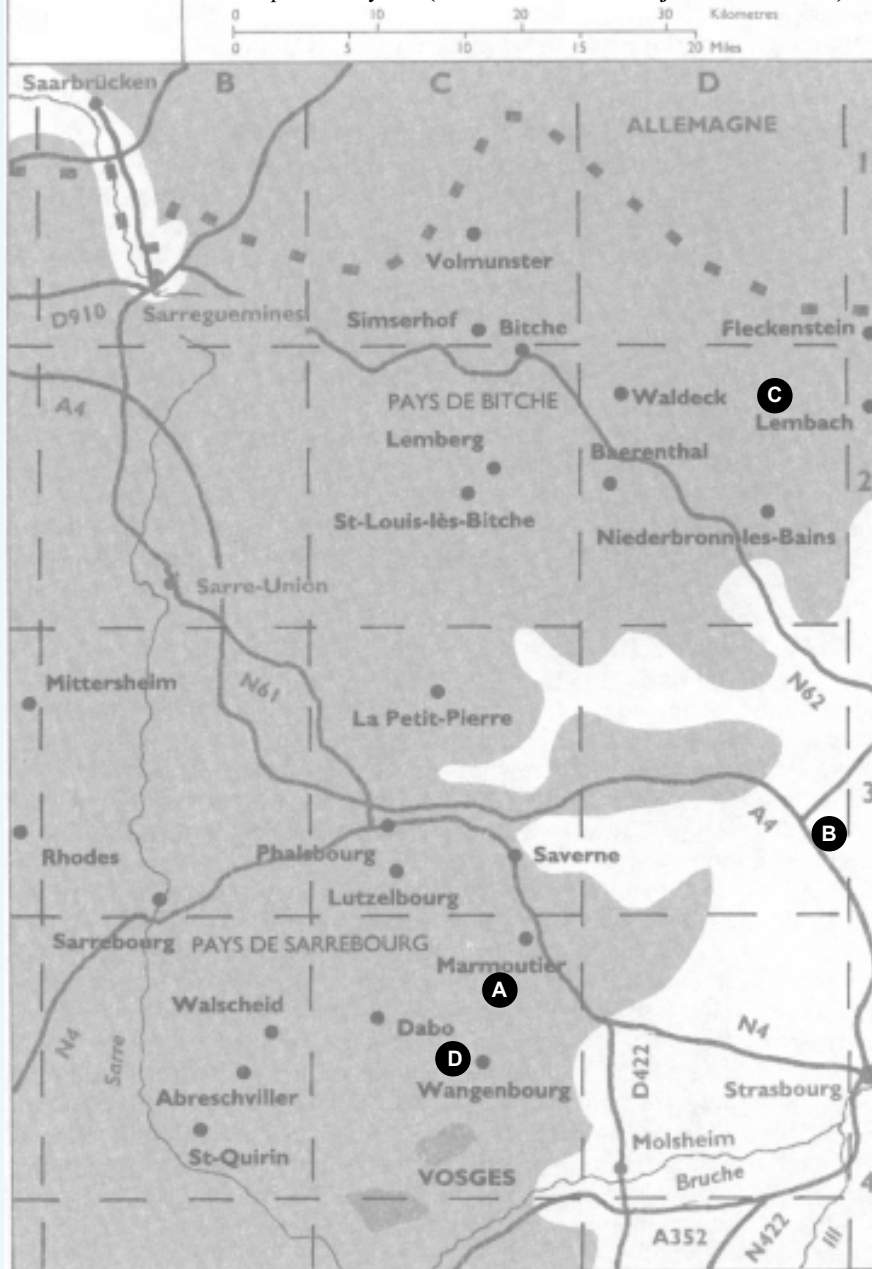


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Vosges du Nord: folly forts, clogs, organs and a barge lift.  
Rock table. Beech forests, sandstone and gentle hills. Vauban  
masterpieces. Crystal. (Refer also to *Alsace Afresh* on website.)



Most tourists ignore this north-eastern corner of France. I plead guilty too; until my detailed exploration a few years ago my only knowledge of the terrain was the **A4** *autoroute* and the wooded **Vosges** hills to the south. I implore you: don't use the A4 as a bypass; get the maps out.

First, I'll describe the wooded hills and valleys of the Parc Régional des Vosges du Nord, the area between the A4 and the German border. Make your first port of call the town of **Bitche** (C1/C2), at the heart of a boat-shaped area tagged the **Pays de Bitche**. Hereabouts the houses and villages have a typical neat and tidy German look and are painted in pastel shades only rarely seen elsewhere in France.

Looming over the town is a monster of a fort, originally designed by that military architect superman, Vauban. First built in the 1680s, the fort's high, impregnable walls are a masterpiece of military engineering. High-tech aids, in the shape of headsets providing an English commentary, help you to understand the place. See two museums: one in the old chapel where the scale model of the fort, made 200 years ago, is a fascinating exhibit; the second *musée* is in the old bakery and evokes life in the local *pays* in times past. (Throughout the Vosges, here and to the south on map 11, you will see scores of castles and forts, some built centuries ago, others this century.)

Now savour Nature's handiwork. Head south-east to Schweizerlaendel (D2). Explore the lanes around the ruined tower of the Château du **Waldeck**: the landscape is Swiss-like but with many outcrops of red sandstone which look just as impressive as any of man's efforts. Much more impressive ruins, where walls merge with the sandstone rocks, are at the high viewpoint of the Château de Falkenstein (D2); the only snag is the 45-minute hike from the D87A. The most renowned of the ruined castles is the Château de **Fleckenstein** (east of D1): easily accessible, this once remarkable fortress combined man-made walls and halls with passages and a watch-tower carved out of the high sandstone rocks.

The Etang de Hanau, between Waldeck and Falkenstein, is a tranquil, triangular pool, surrounded by trees and with a beach and two small hotels. The valley from **Baerenthal** (D2) to **Lemberg** (C2) is delicious: sandstone walls, some so weathered that see-through holes have appeared; mixed woods; pools; smallholdings, including a deer farm; and a *plage* and nature reserve at the Ramstein *étang* (E2) all appeal.

Several villages south of Bitche are renowned for their glassware. **St-Louis-lès-Bitche** (C2) is especially famous. Hidden in a valley, the ugly little place compensates with the production, since the 16th century, of flamboyant glass creations (shop/exhibition open a.m. and p.m. on weekdays; Sun p.m. only). A little further south, in another valley, is Meisenthal: here there's an exceptional *musée*, La Maison du Verre et du Cristal, which explains all the intricate workings involved in the making of fine crystal (Easter to Oct; p.m. only). Just over one mile away, at Soucht, is La Musée du Sabotier: this museum evokes the skills of the dozens of clogmakers who worked in the village before the last war and explains the old art of clog making (July/Aug; p.m. every day. May/June and Sept/Oct; p.m. weekends only).

What else is there to see in the Pays de Bitche? To the west, at **Simserhof** (C1), high above the D35, is the subterranean artillery fort built in the 30s as part of the Maginot Line (tours 9.00 and 14.00 – mid Mar to mid Dec, except Mon). A little further north, near the church at Schorbach, is an ossuary dating back to Roman times – housed behind a row of 11 arches and columns. Continuing north there's a restored water mill, the Moulin d'Eschviller, north of **Volmunster** (C1), where the power of the River Schwalb is used to grind corn (p.m. every day July/Aug; p.m. weekends Easter to June and Sept). South-east of Meisenthal, mentioned earlier, seek out the *menhir*, four metres high, near the D12 (Pierre des 12 Apôtres – 12 apostles); enjoy, too, as you leave the *pays*, the beech woods on the descent to Wimmenau (C2).

Head south-west to **La Petite-Pierre** (C3), passing through grand beech woods. The 'new' town is flower-filled; in the old town, on a rocky spur high above the surrounding valleys, much use is made of sandstone. At the very end of the spur are the ruined walls of an ancient castle; the more modern, high-walled adjacent château houses the HQ of the Regional Park. Other sites in the park merit attention. Especially refreshing is the spa of **Niederbronn-les-Bains** (D2), a mixture of old and new. See, too, the nearby village of Oberbronn where some houses have the 'trade' sculptures of their owners carved on the lintels above the doors. Windstein, to the north, has two ruined castles; also admire the *rocher*, a vertical sandstone needle. Finally, spare time for yet another vast underground Maginot Line fort – the Ouvrage du Four à Chaux, just south of **Lembach** (east of D2): built in the 30s the monumental subterranean town (folly?) was used in anger for just two weeks in 1940 (tours 10.00 to 16.00 every day May to Sept).

Now enjoy yourself in the much higher Vosges mountains to the south of the A4. I'll divide what follows into two: first the country to the east of the north-south crest of peaks; then the terrain to the west.

Start at **Saverne** (C3). As you make the steep descent on the N4 park on the left and then cross the road to the Jardin Botanique where, among the trees, are over 2,000 varied plants. In the town is a small rose garden, the Roseraie, beside the N4 and near the railway, where over 1,000 varieties are planted in soil which is changed every three years. Parts of the old town are eye-catching (especially the richly decorated 17th-century Maison Katz) but I can't say that about the vast slab of a façade, built in neo-classical style, on the Château des Rohans. Much more pleasing are the ruins of the Haut-Barr castle built among three huge sandstone outcrops high above the town; enjoy, too, the tiny chapel with a Romanesque nave. Two other churches worth seeing are at St-Jean, north of Saverne – with three naves, sculptures and Romanesque paintings; and the massive sandstone *église* at **Marmoutier** (C4), south of Saverne, with three lofty Romanesque towers.

In the past I've enjoyed driving the high roads of 'La Suisse d'Alsace' – the wooded slopes and valleys around **Wangenbourg** (C4) and connecting with

Niederhaslach, further south. Ruined castles, forests, waterfalls (it's well worth the climb to see the Cascade du Nideck) and churches (don't miss the *église* at Niederhaslach) combine to please.

What of the terrain to the west? The **Pays de Sarrebourg** has many treats in its valleys and hills. First the two main towns. Phalsbourg (C3) was yet another Vauban fortified creation: see the large *place* and the two massive town gates with their helmet-like tops and walls with ornate stone carvings. **Sarrebourg** (B3) has one exceptional treasure: the Chapelle des Cordeliers with a mammoth Marc Chagall stained glass window which almost fills one end of the *église*.

My preference is for out-of-town pleasures. Start at **Lutzelbourg** (C3) with its site alongside the Canal de la Marne au Rhin. Much the most interesting engineering wonder on this vital canal link is the unique 45 metre-high boat and barge lift built in 1969 to replace 17 locks (Plan incliné on the map, south-west of Lutzelbourg). There's a *musée* in a barge; long and short boat trips using the lift; a motorised train tour; or a simple guided tour. (Every day from Mar to Oct.)

Another highly enjoyable 'engineering' treat is the Chemin de Fer Forestier d'**Abreschviller** (B4), a five km-long 70 cm-gauge railway up the wooded valley to Grand Soldat. Originally a logging railway, the humble little line is a real delight. Steamers at weekends, otherwise diesels; round trip 80 mins. (Apr to Sept. Timetable: G. Baillet, Hôtel des Cigognes, 57560 Abreschviller; tel 03 87 03 79 12.)

Don't bypass the St-Léon chapel at **Dabo** (C3), on a high sandstone table accessed by the corkscrew D45A. Nearby you'll see many signs advertising glass and crystal producers. Of the smaller workshops none come better than the home, literally, of Bruno Lehrer at the D45/D98 junction below Haselbourg (C4). Of the bigger factories the Cristallerie de Vallérystal (B4) has a large showroom and you can also see glass and crystalware being made (a.m. and p.m. every weekday; p.m. Sat/Sun).

More surprises come in the shape of the area's many church organs. Of the six which we saw these two were notable: the large church at **Walscheid** (B4), richly decorated and with a highly colourful mural on the nave ceiling – the organ is a big one too; and **St-Quirin** (B4), where the large *église* has high salt and pepper-pot matching towers, fine stained glass and wood sculptures around the organ.

Anything else? To the west of Sarrebourg is a line of *étangs*, hidden by trees, linked by the Canal des Houillères de la Sarre (from the Marne to the Saarbrücken coalfields) and part of the Lorraine Regional Park. All sorts of watersport facilities are available near **Mittersheim** (west of B3); on the Etang du Stock, further south; and on the Etang de Gondrexange (A4). Visit, too, the Parc Animalier de Ste-Croix, north of **Rhodes** (west of B3), where scores of breeds roam freely in 175 acres of woodland and *étangs* (every day Easter to Oct; closed Mon Apr/May/Sept/Oct).