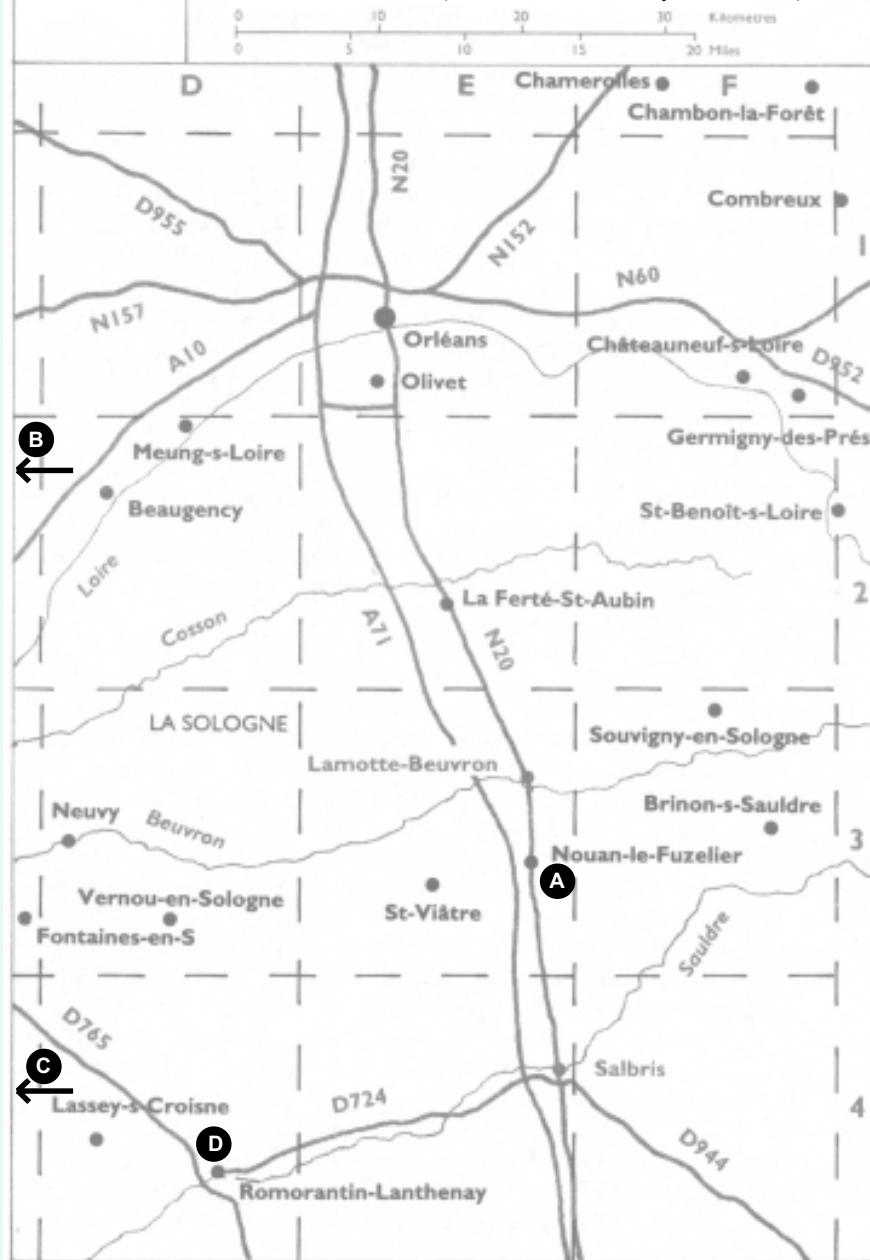


12

Sologne: *forêts, étangs, caquetoires* and beware leeches. *Châteaux* and *églises*. A mosaic jewel. *Maquis* and SOE. Parc Floral. *Bateau mouche*. (Refer also to *Chitenay* on website.)



In selecting the 44 chapters I made a deliberate decision to turn my back on France's celebrated tourist areas: Burgundy's Côte-d'Or, the Côte d'Azur, Dordogne, Provence and others. Instead I have concentrated on those parts bypassed by the majority of tourists.

One of the 'honeypot' areas I have ignored lies to the south-west of map sheet 12, the central section of the **Loire Valley**. There you will find superb examples of man's architectural and artistic skills. In selecting the area to the left I have turned instead to my favourite part of the Loire: **La Sologne** – a land of silver birches, oaks, beech, chestnuts and pine, *étangs* (pools), streams, sandy soil, heather and broom. The area is a wildlife paradise, renowned for fish, wildfowl, game, asparagus, fungi, strawberries, *pâtés* and *tarte Tatin*.

Map sheet 12 is literally a sea of green. I've driven through the extensive forests in early spring, when the first Chartreuse tints refresh the clear air; a month or two later wild flowers tease the senses; and in the misty months of October and November I've seen the armies of trees aglow with their autumn-tinted cloaks.

Let me try to persuade you to seek out the lanes which criss-cross La Sologne. I'll start with a trio of short drives, each one of which will give you a taste of the terrain I described above. First, locate **St-Viâtre** (E3), to the west of the **A71**. Seek out the *Maison des Etangs*, a small half-timbered house on the south side of the village; here there's an *écomusée* which explains the hows and whys of the Sologne *étangs* and the area's flora and fauna (every day mid June to mid October; weekends rest of the year). If time allows see the church and its main treasure: *le polyptique*, four 16th-century paintings on wood panels. Then follow this route, stopping as often as you can to make short detours, on foot, to absorb the restful terrain.

Drive south from St-Viâtre, on the D49, to Marcilly-en-Gault. Leave Marcilly to the north-west, on the D121. Within one km or so turn right at Le Carroin and head north on the V6. The woodland and *étang* landscape is superb. At the crossroads detour east to a romantic visual delight, the *Château Favelle* (E3), a classically balanced small building of red brick and stone. Finish the diamond-shaped run by driving north to La Ferté-Beauharnais and then back to St-Viâtre. Walks are ten a penny. But if you are keen to join accompanied *balades nature* (starting from a trio of nearby villages) then contact Sologne Nature Environnement, 1 av. de Toulouse, 41600 **Nouan-le-Fuzellier** (tel 02 54 88 79 74).

A second typical Sologne drive. Start at **Fontaines-en-Sologne** (just west of D3). Have a look at the half-timbered houses, west and south of the church, and the *église* itself, a part 12th/part 17th-century fortified structure (key from Madame Porcher whose house is 50 yards south of the *boulangerie* on the east side of the D119 just before the bend). Detour briefly on the D120 towards Courmemin, to the *Ferme de Jaugeny*; here you can buy *fumé d'agneau* and *plats cuisinés conservés*. From Fontaines head towards Bauzy (D3), being sure to take the loop

which heads south-east and then north to Bauzy. The loop winds past *étangs*, through mixed woods and alongside fields of asparagus and strawberries. Irises and wildlife abound and there's many a picnic spot. Finally, just north-west of Bauzy, have a look at the château at Veillenne, an eye-pleasing structure built with the small red bricks which suit the unassuming Sologne so perfectly.

South-east now for drive three. But first stop at **Vernou-en-Sologne** (D3), typical of many communities which make the most of an *étang*; witness the pool at the village's northern entrance. On the south-west side of the *commune* is La Borde where the vista is perhaps the finest in La Sologne. Man and Nature combine to create perfection: relish the water, trees, elegant château and inquisitive swallows.

Start drive three from the **Romorantin-Lanthenay** (D4) bypass. Head west on the D59. Soon the Etang de Batarde appears on your right. Note the sluice gate alongside the road; this enables the large pool to be emptied and cleaned periodically, an essential requirement for all *étangs*. The Etang de Paris is covered with water lilies in summer, unless the sluice gate has been used to empty the pool; in the year following the 'cleaning-up' blooms do not appear.

At **Lassay-sur-Croisne** (D4) admire the *église* with a slender spire. Get the key from Monsieur Martin at his house beside the phone kiosk; once inside enjoy the rose window and the 16th-century fresco. Continue on to one of the subjects in the fresco: the Château du Moulin. Access is by a woodland lane (mind the sleeping policemen). The site of the red brick and stone château, with cone-hatted towers and moat, is idyllic (open every day March to mid Nov: 02 54 83 83 51). Finish at La Straize, north-west of the château; here the Musée de la Straize (follow signs for Locature de la Straize), north of Gy-en-Sologne (D4), is a tiny, old cottage which illustrates the way of life of a 16th-century Solognote farm (weekends and public holidays only).

What of other man-made attractions in La Sologne? **Romorantin-Lanthenay** (D4) is the capital. Stand on the bridge across the River Sauldre; admire the happy mix of Nature and man's handiwork; walk the narrow streets upstream on the right bank past old Solognote houses (the tiny Musée d'Archeologie is a treat); and visit both the Musée de Sologne and the Musée Municipal de la Course Automobile. To the east of the town, at Villeherviers (D4), is the newly-opened Aliotis – a high-tech series of varying-sized aquariums (closed Sun & Mon from Sept to Apl).

Don't miss **Souvigny-en-Sologne** or **Brinon-sur-Sauldre** (both F3). Souvigny is a pretty village: admire the old stone and half-timbered houses, village green, trees and *église* with an original feature called a *caquetoire*, a timbered porch on the south and west sides. Brinon's church, too, has its own *caquetoire*. Visit the 17th-century château, alongside the **Cosson**, at **La Ferté-St-Aubin** (E2). The splendid moat (the river is one side of the water defences) and a *parc animalier* share the honours with the château.

Before I round off my all-too-brief words on La Sologne let me remind you that the area was a *maquis* (Resistance) stronghold during the last war. One book is a must: the wonderfully poignant *Jacqueline: Pioneer Heroine of the Resistance* by Stella King (for the Arms and Armour Press hardback try a library if shops are sold out; Transworld have also published a paperback version). The book tells the story of Yvonne Rudellat, known as Jacqueline, the first British woman SOE agent sent into German-occupied France – to the secretive Sologne.

Read the book and then, on the ground, relate geography to history. Stella captures the spirit and bravery of the people and the very essence of the landscape. Visit the Château de Nanteuil (now an hotel) at Huisseau-sur-Cosson (downstream, west of D3). Visit **Neuvy** (69:D3) and read about the 'incident' there (seek out the isolated church and the Resistance monument and graves in the cemetery). Mouné Gardnor-Beard, part of the 'Jacqueline' story, was Owen Watson's wife (see website's *Chitenay* for Owen's pottery). Recently Owen gave me a warning to pass on to readers tempted to swim in an *étang*: beware leeches, as he once found to his painful cost.

Continuing the theme of off-the-beaten track France I'll identify some of the pleasures in the Forêt d'Orléans, north-east of Orléans (E1). First, head for the Château-Promenade des Parfums at **Chamerolles** (above F1), beside the D109 (54:A4). The small 16th-century stone and brick-patterned structure, and the gardens at the rear, have been extensively restored by the owners, the Loiret Regional Council. The moated Renaissance building and formal gardens (restored to their original layout) are a delight; the château houses a museum which explains the use of perfume through the ages. **Chambon-la-Forêt**, to the east, is a two-star *village fleuri*; the area near the church is pretty. Nibelle, to the south, claims three stars for its summer flower show.

The Etang de la Vallée (F1) has all sorts of leisure facilities. The best picnic spots are to the east, alongside the Canal d'Orléans. On no account miss **Combreaux** (edge of F1) and the fairytale château to the north; constructed of small red bricks, and with super stone work and black cone-topped towers, the building dazzles.

What else? Don't miss the small church at **Germigny-des-Prés** (F1); the tiny mosaic roof is a jewel. Don't bypass the Romanesque abbey at **St-Benoît-sur-Loire** (F2) and its breathtaking belfry porch. Make two essential detours: to the Parc Floral at **Orléans La Source** (E1) where, from April to October, there's always a colourful show of flowers; and to **Olivet**, to the west of the park, where you should walk the wooded right bank of the Loiret (or take the *bateau mouche*, *La Sologne*, from the mooring behind the Rest. Madagascar).

I've no space to tell you about the châteaux, *églises* and museums at **Beaugency**, **Meung-sur-Loire** (both D2) and **Châteauneuf-sur-Loire** (F1); and the cathedral and museums at Orléans. Shed no tears if you bypass them; I know where I would head for first.