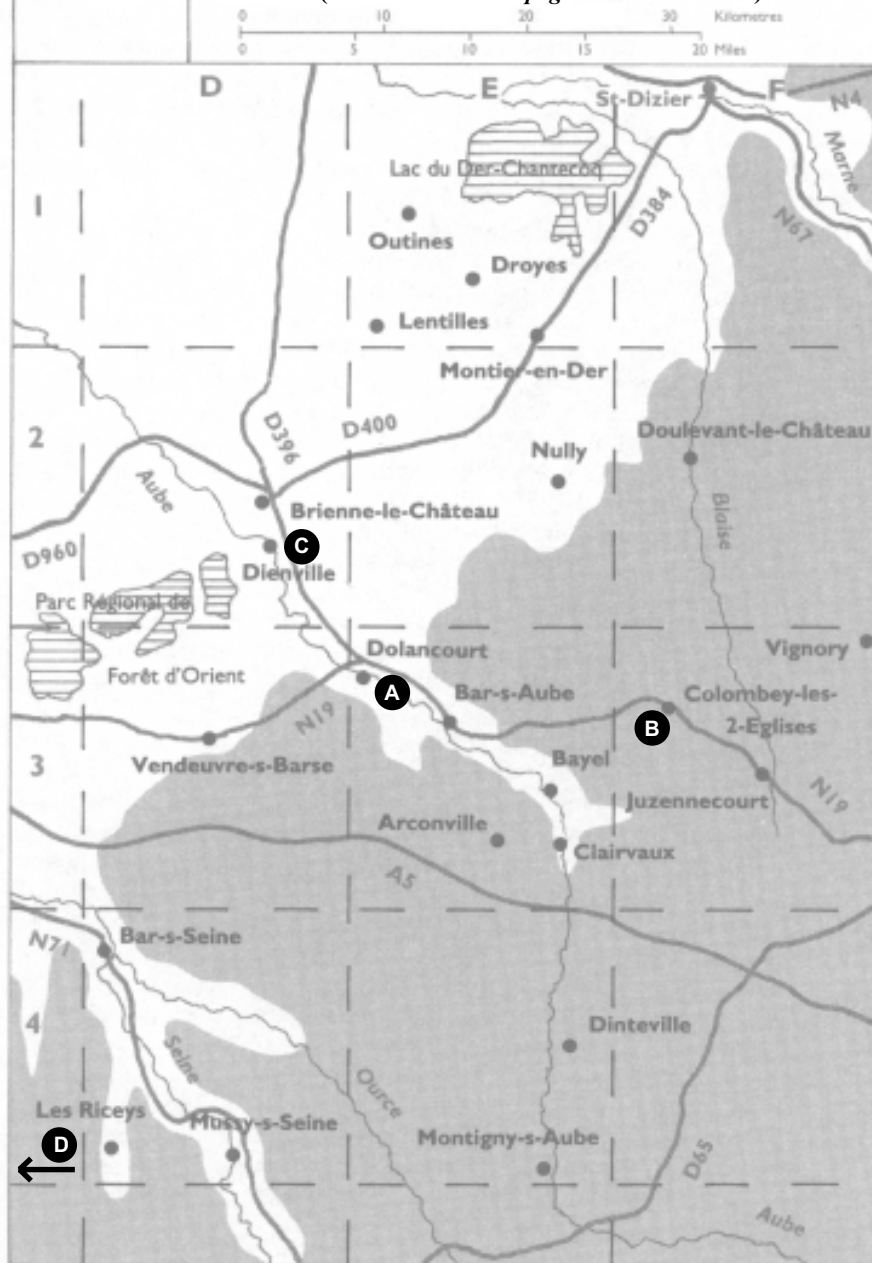


10

Forêt d'Orient, lakes, ecclesiastical surprises and *lapins*. Charles de Gaulle and Napoléon. Crystal glassware. Champagne and cheese. (Refer also to *Champagne Sud* on website.)



The roadside sign, with a drawing of two rabbits, was simple enough: ‘*Ralentir. Passage de lapins.*’ I can think of nothing which emphasises so amusingly – and emphatically – my claim that the terrain on map sheet 10 is as good an example as any of *la France profonde*.

I have divided the map into five. I’ll start in the bottom right-hand quarter – the *pays* to the east of **Bar-sur-Aube** (E3) and the **Aube Valley** (E3/E4). Then I’ll deal with the bottom left-hand quarter which includes a bottle-shaped mass of Champagne country – from **Les Riceys** (D4) to Bar-sur-Aube. In parts three and four I’ll describe two lakeland areas (man-made *lacs* built, during the last 30 years, to control the flow of the **Seine**, **Aube** and **Marne**): the terrain in the **Parc Régional de Forêt d’Orient** (D2/D3); and the **Lac du Der-Chantecoq** (E1). I’ll finish with some ecclesiastical surprises.

Start part one in the Aube Valley. **Montigny-sur-Aube** (E4) has a half-moated Renaissance château with a diamond-shaped chapel/tower alongside the moat. At the rear there’s a black-hatted tower which pre-dates what remains of the present 16th-century structure. Another 16th-century château, refurbished in the 18th/19th centuries, is at **Dinteville** (E3): the kitchen, tower and park are worth seeing.

North now to **Clairvaux** (E3). In map sheet chapters 13 and 14 I refer to St-Bernard and his immense influence in the 12th century. In 1098 the Cistercian order was founded at Cîteaux (east of Nuits-St-Georges) – a breakaway group which felt that the Bénédictine order, based at Cluny (map 21), had moved too far from the principles of poverty, prayer, simplicity and self-sufficiency. Bernard entered Cîteaux in 1112; he founded Clairvaux in 1115. His influence and charisma was such that when he preached he drew thousands of listeners. Both Fontenay (14:D2) and Pontigny (13:B1) were among Clairvaux’s first ‘daughters’.

There’s little to see now of what was, once, the linchpin of the Cistercian order. Most of the site is a prison but every Sat p.m., from May to Oct, you can visit what remains of the great abbey.

Nearby **Bayel** (E3) is renowned for its crystal. You can see the stages involved in making the glassware at the Cristalleries Royales de Champagne; there’s a shop with displays of dazzling modern work – from goblets and glasses to decanters and vases. Another shop, just off the D396, also has fine displays of work created by smaller producers (*artisans cristalliers*). (Both are open every day; p.m. only Sun.)

Colombey-les-deux-Eglises (F3) is synonymous with Charles de Gaulle. High on a hill and dominating the horizon is the huge granite Cross of Lorraine, a memorial to the general who maintained a home in the village for nearly 40 years. You can visit the house, La Boisserie, every day except Tues. De Gaulle’s simple grave is in the village cemetery. Further east, at **Vignory** (F3), approached by a delectable wooded descent, is the pre-Romanesque and Romanesque Eglise St-Etienne; the interior is magnificent with beams, arches, pillars and sculptures.

Now drive the quiet lanes in the **Blaise** Valley, from **Juzennecourt** (F3) to **Doulevant-le-Château** (F2). Relish the pastoral landscape and, whenever possible, cross the village bridges to see the best of the river. There's a covered market at Cirey-sur-Blaise (F2) and the château is famed for its links with Voltaire who lived there from 1734 to 1749 (p.m. mid June to mid Sept; also a.m. Aug).

Start part two at **Mussy-sur-Seine** (D4). As you approach Les Riceys (D4) on the D17 the map indicates nothing but woodland; but, in reality, trees share the extensive hilly vistas with thousands of vines. Les Riceys, part of the Aube Champagne area, is renowned for its *rosé* sparklers (*Rosé des Riceys*), non-sparkling wines (*Coteaux Champenois*) and fruity-tasting cow's milk cheese.

The Aube Champagne-producing area extends north-east to Bar-sur-Aube and beyond. I can particularly recommend the wares of Bernard Gaucher at **Arconville** (E3) – he also makes a Pinot Noir *rouge*.

There are four man-made sites worthy of note in the bottom left-hand quarter of map sheet 11. North of Les Riceys and Ricey-Bas is the Musée des Vieux Tacots – 70 models and makes of car from 1902 to 1960 (p.m. Sun or telephone Christian Fournier at 03 25 29 31 53). Seek out the medieval half-timbered *maisons* in **Bar-sur-Seine** (D4); there's a particularly fine 16th-century house west of the church, in the road parallel to the N71. **Vendeuvre-sur-Barse** (D3) has a dour-looking château – well-known for its *son et lumière spectacle historique* (Fri and Sat July/Aug: details 03 25 41 44 76). Finally, there's Nigoland, beside the N19 at **Dolancourt** (E3): a mini-miniature Euro Disney which provides children with hours of fun and, unlike its Val de Marne counterpart, has survived happily for decades (Easter to Sept).

Part three and the **Parc Régional de Forêt d'Orient** (D2/D3). Call first at the Maison du Parc, north-west of Vendeuvre-sur-Barse, and collect leaflets describing the nature park's amenities. The Lac d'Orient (Lac Seine) and the forest to the east are the main attractions. Several leaflets map out, in detail, marked walks in the woods and alongside both the lake and the newly-built Lac du Temple. Others explain the sights in the nearby villages; there are watersport facilities; flora and fauna; a *plage* and much else besides. One interesting site is the newly-created *ecomusée*, an old mill beside the River Aube and the D11B south-west of **Brienne-le-Château** (D2).

Two man-made sites worth a detour are: the Musée Napoléon in the old Ecole Militaire at Brienne (the great man studied there); and **Dienville** (D2), south of Brienne, where the 16th-century *église* and covered stonebuilt market will appeal. There's also a new marina and watersport facilities at the nearby Port Dienville on Lac Amance.

Part four and the **Lac du Der-Chantecoq** (E1), a 12,000-acre man-made lake with 50 miles of shoreline. Call first at the Maison du Lac, just east of Giffaumont-Champaubert, on the south shore. Facilities around the lake include motor-boat

rides, sailing, a motorised train and beaches (note the following caveat). Seasonal variations in the water level expose huge tracts of mudflats – especially in the autumn and winter. No wonder the lake is a magnet for over 100 species of migrating and resident birds: waders, geese, ducks and others in the autumn; followed by swans, cranes and others in winter; and terns, grebe and herons in spring. Don't miss the *musée-village* at Ste-Marie-du-Lac on the north shore where there's a series of half-timbered buildings – a school, church, barns, café, *pigeonnier* and others (Mar to Nov). The newly-built Maison de l'Oiseau et du Poisson evokes the lake's bird and fish life in a graphic way (Port de Chantecoq, on the west bank).

Finally, part five and the ecclesiastical surprises. The arc of terrain to the west and south of the Lac du Der-Chantecoq is called Der, part of 'wet' Champagne – a Normandy-like *bocage* of fields, oak woods, marshy ground and villages with half-timbered buildings and white-washed walls of clay and earth. A decade ago I visited 12 villages and their 16th-century half-timbered *églises*. I'll describe, briefly, the four I reckoned to be the best of the dozen.

Start at Châtillon-sur-Broué (E1), south of the lake. The 17th-century structure is stunning; inside, photographs show the before and after condition, following recent rebuilding. **Outines** (E1), further west, is the largest of the half-timbered churches: an ornate altar and rose and other fine windows catch the eye – as do some cottages opposite the entrance. South to Bailly-le-Franc, with its lance steeple and simple, down-to-earth interior. Now south-west, to **Lentilles** (E1): a richly-endowed oak interior, a steeple with wooden scales and 16th-century stained glass windows are the highlights.

(All four, and eight others at Drosnay, Arrembécourt, Chasserécourt, Joncreuil, Chavagnes, Villeret, Puellémontier and Droyes are floodlit at weekends and every evening from May to September.)

I've not finished with the ecclesiastical surprises. You can also enjoy some glorious stained glass windows (of the Troyes School) – most of them created as 'explosions of colour' in the early 16th century. **Droyes** and Puellémontier (E1) are half-timbered *églises* with brilliant windows. Ceffonds, just south of **Montier-en-Der** (E1), has a 16th-century church with Romanesque tower and outstanding stained glass. **Nully** (E2), further south, has a 15th/16th-century *église* with a warm, proud, lived-in interior; the paintings, roof and several windows are a joyful sight. Nearby Trémilly also has remarkable windows.

The last ecclesiastical wonder is neither half-timbered nor are its Max Ingrand windows especially enthralling. But on no account miss the *église* at **Montier-en-Der** (E1). Terribly damaged in 1940, the church was rebuilt in primitive style and there are still traces of the past: the vast Romanesque nave is a grand sight but the most thrilling pleasure is the Gothic choir with an arc of multi-level 'cloisters', each with numerous arches. See, too, the adjoining National Stud, housed in what was a former monastery. (Every Thurs at 15.00, from Sept to mid Nov, a colourful horse show is laid on in both the yard and town.)