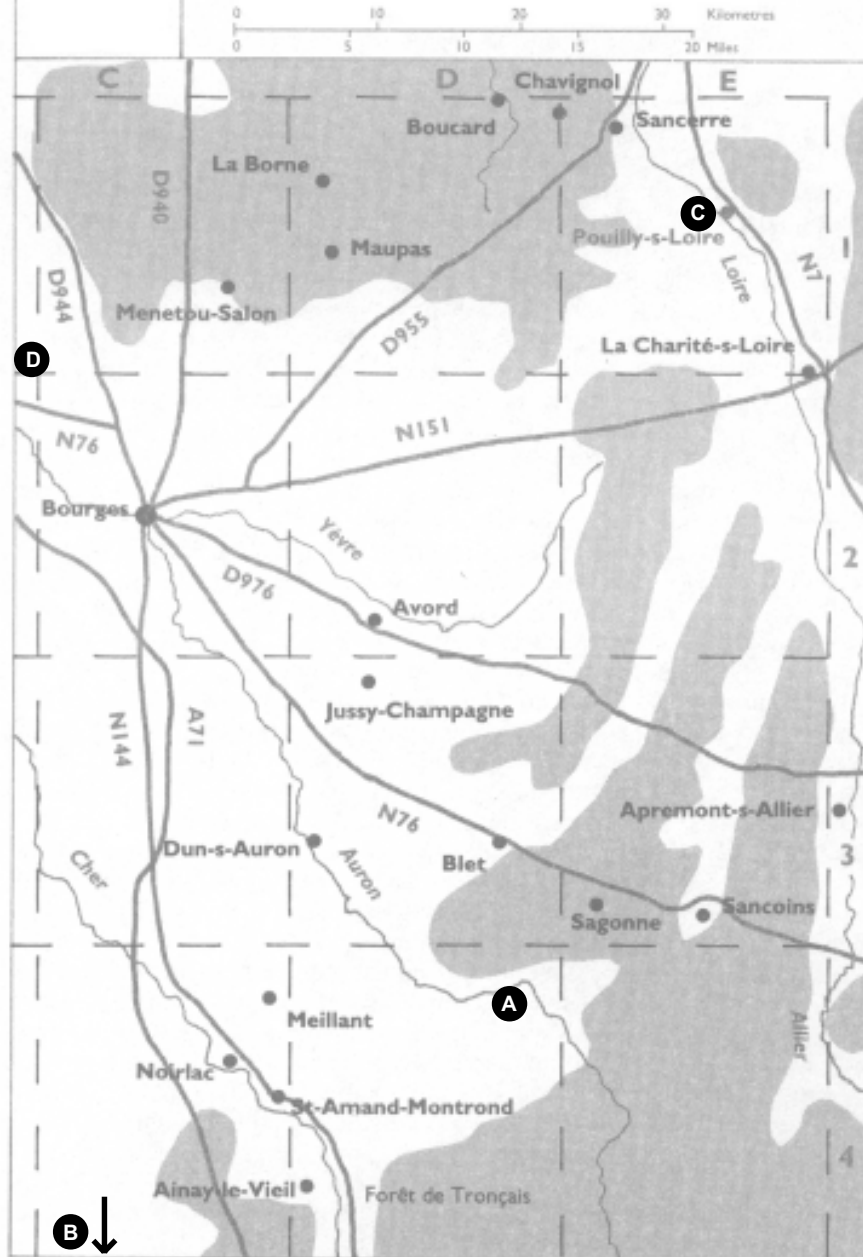


15

Berry and Bourges: *châteaux*, Romanesque *églises* and oaks. Scots' links. Sissinghurst inspiration. Potters' paradise. Sancerrois wines. (Refer also to *Pouilly-sur-Loire* on website.)



Please do not make the mistake I did for three decades and ignore the numerous sights which pepper map sheet 15. Nature takes second place here – in the geographical centre of France; man-made structures, scores of them, win almost all the honours. With one or two exceptions the landscape is flat and dull. Almost all the *pays* covered by the map to the left is in the *département* of Cher, itself part of the Berry region. The country to the east of the River **Loire** is in Burgundy and the bottom edge of map 15 is known as Bourbonnais.

I'll start the chapter by taking Nature's side and describing three inviting corners where she makes a truly commendable contribution. I'll follow that with two tours: one highlighting man-made ecclesiastical treasures; the second identifying a string of sumptuous *châteaux*. I'll finish in medieval **Bourges** (C2), the capital of Berry.

The **Forêt de Tronçais** (D4/E4 and further south off the map), on the northern edges of Bourbonnais and one of France's finest forests, is a rich tapestry of proud and handsome oaks. Careful regeneration and management since the last war, and continuing thinning out in the decades to come, will ensure that in future centuries some majestic specimens will be growing in the forest. Walks abound and, in the autumn, locals have a whale of a time picking *cèpes*, *girolles* and other fungi. Make great use of the excellent notice boards which you'll find at numerous points throughout the forest; Tronçais (D4) is just one example.

Seek out three *étangs*: walk the promenade circling the Etang de St-Bonnet (D4); the same goes for the Etang de Saloup (99:E1); and walk the Futaie Colbert on the north-east corner of the Etang de Morat, the pool north of Tronçais. Many individual oaks, or groups of trees, are marked on the map: nose out those north of St-Bonnet-Tronçais (D4) and the ones near the D978A, east of the D953 (D4).

Nature's second significant contribution is at **Apremont-sur-Allier** (east of E3) – where she gets more than a little help from man. Apremont is unbelievably picturesque with an unspoilt riverside setting where a wide grass walkway is shaded by willows. Beside the grass bank there's a line of brown-shuttered, ivy-covered stone houses, each one different from the others. Nothing is too precious and the overall scene is easy on the eye. Throughout the village there's a profusion of flowers, particularly lapis lazuli. Sitting peacefully above the houses is an elegant *château*, owned by the same family since 1722. Below the *château* walls is the 10-acre Parc Floral d'Apremont: lakes, a Chinese-style bridge, an arboretum, the famed long pergola walk, and the 'white garden', inspired by Vita Sackville-West's Sissinghurst, combine magnificently (open every day, except Tues a.m., Easter to mid Sept).

Nature's third contribution is north of the D955 from Bourges to **Sancerre** (E1). What a refreshing change the hilly, wooded landscape, the Pays de Sancerrois, makes from the monotonous countryside to the south. Sancerre snoozes smugly on a high dome, casting a satisfied eye over the vineyards which have brought the area so much fame since the Sauvignon white wine became very chic when first

'discovered' 40 years ago. You'll have plenty of chances to buy whites and reds (made from Pinot Noir grapes – serve the wine chilled) and the *rosés* from Bué (D1/E1). Another tip: do buy the goat's milk cheeses from **Chavignol** (E1) and Crézancy-en-Sancerre (D1). Other Sauvignon whites, as good and cheaper, come from the **Menetou-Salon** (C1) vineyards.

Seek out **La Borne** (D1), the potters' village, on an elevated site at the western end of Le Sancerrois. Bornoise pottery dates back as far as the 12th century. During the 19th century the potters prospered but, after the 1914-18 War, with an increasing demand for galvanised iron, the industry withered away. Today some four dozen or so potters have workshops in the village and surrounding countryside. Their varied and individualistic *grès* pottery, using local clays, is often stunning in appearance. On the D22 eastern exit from La Borne there's both a *musée*, housed in a church (open every day Easter to Oct; weekends rest of the year) and a nearby exhibition centre (open weekends only).

Now the first of two tours. This is an ecclesiastical route, starting and finishing at two memorable sites. Commence with a bang at the Abbaye de **Noirlac** (C4), the only Cistercian monastery to have survived relatively intact. Approach from the north-west, on the D35 alongside the River **Cher**. The 12th-century abbey is a graceful structure and the initial sight of Saracen chimneys is an intriguing one. The interior's cloisters and arches are eye-catching – austere and simple but a perfect reflection of Cistercian architecture. An annual music festival is held from mid July to mid Aug (contact Assoc. des Amis de l'Abbé de Noirlac, 5 rue de Séraucourt, 18000 Bourges; tel 02 48 67 00 18).

Continue by seeking out some of Berry's numerous Romanesque churches. I saw the following *églises*, many of which are illuminated every evening during the summer. (I've used the word 'illuminated', in brackets, to identify them.) Start at La Celle (C4), north of Noirlac: the Eglise St-Blaise has surprisingly large flying buttresses, some fine capitals and an elegant chevet. The Eglise St-Amand is at the heart of **St-Amand-Montrond** (C4): admire the choir, nave, capitals and 15th-century chapels. The Eglise St-Etienne at **Dun-sur-Auron** (D3) is a large multi-coloured stone building with handsome chevet, chapels and has an attractive *place* on the southern side. I was not so struck with the town's ancient ramparts. There's a bustling Sat morning market and a Musée du Canal de Berry (open May to Sept).

Next **Blet**, on the N76 (D3). Don't be put off by the church's hideous tower and spire. The 12th-century interior is remarkable, especially the capitals and columns with frescoes. Nearby Charly (illuminated) also has a banal exterior; savour instead the pillars, topped with capitals, the side chapels and the rather too enthusiastically decorated choir. Vereaux (E3: illuminated) is a modest structure; the highlight is the west door and façade. **Jussy-Champagne** (D3: illuminated) is renowned for an extravagant three-level façade which contrasts dramatically with the simplicity

of the church. **Avord** (D2: illuminated) is also worth a detour just to admire the three-part façade.

Finish the tour with a flourish at the glorious Eglise Notre-Dame in **La Charité-sur-Loire** (E1). One of Burgundy's best Romanesque treasures, the vast structure is noted for its chevet, domed transept, handsome choir and radiating chapels, and Max Ingrand stained glass windows. Once, after Cluny, this was the largest church in France, capable of housing a congregation of 5,000 worshippers.

The second 'châteaux' tour starts at **Ainay-le-Vieil** (C4/D4), south of St-Amand-Montrond. Access the *village fleuri* from the east and look out for the fisherman and the lady with a parasol. The octagonal walls of the small moated château have been tagged Le petit Carcassonne; notable, too, is the rose garden (open every day Feb to Nov except Tues in Feb/Mar/Nov). **Meillant** (C4) is a Renaissance stunner – the exterior a mix of flamboyant Gothic and medieval and the interior elegantly furnished (every day except Tues from mid Nov to Jan).

The moated Château de **Sagonne** (E3), west of **Sancoins**, is a small circular fortress. Relish the 14th-century site, moat, keep and furnished rooms (every day July to Sept). Jussy-Champagne (D3) is a more modern structure from the 17th century – a happy mix of brick and stone, pastoral landscape, river and splendid furnishings (every day Apl to mid Nov). The ornate and grandiose Château de **Menetou-Salon** (C1) was rebuilt in the 19th century and is particularly renowned for a collection of carriages and cars (every day Apl to Oct). The nearby 15th-century Château de **Maupas** (D1) is to the east; the many-floored building has furnished rooms and a staircase decorated with 887 earthenware plates (p.m. every day from Palm Sunday to Sept).

To finish the châteaux tour, detour to the north. First, to the moated and multi-towered 14th-century fortress at **Boucard** (D1), west of Sancerre, with an austere exterior which is softened by the pools and water meadows of the Sauldre Valley (open every day). Next, the 15th-century Château de la Verrerie with many Scottish links, nine miles north-west of Boucard. If you were asked to draw your perception of a château this is the image you would put on paper: water, trees, parkland and man's subtle efforts with differently-styled towers, walls and stone combine to create Renaissance perfection (every day Mar to Nov).

Finally, despite the heavy traffic, head for the medieval centre of **Bourges** and the superb Gothic Cathédrale St-Etienne: be bowled over, as we have been, by the gigantic nave; the stained glass; the flying buttresses; the ornate chevet; the west front; and the restored organ. Rest awhile in the adjacent Jardins de l'Archevêche; then head north, past half-timbered houses to the Jardin des Prés-Fichaux. Visit the flamboyant Palais Jacques-Coeur; and the many museums, especially the Musée Estève, an art gallery *par excellence*, and the Musée du Berry in the 16th-century Hôtel Cujas. (Details of all the above from Office du Tourisme, 21 rue Victor Hugo, 18000 Bourges; tel 02 48 23 02 60.)