

Cyclists will find picture-postcard villages and plenty of attractions riding through La Sarthe à Vélo – 250 miles of trails in Sarthe, north-west France

FIONA RUSSELL

Say Velo, wave goodbye

With the sun warming my back and the cycling easy, I wonder why anyone would holiday without a bike.

My route – in the Sarthe region of north-west France – is traffic-free along a smooth, flat and straight greenway that was once a railway line.

Earlier, I rode on peaceful roads and when I encountered traffic, the drivers were disarmingly polite – even when I went the wrong way on a roundabout.

I enjoyed time off my bike too, popping into a fascinating ecological garden, The Jardin Mosaïque at Asnières-sur-Vègre, looking in on the wall paintings at the nearby church of St Hilaire and visiting a ceramics museum at La Flèche.

I refuelled at embarrassingly frequent intervals times on delicious pastries, good coffee, creamy tartiflette, frites and several glasses of ice-cold cola.

Later, I planned to explore Château du Lude – a magnificent castle of the first French Renaissance in the historic town of Le Lude before resting at a bike-friendly chambres d'hotes (house with guest rooms).

The previous day was rewardingly similar. Leaving the vibrant city of Le Mans on a traffic-free riverside path, I cycled for hours on quiet country roads through picturesque farmland.

Sometimes I could see only fields of tall, waving sunflowers and closely planted stems of green corn.

At other times, I glimpsed the

outline of another chateau or abbey or saw, in the distance, the next village, each prettier than the one before and almost all boasting a picture-postcard church.

Tomorrow promised another chateau – the decadently renovated Château de Grand-Lucé and a vineyard, Vin Gigou at La Chartre-sur-le-Loir.

Riding solo and carrying only basic clothing and kit, I thoroughly enjoyed my four-day journey through the Sarthe department.

Le Mans, made famous by the motor racing circuit, is less than an hour's direct train journey from Paris.

Recently it has promoted itself as a cycling destination with 250 miles of signposted trails, "La Sarthe à Vélo".

If riding leisurely routes on mostly flat terrain amid a bucolic countryside between historic towns, cities and plentiful attractions sounds like your thing, Sarthe is a cycle touring heaven on earth.

I was blessed by days of sunshine and light or non-existent winds.

Each day, I rode around 50 miles and followed two routes – the V44 and the V47. The V44 links the historic town of Alençon in the north with Le Mans then on to Sablé in the west, which I discovered is the home of a delicious shortbread-style biscuit.

It's also close to the Abbey de Solesmes, which offers the eerie but uplifting opportunity to listen to Gregorian chants.

From La Lude, the V47 Vallée du Loir à Vélo takes cyclists on a delightful tour of the lesser-known

Loir valley. The Loir is the far less touristy sibling of the Loire Valley, 30 miles further south.

It might lack some of the Loire's headline-grabbing attractions but it boasts castles, renowned wines and many charming towns and villages.

The cycling is a little hillier in this valley but more undulating than anything I am familiar with back home in Scotland.

While La Sarthe a Velo has an impressive amount of waymarking, at times the navigation can be tricky when exiting towns or where vegetation has grown to cover signposts.

But this is part of the adventure and I was equipped with maps and a bike GPS gadget.

As a solo rider, there was comfort in the signposted routes and a sense of purpose each day. I got up, ate breakfast, charted my route and had an overnight destination in mind.

Booking B&Bs ahead of the holiday removed some of the cycling flexibility but also overcame any anxiety about finding a bed for the night. The planned routes also stuck, where possible, to greenways and quieter country roads.

I took my road racer bike with 25mm tyres but my advice would be to ride a hybrid or tourer bike.

If I had been travelling for longer, I might have enjoyed shorter riding days and more time at some of the more spectacular castles.

That's the beauty of cycle touring, do as many or as few miles as you fancy and enjoy exploring a different country at the perfect pedalling pace.

Travel info

■ Fiona flew with her bike with easyJet from Glasgow to Paris then by SNCF train to Le Mans.

■ She stayed at Le Charlestown, Le Mans; La Maison de Charlotte, Solesmes; 5 Grande Rue Chambres d'Hotes, Le Lude; La Roiserie, Le Grand Luce.

■ See "Great places to stay (and eat) while riding La Sarthe a Velo" at www.fionaoutdoors.co.uk

■ The trip was supported by Sarthe Développement and Tourist Office of the Loir.

■ For more holiday ideas, visit www.tourisme-en-sarthe.com



QUIET HAVEN Village of Asnières-sur-Vègre



CAFE STOP At Souge le Ganelon village



POTLUCK La Flèche has ceramics museum

"Sarthe is a cycle touring heaven on earth"

HISTORIC Fiona cycles beside the castle at Le Lude in Loir

