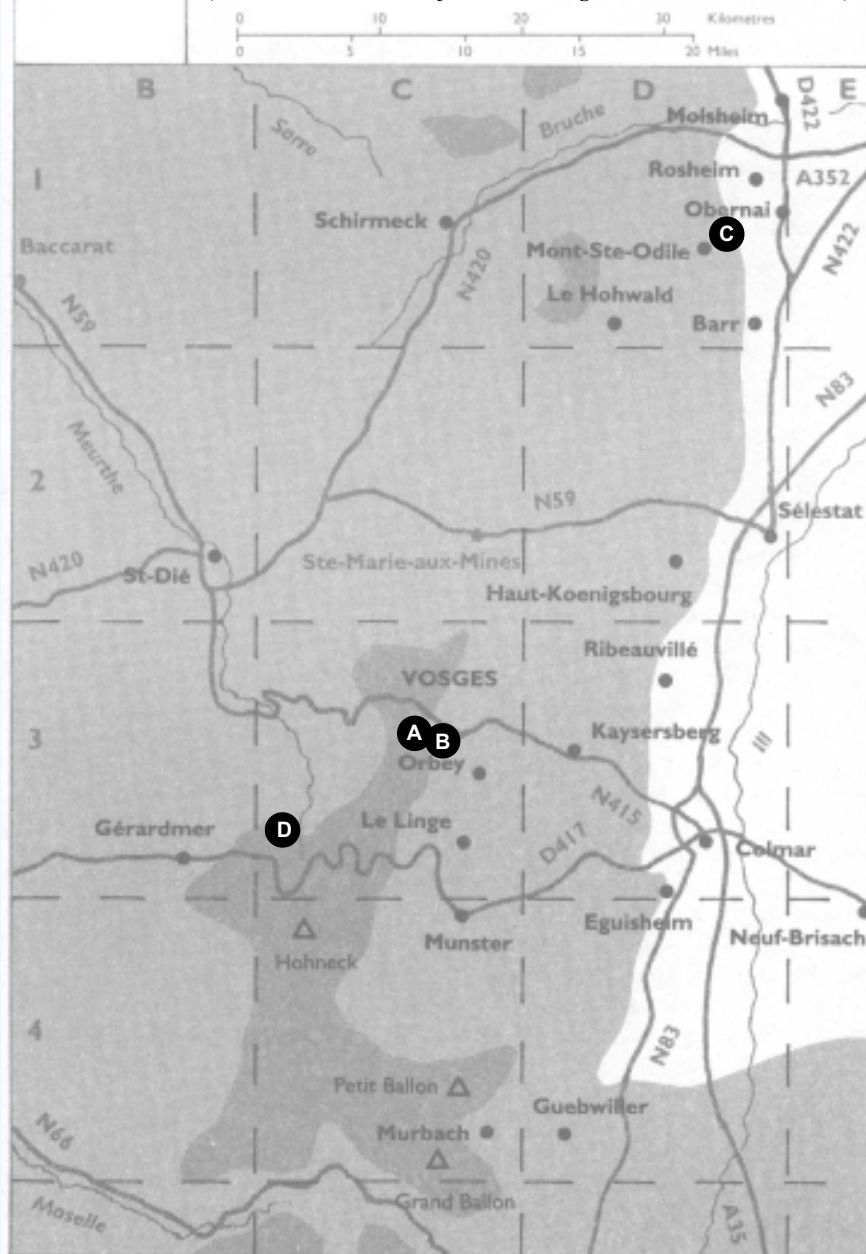


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Vosges du Sud: Route du Vin, *ballons* and a Christmas buzz.
Route des Crêtes. Kaiser Bill and futile fighting. Bugatti bonanza.
(Refer also to *Alsace Afresh* and *Vosges Christmas* on website.)



There's a surfeit of riches within the terrain to the left – all part of Alsace. This is a *pays* where you can enjoy yourself in each of the four seasons. There's an abundance of man-made creations and Nature's handiwork: scores of *villages fleuris*; a dark curtain of mountains, the wooded **Vosges** (C&D: 1 to 4); beneath them, to the east, the flat Rhine plain and Ried (marshland); and, as bonuses, some of France's most drinkable wines and a larder full of appetite-busting regional dishes.

I shall find the job of fitting everything into 138 lines of text impossible. To make more sense of my task I've split the map into three parts: imagine a line drawn from **Sélestat** (D2) to **St-Dié** (B2); and another from **Colmar** (D3) following the **D417** west to **Gérardmer** (B3). I'll start in the southernmost section.

Before we head west to the high Vosges *ballons* let's see what the Ried has to offer. **Neuf-Brisach** (E4): what a pity we can't all be eagles and admire the town from one-mile high. The perfect octagonal outline, with its complex exterior star-defence system, was one of Vauban's most masterful creations; within the octagon is a grid of criss-crossing streets and, at the very centre, a large *place*. To the north-east there's something different: the Chemin du Fer du Rhin. From Neuf-Brisach take a steam train north to Baltzenheim, enjoy a boat trip on the Rhine, and then return by the same puffer (weekends from Whit Sun to 2nd Sun in Sept: details Office de Tourisme, 68000 Colmar; tel 03 89 20 68 92).

Another significant attraction on the Rhine plain is the Ecomusée d'Alsace at Ungersheim (D4), east of **Guebwiller**. Here, scores of houses in a village layout take you back in time and explain the old traditions and skills of the region (open every day, except Jan/Feb).

Colmar (D3) is a seductive charmer. Many of the old town's streets have been pedestrianised: relish the multi-hued, half-timbered, 16th-century houses (the Maison Pfister is said to be Alsace's most beautiful); the area nicknamed La Petite Venise; and the Musée d'Unterlinden with its majestic Issenheim reredos. Nearby **Eguisheim** is another smasher: walk the narrow streets, circle after circle of them, their half-timbered houses groaning with flower-laden displays.

Seek out two churches in this southern segment: the Romanesque St-Léger *église* in **Guebwiller** (D4) with triple naves and a magnificent western façade under two towers; and the superb Romanesque half church at **Murbach** (C4) where only the twin towers, transept and choir remain – a vision of both austerity and elegance at the same time. Michelin rate the Guebwiller Valley very highly: why? The houses have less of the wine-village glitz, which is no bad thing; the beech woods are fine, especially on the D430 run to Westhalten (D4); and the climb to Le Markstein (C4), past the minute Lac de la Lauch, is exhilarating.

At Le Markstein you join the Route des Crêtes, a spectacular mountain-top run, which snakes north from Cernay (south of D4) to the Col du Bonhomme (C3). Detour south to the highest of the Vosges peaks, the **Grand Ballon** (1424 m), with a *table d'orientation* and a monument to the Chasseurs Alpins (mountain troops).

Another way of accessing the Route des Crêtes is by driving up the **Munster** Valley (C4). Locals claim this the best in the Vosges. Munster cheese is certainly top-notch; so are the lanes which wind up to the **Petit Ballon** summit (1267 m); and arguably the handful of small lakes to the north of the valley, bordered by woods, are tranquil, soothing sights – especially the Fischboedlé and Schiessrothried *lacs* west of Muhlbach (C4). Whatever route you take aim for **Hohneck** (C4: 1362 m), the best of all the mountain summits; minimal effort is required for you to absorb the far-reaching views.

West of Hohneck is some of my favourite Vosges terrain. In the spring I've thrilled at the sight of wild daffodils in the pastures high above Gérardmer (B3); in June I've admired the carpets of wild flowers at altitude; I've driven the forest roads (RF) between Xonrupt-Longemer (B3) and Gérardmer with their 'hidden' views; in high summer I've cooled myself by the unspoilt lakes of Longemer and Retournemer (C3), east of Gérardmer, and the larger, much busier Lac de Gérardmer; I've picked bilberries and blackberries in August and September; and, in late autumn, I've adored the varied hues of dying leaves on broadleaved trees. One must: don't bypass the Jardin Botanique de la Schlucht, north of Hohneck – an Alpine flora wonderland in early summer.

Now for the middle segment. Complete the rest of the Route des Crêtes run north. Then drive the lanes, through dense woods, to four lakes: Blanc, Noir, Forlet and Vert (C3: north to south). Admire the stunning views south from Hohrodberg (C3) and then give time to nearby **Le Linge** – a football pitch-sized hilltop where, in 1915, 17,000 Chasseurs Alpains (note the nearby cemetery on the map) and German soldiers lost their lives in futile fighting. The opposing trenches, often just yards apart, have been left as they were, rusty barbed wire and all. A small museum tells the story of the massacre: some of the finds unearthed from the site are chilling; others are both morbid and poignant human effects. To the east, Les Trois Epis (D3) is a cool haven of peace – high above the Rhine plain and a world away from Le Linge.

Of the Vosges valleys my vote goes to the Vallée de la Weiss – from above **Orbey** (C3) and east to the plain. Enjoy Orbey, Lapoutroie and the four-star *village fleuri* of **Kaysersberg** (D3). There's much to see. But for the four weekends prior to Christmas the place both buzzes and sparkles. The buzz comes from the Christmas market stalls where hand-made, quality products are on sale. The sparkle comes free every evening during the four weeks. Every window, balcony and tower is garlanded with traditional festive decorations and lights.

Give your attention now to man-made attractions. To a trio of villages to the south: Ammerschwihr, Niedermorschwihr and Turckheim (all C3) – each one associated with wine and the latter two with picturesque ancient treasures. Head north to Riquewihr (D3) – an unbelievably delectable village where the medieval heart is weighed down with richly decorated 15th/17th-century stone and half-

timbered houses. Nearby **Ribeauvillé** is also a treasure chest of old houses with ornate façades, complemented by flowers seemingly everywhere.

A trio of differing pleasures. The Parc des Cigognes, on the D1 east of Ribeauvillé, is a stork-breeding reserve (a.m. and p.m. every day Apl to Oct). To the south-east, west of the **N83**, is the Parc Naturel de Schoppenwihr – an English garden (a.m. and p.m. every day July/Aug). On the D416 western exit from Ribeauvillé is the Beauvillé textile factory. Save your francs before you call: the products and designs are super – from tea cloths to tablecloths, from scarves to serviettes. You'll not leave empty-handed. (See website: *Alsace Afresh*.)

Finish the middle section at Sélestat (D2) with its medieval heart, old houses, Romanesque and Gothic churches, and the unique Humanist Library (detour north-east, too, to the extravagantly decorated Baroque Eglise d'Ebersmunster); and the perched, perfect conception of a castle at **Haut-Koenigsbourg** – restored in 1900 by Kaiser Bill.

Finally, the northernmost section. Last year I spent some time in the hills around the Donon peak (C1) and in the Bruche Valley, south and north-east of **Schirmeck** (C1). Fine, as they go; but I suggest you leave that terrain until you've explored everything to the east.

Start in **Le Hohwald**, the wooded peaks and valleys circling the village of the same name (D1). To get a flavour of the delectable *pays*, drive a clockwise loop from the village, via the Champ du Feu (D1/D2); views of woods and pastures – all quintessential Vosges. Then aim north-east for **Mont-Ste-Odile** (D1): the site, on yet another sandstone table, has for thousands of years been both fortress and place of pilgrimage. The large present-day convent was rebuilt 300 years ago. Admire the views, see the various chapels (especially the mosaic roof of the Chapelle des Larmes), and wonder most at the 10 km-long Mur Païen (Pagan Wall) that loops around the hill on which the convent is perched.

Which way now? To the south there's **Barr** (D1), guarded by two perched ruined castles, and renowned for its Musée Folio Marco; enjoy the house, the various designs of furniture and exhibits evoking local life.

To the north of Mont-Ste-Odile are three further attractions. First, the ancient heart of **Obernai** (D1) where you'll find the famed Place du Marché, narrow lanes radiating off, half-timbered and stone houses, high belfry, richly-decorated town hall and the elegant 16th-century stone Puits (well) aux Six-Seaux. Then north to **Rosheim**, where the pride and joy is the Romanesque church of Sts-Pierre-et-Paul – which, for balance and supreme clarity of construction, is unbeaten in Alsace. Finally, head for **Molsheim** (D1) and the town centre: admire the stylish Renaissance Le Metz building and, a few strides away, visit the Musée de la Chartreuse/Fondation Bugatti – the latter with exhibits, including cars, which evoke the story of the town where the classic vehicles were made earlier this century (a.m. and p.m. weekdays; p.m. weekends; mid June to mid Sept; closed Tues).