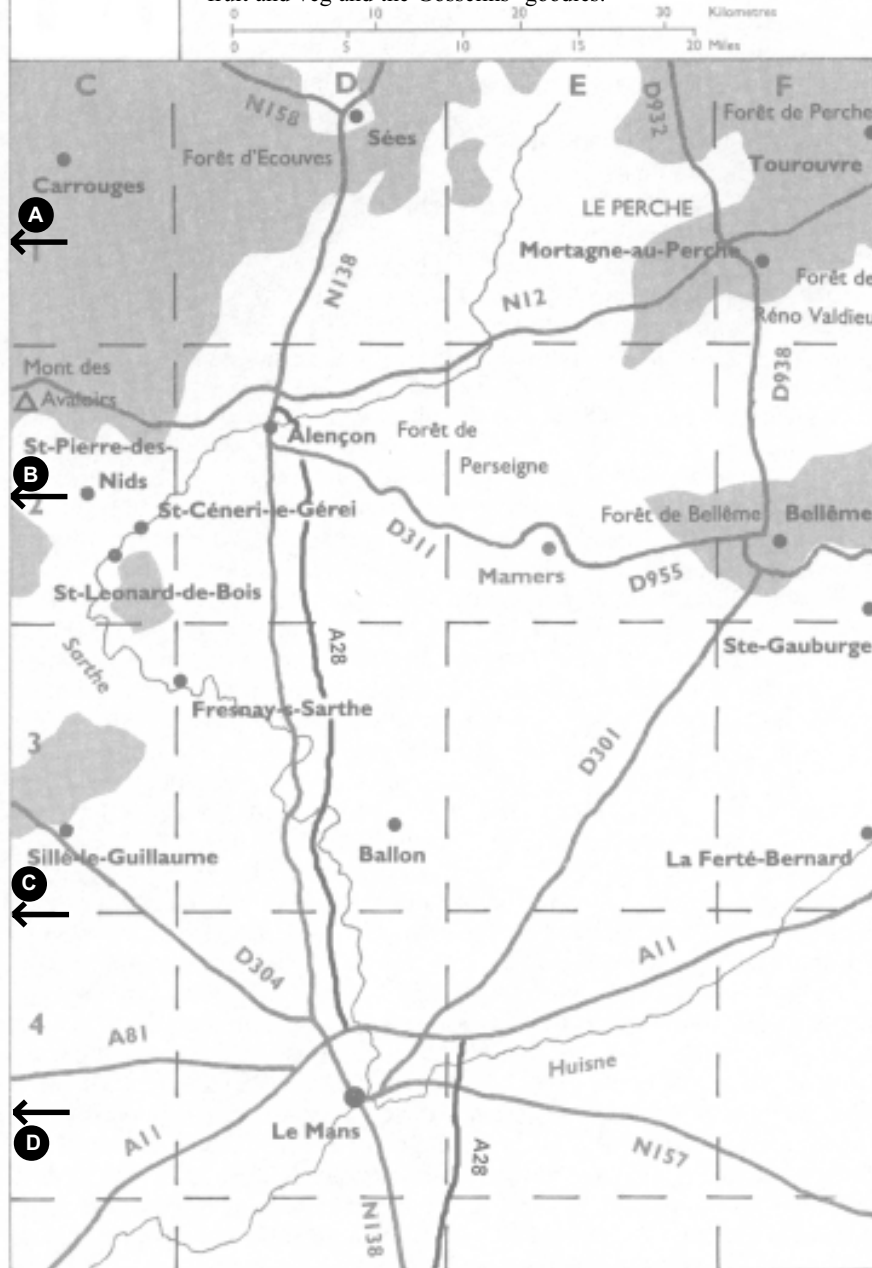


9

Vieux Mans, Le Perche, *Alpes*, cool forests and black puddings. Manor houses, *musées* and *châteaux*. Humming weir. Cracking fruit and veg and the Gosselins' goodies.



This is the fourth chapter devoted to Normandy (as Michelin define the region) though, to be absolutely correct, the bottom half of the map on the left is part of the *département* of Sarthe in the Pays de la Loire region. Whatever the name, most tourists rush through the area.

I'll divide the chapter into four: first, the top right-hand quarter, the mysteriously-tagged **Le Perche**; second, the arc of forests and man-made attractions to the north and east of **Alençon** (D2); third, the endearing hills to the south-west of Alençon; and, last, the exhilarating man-made thrills in and around **Le Mans** (D4).

Le Perche was the name of an ancient province founded in 1114, only to be dissolved in 1790 when French *départements* were first formed. The *pays*, which also extends to the east of **Tourouvre** (F1), is a land of rolling hills, massive forests and fortified manor houses.

Start at **Mortagne-au-Perche** (F1). High on a hill the town is proud to be called the 'Black Pudding World Capital'. Equally odd-ball, and a Mortagne curiosity, are 27 sun dials; only half a dozen are easily spotted. Explore the town's medieval heart, clustered around the 16th-century Eglise Notre-Dame; the gardens with fine views on the western edge; the Maison des Comtes du Perche, the site of the Musée Alain which has the memorabilia of the French philosopher born in Mortagne; and the bulky Porte St-Denis with two floors above the fortified gate (the home of the Musée Percheron). Both the latter are near the *église*. Market day, a showpiece affair, is on Saturday morning.

In the 17th century Le Perche was the cradle of emigration to Canada. There's even a museum devoted to the historical importance of those first French settlers at **Tourouvre** (F1), north-east of Mortagne (every day June to Sept, except Monday). The village church has two stained glass windows devoted to the first Quebec settlers. Another fascinating museum, which I thoroughly enjoyed, is at **Ste-Gauburge** (F2), south-east of Bellême (p.m. May to October): based in two buildings, one custom built, the other a church, the *musée* explains the old crafts and skills of Le Perche inhabitants.

Among the stone-built manor houses three remain vivid memories: the Manoir de Courboyer (F2), like a vision of Scotland and to the east of **Bellême**; the high-pitched roofs and cone-topped towers of the Manoir de la Vove (F2), north-east of Bellême; and the handsome small Manoir de l'Angenardière (F2), sandwiched between two strong towers (near the Ste-Gauburge museum). The Château des Feugerets (F2), alongside the D7 south of Bellême, is more a castle with towers and moat.

Broadleaved forests play a part in the appeal of Le Perche. The **Forêt de Réno Valdieu** has some 100-ft-high oaks with names Aberdeen, Oxford and Forestry Commission; they're marked as *vieux arbres*, east of Mortagne (F1). The **Forêt du Perche** (F1), north-east of Mortagne, is a classic example of how important regeneration is in the management of ancient hardwood forests: here several *étangs*

(pools) and the Abbaye de la Trappe, a working monastery, are bonuses. The **Forêt de Bellême**, north of the town, is a cool haven; I recall the extensive views from the pretty village of La Perrière, at the western end of the forest (use the cemetery path at the church).

A last detour will require some navigational effort. I'm sending you to the Ferme du Perrier, the isolated home of Liliane and Gérard Gosselin, lost on the edge of the Forêt de Réno Valdieu, and surrounded by gorgeous rhododendrons. Here you can buy *foies gras* (both duck and goose), *confits*, *magrets* and *rillettes*. Or, better still, you can tuck into appetite-quenching, home-cooked fare in the shape of traditional farm meals (ranging in cost from £15 to £25). For the latter you must book ahead, two days in advance (tel 02 33 83 86 80). How do you find the farm? Leave La Chapelle-Montligeon (F1/F2), south-east of Mortagne, to the south (on the east side of the basilica); at the D213 T junction turn left and, in a few hundred yards, left again to Courthenou and beyond, following signs for the Ferme du Perrier.

The second of the four segments is an arc on the east and northern sides of **Alençon** (D2). The town is, to say the least, a busy place. I had a hectic Thursday morning there on a hot summer's day: first walking the extensive open-air market which takes over much of the town centre; then I enjoyed the Eglise Notre-Dame, a flamboyant Gothic extravaganza; and, more than anything else, I was hooked on the Musée des Beaux-Arts et de la Dentelle. Alençon is famed for lace-making; the museum houses fascinating displays of superb lace (open every day except Monday). Finally I was glad to escape the heat and head east to the refrigerator coolness of the **Forêt de Perseigne**, an undulating forest with fine trees, viewpoints and the mysterious Vallée d'Enfer.

More recently I have explored the **Forêt d'Ecouvès** (D1), to the north of Alençon. This is a giant-sized forest of mixed trees with extensive numbers of beech. Ecouvès is another excellent example of how well the French manage their forests. La Croix de Médevy is a spot where a small tank is the monument to the French who died in the area between the 10 and 23 August 1944; a display board and map explains the battle for Alençon in August of that year. The Rochers du Vignage is an outcrop of granite hidden among the trees to the west of the D26; here the road lies alongside a tiny stream and is an ideal picnic spot. Further west, La Croix Madame rewards all those who make the short walk from the crossroads with an exhilarating southern panorama.

Several man-made treats are to the north of Alençon. The Château de **Carrouges** (C1) is a favourite (north-west of Alençon): the stone and brick structure has many eye-pleasing patterns and hues, a moat and a lived-in feel – yet still manages to give the impression of being a strong fortress. Just north of the château, on the D16, is the Maison du Parc (of the Parc Régional Normandie-Maine), housed in an old farm with the unusual living exhibit of over 100 different apple and pear trees in an adjoining orchard (weekdays only). **Sées** (D1) is the site of a massive

twin-spired Gothic cathedral; the stained glass windows are a special joy. Château d'O (D1), north-west of Sées, is an exuberant ornate mix of Gothic and Renaissance with stunning stonework and moat.

The third segment, as described in paragraph two at the chapter's start, is my favourite on map 9. Start at the viewpoint on the **Mont des Avaloirs** (C2), west of Alençon. Some years ago the tower providing the 360-degree panorama was overtaken by events: the surrounding trees outgrew the platform. By the time this book goes to press a modern structure will have been built; the top of the new tower will be above the tree tops. Explore **St-Pierre-des-Nids** (C2): at the heart of the village is a cracking fruit and vegetable shop; an almost as good *boulangerie/pâtisserie*; and the Hôtel Dauphin.

Now south, to the Alpes Mancelles. Alps they most certainly are not; deserted they most assuredly are. **St-Ceneri-le-Gérei** (C2) is a gem of unspoilt charm, bustling with character; a combination of centuries-old houses, Romanesque church high above the Sarthe, bridge across the river and weir humming away upstream. **St-Léonard-de-Bois** (C2), to the south, is less appealing but you'll grasp why the hills have the label 'Alpes'; the wooded cliff above the river has a Swiss look.

Finally, the last segment – **Le Mans** (D4) and the terrain around the city, all of which was once inextricably linked with the Plantagenets. When I first visited **La Ferté-Bernard** (F3) I didn't realise this 'Little Venice of the West' was built on marshes; most buildings are on piles. The Notre-Dame-des-Marais (well-named) is a flamboyant Gothic masterpiece. At **Ballon** (D3) the Jardins du Donjon (see map) are a medieval rarity (p.m. mid July to Aug, except Wed). **Fresnay-sur-Sarthe** (C3/D3) has an attractive setting above a Sarthe meander; walk the narrow streets with old houses. **Sillé-le-Guillaume** (C3) has a castle, forest and *étang* used for numerous watersports

I plead guilty, along with many others, to having always associated the name Le Mans with the 24-hour sports car race. Not now. Le Vieux Mans is breathtaking. First spare time for St-Julian's Cathedral with an inspiring interior, especially the 'crown of light' windows above the chancel. Then step into the old streets to the south-west for the surprise of your life: 1,700-year-old Roman stone and brick mosaics, murals and patterns abound; and, in addition, there are medieval half-timbered houses, cobbled alleyways and stone towers. To the east of Le Mans is the Abbaye de l'Epau, founded in 1229 by Queen Berengaria, widow of Richard the Lionheart. Altogether more restful, the abbey and 32-acre park, alongside the River **Huisne**, is a relaxing spot.

I'll finish by reminding you of the 24-hour circuit south of Le Mans (D4). There's always something going on at the shorter Bugatti Circuit. The Musée Automobile de la Sarthe, inside the circuit, is the main draw: owned by the *département* the museum, and over 100 cars, tell the story of the automobile and the events which make the words Le Mans synonymous with motor racing (every day June to September; closed Tuesday October to May and in January weekends only).