

# Angers: the tranquil face of France

By Matt Amato

Time hasn't diminished France's volatile relationship with authority. The 18th century revolution, in some ways, could be the starting point. Fast forward a couple centuries to the 1960s, Parisian streets again shook with zealous screams as student-led Socialists infamously controlled the capital a couple of days before succumbing to the government's crushing counter-resistance.

More recently, the city's disgruntled working-class youth tested President **Nicholas Sarkozy** with bricks and Molotov cocktails, angered by bleak employment opportunities within the country's grinding economy.

On Bastille Day (celebrated annually on July 14) in the medieval city of Angers, roughly 300 kilometers southwest of Paris, however, the mood was ghostly quiet. The cafes lining its cobbled streets and arcades were closed, clearing a path normally hard to navigate on bustling sunny summer days. Boulangeries, bakeries that are a staple of everyday French life, had also shut down, depriving the few passersby craving wafts of baguettes.

Had France decided to mark the holiday symbolizing its seizure of a radical ideology by sleeping? Was a national hangover in effect? Or does the first explosive event of the French Revolution remain so morally sacrosanct that commerce and celebration should be viewed sacrilegious?

"You've got to remember that in this part of France [Anjou] the people are very laid back," explained **Tim Gibbons**, a British ex-pat street performer, in Angers for a few days on a nationwide tour. "Today [the day after Bastille Day], you see everything's back to normal, but they don't party like other people on national holidays."

While Anjou's psyche is relatively passive, Angers is somewhat lively. This city of roughly 250,000, perched on the Loire River, has a sizable student population, lending an appreciatively chic, sartorial air to its hulking monuments.

But Angers has faced tumultuous times. A massive ancient chateau, once the city's entrance, testifies to it. According to local history, Norman-period harassment was routine. Before that, Romans used the settlement as a base to repel Gallic tribes. And one tour guide revealed the parched grass moat was once filled with exotic savage animals.

"You hear the history, but you'd never imagine it sometimes. In Paris, people are still tense, like any other major city, but a little more so. But it is easygoing here," said **Franck Prost**, a nearby horse farmer and trainer, puffing on a filter-less cigarette. "Even though I live in the country, I come here because it's beautiful, a little busy, but not a pain in the arse."

So what should a visitor do? "You have to see the tapestries, some of the other towns nearby, and just walk around this place. The region is very rich," he said.

At the fortress Chateau d'Angers, The Apocalypse tapestry, in particular, is considered among the country's most exquisite 14th century pieces. There are also a number of contemporary tapestries, solidifying the city's image as a cultural treasure.

Many use Angers as a launching pad to explore the rest of Anjou. The medieval cities of Saumur and Nantes are within an hour's travel by train or car. Many tourists prefer to follow the Loire River's path, as it offers a wealth of villages and towns en route to Saumur,



which is a must-see.

Most consider it Anjou's most breathtaking town; its pristine chateau perched over handsome townhouses spread out below on both banks of the river and on the large island mid-stream.

However, the city's serenely impregnable image took a knock in 2001, when a huge chunk of the star-shaped fortifications added during the Wars of Religion – when Saumur was a Protestant stronghold – collapsed. Like Angers, Saumur has a number of 15th century tapestries and art pieces.

"I come here with my wife every year because I just love how laid back and beautiful it is," said **Trevor Tulloch**, an English chartered surveyor. "You can have a glass of wine or dinner and not feel rushed, like you get in the south of France or Paris. Tomorrow's our last full day, and we're going on a bike trip along the river to see some of the other towns."

Regional dishes focus on poultry and freshwater fish, reflecting its farming roots. Prices are also more reasonable, with a three-course meal under \$20 not

uncommon. As **Patrick Depallier**, a local travel agent, succinctly put it, "Yes, it's much different here than in other parts of the country. We eat well, and we live prudently. Parisians may call us boring, but they would anyway. Let them think what they want."

## Getting there:

The TGV train runs several times daily from Paris' Charles de Gaulle International Airport to Angers. Travel duration ranges from 90-130 minutes, depending on train times. Buying a return ticket minimizes the cost. All of Anjou's major towns can be reached by Angers train station.

## Places to stay:

In the heart of Angers, the three-star Hotel de France is only steps away from the train station and a number of eateries.