



PUSH IT
Bicycles for hire in Dijon
Opposite: Signage along a Burgundy
walking trail

Burgundy by bike



Forget driving – the best way to explore France’s wine country is on two wheels, as Ewan Bell discovers on a cycling tour through Burgundy.

There are more than 3,000 wine growers in Burgundy and some 500 kilometres of bike trails. Thankfully, what’s good for the vines also seems to be good for cycling. The rolling hills of the Côte d’Or not only provide excellent grape-growing terroir but also scenic vistas: trails wind through historic towns such as Dijon (Burgundy’s capital) and Beaune before disappearing down narrow lanes leading out into immense fields lined with grape vines and wild poppies. I have eight days and two wheels to explore the region as part of a self-guided cycling tour. We’ve been given bikes and daypacks as well as helpful trip notes giving us pointers about the landscape. All we need to do is uncork the majesty of this fabulous region.

Glaciers once scoured this landscape and it was Burgundy – the valleys and slopes west of the Saône River, a tributary of the Rhône – that collected the debris from their passage. The result is

a dramatically variable range of soils – around 400 different types, according to local estimates. Some have limestone deposits; others are heavy with clay; and some are rich in organic matter. From one vineyard to the next, the terroir is visibly different. Residents of Burgundy know these grape-growing slopes in remarkable detail, and they credit the land with determining much of the character in their wines. Some plots of land are so famous for producing consistently great wines that the details of the plot itself appear on the bottle.

The name Burgundy, my trip notes tell me, is the broadest level of appellation a wine from the region can earn. Many villages are known for having excellent terroir in their vineyards and earn appellations of their own. A few hundred enclosures are especially notable and are officially recognised as Premier Cru. Of the thousands of locations across Burgundy that

produce wine, only 38 – most of them on the Côte d’Or – have earned the appellation of Grand Cru. These are the very best vineyards Burgundy has to offer, and we discover that cycling trails roll right past a couple of them.

In the Clos Vougeot – arguably the most famous vineyard in the Côte d’Or – Château de La Tour has been producing quality wines since 1890. The largest château in the vineyard, Château de La Tour primarily produces Pinot Noir, notoriously difficult grapes to cultivate and manage but stunning when done right. Today, the château welcomes in passing travellers to taste its superb wines, including its Grand Cru, applauded for its elegant bouquet and a flavour that hints of truffles, liquorice, violet and wild mint.

These wines just get better with age: the Pinot Noir should be cellared for at least a decade, ideally more, for it to reach



SERVICE WITH A SMILE

Below: Stocking up on produce at a local deli

Left: Overlooking vineyards and historic villages in Burgundy

its full potential. This is not always achievable, however, as Claire Naigeon from the château explains: “You need an imaginative palette – you need to taste the potential of the wine. Cellars don’t keep their wines for the decades required to mature a bottle, so we don’t often have many wines to taste older than a few years.”

It’s time to move on and we cycle toward the village of Puligny-Montrachet. It’s spring and lipstick-red poppies have taken over the landscape. They appear among fields of wheat, dotting themselves beneath rows of grapevines and clinging along the edges of forest trails. Entire fields are carpeted with the flowers, swaying in the wind like waves.

In the heart of Burgundy, Puligny-Montrachet lies at the foot of a band of vines known for

producing some of the finest (and most expensive) dry white wines in the world. One of the best places to explore the relationship between terroir and wine is at local Olivier Leflaive’s eponymous vineyard.

“I am now 18th generation,” Leflaive laughs. “I am older than I look! To make the wines needs a lot of knowledge – it can’t come from reading. If you want to understand Burgundy, it will take your entire life. The wines are complicated but diverse, and every day, I can taste something new. It’s always exciting.”

Leflaive produces wines that have excellent personality at a fairly young age, which makes him something of an oddity in Burgundy. He’s almost like a wild poppy himself, adding colour and nuance to a well-established landscape.

Aside from his wines, Leflaive



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travelfacts

getting there

Air France operates multiple daily flights from Australian capital cities to Paris. 1300-390-190; airfrance.com/au

Thai Airways operates daily flights between Australian capital cities and Paris. 1300-651-960; thaairways.com.au

Rail Europe connects Paris with Dijon, the capital of Burgundy, in an hour and 40 minutes. raileurope.com.au

getting around

Utracks organises a range of guided and self-guided cycling tours around France. Package rates include hotel accommodation, luggage transfers and cycling advice and tips. 1300-303-368; utracks.com.au

when to go

Peak season for travel to Burgundy is the northern summer (June through August), though the weather in April and May as well as through September and October is ideal for cycling and walking tours across the country.



TOUR DE FORCE
Clockwise from right: Château de La Tour is popular for its Pinot Noir; a bakery in Dijon; a cassis factory

has made a name for himself with his restaurant, La Table d'Olivier Leflaive. Set in a 17th-century building in the centre of Puligny-Montrachet, the restaurant serves exceptional French fare that understates the food in order to spotlight the wine. And there's a lot. With each course, diners are poured three closely related wines, each originating from different soils in Burgundy but following an identical path of production. The intention, Leflaive explains, is to let the terroir speak for itself. A degustation menu featuring dishes such as a terrine of tuna and parsley, or chicken in puff pastry with a Chardonnay sauce and ratatouille may be paired with delicious local drops such as a Bourgogne Rosé Cuvée Margoton 2007 or Chablis Les Deux Rives 2008. Superb.

With 20 kilometres of cycling still ahead of us in the day, Leflaive reminds us over lunch that the emphasis should be on tasting the wines rather

than drinking them. With so many delicious vintages at our disposal, this is easier said than done. A couple of hours later, we hop on our bikes again and – considerably wobblier than we were earlier in the day – head off to explore more of the region's lovely towns and trails at a leisurely pace.

You don't get much more French than that. •

Photography by Ewan Bell.



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