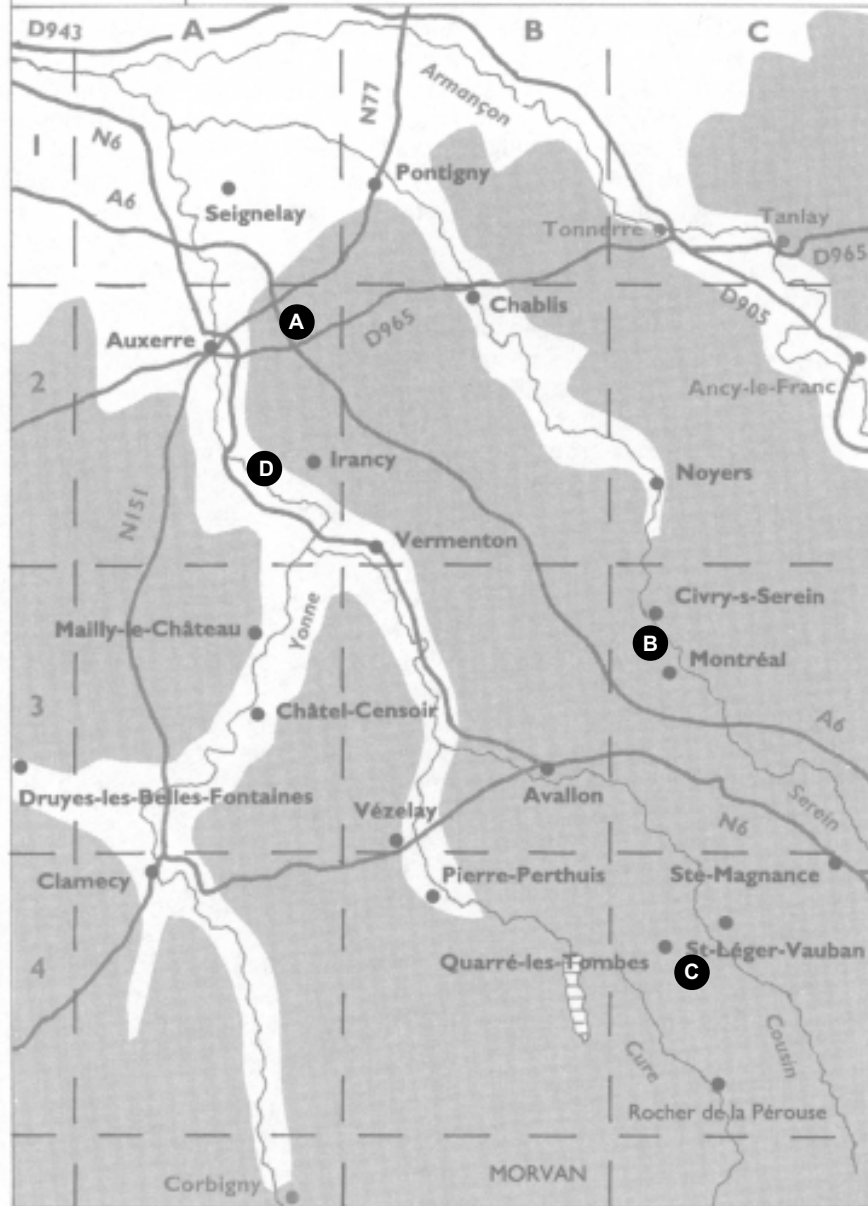


13

Auxerrois. Vézelay. Morvan and *Tardis* time travel. Pierre-qui-Vire. Noble Noyers. Chic Chablis. Medieval Montréal..  
(Refer also to *Auxerrois* and *A Morvan Must* on website.)

0 5 10 15 20 25 Miles  
0 5 10 15 20 Kilometres



Don't make the same mistake which I made for so many years. In my rush across France, first on the **N6** and, later on the **A6**, I was quite oblivious to the myriad Burgundian pleasures on each side of the busy highways which slice across map sheets 13 and 14. Yes, I visited the great historical sites: **Auxerre** (A2), **Vézelay** and **Avallon** (both B3) and to the south-east, the Côte-d'Or's Dijon and Beaune. But I ignored all the lesser-known attractions. For much of this chapter, and the next, I'll concentrate primarily on the latter.

On the bottom of map sheet 13 is the northern border of the Parc Naturel Régional du Morvan. In the chapter for map sheet 16 I describe the **Morvan** and the best of the park's countryside. Here, I'll finish off the job by looking at what remains of the park on map sheet 13. (Look also at the website's *e Auxerrois* and *Les Lavaults*.)

Let's assume you follow my advice on map chapter 16 and make the climb to the top of the **Rocher de la Pérouse** (C4 on map 13) with its quintessential Morvan panorama. Here wooded hills surround you and, far below your feet, you may catch sight of canoeists taking on the challenge of the white water in the River **Cure**. The hills rise slowly but surely to their highest point, 901 m, some 25 miles further south.

From the rocks follow this route to get a real taste of just what makes the Morvan special. Continue up the one-way forest road to the D10, turn right and head for St-Agnan (C4); but, just before Les Amans, aim north for Trinquelin. Driving in these lanes is akin to time travel with your *Tardis* – taking you back to rural, rustic Burgundy as she used to be. At Les Brizards you'll pass an *auberge* on your left where you can tuck into hearty, anything but prissy, Morvan fare. At **St-Léger-Vauban** (C4) keep turning right and then south, through conifer and beech woods, and under a memorable beech tunnel, to the Bénédictine Abbaye de la Pierre-qui-Vire – founded just over 100 years ago at the site of a granite *dolmen* (a legend claims that the 'stone that turns' can be moved by one hand). There's an exhibition on monastic life but what makes the trip worthwhile is the chance to buy the small, organically-produced, herb-flavoured cows' milk cheese made by the monks.

Which way now? Head north through the lanes to **Ste-Magnance** (C4) and its Gothic church with flamboyant vaulting on the apse and the Romanesque tomb of Ste-Magnance. Or re-trace your steps to St-Léger. The elevated village was the birthplace of the military architect, Vauban (a genius I've referred to often in this book). There's a Maison Vauban, in the handsome *mairie* beside the church, which tells his life story – and note the statue on the D55 (the *musée* is open a.m. and p.m. June to Sept; weekends only May and Oct). **Quarré-les-Tombes** (C4), also on an elevated site, has an unusual 'attraction'; outside the church walls are 100 or so 7th/8th-century limestone sarcophagi.

Continue west and then north along the western banks of the lake formed by the Barrage du Crescent (B4) to Chastellux-sur-Cure (B4). I reckon the château, on

its perched site, is one of the most handsome in Burgundy. Now north and then west on the D20 with its first eye-catching vista of **Vézelay's** (B3) hill-top basilica. Dive down the D353 to the wooded valley and the old bridge over the Cure at **Pierre-Perthuis** (B4); wind through St-Père with its proud Gothic *église*; and then climb to the majestic ecclesiastical marvel high above you, at Vézelay.

For me the Romanesque Basilica of Ste-Madeleine is one of the most inspiring places in France – for 900 years a pilgrimage site second to none. Whether you admire the tympanum sculpture of the main doorway, or the glorious rounded arches and capitals of the interior, or the views from the tree-shaded terrace, you'll most certainly be filled with an overpowering sense of history past. This is where, in 1146, St-Bernard, the Abbot of Clairvaux (map 10: E3), preached the second Crusade; and where the arch-enemies, Richard the Lionheart and Philippe-Auguste, undertook jointly the Third Crusade in 1190.

Vézelay marks the top-most edge of the regional park. I'll describe what remains on map 13 in three parts: the rest of the Cure Valley (B2/B3) – upstream stretches have already been mentioned – and its tributary, the **Cousin** (B3); the **Yonne** Valley (A1 to A4); and the **Serein** Valley (C3 to A1). I shall refer to the short stretch of the **Armançon** (B1/C1/C2) in the next chapter where I can make more sense of the many sights along its entire length.

The Cousin packs a scenic punch below the town of **Avallon** (B3). Explore the latter, on a granite table, first: the Romanesque church of St-Lazare with its exuberant carvings on the two main doorways; the extensive ramparts; and the views over the Cousin from the south gate. Descend and follow the Cousin downstream through a small wooded valley, which is as pretty as a picture. Spare time for the Romanesque *église* at Pontaubert (B3) and the mammoth 16th-century fresco in the church at nearby Vault-de-Lugny. Continue on to the Cure.

Further downstream on the latter, head for the Grottes d'Arcy (B3) – 500 metres of underground caves carved out millions of years ago by the river. They are full of stalagmites and stalactites and, at the end of the caves, the floor surface looks as if a tiny part of the moon's surface has been brought back to earth (open every day Mar to Nov). A hop-step-and-jump to the north is the 16th-century Manoir du Chastenay; tucked away the manor house may well be, but do take a peek and admire the exterior Renaissance features. Two Romanesque churches are also worth a look: Sacy (B2), to the north-east, has a striking octagonal tower; and **Vermenton** (B2) has a fine stone spire and western doorway, though the statues on the latter are in poor condition.

Now to the west and the Yonne. Study any large-scale map and you'll soon grasp that for much of the valley's length the Canal du Nivernais keeps the river company (in times past the Yonne was used to float timber downstream from the Morvan). The canal is much loved by holidaymakers who hire craft at Auxerre (A2) and then chug south to **Clamecy** (A4) and beyond. Explore Clamecy: the church with

its flamboyant-style west front and tower; and the old houses in the nearby streets. **Châtel-Censoir** (A3) has a church with a 12th-century triple apse (note the capitals); further downstream, Ste-Pallaye (A2), too, has a Romanesque *église*. But please don't bypass **Mailly-le-Château** (A3). See the fortified church at the heart of the village; the neighbouring 400-year-old lime tree; and then drink in the tonic of a view from the terrace around the corner – below you the tree-lined arms of the Yonne, the canal, wooded hills and the lower half of Mailly.

At Bailly (A2) explore the vast underground caves, once quarried to provide stone for buildings and now used to store millions of bottles of wine. Above the caves are St-Bris-le-Vineux and **Irancy** (both A2), renowned for their largely-ignored wines: whites from the former; reds and *rosés* from the latter. Admire the views too.

Before heading for Auxerre I'll tell you about two spots just west of the Yonne. I fell in love with **Druyes-les-Belles-Fontaines** (west of F3). The source of the short-lived River Druyes is some springs at the foot of a low cliff, the latter ringed by a small park. There's also a tiny lake and a buzzing weir – all-in-all a tranquil and soothing scene. High above the village are the ruins of a once formidable 12th-century castle (p.m. every day July/Aug).

**Auxerre** (A2) is an always busy town – but be patient, endure the traffic, park under the shady trees alongside the Yonne's left bank and then make the short walk to its two most famed treasures: the massive and impressive Gothic cathedral (the crypt is Romanesque); and, just to the north, the pre-Romanesque crypt at the Abbey Church of St-Germain.

Finally, the serene Serein Valley. Start at **Montréal** (C3). Turn off the D957 and pass under three combined arches into a medieval village with stone houses, paved lanes and views over the Serein; don't miss the church with its 26 elaborately carved oak stalls. Note the fortified farm beside the D11; and make the detour to hidden **Civry-sur-Serein** – humble but proud and with a smashing church porch.

**Noyers** (C2) is a must. I know of few places which deserve a *cité médiévale* label so much. *Maisons* of stone and timber; *portes*, arches and tiny *places*; walk the maze of alleys which pass under both houses and gates. Walk, too, the promenade to the east, between the Serein and the ancient ramparts and towers. **Chablis** (B2), shining with good wealth, has become a cult wine word; enjoy the new park beside the Serein and the excellent Sat a.m. market. The *église* at Ligny-le-Châtel (B1) is a mixture of styles: Romanesque nave, transept and tower; and huge Renaissance choir (smile, too, at the exterior gargoyles).

Continue to the Cistercian abbey at **Pontigny** (B1), built during the transition period between Romanesque and Gothic. The nave is vast, enhanced by numerous tall windows; and admire the huge *chevet*, plus flying buttresses, from the lane to the south. Finish at **Seignelay** (A1) on a Saturday morning – when you can enjoy both the *marché* and the 17th-century covered market hall with its timbered roof.