

Le weekend

Short but sweet breaks



CHALON-SUR-SAÔNE

On the doorstep of the Côte Chalonnaise, **Paola Westbeek** explores a Ville d'Art et d'Histoire known as the cradle of photography

Nestled in the heart of southern Burgundy, Chalon-sur-Saône offers the perfect weekend escape, with its rich cultural heritage, architectural beauty and cosy restaurants that serve the region's wine-infused cuisine. It is the largest town in Saône-et-Loire, a rural *département* where peaceful hillside villages and lush woodlands invite you to

pause and savour life. From Chalon, you'll have plenty of opportunities to soak up this surrounding natural splendour, whether cycling along the Voie Verte or enjoying a leisurely cruise on the River Saône. And if you happen to like wine, it's good to know that you're practically at the doorstep of the Côte Chalonnaise, a lesser-known subregion of Burgundy certainly worth discovering.

Architectural allure

Even in the greyness of winter, the medieval half-timbered houses on Place Saint-Vincent manage to stand out with their irregular shapes and colourful facades, giving the town's picturesque market square a whimsical liveliness.

On Fridays and Sundays, when the *marché* is in full swing, no one seems bothered by the cold as terraces quickly

Above:
Café culture
in Place Saint-
Vincent

Top right:
Niépce
Photography
Museum

Bottom right:
Statue of
Nicéphore
Niépce



fill up with people slurping freshly shucked oysters or sipping a restorative *vin chaud*.

I've been visiting Chalon-sur-Saône every February for the past decade or so, but this time I'm spending a few days here in summer, and as expected, the square's typical Gallic charm is even more appealing on this sunny mid-July morning. My first stop is Le Verre Galant, one of the many welcoming restaurants encircling the magnificent

cathedral that dominates the square. While enjoying a glass of Rully, I admire its handsome neo-Gothic facade, which was destroyed during the Revolution and rebuilt in 1827. The rest of Cathédrale Saint-Vincent was erected between the 11th and 15th centuries in a Gothic/Romanesque style, and especially worth mentioning is its recently renovated 14th-century cloister. After a 10-year restoration period, it reopened to the public during the European Heritage Days in September 2019. The northern wing was completely rebuilt and boasts limestone pillars decorated with beautiful sculptures by Dijon artist Laetitia de Bazelaire.

The cathedral is the town's main landmark, but there are other noteworthy buildings nearby that add to Chalon's architectural allure. Among them is Théâtre Piccolo on Rue aux Fèvres. The theatre's design was inspired by the Royal Opera of Versailles and dates back to 1776. Though it was largely rebuilt in 1886, you can still admire its original facade decked with ionic pilasters. In stark contrast with this classical style is Maison de la Mothe, a striking part stone, part timber-framed house standing on the corner of Rue du Pont and Rue Saint-Vincent, built between the 15th and 16th centuries.

In the footsteps of Niépce

Listed as a Ville d'Art et d'Histoire, Chalon-sur-Saône is mainly known for being the cradle of photography. Its most famous citizen, Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, can be credited with taking the world's first photograph (called a heliography) in 1827. I decide to spend Saturday morning





following in his footsteps and make my way to 15 Rue de l'Oratoire, the house where the great inventor was born in 1765. If it wasn't for the plaque on the facade, you might easily overlook this humble dwelling located on what is an otherwise rather ordinary street. From here, it's a pleasant stroll towards the river to 28 Quai des Messageries, home to the Nicéphore Niépce Museum since 1974. With a vast collection detailing the origins of photography, including historic objects from Niépce's laboratory and more than three million images, it's easy to become engrossed in this fascinating art form and lose track of time while wandering through the two exhibition wings.

After admiring Niépce's statue on Place du Port Villiers (it is the work of Eugène Guillaume and dates to 1885), I cross Pont Saint-Laurent and head to the

Above:
View of Chalon

Middle:
Fountain in
Place Saint-
Vincent

Bottom:
Voie Verte
near Chalons



most delicious street in town, Rue de Strasbourg. Lined with restaurants serving everything from local to international cuisine, it's the perfect place to stop for lunch. At Chez Jules, I order *oeufs en meurette* (a poached egg with red wine sauce served on garlic toast) followed by a delicate fillet of trout with *beurre blanc*.

Cruising through the vineyards

Due to its proximity to the river, Chalon-sur-Saône's history has been linked with wine trade since Gallo-Roman times. The town gave its name to the Côte Chalonnaise, a viticultural area stretching out over 4,000 hectares and located to the south of the Côte-d'Or, known for some of Burgundy's finest *appellations*. Mostly made from pinot noir and chardonnay with a small percentage of aligoté, the wines produced in the Côte Chalonnaise's clay-limestone soils are similar in style to those of its prestigious neighbour, but are much more affordable. At the Maison des Vins, situated in Promenade Sainte-Marie, you can sample a selection of wines from the region's five *appellations*: Bouzeron, Rully, Mercurey, Givry and Montagny.

PHOTOS: ALAIN DOIRE, JÉRÔME MARCHE, HANS WESTBEEK

It was a winter wine getaway through the Côte Chalonnaise that first brought me to Chalon-sur-Saône all those years ago, and though there's nothing quite as idyllic as driving through the bare vineyards on frosty mornings while workers are busy pruning vines and the smoldering scent of wood fills the air, it's good to be here in summer. Cruising through the scenic Route des Grands Vins on Sunday afternoon, I admire the vineyards that are now lush and heavy with grapes, realising that the beauty of Chalon-sur-Saône and its surroundings transcends all seasons. ♥



Above: Driving through the vineyards in winter

Francofile

Discover the hometown of photography pioneer Niépce

GETTING THERE

It takes three hours by rail from Paris Gare de Lyon (TGV). From Lyon Aéroport, it's a 90-minute drive north to Chalon-sur-Saône.

GETTING AROUND

Cycling on the Voie Verte

Enjoy a scenery of hills, castles and waterways as you pedal through the smooth cycling paths stretching from Chalon-sur-Saône to Charnay-lès-Mâcon in the south. More information at the tourism office.

Chalon Balade sur Saône

Tel: 0033 (0)6 09 04 92 82
Take a leisurely cruise over the Saône with friends and family.

Don't forget to pack a picnic lunch and a bottle of local wine! Rentals from May through September, departing from the tourism office: 1hr 30 mins. Adults €25, children €10.

WHERE TO STAY

Couette et Tartine

Tel: 0033 (0)7 83 04 06 92
You'll feel right at home at this friendly bed and breakfast situated in a quiet corner of town, just a 10-minute stroll from the station. Each room has its own entrance. Doubles from €80.

WHERE TO EAT

Chez Jules

restaurant-chezjules.com
Tel: 0033 (0)3 85 48 08 34



TOURIST INFORMATION:

Tel: 0033 (0)3 85 48 37 97; achalon.com

Département: Saône-et-Loire (71)

Cosy restaurant serving regional cuisine made with local ingredients. Menus change every two months. Three-course menu €21 and €29, or à la carte. Open for lunch and dinner. Closed Thursdays and Sundays.

WHERE TO VISIT

Maison Nicéphore Niépce

Tel: 0033 (0)1 40 09 18 58
photo-museum.org
Take a short drive to Saint-Loup-de-Varennnes, 10km south of Chalon,

to visit the house where Niépce took his first photograph (known as Le Point de vue du Gras). Open daily (except Tuesdays) from 1 July to 31 August, 10am-6pm. Adults €6, children €3.

