

## **J / Laval**

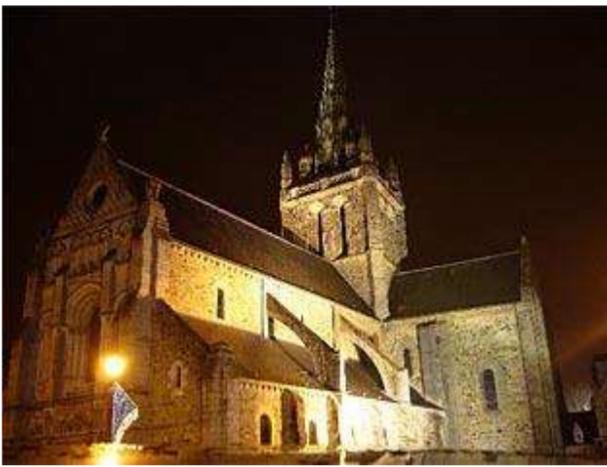
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With a population of over 50,000, Laval is the “capital » of the department of La Mayenne, and larger than Alençon (in the near-by department of l’Orne, with about 26,000).

Laval is a historic town which dates back to the 6<sup>th</sup> century and lies on the banks of the river Mayenne. Its visit, again, can be combined with a fresh produce market held in the town centre every Tuesday and Saturday, near the Palais de Justice.



The medieval town with its half-timbered houses, towers and ramparts is interesting to walk around and some of the shops in the Grande Rue have origins going back centuries. ( the Grande Rue is the one which descends from the castle to the river and the old bridge).



Ranked as one of the most beautiful buildings in the city is the Basilica Notre Dame d'Avesnières with its magnificent steeple, overlooking the river.

The city is restoring its “bateaux-lavoirs”, the first of which appeared in 1860. Out of the 22 in operation around 1904, only two survive and exemplify how these laundry boats operated (on 2 storeys, with boilers in the hold). The St Julien stopped operating as late as 1971



Today, the “Valis Guidonis”, takes you down the river for day cruises, with or without lunch, and you can see the countryside in a different way while gliding down the river.

<http://www.laval-tourisme.com/decouvrir-bateau-promenade-restauration>

The chateau dates back to the 11<sup>th</sup> century and was built to protect the city and the river crossing. The old part shelters the “Art Naïf” museum. The reason for the existence of this collection is that Laval was the birthplace of the famous ‘Douanier Rousseau’ (1844-1910)

Now internationally famous, Henri (Le Douanier) Rousseau was not acclaimed in his lifetime, and his paintings were mocked and ridiculed for their “naïve” or “primitive” quality.





When he died, he offered some of his paintings to the city of Laval, which refused the gift ...! Today, Laval owns only one painting by its illustrious son, (small, but beautiful) acquired much later and for a handsome price !!

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henri\\_Rousseau](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henri_Rousseau)

The **Lactopole** offers a very interesting visit. Plan at least a couple of hours in this very large museum which takes you through the history of milk production, in parallel with that of the Besnier family, starting with a single milk truck in the thirties and now at the head of a forever expanding conglomerate (who has never heard of President camembert or butter ?). The last room, with a video presentation of the commercial success of the Lactalis group (still headed by a member of the Besnier family) makes your head reel. Lactalis is presently the third milk group in the world and has maintained its headquarters in Laval.



<http://www.lactopole.com/>

If you prefer very small to very big, pay a visit to 'Le musee vivant de l'ecole publique' (The state school living museum) which has reconstituted a classroom of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, complete with original furniture and artifacts. Fun ! (but not open every day of the week).



<http://www.museecole-laval53.fr/2Accueil2.html>

Finally, for a breath of fresh air, head to the "Jardin botanique de la Perrine", a botanical garden and park. The garden was created in 1920 by Jules Denier on land purchased in 1885 by the city from its previous owner, who lost it to gambling debts. It consists of a French garden and a second English-style rose garden containing about a hundred rose varieties. The garden also contains a memorial to native son *Le Douanier*, Henri Rousseau the painter, engraved with the autograph poem written by Guillaume Apollinaire in chalk on its stone, as well as a duck pond, an aviary of exotic birds and another of pigeons, and an orangerie now reworked as exhibition hall.

