

Champagne

lifestyle

Overflowing with champagne vineyards, rivers and major cultural attractions, Marne has much to offer, as **Paola Westbeek** discovers

Located in the Grand Est region, Marne is home to 66% of Champagne's noble vineyards, yet the department has much more to add to its list of wonders than the revered sparkling drink. With UNESCO sites such as Épernay's prestigious Avenue de Champagne and the magnificent Notre-Dame Cathedral in Reims and former Abbey of Saint-Rémi, Marne is also known for its rich cultural heritage and lush green landscapes.

Discover how *cachet* meets *campagne* in a department that invites you to taste its *terroir* with passionate winemakers one day and go mountain biking between vineyards and forests the next.

CRADLE OF CHAMPAGNE

Mention Marne and most may not immediately make the connection to the iconic drink, yet it is in this department where champagne's story unfolds and continues to inspire.

In Hautvillers, an historic village surrounded by vineyards, Dom Pérignon (1638-1715) dedicated his life to his faith and to perfecting champagne. During his 47 years at Abbaye St-Pierre, the Benedictine monk was cellar master and in charge of wine production. Though he cannot be credited with inventing the sparkling wine, his remarkable innovations such as blending grapes from different soils to make the perfect *cuvée*, pressing black grapes quickly to keep their juices clear and using heavier bottles and

corks, were of crucial importance for the production and success of champagne.

Today, as you stroll through Hautvillers' pleasant streets, it isn't just the spectacular vistas of slopes hugged by vines or the famous abbey and church where Dom Pérignon was laid to rest that will capture your attention, but also the charming alleys and houses adorned with decorative wrought-iron signs used to symbolise vineyard work and other professions. Spending a day here is easy, whether feasting your eyes, tickling your taste buds - or both.

In the bright, spacious tasting room of G. Tribaut (one of the local producers) located on the edge of the village, you can educate your palate while indulging in panoramic views over a sea of vineyards.

Or, you can stop by Au 36, a cosy and friendly wine bar that serves beautifully presented local appetisers with different styles of champagne.

Some 10km to the east, nestled among the vines, is Mutigny where more impressive viewpoints await. Perched at an altitude of 240m, it is the region's highest viticultural village and a must-visit for champagne novices. During the 2.2km *Sentier du Vigneron* tour (including one to three tastings), you can learn about the wine region's history, grape varieties, soil, seasons and all the work that goes into making champagne. You will leave with a new appreciation for the distinguished bubbly, which isn't only saved for celebrations here! ▶



Marne



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VERDANT PARADISE

Besides wine production, Marne is a mostly agricultural and green department with a wealth of natural and floral splendour. In fact, Marne was voted France's number one *Département Fleuri* in 2014 with 179 towns and villages awarded one to four flowers.

Marne's verdant paradise, Parc Naturel Régional de la Montagne de Reims, consists of 40% dense forests that provide plenty of space for walking, cycling and all other kinds of outdoor pursuits. The protected park spans 65 communities and 50,000 hectares. To the east, you'll find the Faux de Verzy, home to the world's only reserve of dwarf beech trees that grow in peculiar twisted shapes. Also unique in Verzy's forest is the Perching Bar, a chic 'treehouse' decked with hanging ice buckets and leather swings where you can sip champagne at an altitude of 5.5 metres.

In the neighbouring village of Verzenay, the Musée de la Vigne invites you to discover the history and geology of the vineyards in a lighthouse (Le Phare de Verzenay) dating to 1919. If you're in good shape, start the visit by climbing up the lighthouse's 101 steps. You will be rewarded with a wonderful bird's-eye view of the Montagne de Reims vineyards and,

at the end of your visit, with a tasting of champagne.

Come the summer, the Lac du Der's six beaches are a great place for soaking up some sun or partaking in water sports such as swimming, sailing, paddling, canoeing and fishing. Measuring approximately 4,800 hectares, it is Europe's largest artificial lake and the natural habitat of more than 200 bird species and other wildlife.

SPARKLING CITIES

Sparsely populated (and often overlooked), Marne is especially appealing to those who crave tranquil surroundings, space and fresh air. Its lively cities, however, attract plenty of tourism. Reims, only 45 minutes from Paris by high-speed train (TGV), is perfect for a weekend getaway. Famed for its 13th-century Notre-Dame Cathedral where 33 rulers were crowned between 816 and 1825, the 'Coronation City' is replete with cultural heritage.

The Palais de Tau, former residence of the city's archbishop, is now a much visited museum displaying the cathedral's statues, tapestries and other treasures.

Taittinger, Mumm, Pommery and other famous cellars are headquartered



See Marne's vineyards from the sky in a hot air balloon



Exploring Châlons-en-Champagne by boat

Did you know?

During the Hundred Years' War, Reims Cathedral and the city was under siege by the English from 1359 to 1360



Reims Cathedral is a World Heritage Site

in Reims making the city one of the most important centres of champagne production in the region.

Épernay, champagne's prosperous capital, is 25 kilometres to the south. Stroll through the monumental Avenue de Champagne and admire the sumptuous mansions that were built by wealthy wine merchants in the 19th century. Even more remarkable perhaps is the distinguished avenue's exceptional underground allure: a 110km network of cellars dug out in the 18th and 19th centuries and now home to more than 300 million bottles of champagne.

Châlons-en-Champagne, known as the 'Sparkling Venice' and the department's capital, is intersected by the Marne, Nau and Mau rivers, making the city a joy to discover from the water.

Its centre boasts handsome squares and cafés where you can stop for a coffee before exploring attractions such as the Gothic St-Etienne Cathedral and the Notre-Dame-en-Vaux church, which houses Europe's largest carillon comprised of 56 bells.



Épernay's Avenue de Champagne boasts mansions built by wealthy wine merchants in the 19th century



Enjoy a glass of fizz at a champagne bar in Reims

AFFORDABLE PROPERTY

Johannes Landman (former ambassador to the Netherlands) fell in love with Argonne, the hilly and wooded area to the east, when he first visited in 1979. After spending summers with his French in-laws, he decided to buy the historic Château de Villers (*chateau-de-villers-en-champagne.nl/en*) in 1994, permanently settling there after his retirement in 2009. Miraculously, the centuries-old estate, which is situated on a hill and overlooks the beautiful village, managed to survive the ravages of war.

"Since the times of Jeanne d'Arc, this region witnessed many wars, of which the First World War was the most destructive," says Johannes.

"The French Revolution was also particularly ferocious in this border area and an obvious passageway into France for Austrian and Prussian troops.

"That explains why not many castles survived destruction," he continues.

In order to meet the cost of renovations and upkeep, parts of the château's estate were turned into a holiday let.

Johannes says: "We transformed one of the outbuildings, the Hunting Lodge, into a holiday cottage with two wings which can be rented separately or together.

"The east wing sleeps six to eight and the smaller west wing has two bedrooms. Recently, we restored the Great Stable. It sleeps two to eight and has a spacious loft and large balcony overlooking its own private garden."

The fact that Marne is not high on the list of those looking to settle or buy a second home or holiday let in France has its advantages.

"You can find attractive property here, *maisons de caractère*, as some are called, at relatively low prices," Johannes says.

"It helps if you are handy, because restorations are not cheap. Nevertheless, prices are way below what you would pay in the more popular and populated departments of France."

According to Trevor Leggett, Chairman of Leggett Immobilier (*leggettfrance.com*) the average price of a house in Marne is €1,578/m², so for a house of 150m² you would pay approximately €236,000. ▶



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FACTS ABOUT CHAMPAGNE

The Champagne wine region, located approximately 150km east of Paris, encompasses 34,000 hectares and stretches out over four viticultural areas: Montagne de Reims, Vallée de la Marne, Côte des Blancs and Côte des Bar.

Out of the 320 Champagne villages (*'crus'*), 17 are classified as Grand Cru and 42 as Premier Cru.

Champagne wines can be made with a blend of three grape varieties, each one adding their own specific characteristics to the *cuvée*: Pinot meunier, planted mostly in Vallée de la Marne, provides roundness and notes of apples, pears and honey; pinot noir, grown mainly in Montagne de Reims, packs a punch adding structure and body with forest fruits and spice; and chardonnay, king of the chalky soils in the Côte des Blancs, adds elegance and finesse with white flowers, minerality and citrusy notes.

Millésimes are made exclusively from a single year, blanc des blancs from chardonnay and blanc des noirs from pinot noir and/or pinot meunier. Rosé champagnes are made with 15% still red wine.

In 2015, Champagne's hillsides, houses and cellars were declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site. More than 300 million bottles of champagne are produced annually, of which 50% are exported (with the UK trumping the list of export markets).



Find out more about the Grand Est region completefrance.com/regions-of-France/alsace-champagne-ardenne-lorraine



Did you know?

The first vintage of Dom Pérignon was 1921 and it was only released for sale in 1936 in New York

Lac du Der has six sandy beaches and is abundant in birdlife



Above: Ripe red grapes in Verzenay

Below: Delicious *biscuits roses de Reims*



This compares to an average price in France (excluding Paris) of €1,983/m², or €297,450. “Of course, prices within the department vary,” he says. “Expect to pay over €2,000/m² in prime areas (Reims and Épernay) and under €1,100/m² in the most affordable, which are away from the vineyards towards the east and south-east of the department.”

GOURMET DELICACIES

While champagne attracts wine connoisseurs, Marne’s cuisine is equally tempting and will please even the most discerning of palates. From October to December, black truffles grow between the roots of the region’s trees and are used to add aroma and flair to many local dishes.

Mustard and oak-aged vinegar from Reims imparts zesty flavour to sauces, vinaigrettes and marinades. Reims mustard goes particularly well with the robust *jambon de Reims* and other local charcuterie. Though it may not sound very appealing, if you spot *pieds de porc à la Sainte-Ménéould* on a menu, do give the dish a go.

The recipe, which is believed to date to the 15th century, calls for simmering pig’s

trotters in a fragrant bouillon for at least 12 hours before breasting them and roasting them in the oven.

The region’s delicate, blush-coloured lentils, delicious in soups or hearty salads, are another must-try.

Sweet treats, including the cork-shaped chocolates known as *bouchons de Champagne* and Maison Fossier’s *biscuits roses*, are just as pretty as they are tasty. The production of the chocolates can be witnessed at Chocolatier Thibaut in the village of Pierry, and if you visit Maison Fossier’s factory in Reims, you can see how the pink biscuits (which according to tradition, should be dipped in champagne!) have been made since 1756.

Clearly, Marne’s charm goes beyond its famed drink. The department’s food, peaceful villages, historic cities and natural beauty make it one to keep in mind when house-hunting in France.

TURN OVER ▶

For a family’s story of finding their dream country villa in Oyes