

# Wine Country Touring

## A Passionate Journey

For the wine lover who's as passionate about travel as they are about fine Cabernets, touring the wine country can be the vacation of a lifetime. Wine touring has become one of the hottest specialty travel options available and wine-savvy travelers now have a wide choice of fascinating wine regions to visit worldwide.

It's not hard to understand why wine travel has become so popular. Today's wine lover has as big a thirst for knowledge as they do for great wine.

Wine education has been booming in recent years and wine tastings are now regularly held in most cities. Taking a wine tour is the ultimate step in developing your wine knowledge, a grown-up "field trip" to see first-hand where and how your favorite wines are made. It's also a very pleasant excuse to spend time in some of the most beautiful areas of the world and enjoy the rich, local gastronomic and cultural heritage that the wine regions offer.

Here in the States, wine loving tourists can find excellent wines and scenic beauty in the wine country of California, Oregon, Washington and New York state. Touring on your own is easy and each year, millions of visitors flock to the wine country to watch the harvest and taste at local wineries. Many wineries have public tasting rooms and some also have a restaurant, wine shop, gift shop, tours of the facility, gardens, and even a theatre. Quaint B&Bs and luxurious hotels abound, as do excellent restaurants. But for those who want a more in-depth wine experience, taking an organized wine tour may be a better option. Jim Tennant, owner of Wine Destinations ([www.winedestinations.com](http://www.winedestinations.com)), one of the Napa Valley's best wine tour companies, explains, "Touring on your own is like trying to understand the United States by going to Disneyland. The wineries are very

tourist-oriented, and don't give you the feeling of the real wine country. We make special arrangements for people to go to smaller wineries, where they can come in contact with the people who are actually doing the (wine) work."

It's exactly that kind of intimate, unique and authentic experience that most wine lovers look for from an organized wine tour. The best wine tour companies have contacts at the top wineries, and are able to book private visits and tastings that the average

tourist could not arrange on his own. For the real wine enthusiast, the opportunity to go behind the scenes and meet the people who make their favorite wines is a thrilling experience. Personal contact is the key: having the opportunity to sip a winemaker's latest vintage in the shade of his patio or join him for a walk in the vineyard are one-of-a-kind experiences that quality wine tours can offer.

Good wine tour operators have extensive knowledge of the countries they operate in and speak the language fluently. This is especially important when your wine passion takes you abroad. Although language is not an issue in the Australian or South African wine country, it can be an obstacle in European or South American countries. Just finding the wineries can be an ordeal, since many are located on tiny country roads that are invariably poorly marked. Countries like Australia make considerable efforts to encourage and facilitate wine tourism, but others like France, Italy or Chile still have a long way to go to make wine touring accessible to all. If your high-school French or Spanish is not what it used to be, taking an organized wine tour can help you get the most out of your foreign wine vacation.

Wine lovers who enjoy foreign travel have their pick of some of the most beautiful and exciting destinations in the world. The



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hottest countries are those that are currently making news in the world of wine: France, Italy, Australia, South Africa, Chile, Argentina, and Hungary. Each country has a wealth of wine-making history and culture and offers a great variety of wines to discover during your travels.

France is the Number One tourist destination in the world and a big part of the country's allure is its beautiful and historic wine country. From the majestic chateaux of Bordeaux to the languid Mediterranean charm of the Rhone Valley, from the flowered villages of Alsace to the rolling hillsides of Champagne, France offers travelers an enchanting wine country experience. The American company French Wine Explorers ([www.wine-tours-france.com](http://www.wine-tours-france.com)) can give you an insider's view of the French wine country, on a scheduled or customized wine tour led by two professional, certified sommeliers who work in the French wine business.

One of the most popular wine destinations in Europe is the sultry and lovely Tuscan wine country of Italy. You'll discover the famous wines of Chianti Classico and Brunello di Montalcino, as well as the newest "Super Tuscans" that are revolutionizing the Italian wine industry. Custom Tours of Tuscany ([www.customtourtuscany.com](http://www.customtourtuscany.com)), a Chicago-based company, arranges fully customized group wine tours of Tuscany, which also can include visits to important art or historic sights in the area.

Want a more exotic wine country adventure? Why not try South Africa, one of the world's most up-and-coming vineyards. Cape Winelands Tours ([www.capewinelands.com](http://www.capewinelands.com)) is the only American company focusing exclusively on the Winelands, the dramatically beautiful wine-producing region of South Africa. Or try Australia's rugged wine country, which offers great wines and the quirky fun of the "laid down under" culture. The Wine and Travel Company ([www.thewineandtravelco.com](http://www.thewineandtravelco.com)), based in Toronto, offers customized wine tours of Australia, and can also take you to the wine country of Hungary, Spain, New

Zealand or Canada (yes, there is a wine country in Canada!).

If you're a serious wine enthusiast, make sure that the wine tour you sign up for is worthy of the name. Many wine tours are nothing more than a sightseeing tour with a few brief winery visits thrown in (and not very good wineries at that), led by guides who have no particular wine training or experience. Look for companies that feature top-quality wineries, at least two winery visits per day, and opportunities for more wine tasting at local restaurants serving finely-prepared regional cuisine. Group size should be small, so each person can have the opportunity to have his questions answered and have a personal contact with the winemaker. Many of the best small wineries simply do not accept groups larger than 15 people.

Ask about the qualifications of the person who will be leading your tour. The guide should be bilingual and have extensive knowledge of the region to be visited, its wines, and its culture. Expert wine tour guides are either working wine professionals or have completed professional-level wine studies.

For those who prefer a less intensive wine vacation, many companies offer tours with equal portions of sightseeing and wine touring. Again, best to go with a specialized wine tour operator who can ensure that the wine part of your program is of the highest quality. Some companies have tours that include cooking classes or visits to cheese or olive oil producers, great for travelers who are as passionate about food as they are about wine.

Speaking of food... No wine tour is complete without great meals. In "Old World" countries like Italy, France or Spain, great wine is always thought of as an accompaniment to great cuisine, and understanding the local gastronomy is essential to understanding its wines. Meals are also a great opportunity to play with food and wine pairing and to try some more obscure local wines that you know you'll never find at home.



Volume 1, Issue 3

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A good alternative to signing up for a scheduled wine tour is having a customized, private wine tour designed for you and your travel companions. Most good wine tour companies offer customized tours and families, groups of friends, corporations and their clients, and wine clubs are among the groups that find this to be an ideal option. The tour company will tailor the itinerary to your group's wishes, arrange your hotel accommodations, transportation and meals, and assign a wine expert guide to your group for all or part of your trip.

If you decide to travel on your own, the Internet can be a great information resource. Many wineries now have web sites, and email makes it easy to request a tasting for your upcoming trip. The wine-growing regions often have promotional organizations that publish extensive information on touring the wine country, like the web site for the Interprofessional Committee of the Rhone Valley ([www.vins-rhone.com/ANGLAIS/index2.htm](http://www.vins-rhone.com/ANGLAIS/index2.htm)). Amazon.com features a wonderful series of books edited by the illustrious wine writer Hugh Johnson called *Touring in the Wine Country*. These informative and beautifully illustrated books provide winery, restaurant and hotel suggestions, as well as extensive information on the region and its wines.

Remember to contact wineries in advance to make appointments for tasting, either by fax or by email. Choose a hotel in a

central location, so you can spend your time exploring the wine country rather than driving unnecessary distances in unknown territory. Buy a phrasebook in the language of the country, and be sure to buy a detailed map of the area.

Whether you travel on your own or with other like-minded wine lovers on an organized tour, your wine vacation can be one of the most memorable you'll ever take. Winemakers are colorful, passionate people, and spending time with them transports us into a mystical and romantic world most people can only imagine as they sip their wine at home. Spontaneous and enthusiastic, they'll open a rare, old vintage just because you expressed sincere interest in it, or take you out into the vineyard to share a particularly beautiful sunset over the vines. Wine is about passion, and sharing the passionate life of the wine country is one of the most pleasurable ways to spend your holidays.

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