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Laon and Laonnais: Gothic marvels and fortified *églises*. Rivers great and bloody. Forests, beech tunnels and swooping owls. *Maroilles*. *Pédalos*. Zig-zags and canal tunnels.



Is there a name more synonymous with slaughter than the word ‘Somme’? No matter how many times I visit, or cross, northern France, I am always reminded of the inconceivable slaughter which took place 90 years ago in the killing fields of both Flanders and Picardy. We must never forget and we should all give a little time, every year, to quietly remembering the supreme sacrifice made by so many of our forefathers.

Most of map 4 is part of Picardy. The Source de la Somme (E1) is north-east of **Fonsommes**. The ancient spring has been turned into an ‘attraction’ (1993) with an explanatory map and board, gardens and toilets. The 245 km-long **Somme** flows west, past so much consecrated ground. Now seek out some of the nearby cemeteries and memorials.

The Prospect Hill Cemetery is just east of **Gouy** (north of Bellicourt: D1). The cemetery is the last resting place of 451 UK, 77 Australian and 10 South African soldiers who fell in the October 1918 advance, just weeks before the end of the war. Read the notes in the register and study the explanatory plate behind the shelter. Quite different, and set out in 14 acres of tree-lined grounds, is the American Cemetery at nearby Bony, south-west of **Le Catelet**. 1837 soldiers are buried here; their names, and those of 333 missing in action, are commemorated in the chapel alongside the cemetery.

Give time, too, to the impressive Bellicourt American Memorial on the N44’s west side, south of Bony. Look at the western façade where a large map explains the attack, at the end of September 1918, which pierced the Hindenburg Line, the ultra-strong German defensive position, just west of the canal tunnel below you.

Canal tunnel? You can trace the 6,200 yard-long Canal de St-Quentin tunnel, built by Napoléon between 1802 and 1810, on large-scale maps. Just south of **Bellicourt** (D1), stop on the N44’s west side, at the ‘Vermandois’ Tourist Office, and walk down the zig-zags to the tunnel’s southern entrance. Note the blue water, electric lights and the canal details at the entrance. Call, too, at the first-class tourist office.

Let’s change tack and head east from the monotonous, hedge-less *pays*, where maize and sugar beet predominate, to **Guise** (E1). In the terrain to the east the **Oise Valley** is an eye-opening treat: wooded, hilly and with pastures where cows munch contentedly. Note that Michelin use few green markings alongside the roads (to signify pretty routes); yet, further downstream from Origny-Ste-Benoite (E1), the D13 is edged all the way. Michelin are wrong: the Oise thereabouts is no great shakes and Origny has a hideous cement works dominating the town.

East of Guise is **La Thiérache**, a pastoral area famed for fortified churches built of brick and stone and with varying towers. Just as interesting are the villages where houses, cottages, gardens and barns catch the eye. Start at **Beaurain** (F1) where clever use is made of agricultural machinery to win a two-star *village fleuri* rating. The 16th-century church is to the north-west; note the small cone-topped

turrets. At Gomont, further east on the D31, smile at the tiles on the red-brick façade of the house at the D26 junction.

Englancourt (F1) is high above the right bank of the Oise. The church has four towers with sharpened pencil hats. Admire, too, the attractive red-brick farms and cottages. Now south to the Brune Valley, stopping first at the Ferme de la Fontaine Orion, where Claire Halleux produces *Maroilles* cheese – soft, slightly salty and gold – and the regional classic, *tarte aux maroilles*. Her farm is on the D464 at **Haution** (F1) and is open p.m. only except Sun and *fête* days.

In the pleasant Brune Valley make a start at **Prisces** (F2). Here the church's red-brick tower has the look of a formidable castle keep; note, too, the wattle and daub cottages. At Burelles (20:B2), the *église* is all red brick; see the wash house opposite. Further east the church at Hary is the first, on my route, to have a cone-topped tower.

South-west now to one of France's greatest glories, **Laon** (E3/F3), calling on the way at the pilgrimage site of **Liesse-Notre-Dame** (F2) where the white-stoned *église* has some striking stained glass windows. Laon, once the capital of France, sits majestically on a solitary hill. The stunning Gothic cathedral, one of the oldest and finest in France, is both the centrepiece and a proud landmark, seen from miles away. The western towers; the glorious façade below them; the pulse-racing purity of the nave; the stained glass windows; I defy anyone not to be moved by this medieval wonder. To access the high old town use either the POMA cable railway from the SNCF station or drive up the *lacets* on the hill's south side. Enjoy the town gates, the old houses and streets, the ramparts and cliff-top promenades.

To the west of Laon is the **Forêt de St-Gobain** (E3) – a self-contained beech forest, gently undulating with hidden valleys, *étangs*, smallholdings, ruined priories and abbeys, swooping owls, beech tunnels and villages where houses are built of either white stone or small red bricks. In late autumn the forest is a sensual sight. Seek out the 14th-century priory of Le Tortoir, a collection of white stone buildings with a fortified look and a solitary tower; access is possible. The 15th-century Benedictine abbey at St-Nicholas, further south, has an idyllic setting with *étangs*, woods and, among the trees, a tantalising glimpse of distant towers; the building is not accessible.

The vast abbey at Prémontré, rebuilt in the 18th century, is now a psychiatric hospital; parts of the classical buildings can be visited. The *étangs* to the east are much to my liking. South of Prémontré, at Brancourt-en-Laonnois, is a 1920s *église* noted for a pierced tower. Finally, at Coucy-le-Château Auffrique (D3), outside the forest, little remains of what was once a massive 13th-century fortress; but the ruined walls, towers, gate and views make a worthwhile detour.

To the west and south of Laon is the appealing wooded and hilly *pays* of **Le Laonnois**. Nose out some of the man-made attractions. Mons (E3), south-west of

Laon, has a 13th/14th century *église*; drive up to the end of the tarmac road at Les Creutttes for a fine view of Laon to the east. Climb, too, to the modern church at Montbavin. The 13th/14th-century *église* at **Royaucourt** is a mini cathedral: drive the one-way system and relish the lofty exterior, flying buttresses and several towers with tops like knights' lances. The restored Romanesque church at **Urcel** (E3) is a handsome, balanced structure with ingenious use made of arches in the porch and tower (east of the N2).

North-east to the Romanesque church at Nouvion-le-Vineux, an admirable building in an appealing site above the village; note the 1841 wooden *lavoir*, with running water, to the east. **Presles** (F3) is a smart *village fleuri*. The Romanesque church has a cemetery where three RAF crew are buried (they died on 17 May 1940). Vorges has a 13th-century *église* with an open bell-tower and large rose window in an agreeable *place*. The church at Bruyères-et-Montbérault has a massive bell-tower; look out for the good-looking *mairie* and paved *place*.

Now climb the wooded ridge to the south of the previous four villages and make for the Parc Nautique de l'Ailette, south-east of **Chamouille** (F3): here the River **Ailette** has been turned into an inviting lake with excellent use made of trees and woods. Savour the walks, picnic areas, sailing, *pédalos*, super children's playground and wild life. To the east is the ruined and accessible Cistercian Abbaye de Vauclair; note the garden of medicinal plants and the *étang* across the road.

Next, to another tragic reminder of the futile fighting in the 1914-18 war. The sacred Chemin des Dames (E3/F3) runs east to west, along the crest of hills between the Ailette and **Aisne** valleys. Just north of **Craonne** (F3), on the south side of the D895, is a *table d'orientation* which explains how the hideous fighting between the French and Germans lasted almost throughout World War One in the valley below. Visit, too, the Caverne du Dragon (closed Tues) to the west, a *musée* explaining the futile four-year engagement. Wrap up as you get cold underground.

What else? On the small scale there's a 13th-century *église*, in a colourful garden setting, at **Braine** (E4); the flamboyant Gothic keep at **Septmonts** (D4); the château and Musée de Bois at **Montgobert** (D4), approached by an avenue of handsome trees (open p.m. weekends) – admire, too, the village's smart stone houses; the ruined Cistercian abbey at **Longpont** (D4) where the village has a beguiling cobbled terrace, flowers, stone buildings, the vine-covered Hôtel de l'Abbaye, and stone gate under an old half-timbered house with cone-hatted towers; and, at **Blérancourt** (D3), there's a Franco-American *musée* evoking the historical links between the two nations.

On a larger scale admire the vast interior of the Gothic cathedral at **Soissons** (D4) – and the dagger-like spires of the ruined 14th-century Abbaye de St-Jean des Vignes where the west front is still intact; and, finally, the Gothic basilica at **St-Quentin** (D1), with double transept, stained glass windows and 75-stop organ. (Spare time, too, for the nearby flamboyant Gothic Hôtel de Ville and the Marais d'Isle de St-Quentin – a nature reserve north-east of the station.)