

F / Le Mans 46km / 50'

Le Mans is the largest city around us (over 150,000 people for the city proper, and more than double for Greater Le Mans).

It is known worldwide for its famous **24-hour car-race** (the first of which was held in 1923), which takes place every year in June, and attracts thousands of visitors, mainly foreign. The race takes place for a good part, on public roads (closed for the occasion...), so, the rest of the year, you may drive on them and fancy yourself as a test pilot ! Just take the Tours road, South of Le Mans, and drive on the famous "Mulsanne straight" for a couple of hundred meters. If you can arrive before race day, you will see cars practicing on the tracks and the parade of drivers and cars through the streets of Le Mans. Lots of boutiques and merchandising outlets are set up during the race period. Entry to actual racetrack events can be expensive.



If you are a fan, you should not miss the 'Musée de l'Automobile', where you can see and (almost) touch a large collection of cars, up to recent, and most impressive winners.

<http://france-for-visitors.com/loire/le-mans/racetrack-and-car-museum.html>

Do not forget that Le Mans has a long tradition with automobiles, going back to Amedee Bollee and his first steam-driven car in 1873. Today, one major source of employment is a huge Renault factory, now dedicated to building agricultural machinery.

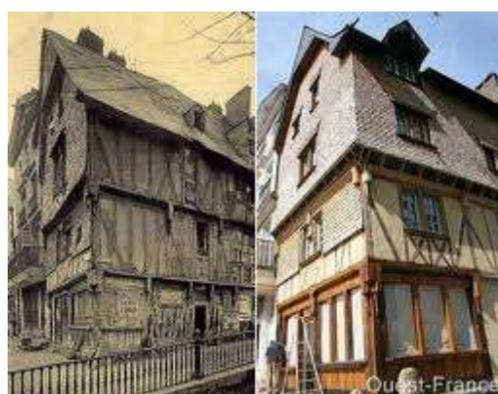
But there is more to Le Mans than just cars ! To visit the old town 'Le Vieux Mans' as it used to be called, now replaced by "Plantagenet city", you should pick a Friday or a Sunday, because this allows you to start your visit by going to a large open-air market, just at the foot of the cathedral. You will be able to stock fresh produce, fish, meat, cheese, everything needed to make a feast. There will also be some clothing, shoes etc., and on Fridays, a small antique section on the lower side.

After exploring the market, you can just climb the steps, near the fountain, and you will find yourself ready to take a look at the cathedral. But, from the market place, you should first admire its spectacular flying buttresses.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cath%C3%A9drale_Saint-Julien



From the cathedral, you will then proceed to the winding cobbled streets and their beautifully preserved medieval buildings, each with a rich history behind it.



It was here, in 1129, that Geoffrey Plantagenet, Count of Maine and Anjou, married Matilda, daughter of Henry I of England, and where their son, the future Henry II Plantagenet, was born.

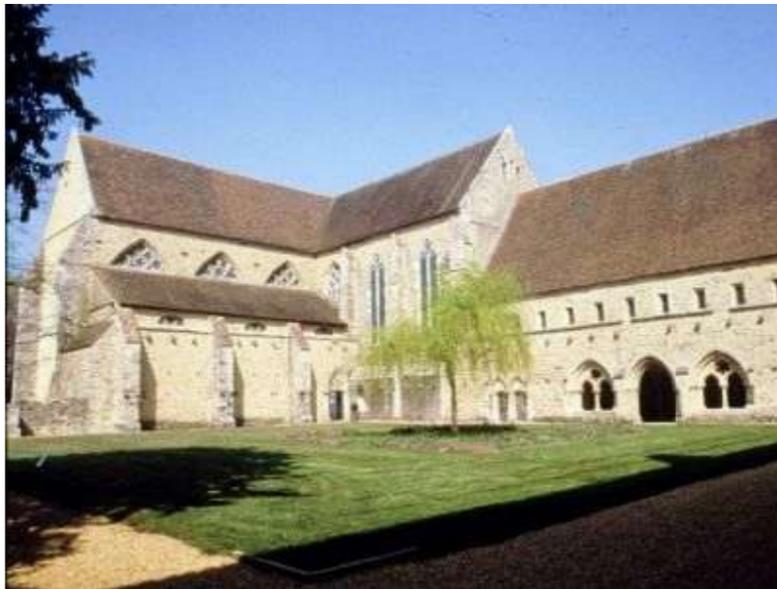
Le Mans will surprise many with its Roman heritage. The city's walls, now restored and all exposed to view from the river, are in themselves worth a visit. The 1300m-long construction, with 11 towers is one of the finest of its type and the decorative black and white geometric motifs are fascinating. It remains some of the most complete Gallo-Roman city walling that survives.



Le Mans also boasts a Cistercian Abbey, '**l'Abbaye de l'Epau**'. On the outskirts of the city, yet in rural surroundings, the site is serene and beautiful.

It was founded in the 13th Century by Queen Berangaria of Navarre in 1229, and is one of the finest examples of a Cistercian building in France. The Sovereign, Dame of Le Mans lies within the Abbey.

<http://france-for-visitors.com/loire/le-mans/abbaye-de-l-epau.html>



There is a large supermarket ("Auchan") on the way back to us, direction "Alencon". It will be on your right-hand side as you drive out of town