



# Estavayer-le-Lac

Medieval town



Self-guided QR-code tour  
English version





## Estavayer-le-Lac

Once a thriving port, Estavayer-le-Lac today is a popular tourist resort thanks to its fantastic location on the southern shores of Lake Neuchâtel and right in the heart of the Grande Cariçaie nature reserve. With its temperate climate and beautiful beaches, the “City of Roses” attracts visitors from far and wide, particularly in the summer months. But its stunning medieval architecture, winding cobbled streets, covered carriage entrances and fountains are admired and enjoyed all year round. If you long to visit a destination that is authentic, scenic and steeped in history, then Estavayer-le-Lac is the place for you.

### Tours and visitor trails

There are lots of ways to make the most of your visit to Estavayer-le-Lac. You could opt for a self-guided QR code tour, or take a leisurely stroll around the medieval city walls. Alternatively, you could hop on board the mini-train or explore the town with the help of an experienced guide. For more information and brochures, head to the tourist office.

### QR codes

There are a total of 16 interpretive panels dotted around the town, each with a QR code. Simply scan the code using your smartphone to listen to the audio commentary for additional insights into Estavayer’s fascinating history. Enjoy your visit to Estavayer-le-Lac!

To be able to scan the QR codes from your mobile phone, you first need to download a QR code reader. There are several free iPhone and Android applications available.

## History

### Prehistoric settlement

Humans have inhabited the site of present-day Estavayer-le-Lac since Mesolithic times (8000-5500 BC), as confirmed by the remains of a dug-out canoe found under the château de Chenaux. By the late Bronze Age (1000-900 BC), a large village had colonised the lakeshore. The first correction of the Jura waters in 1879 uncovered the remnants of hundreds of pile dwellings that would have dotted this earlier settlement.

Throughout history, the popularity of these shores fluctuated with the lake’s water levels. In Roman times, for example, the population was forced to move to higher ground due to rising water levels. While few artefacts have been found within the confines of the medieval town, vestiges of human occupation dating from the first Iron Age and the Roman era have been unearthed along the Motte-Châtel esplanade.

### Estavayer - a tale of three castles

The history of Estavayer is intertwined with that of its three seigneuries. Originally the dominion of three branches of the Estavayer family, the territory was occupied by the Royal House of Savoy, and later the city of Fribourg which turned the town into the centre of one of its bailiwicks. As a result, the town boasted three castles of which only one, the château de Chenaux, survives.

Given that there is no written record of Estavayer before 1000 AD, the origins of the medieval city remain shrouded in mystery. However, the fact that the town’s church is dedicated to Saint Lawrence, a martyr revered in

# History

the early Middle Ages, would suggest that Estavayer had been a place of Christian worship since the end of the Roman era.

The earliest historical reference to an autonomous seignery dates to the 12th century, with mention of Renaud, Lord of Estavayer, and his son, Conon. The Estavayer dynasty elected to build their fortress on the top of a rocky outcrop, known as "Motte-Châtel", not far from the church. This was an excellent strategic location as the sugarloaf-shaped cliff was virtually unassailable.

Following the death of their father, Conon, brothers William and Renaud II shared feudal rights over the territory until 1240. While sovereignty over the surrounding villages was clearly assigned to one or the other, the town of Estavayer was their joint fiefdom. One generation later, Renaud's descendants had split into a third branch. The three co-seigneurs decided that the ever-growing town could be better defended if each lord had his own family seat.

By the end of the 13th century, Estavayer had three castles: Motte-Châtel which remained in the hands of the older branch of the family; the Savoy-style château de Chenaux, built by the Estavayer-Chenaux branch on the north side of the town; and the château de Savoie, built by the Estavayer-Cugy family around 1300 to the south of the town. The latter owes its name to the fact that huge debts forced the family to sell the property to the House of Savoy in 1349.

Chenaux is the only castle which has survived completely intact. The sole remaining vestige of the château de Savoie is its imposing square tower which is flanked by what would have been the outer walls of the main building. As for Motte-Châtel, by the end of the 13th century it had ceased to serve a defensive function and was subsequently demolished. The ruling family occupied the main part of the bailey before building a more comfortable residence, close to the church. The house, which dates from the early 14th century, has survived and is known as the "Maison des Sires".



1. Collegiate Church of Saint Lawrence
2. Castle of Chenaux
3. Castle entrance
4. Dungeon
5. et 6. Brickbuilt round towers

## Humbert, Bastard of Savoy

In the early 15th century, the House of Savoy strengthened its foothold in La Broye. In 1403, Amadeus VIII, Duke of Savoy, gifted all incomes from the territory to his half-brother Humbert, nicknamed "the Bastard of Savoy", so as to keep a firmer grip on the northern confines of his purlieu. Humbert embraced his new home, choosing Estavayer as his main residence. As well as two houses in town, Humbert acquired the château de Savoie in 1421. He also bought the château de Chenaux in 1432 from co-seigneur, Anselm of Estavayer, who had fallen on hard times and could no longer afford the castle's upkeep.

Humbert reinforced the fortress and flanked it with imposing round towers. An architectural show of strength, this urban stronghold sent out a clear message to the denizens of Estavayer whose record as loyal subjects was, at best, patchy. Humbert died in 1443 before work on the interior of the fortress was completed. He was buried in the Holy Trinity burial chapel of the





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Dominican convent that he founded in 1423-25. The people of Estavayer remembered Humbert with fondness and viewed his legacy in a positive light. Documents in the town archives refer to him as “Humbert, of happy memory”.

## Burgundian Wars and Fribourg rule

On the eve of the Burgundian wars, the overlord of the Estavayer co-seigneurs, James of Savoy, the Duke of Romont, pledged his allegiance to Charles the Bold. His actions led the Confederates to launch an attack on Estavayer in 1475. Contrary to contemporary Swiss accounts, the assault was far from a rout. Admittedly, the town's defender, co-seigneur Claude of Estavayer, was killed, as were the soldiers manning the garrison. However, the population escaped virtually unscathed and the only building that was torched was the château de Chenaux.

In 1478, faced with crippling debts, the co-seigneurs of Estavayer-Chenaux were forced to surrender the château de Chenaux, and with it their feudal rights, to their creditors, their Excellencies of Fribourg. This marked the start of Fribourg domination, which would be further consolidated in 1536, when Fribourg acquired the château de Savoie and its co-seigneurie following the expulsion of the Duke of Savoy from Vaud. Fribourg further tightened its grip when its bailiff, now installed in Cheneaux, was appointed sheriff (Schultheiss) of the town. He presided over the supreme local authority, the town council. However, the Savoys, in their wisdom, had made sure that their interests would be defended by members of the minor nobility and local bourgeoisie. However, it was not until 1632 that Fribourg finally had complete control over Estavayer, acquiring the feudal rights of the older branch of the ruling family upon the death of Lawrence, the last co-seigneur of Estavayer .



Hörtner, 1599

## Prosperity and decline

To understand Estavayer, you need to bear in mind that until the middle of the 19th century water levels in Lake Neuchâtel were much higher, extending as far as the town's northside defensive walls. At that time, Estavayer was a bustling harbour and trading hub. While people in the upper parts of the town earned a living from farming, the residents of La Rive depended on the lake for their livelihood, working either as fishermen or boatmen. Trade with settlements on the northern shores of the lake and with Neuchâtel generated valuable income. However, this prosperity would not last. In 1536 Neuchâtel and Vaud voted in favour of the Reformation. From that point on, trade with Catholic Estavayer dwindled. This economic decline was hastened by the advent of the railways and motorised transport. By the end of the 19th century, residents of La Rive eked out a living from fishing. Fribourg was almost powerless to curb the descent of its remote outpost.

# Historic sites and buildings

Self-guided QR-code tour.  
16 panels near historic sites  
with audio commentaries



1. The Banc des Halles



5. Château de Chenaux



2. Collegiate Church of Saint Lawrence



6. Motte-Châtel and Passage des Egralets



3. Tithe house



7. Maison des Sires



4. Porte de Grandcour



8. Place de Moudon and rifle houser





# Historic sites and buildings

9. Porte de la Rochette



10. Rivaz Chapel



11. Ruelle des Moulins



12. Porte de la Thiolleyres



13. Tour de la Trahison



14. Tour de Lombardie



15. Tour de Savoie



16. Dominican Convent

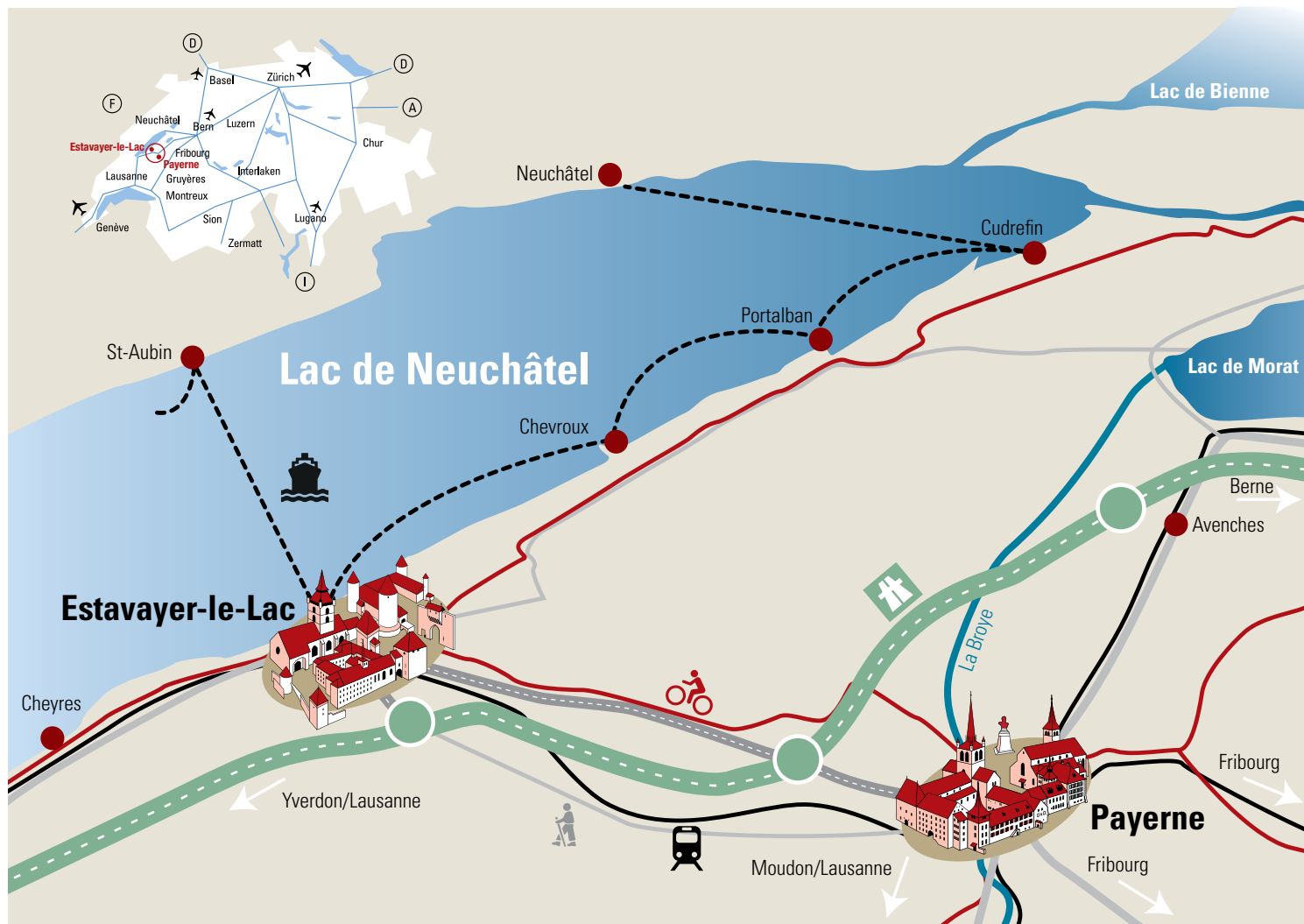




## Historic sites and monuments

- |  |                                     |                         |
|--|-------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. Banc des mensonges                  | 7. Maison des Sires                 | 13. Tour de la Trahison |
| 2. Collegiate Church of Saint Lawrence | 8. Place de Moudon and rifle houser | 14. Tour de Lombardie   |
| 3. Tithe house                         | 9. Porte de la Rochette             | 15. Tour de Savoie      |
| 4. Porte de Grandcour                  | 10. Rivaz Chapel                    | 16. Dominican convent   |
| 5. Castle of Chenaux                   | 11. Ruelle des Moulins              |                         |
| 6. Motte-Châtel and les Egralets       | 12. Porte de la Thiolleyres         |                         |

# Our region



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PAYERNE  
ET REGION**  
In perfect harmony

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