

FRANCE – ALSACE AND THE RHINE RIVER VALLEY

8-days / 7-nights easy to moderate GUIDED inn-to-inn cycling from Colmar



Alsace is frequently described as 'unique' – and it truly is. The region has always been important, with its strategic location on the Rhine River, a major trading route. The Romans displaced the early Celts and brought the first vines; later they were overrun by the Germanic Alemanni tribes. Over the centuries that followed Alsace went from Alemanni to Frankish, became part of the Holy Roman Empire, and was sold to France by the Habsburgs, with treaties protecting the existing traditions and customs of Alsatians. Despite being passed back and forth between France and Germany multiple times, or perhaps because of it, Alsatians have held doggedly on to their distinct identity, language, culture and traditions – with both French and German influences, but completely Alsatian. If you are looking for interesting cycling, fine wines, fascinating history, charming villages, remarkable cuisine, stunning scenery and unique culture – you'll find it in Alsace!

On this cycling tour we visit beautiful medieval villages, reminiscent of childhood fairy tales, with half-timbered houses, balconies lined with bright flowers, and buildings painted in vivid colours. We cycle along the 'Route des Vins', a fantastic cycle route winding along tiny roads and paths through vineyards and villages, often with views stretching to the Vosges Mountains, Black Forest Mountains and the Rhine. Strasbourg, the capital of Alsace and home to the European Parliament, has a magnificent Gothic cathedral. And we sneak across the Rhine for a quick visit to Germany. The cycling is easy to moderate, with some hills on the first three days, and one day of longer distances; but if you find it too challenging your guide will arrange support.

Some of the world's finest white wines are made in Alsace and the German influence means that there is plenty of beer as well – mostly lager brewed at the large Kronenbourg and Fischer breweries in Strasbourg, but there are also more interesting varieties like March beer (brewed with the new barley crop at harvest-time) and Christmas ale. The dish most synonymous with Alsace is *choucroute*, a local variation on sauerkraut, shredded cabbage seasoned with salt and juniper left to ferment, typically served with smoked pork or sausages and potatoes or dumplings.

Cost from: \$2815 per person, twin-share. Single supplement from \$700.

Departs: 15th June; 20th July; 17th August; 14th September, 2019

Grading: Easy to moderate - 25-75km daily distances; some hills and longer days.

Includes: 7 nights in carefully selected 2- and 3-star hotels (all rooms with private bathrooms), breakfast and dinner daily, wine-tasting at vineyards, route notes, luggage transfers, cycle tour guide, hire of quality multi-gear hybrid touring bicycle with helmet, lock, panniers and water bottle, transfers from/to Colmar train station at the start/end of the tour.

Not included: Lunches, drinks, entrance fees at local attractions, personal expenses.

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Suggested itinerary: *please note that weather and road conditions, group interests and the decision of the tour guide will influence the final route taken each day:*

Day 1: Arrive Colmar or Guebwiller

Make your way to the first hotel of the tour at Guebwiller, or join the late-afternoon transfer from Colmar train station to the hotel. Transfers from Basel-Mulhouse airport can be arranged at extra cost.

Day 2: Guebwiller to Turckheim

cycling distance @ 60km

Our first day is fairly long, but the cycling is easy and beautiful. Following the 'Route des Vins' we ride through pretty vineyards and medieval villages to visit a producer of Alsace's famous Munster cheese. This cheese is offered at virtually every restaurant in the region, so best to start by learning a bit more about it. Cycling through Orschwihr, Rouffach and Eguisheim, we finish the day at a traditional 2-star inn in Turckheim.

Day 3: Turckheim to Ribeauvillé

cycling distance @ 21km

A shorter day today, because we're busy! We explore Turckheim, famous for its three fortified gates and nesting storks, considered to be good luck, which we see throughout Alsace. Some householders place old wagon wheels on chimneys to encourage storks to nest. Turckheim is home to probably Alsace's finest red wine, made from Pinot Noir – it's a similar landscape to Burgundy, at a similar latitude, so no great surprise the same grape thrives here. We sample Pinot Noir and Gewurtztraminer, the most aromatic of the Alsatian wines. We visit picturesque small villages and the Domaine du Moulin Dusenberg where we learn more about local cheese and their highly-rated Alsace wines. We stay in the centre of Ribeauvillé at a quaint 3-star hotel.

Day 4: Ribeauvillé to Obernai

cycling distance @ 58km

We start on the Route des Vins then detour onto the Alsace salt route bike path. We visit a distillery at Saint Pierre Bois where whisky and fruit liqueurs are produced, then re-join the wine route on our way to the villages of Itterswiller and Andlau. In Gertwiller we have a chance to visit a gingerbread museum – gingerbread has a significant place in Alsatian culture. We end in Obernai, yet another beautiful medieval village, where we stay in a 3-star hotel in a half-timbered 16th Century building.

Day 5: Obernai to Strasbourg

cycling distance @ 44km

We follow an old Roman road and the Route des Vins as far as Alvosheim where we meet the Canal de la Bruche. We follow a cycle path along the Canal de la Bruche and cycle right into the centre of Strasbourg without going on a road. Strasbourg is a beautiful city, and at its heart is the huge Cathedral of Our Lady of Strasbourg. We stay near the Cathedral in a 3-star hotel with a patio garden.

Day 6: Strasbourg to Séléstat

cycling distance @ 72km

We start with a morning visit to the Cathedral. If time (and if your legs) permit, climb the 332 steps to the observation platform in the cathedral tower. Then we cycle into Germany. These days there simply is no border between France and Germany. We pass the European Parliament building and cross the Rhine into Germany without let or hindrance – it's rather lovely. We follow a cycle path up the River Rhine then cross back into France to follow the Canal du Rhône au Rhin which links the Mediterranean with the North Sea. We end our day in Séléstat, home to the world's most famous Humanist library, which has over 500 *Incunables* (books printed, not hand-written, before 1501). We stay in a charming, centrally-located 3-star hotel.

Day 7: Séléstat to Colmar

cycling distance @ 59km

We follow a cycle path across the Rhine into Germany, and ride the Baden Wine Route on cycle paths through forests to the wine village of Burkheim, where we visit a vineyard and have lunch, then to Breisach, a town with a tempestuous history, changing hands between France, the Holy Roman Empire and Germany at least six times and suffering badly in WWII. Today it is a lovely and peaceful place; its reconstructed cathedral has a silver shrine housing the relics of its patron saints. Returning to France, we arrive at the fortress of Neuf-Brisach, designed by Vauban (Louis XIV's military engineer) in 1697, then follow a cycle path into Colmar, where we stay at a cosy hotel close to the centre. We spend our final evening in Colmar's medieval old town.

Day 8: Departure day.

Tour arrangements end after breakfast at our hotel in Colmar.

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