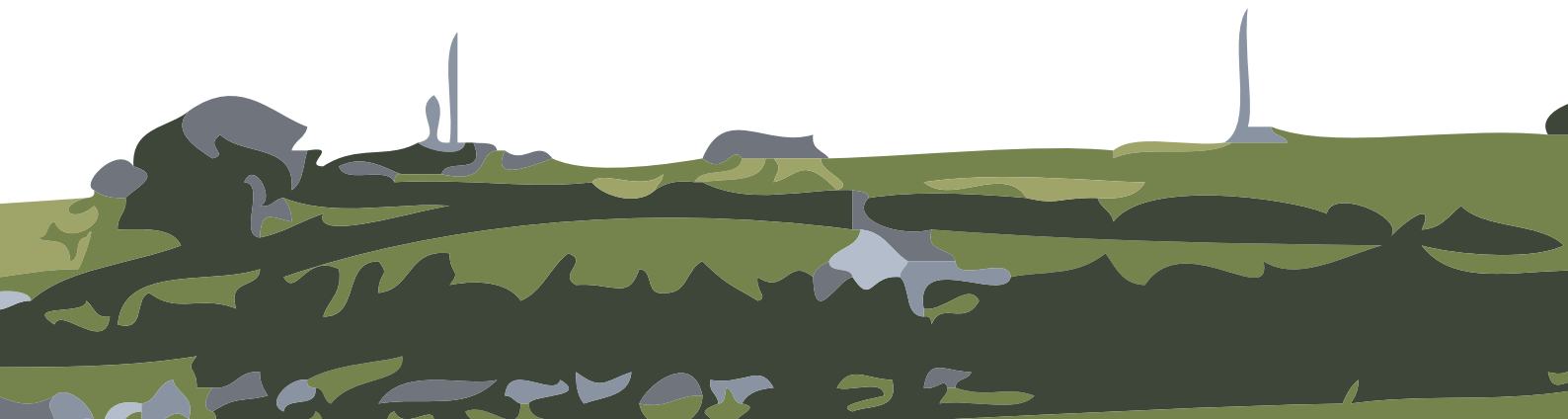


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Via Fluvia

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Via Fluvia

France's two greatest rivers, the Loire and the Rhône, come tantalisingly close... but to cycle between them, you need to conquer the hilly country of the Haute-Loire and the Ardèche.

Until now. A brand new rail trail, the Via Fluvia ('Way of the Rivers'), connects Loire to Rhône via fabulous scenery and gentle climbs. It's a work in progress, so you'll have to divert onto roads now and then, but this is already shaping up to be one of the country's finest véloroutes – whether ridden in its own right or as part of a longer cross-country tour.

The old metre-gauge railways of the Vivarais take you up to the watershed near Dunières, after which a former freight line whisks you downhill to Annonay. There's no railtrail yet after Annonay, which is the perfect excuse to enjoy the glorious descent of the Cance valley to the Rhône at Sarras.

Lavoûte sur Loire (0m)

The Via Fluvia begins on the Haute Loire just a short way downstream of Le Puy en Velay, at Lavoûte sur Loire, where there's a railway station on the Lyon–le Puy line. Cross the viaduct over the Loire and follow the gravel trail, slowly climbing up towards the watershed as the hills loom ahead. (Those on road bikes may choose to follow the parallel D 7 road.)

Rosières (6km)

The railway path skirts the outside of Rosières, but the town centre is worth a visit. The stunning Corboeuf ravines just after the town are nicknamed the 'French Colorado'. From here the scenery becomes more dramatic and the route twistier, crossing an impressive viaduct at Chavalamard. This is all good-quality rail trail, though a few sections are shared with cars.

Yssingaux (21km)

The route across Yssingaux is fairly uninteresting, running beside the busy N88 road before dropping onto a local access road. Yssingaux is a local centre (*sous-prefecture*) and its town centre a useful stop-off, just a short ride uphill from the Via Fluvia.

From here, the voie verte is an absolute delight. The smooth tarmac curves through verdant scenery in steep valleys that you would swear had been transplanted across the border from Switzerland. A short missing section in the Lignon valley currently necessitates a brief diversion onto the D 105, rejoining at la Chapelette: the viaduct and tunnel here have been fully restored, cul-de-sac though they may be, so don't miss out.

The little village of Lapte is especially picturesque and merits the brief detour. The villagers have erected 'Welcome to Lapte' signs on the cycleway – a nice touch.

Montfaucon en Velay (45km)

Approaching Montfaucon, the rail trail meets a real railway at Raucoules. This is the terminus of the Velay Express, the inaptly named steam railway that rattles along the old metre-gauge line to Tence, Le Chambon-sur-Lignon and Saint-Agrève. (Bike carriage is available on request in a special wagon, so you can connect with the Dolce Via route at Saint-Agrève.)

The preserved railway once continued to Montfaucon and Dunières, but this section was replaced with an excellent-quality asphalt cycleway in 2015. It's a steady climb across open wooded landscapes to Dunières, from where the route follows another breathtaking river valley through Riotord to the watershed at the Col du Tracol. The old railway tunnel hasn't yet been refurbished for cycling, so for now you need to take the hairpins of the D 503, with gravel farm tracks connecting it to the

trackbed on either side.

Saint Sauveur en Rue (69km)

The route is fragmentary from Saint Sauveur, through Bourg Argental, to Saint Marcel lès Annonay. At several points the old railway is cyclable as a (very) minor road, but at the time of writing, you'll need to duck back onto the busy main road around Bourg Argental, and on the approach to Saint Marcel.

A *voie verte* is under construction at the moment and is expected to open later in 2022, which will avoid the busy road.

As a temporary alternative you can follow the D 503 to Saint Julien Molin Molette, then return to Saint Marcel lès Annonay passing the Lac du Ternay. It's a significant climb but avoids the heavy traffic.

Saint Marcel lès Annonay (86km)

Normal service is resumed with the tarmac rail trail from Saint Marcel into Annonay. Watch out for industrial traffic in Saint Marcel and on the entrance to Annonay, where it doubles as an access road for a while.

Annonay (94km)

The bustling town of Annonay, the largest in the Ardèche, is best known as the birthplace of the Montgolfier brothers – the inventors of the hot-air balloon. There's an annual balloon festival (in June) to commemorate the town's favourite sons.

The official route stops here for now, but work is underway to extend it downstream. As well as the main route to Sarras, there'll also be a second branch to Serrières (to the north).

For now, the stand-out favourite is to follow the D 270 to Sarras, an easy, lightly trafficked, and superbly scenic road clinging to the side of the Cance valley.

Sarras (115km)

At last: the mighty Rhône. A couple of kilometres on the busy D 86 will take you to the Via Rhône cycle route by the Saint Vallier bridge, but you might choose to continue to the mouth of the Cance on a riverside track. From here, it's 300km downstream to the Mediterranean – or there's a train station to take you back to Lyon and the line to Le Puy.

