Park**, with its five theme parks; and **Walt Disney Studios Park**, which brings film, animation and TV production to life, most recently in the walking, talking, life-sized shape of alien puppy Stitch and the dimly lit rollercoaster ride, Crush's Coaster. Fans of the film *Cars* will love the Cars Race Rally. RER and TGV train stations separate the first two, and the studios neighbour Disneyland Park. Moving walkways whisk visitors to the sights from the far-flung car park.

Disneyland Park's *pays* (lands) include **Main Street USA**, a spotless avenue just inside the main entrance reminiscent of Norman Rockwell's idealised small-town America c 1900; **Frontierland**,

a re-creation of the 'rugged, untamed American West' with the legendary Big Thunder Mountain ride (minimum height 1.02m); and **Adventureland**, which evokes the Arabian Nights, the wilds of Africa and other exotic lands portrayed in Disney films, including that of the Pirates of the Caribbean; the spiralling 360-degree rollercoaster, Indiana Jones and the Temple of Peril, is the biggie here (minimum height 1.40m). Pinocchio, Snow White and other fairy-tale characters come to life in **Fantasyland**, while **Discoveryland** is the spot for high-tech attractions and massive-queue rides like Space Mountain: Mission 2 (minimum height 1.32m), Star Tours and the *Toy Story 2*-inspired Buzz Lightyear Laser Blast, apparently still the hottest thing since sliced bread.

Before hot-footing it to Disney, devote a good hour on its website planning your day – which rides, shows, characters etc you really want to see.

EATING & SLEEPING

No picnics allowed at Disneyland Paris! But there are ample themed restaurants to pick from, be it Buzz Lightyear's Pizza Planet (Discoveryland), Planet Hollywood or the *Happy Days*-inspired Annette's Diner (Disney Village), the meaty Silver Spur Steakhouse or Mexican Fuente del Oro (Frontierland) and the sea-faring Blue Lagoon restaurant (Adventureland) for future pirates. Most have *menus* for children (around €10) and adults (€20 to €30); opening hours vary. To avoid another queue, pick your place online and reserve a table in advance (☎ 01 60 30 40 50).

The resort's seven own American-themed **hotels** (central booking ☎ 01 60 30 60 30) and a handful of others are linked by free shuttle bus to the parks. Rates vary hugely, peaking in July and August and around Christmas; on Friday and Saturday nights and during holiday periods April to October; and on Saturday night mid-February to March. The cheapest rates are Sunday to Thursday January to mid-February, mid-May to June, September, and November to mid-December.

Advertised rates are for a minimum of two, three or four nights and supplementary nights can be added – rates include park admission. Lucky hotel guests are often entitled on designated days to two 'Magic hours' in Disneyland Park when the park is closed to regular punters. Consider Disney's Hotel New York for Big Apple 1930s Art Deco, its Newport Bay Club for a nautical theme, Hotel Cheyenne

for Hollywood, and Santa Fe for some deep southwest. Otherwise, try the prince or the pauper of the sleeping scene:

Disneyland H tel (d 2-night/3-day package per adult €483-720; 🍷) The flagship of Disneyland Resort Paris accommodation, this 496-room Victorian palace stares in all its majesty at Sleeping Beauty's 43m-tall castle.

Disney's Davy Crockett Ranch (d 2-night/3-day package per adult €242-361) As 'relaxing' as you're gonna' get at Disney, this trapper's village is not bad. Imagine 535 log cabins planted in a 57 hectare-large wood with limited self-catering facilities (fridge, microwave). Cabins sleep up to six.

PARC AST RIX

Just beyond Roissy Charles de Gaulle airport, this seasonal theme park splits into seven 'zany zones', the Gaulish Village, the Roman Empire, Ancient Greece and so on. Rides are numerous, invariably hair-raising and as much a hit with kids as the various shows, spectacles and devilishly Gaullist pranks throughout the day.

INFORMATION

Parc Ast rix (☎ 08 26 30 10 40; www.parcasterix.com, in French; adult/3-11yr/under 3yr €37/27/free, parking €7; 🍷 10am-6pm early Apr, 10am-7pm Jun-Aug, 10am-7pm Wed, Sat & Sun Sep-early Oct) Tickets including admission and all transport to/from the park (adult/3-11yr €41.60/27) are available at most RER and SNCF stations in central Paris.

TRANSPORT: PARC AST RIX

Distance from Paris 36km

Direction Northeast

Travel time 50 to 60 minutes by shuttle, RER train and bus

Car Route A1, Parc Ast rix, exit between exit Nos 7 and 8

Shuttle The park operates a daily *navette* (shuttle; ☎ 01 48 62 38 33; adult/3-11yr return €19/13) departing from outside the Louvre (metro Palais Royal) at 8.45am and from Parc Ast rix at 6.30pm.

RER train & bus Line B3 from Ch telet or Gare du Nord to A roport Roissy Charles de Gaulle 1 train station, then take the Courriers  le-de-France *shuttle bus* (☎ 01 48 62 38 33; adult/3-11yr return €6.90/5), departing from the bus station, platform 3, every half-hour between 9.30am and 6.30pm (7pm from the park).

REIMS

This city of 202,600 people some 144km northeast of Paris has two claims to fame. It is by far the largest and most attractive of the major champagne-producing centres, affording travellers a smorgasbord of things to see and do as well dining and accommodation options. At the same time, as the so-called Coronation City, Reims – pronounced something like ‘rance’ – is the place where, over the course of a millennium (816 to 1825), some 34 sovereigns – among them 25 kings – began their reigns as Christian rulers.

The focal point of these pompous occasions was **Cathédrale Notre Dame** (www.cathedrale-reims.com, in French; place du Cardinal Luçon; ☎ 7.30am-7.30pm, closed to visitors Sun morning), a Gothic edifice begun in 1211 – on a site occupied by churches since the 5th century – and mostly completed 100 years later. The most famous event to take place here was the coronation of Charles VII, with Joan of Arc at his side, on 17 July 1429. The tourist office rents **audioguides** (1/2 people €5/9) with self-paced tours of the cathedral. Tours of the **cathedral tower** (adult/12-25yr €6.50/4.50; ☎ Tue-Sat & afternoon Sun early May–early Sep, Sat & afternoon Sun mid-Mar–early May & early Sep-Oct) can be booked at the Palais du Tau.

Very badly damaged by artillery and fire during WWI, the 138m-long cathedral, a Unesco World Heritage Site, is more interesting for its dramatic history than its heavily restored architectural features. The finest stained-glass windows are the western façade’s 12-petalled **great rose window**, its almost cobalt-blue neighbour below it, and the rose window in the north transept arm (to the left), above the flamboyant Gothic organ case (15th and 18th centuries) topped with a figure. Nearby is

a 15th-century wooden **astronomical clock**. There’s a window by Chagall (1974) in the central axial chapel (behind the high altar) portraying Christ and Abraham and, two chapels to the left, a statue of Joan of Arc. Persons strong-of-thigh might want to climb the 250 steps of the **cathedral tower** on a one-hour tour.

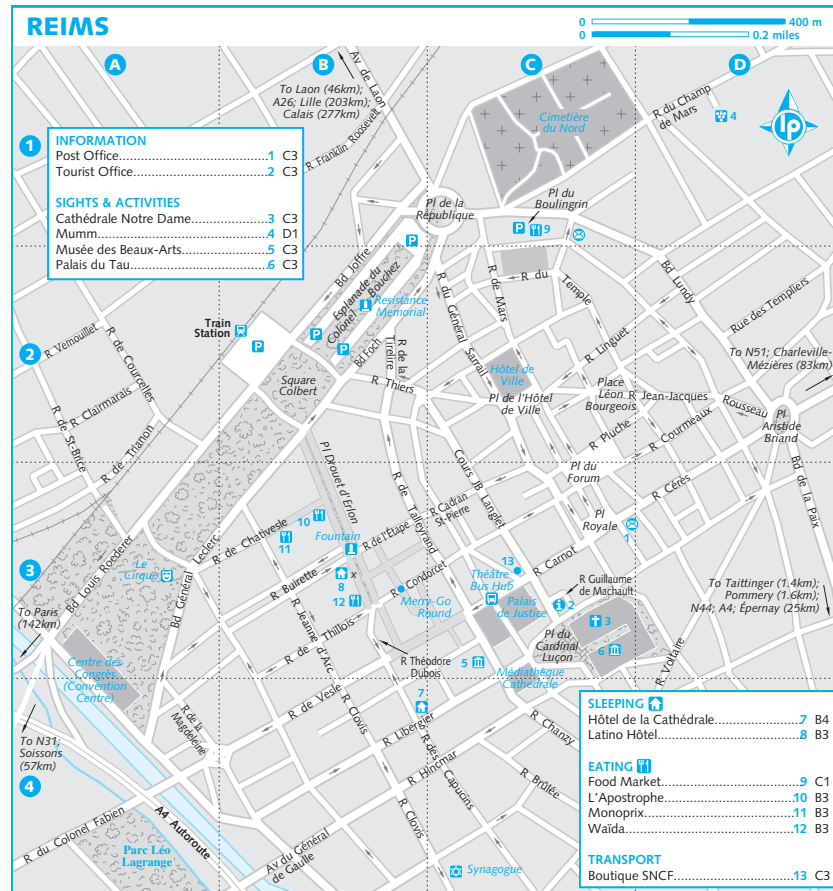
Next door, the **Palais du Tau** (☎ 03 26 47 81 79; www.palais-du-tau.fr, in French; 2 place du Cardinal Luçon; admission free until end Jun 2008, then adult/under 18yr €6.50/free; ☎ 9.30am-6.30pm Tue-Sun early May–early Sep, 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-5.30pm Tue-Sun early Sep–early May), a former archbishop’s residence constructed in 1690, was where French princes stayed before their coronations and where they hosted sumptuous banquets afterwards. Now a museum, it displays truly exceptional statues, ritual objects and tapestries from the cathedral, some in the impressive Salle du Tau.

The rich collections of the **Musée des Beaux-Arts** (☎ 03 26 47 28 44; 8 rue Chanzy; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-6pm Wed-Sun), housed in an 18th-century building, include one of only four versions of Jacques-Louis David’s world-famous *Death of Marat* (yes, the bloody one in the bathtub), 27 works by Camille Corot (only the Louvre has more), lots of Barbizon School landscapes, Art Nouveau creations by Émile Gallé and two works each by Monet, Gauguin and Pissarro.

No visit to Reims would be complete without a tour of a champagne *cave* (cellar) and eight *maisons* (houses or producers) offer guided tours of their premises that end, *naturellement*, with a tasting session. Of the Reims trinity, **Mumm** (☎ 03 26 49 59 70; www.mumm.com; 34 rue du Champ de Mars; tours adult/under 12yr €8/free; ☎ tours 9am-10.50am & 2pm-4.40pm daily Mar-Oct, Sat only Nov-Feb) is most easily accessible from the centre, while **Taittinger** (☎ 03 26 85 84 33; www.taittinger.com; 9 place St-Nicaise; tours adult/under 12yr €10/free; ☎ tours 9.30am-noon & 2pm-4.30pm, closed Sat & Sun mid-Nov–mid-Mar) and **Pommery** (☎ 03 26 61 62 55; www.pommery.fr; 5 place du Général Gouraud; tours adult/student & 12-17yr/under 12yr €10/7/free; ☎ tours 9.30am-7pm Apr–mid-Nov, 10am-6pm Sat & Sun mid-Nov–Mar) are under 2km to the southeast.

INFORMATION

Tourist Office (☎ 03 26 77 45 00; www.reims-tourisme.com; 2 rue Guillaume de Machault; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-6pm Sun mid-Apr–mid-Oct, 10am-6pm Mon-Sat, 11am-4pm Sun mid-Oct–mid-Apr) The Reims City Card (€14) gets you a champagne house tour, an all-day bus ticket, entry to four municipal museums, including Musée des Beaux-Arts, and a guided tour of the cathedral.



EATING & SLEEPING

L'Apostrophe (☎ 03 26 79 19 89; 59 place Drouet d'Erlon; starts €6.50-15.10, mains €14.50-25, lunch menus €14; ☎ lunch & dinner to 11.30pm) This stylish café-brasserie in the centre of Reims dispenses French and international cuisine as well as some mean *piscines* (enormous cocktails for several people). A perennial favourite thanks to its chic atmosphere, summertime terrace and good value. Open as a café straight through from 9am to 1am.

Waïda (☎ 03 26 47 44 49; 5 place Drouet d'Erlon; ☎ 7.30am-7.30pm Wed-Sun) An old-fashioned *salon de thé* and confectionery with mirrors, mosaics and marble. This is the place to buy a box of *biscuits roses* (pink biscuits; €3.30), traditionally nibbled with champagne.

Hôtel de la Cathédrale (☎ 03 26 47 28 46; www.hotel-cathedrale-reims.fr; 20 rue Libergier; s/d/q €54/62/78; ☎)

Charm, graciousness and a resident Yorkshire terrier greet guests at this hostelry run by two musicians. The 17 tasteful rooms are smallish but pleasingly chintzy and some have been recently renovated. There are four floors but no lift. Go for room No 14 with two windows or No 43 with views of Basilique St-Rémi and the hills to the south.

Latino Hôtel (☎ 03 26 47 48 89; www.latinocafe.fr; 33 place Drouet d'Erlon; s & d €54-74, apt €130; ☎) This budget boutique hotel above a buzzy musical café has a dozen gaily painted guestrooms (think cherry and pumpkin) over five floors but no lift. The furnishings are fun, the welcome exceptionally warm and we love the quotes from the great and the good (Gandhi, Boris Vian) painted on the hall walls. The apartment on the top floor looking straight onto the cathedral can accommodate up to five people.

TRANSPORT: REIMS

Distance from Paris 144km

Direction Northeast

Travel time 45 minutes by TGV, 1½ to 1¾ hours by normal train or car

Car Route A4 from Paris' Porte de Bercy (direction Metz), exit No 23 (Reims-Centre)

Train Up to 15 daily trains link Reims with Paris' Gare de l'Est (€22.70, 1¼ hours); seven of them are TGVs (45 minutes, €28). Information and tickets in the city centre are available at the **Boutique SNCF** (1 cours Jean-Baptiste Langlet; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat).

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