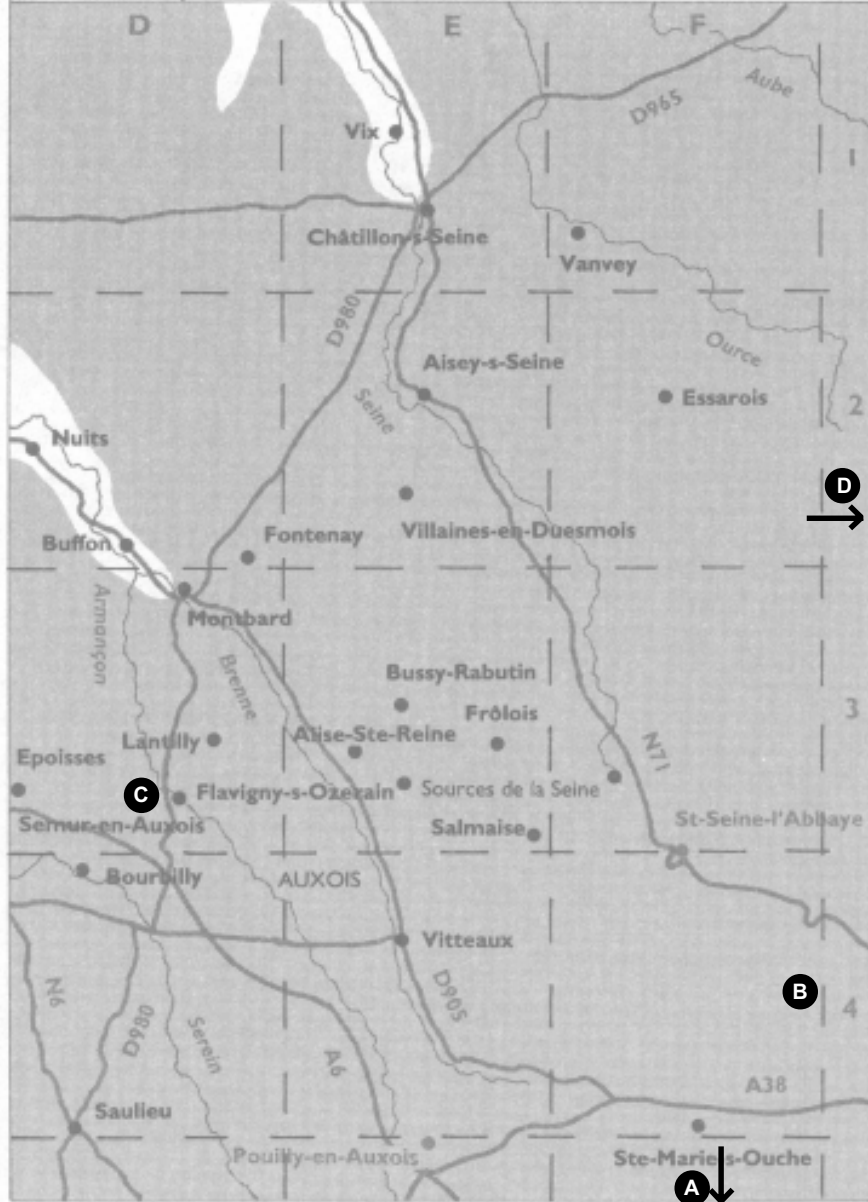
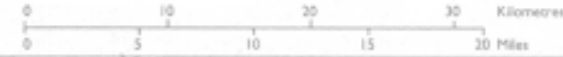


14

Auxois, architectural glories, *doux* and a 'sourcey' goddess. Flavigny and aniseed. Julius Caesar and 52BC. Cistercians. *Maquisards*. (Refer also to *Beyond La Côte d'Or* on website.)



A quick glance at map sheets 13 and 14 will confirm that much of the landscape is tree covered. On 14 I would guess that 90 per cent of the terrain is wood-washed on the northern half of the map; when you drive the lanes on the ground you'll not argue with that statistic. The second principal geographical feature is a series of river valleys: the **Seine** rises on the eastern edge (F3); on the western side the **Armançon** threads a path north; and, between them, many minor streams and rivers wind their way north-west to join the Armançon. I've divided what follows into the three parts described in the previous sentence.

I'll start with the last of the three parts – the rivers and hills of **Auxois**. Study any large-scale map and trace these rivers: the Lavau (F3) and Vau (E3); Oze (E3/F4); Ozerain (E3/E4) and **Brenne** (E3/E4). To the east is the Langres plateau. But between the four valleys are lines of hills where big-dipper lanes rise and dive between the rivers. There are many scenic treats: some famous, others quite unknown.

Begin your Auxois exploration of map sheet 14 at **Ste-Marie-sur-Ouche** (F4), just off the toll-free A38 *autoroute*; here a Roman bridge will capture your attention. At nearby Pont-de-Pany you can watch holidaymakers work a lock on the Canal de Bourgogne.

North-west to **Vitteaux** (E4): at the heart of the town look out for some old half-timbered houses and a 13th-century covered market. Drive east, on the D26, to Villy-en-Auxois (E4): here a simple *maquis* memorial honours 11 dead and explains how, when and where they came to die. **Salmaise** (E3) sits high above the Oze: note the wash-house with fountain, the long and narrow restored covered market, the tree-lined *place* and the château's high walls; all-in-all a pleasing spot. Detour, briefly, towards Blessey and the Swiss-like Lavau Valley.

Frôlois (E3) has two halves: La Montagne and Le Vallon. The restored 18th-century château has a commanding site above the valley (p.m. July/ Aug). After heavy rain nose out an amazing surprise. From Darcey (E3) follow signs for La Douix and, 300 metres after the cemetery, the Grotte Douix; a short, steep descent, through the trees, leads you to a roaring rush of water from a cave – a Jura-like resurgent stream (*doux* is the local name for this type of spring).

Next **Flavigny-sur-Ozerain** (E3), of *Chocolat* film fame, high above the river. The medieval fortified town is an architectural marvel. See the machicolated 15th-century Porte du Bourg, the evocative Rue de l'Eglise, the old stone houses and the pre-Romanesque remains at the ancient Abbey of St-Pierre where, incidentally, the village's famed aniseed sweets are made. On to **Alise-Ste-Reine** (E3) where Julius Caesar finally defeated the Gauls, led by Vercingétorix, in 52BC. The Battle of Alésia, where his legions were outnumbered by five to one, was Caesar's greatest and most audacious victory. On Mont Auxois visit the excavations of the Gallo-Roman town of Alésia and, in the village, the *musée* housing the finds. Also high above the village is a giant statue of Vercingétorix, looking north; there's also a

covered *table d'orientation* nearby. Finish with a loop to the north, to **Bussy-Rabutin** (E3), where you have to work hard to catch a glimpse of the handsome, moated and superbly balanced 16th/ 17th-century château with four round, black-coned towers. Drive up the lane, as far as you can, to the south. (Apl to Sept: every day. Oct to Mar: every day but not Tues/Wed.)

Detour west to **Lantilly** (D3) where the 18th-century château, with 100 windows, has a commanding hill-top site (every day July to mid Oct; not Tues). Immediately west of the village, on the D103, is a memorial to *maquisards* who were killed on the spot on 25 May 1944. The monument's words pull no punches: '*Ici les barbares Hitleriens ont martyrisé et massacré 23 jeunes maquisards du groupe Henri Bourgogne.*'

Montbard (D3), to the north, has little to offer – other than the cleverly-designed Buffon Park. **Fontenay** (D2), to the east, offers a treasure chest of riches. In an idyllic wooded setting, the restored Cistercian abbey was founded in 1118 by two of St-Bernard's uncles. Fontenay was the second daughter of St-Bernard's Clairvaux (map 10: E3) and there is no finer place in Burgundy for you to grasp just why the region, the mother of all the arts, and the Cistercians – led by the saint who was thought then to be Christianity's spiritual leader – had such a vital and important influence throughout Europe. Detour, too, upstream, to a delectable scene of woods and meanders.

Part two: **Armançon Valley**. Approach from the south, via **Saulieu** (D4) and the **Serein Valley** (see map 13). At Saulieu the renowned attraction is the Romanesque Basilica of St-Andoche, famed for its carved capitals covering a wide spectrum of subjects. Continue north and seek out the isolated château at **Bourbilly** (D4), south-east of **Epoisses** (C3/D3). The restored structure, built in the 14th century, with seductive, sleek towers at each corner, almost rivals Bussy for eye-appeal: set in the wooded Serein Valley the detour is rewarding (every day July/Aug; closed Mon). Epoisses is renowned for both its cheese (buy from factory shop off D36 on south exit) and château, a mixture of buildings flanked by 12th-century towers.

Now to **Semur-en-Auxois** (D3), as eye-catching and impregnable as ever. The Armançon loops in a circle below the town's massive 14th-century round towers and walls. Both the latter, together with the river, narrow alleys, lovely views and the much-altered 13th-century Eglise Notre-Dame make Semur hard to resist. Admire, too, the views from the riverside lanes below the town walls and from the Pont Joly.

North to the Forges de Buffon (**Buffon**: D2) where the Taylor-Whiteheads did such sterling work in restoring the once model factory (with furnace, forge and roller-mills), built in 1768, and powered by the Armançon (July/Aug: p.m. every day; a.m. Wed/Thurs/Fri. June and Sept: p.m. every day except Tues). Detour to Cry (D2) where the river, canal and wooded hillside combine well. **Nuits** has a 16th-century château, a small building hidden behind a curtain of trees (every day).

To the north-west are two world-famous Renaissance châteaux. Ancy-le-Franc (13:C2) is a priceless 16th-century treasure; the austere, square-cut exterior is outshone by the rich elegance of the interior's 25 apartments (every day Apl to Oct). Tanlay (13: C1) is a sumptuous, 16th-century moated structure – though the white stone is looking a bit dirty these days (every day Apl to mid Nov but not Tues). Finish at Tonnerre (13:C1). You'll not fail to see the large, striking-looking Eglise St-Pierre; visit the church and the immense 12th-century Hôtel-Dieu (or Ancien Hôpital) but what pleases me, just as much, is the Fosse Dionne where a spring feeds a basin of deep blue-green colouring, ringed by a picturesque 18th-century wash-house.

Part three: **Seine Valley**. Start at the **Sources de la Seine** (F3), France's most famous river. Approach from the north-west, through a beech tunnel, to a wooded park and its several springs (the Goddess Sequana reclines gracefully in a grotto over the largest source). A board explains the importance of the springs in ancient times. Head north: first, along the D103C from St-Germain-Source-Seine to Chanceaux; then to Jours-lès-Baigneux (E2/E3) with a small Renaissance manor house and a pepper-pot tower tagged La Tour Joyeuse; and then, north-west, to **Villaines-en-Duesmois** (E2), where all that remains of a medieval castle are four ruined towers (p.m. every day except Tues).

The **N71** from St-Marc-sur-Seine (E2) is a pretty run; nearing Brémuret-Vaurois look right through the trees for the multi-towered château across the river. **Aisey-sur-Seine** (E2), from the N71, presents a beguiling scene of river, pastures, woods and village. Now a must. Drive east along the Brevon Valley (E2/F2): a winding and unspoilt river, pools, cascades, woods, villages and, at Rochefort, a handsome château in a classic setting – all combine to refresh the senses.

At **Essarois** (F2) take the lane which heads north-west from the church. Just above the village stop and walk 20 metres to a monument to five *maquisards* '*massacrés par les Barbares*' on 11 June 1944. Soon you pass the 12th-century abbey at Val-des-Choues, in an isolated woodland site (open all year). Stop at the Etangs des Marots (F1/F2). The pools and woods make an ideal picnic site: we were amused by the ducks and water fowl but we were not so lucky as an Oxford reader who saw two beavers swim past. On to **Châtillon-sur-Seine** (E1), either through the forest or via the *lavoir* at **Vanvey** (F1).

At Châtillon seek out first the Musée Archéologique (in the Maison Philandrier). This houses many Gallo-Roman finds made in the locality. The most stunning is the Vix treasure – a collection of jewellery, goblets and a massive ornately-decorated bronze vase dating from the 5th century BC (excavated on Mont Lassois at **Vix** (E1) in 1953). Then proceed 400 metres to the north-east from the *musée*, to a remarkable resurgent spring, the source of the 100-metre-long Douix, surely France's shortest river. The small stepped cascade, pool and park is a visual tonic. Finish at the Romanesque St-Vorles *église*, with its Lombardian arcades, perched high on a terrace between the *musée* and source.