



The *Decanter* travel guide to

World heritage wine regions

Wine is one of mankind's greatest traditions, bringing man closer to the land over thousands of years. On the 40th anniversary of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention, Katie Kelly Bell looks at five famous wine regions that are also designated World Heritage Sites

Above: the Château de Saumur dominates views along the Loire River, and the city is a perfect place to base yourself for a visit

Loire Valley, France

With its swathes of rolling vineyards and wheat fields surrounding palaces built or modified during the Renaissance, the architectural heritage of the Loire is a vivid testament to mankind's golden age.

The UNESCO area of the Loire comprises 164 towns and villages – including Chinon, Saumur and Angers – between the two hillsides that border the river from Sully-sur-Loire (Loiret) and Chalonnes-sur-Loire (Maine-et-Loire). Many of the region's charming villages and roadways are vestiges of the enormous Roman influence, as the Loire was a vital waterway between Rome and ancient Gaul.

Spring and autumn are ideal times to visit the Loire, when weather is still mild, summer crowds have thinned and winter's damp, dreary climate has not settled in. Base yourself in Saumur, a pretty little city famous for the Château de Saumur, a medieval castle depicted in illuminations in the French gothic manuscript *Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*. It is also the centre for the Loire's sparkling wine production (the Loire is France's second-largest producer of fizz) and home to the Cadre Noir, France's elite cavalry regiment. ➤

About UNESCO

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO)



identifies cultural and natural examples of heritage around the globe with the goal of protecting and preserving them for future generations. The organisation was founded in November 1945, just after the end of World War II, as a way to nurture humanity and heritage by developing 'the intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind'. Sites that qualify must have 'outstanding value to humanity'. Once a site has been accepted, UNESCO offers everything from technical assistance and public awareness to professional training and emergency assistance to preserve sites. UNESCO has 195 member states, while its World Heritage Committee, which meets yearly to select new sites and allocate funds as needed, has 21 member nations.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention, a treaty that has become the foremost international legal tool in support of the conservation of the world's cultural and natural heritage.

For more information, visit www.unesco.org

Douro Valley, Portugal

Demarcated in 1756, the Douro is one of the world's oldest wine regions and is a UNESCO World Heritage Site because of the human influence on its development. More than 2,000 years of winemaking have shaped it into a terraced, vine-covered, wine-producing destination. The highly acidic terroir is unforgiving schist, which winemakers have physically cracked and crushed to accommodate vines. Steep mountain contours require heavy terracing and water management; some vines have roots that run to 20m deep. Growing grapes here requires rare fortitude.

Portugal's famous river valley is a landscape of rugged, unforgiving hillsides that plunge into the deep Douro River below. Human grit and toil have shaped this virtual moonscape over the centuries.

Located in Portugal's northeast, between Barqueiros and Mazouco on the Spanish border, the western edge of the Douro is hemmed in by the Serra do Marão mountain range and covers roughly 160km. It is remote, sparsely populated and supremely beautiful in its own raw and wild way.

Most visit the region for the complex and beautiful Ports, but today many Portuguese producers are crafting fine red table wines, too. If you visit it's best to enjoy a boat ride up the Douro River or a train journey: roads are poorly marked and narrow. And, if timing is no issue, visit when the moon is full and round, casting her otherworldly light over the valley's quiet beauty.

Below: the raw and wild beauty of Portugal's Douro Valley, with the famous river leading to Pinhão in the distance



Photographs: Michael Howard/ACOrnersImages, T. Sanson; (Previous page) Riccardo Spilla/SIME/ACOrnersImages



Above: a tram passes in front of Bordeaux's 18th-century Place de la Bourse, reflected by the Miroir d'Eau – a shallow pool of water

Bordeaux, France

As well as being France's largest wine-growing region, Bordeaux is home to some of the world's most revered vineyards. However, it is the town of Bordeaux ('Port of the Moon', named for the crescent-shaped bend in the Garonne River) that is the official UNESCO site, due to its role as a cultural centre and for its architectural consistency.

According to UNESCO, the city's 2,000-year-old role as the capital of a world-famous wine-producing region make it a shining example of cultural heritage. And in many ways, the city is as lovely and intriguing as the region's châteaux.

The city centre also gets praise for its beautifully preserved classical and neo-classical architecture, much of which has remained unchanged for well over two centuries. In the past decade most of the buildings (previously covered in layers of grime and soot) have undergone a massive façade-cleansing, lending added lustre to the city's grand structures. Given Bordeaux's density of fine dining, shopping

'The city's 2,000-year-old role as the capital of a world-famous wine-producing region make it a shining example of cultural heritage'

and culture, as well as its situation at the centre of the region's various appellations, it's an ideal place to stay during a visit.

Visitors can enjoy guided tours of the city, take a class at the Bordeaux Wine School, jaunt into the Médoc (or any of the other nearby appellations) and finish the day with dinner in a Michelin-starred restaurant. Plan your trip for May to enjoy all of the outdoor offerings and beat the summer crowds. ➤



Above: the slopes of Tokaj in Hungary – Europe's first classified wine region

Left: the Rhine River threads its way through historic towns and wine villages in this western part of Germany

Middle Rhine, Germany

The Middle Rhine's beauty is well-chronicled, but it gained UNESCO status for its role as a major trade artery in the evolution of history and human development. The region, also known as the Rhine Gorge, is an extraordinary example of a mutually beneficial relationship between land and people.

The area's natural centrepiece, the Rhine River, threads its way through the steep-sided valley. Ancient castles, historic towns and vineyards imbue the area with a uniquely romantic aspect – more so than any other wine region.

Numerous hiking trails surround the villages, offering visitors magnificent vistas of vineyards and forested countryside. Riesling flourishes on the

region's precipitous hillsides but requires great care and skill during harvest (some slopes angle nearly 45°). Winemakers here endure the taxing conditions for the reward of crisp wines with racy minerality and intense fruitiness.

The ideal way to explore the region, and certainly the most bucolic, is by boat. Consider making the village of Boppard your home base, a 2,000-year-old town that hosts an annual walk through the vineyards on the last Sunday in April. During the scenic walk, which celebrates bud break, participants enjoy the various makeshift stops along the way to taste and visit with local winemakers and chefs.

Tokaj, Hungary

Hungary's Tokaj appellation, characterised by its rolling and verdant hills, has the distinction of being Europe's first classified wine region. The thousand-year-old winemaking traditions that still remain in place today make it an obvious choice for UNESCO world heritage designation.

Home to the famous Tokaji-Aszú dessert wine (characterised by French King Louis XIV as 'the wine of kings, the king of wines'), it is also noteworthy for its labyrinthine cellars where these historic sweet wines are stored. The Ungvári cellar in Sátoraljaújhely, near the Slovakian border, comprises four floors which connect 27 different cellars, accessed from different, above-ground gates. Covered in extraordinary mould, the cellar labyrinth is one ingredient that contributes to the magic of these dessert wines.

Plan to stay in the village of Tokaj for stress-free, simple access to tasting rooms, hotels and restaurants. Logistics in Hungary are challenging: trains and buses are complicated to navigate and taxis are rare. Wine buses do offer tours but you may also choose to hire a driver to take you from winery to winery (make sure you've made your tasting appointments in advance); drivers are essential as there's a zero blood alcohol policy while driving here. Time your visit to coincide with the annual Tokaji Wine Festival during the last weekend in May. [D](#)

US-based Katie Kelly Bell specialises in food, wine and travel, and writes the Adventures in Taste blog for Forbes



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www.royal-tokaji.com