

Mapaholics' France

Discover France's hidden scenic delights



Richard Binns

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the more certain you are of seeing the real France'**

Introduction

France remains the 'First Lady of Europe'. She is as beguiling as ever, a country both deeply rural and highly civilised. An added plus is that the tourist 'industry' is run by individuals for individuals. And, joy of joys, *Marianne* still clutches to her breasts endless delights – hidden corners where Nature's priceless legacies and majestic man-made creations are ignored by all but a few enterprising visitors.

How can you prise out of *La Belle France* your share of her cornucopia of pleasures? One golden rule applies as much as ever: maps are the essential key if you are to open the door to France's seductive charms. Good large-scale maps repay their outlay a thousand times over.

A second golden rule goes like this: 'The more you run the risk of getting lost the more certain you are of seeing the real France.' In *Mapaholics' France* I've chosen an idiosyncratic way of persuading you to emulate my freewheeling philosophy of exploration. I've selected 44 areas, each one covering an area of approximately 40x50 miles; 2,000 square miles in total. Each area, with its *aide-mémoire* map, forms the basis of a chapter, in which I detail as many as possible of the widely differing natural and man-made treats on the ground. The 44 chapters cover 1,001 different subjects! Though much of the material I have unearthed is not listed in Michelin's green guides I do not claim to have done anything more than scratch the surface of each area.

In the box above each *aide-mémoire* map, where applicable, I suggest you also refer to other articles in the France section on my website's 'Reprints' and 'New Articles' indexes (both under the blue 'New Work' button on the home page) for extra freshly researched material. The grid reference system on my *aide-mémoire* maps will make navigating from large-scale maps easy as pie; for example the Michelin spiral-bound atlas is ideal.

If you want to enjoy France's varied topography then you must have a go at 'navigating'. By that I mean you must use as many of the Michelin maps' 'yellow' and 'white' lanes as you can manage. There's a foolproof system which helps you enormously: all but a few French minor roads have an identifying number which is shown on both maps and signposts. Dyed-in-the-wool readers, doing a 'Binns', will already be familiar with the term 'mapaholic'. Join the club – the guidelines are simple: immerse yourself in maps; get lost often; laugh over your wrong turns; and always remember a third golden rule – the best parts of any country are found, more often than not, at the end of roads that go nowhere.

Important advice: use France's tourist offices. Your *Maison de la France*, MDLF, (French Government Tourist Office) will provide you with lists of the departmental and regional (22) tourist offices; all of them are useful sources of information. Hundreds of *Office de Tourisme* and *Syndicat d'Initiative* addresses in France (and phone numbers) are listed under village/town names in the Michelin red guide.