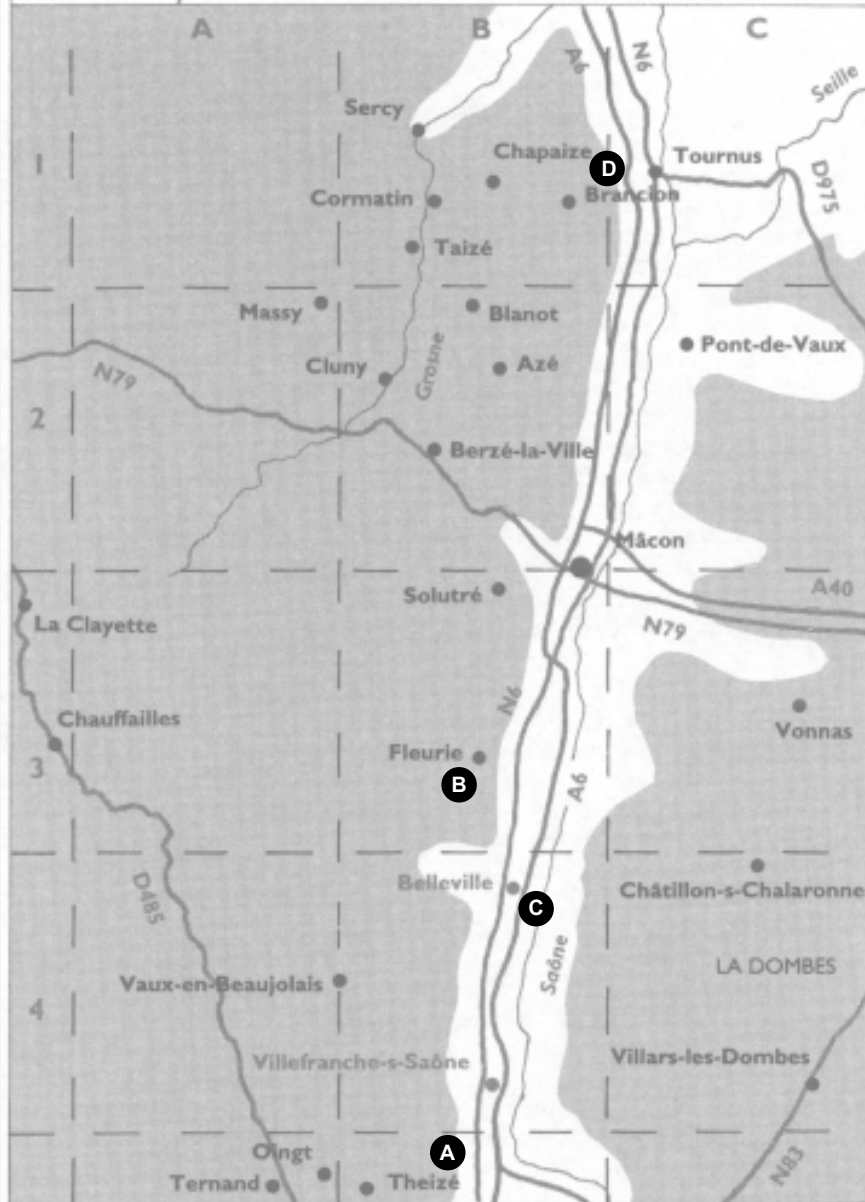


21

Bourgogne Romane, Dombes, Beaujolais and bright boîtes. Renaissance galleries. Pierres dorées. Clochemerle pays. Saracen chimneys. Secret lavoir. Cluny; a spiritual hub.

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



Few other map sheets in *Mapaholics' France* hide such golden riches in their Fort Knox treasure chests of countryside. But before I signpost dozens of places for you to see let me tell you about a corner of terrain seen by few speeding motorists on the A6.

The wooded hills west of **Tournus** (C1) are typical of what I call my golden objective in travel writing: the not-so-obvious. I first encountered what lay immediately beyond the Col de Brancion, 15 miles west of the Saône, almost two decades ago. I had descended on the D14 to a village I knew nothing about, **Chapaize** (B1).

By far the most significant village attraction is the hugely impressive Eglise St-Martin with its lofty belfry. I parked outside the church. What immediately caught my eye, alongside the lane on the north-west side of the church, was La Forge, a classic example of the local houses, some of which you may have seen as you crossed the wooded hills from Tournus. The silver birch growing almost out of the wall and old forge machinery made me chuckle.

La Forge was also a small shop then, full of examples of work created by local artisans. Much the most stunning was the owner's work. Yvonne Courson explained that the couple of dozen *boîtes* (boxes), all different, were models of actual Mâconnaise houses: every one had a staircase leading up to the living accommodation and a *meurot*, a first floor terrace. She had nosed out the actual houses and then made and painted each of the authentic models.

The houses in the area, not the models, were built in this way for the sole purpose of keeping the ground floor, centrally-sited *cave* at a cool and constant temperature throughout the year; remember wine has been one of the main trades hereabouts for centuries.

Chapaize's high-towered *église Romane*, with its Italian touches, is one of the finest in the Mâconnaise hills. The 11th-century wonder is being extensively restored. Yvonne pointed out Le Médiant on the bell-tower – lit at sunset between March 21 and September 23. She also showed me the last remaining tower of the Bénédictine monastery (for monks) and I chuckled over her tale of the tunnel linking the latter with the convent for nuns a kilometre or so away. She also told me about the previous male owner of La Forge. He had never washed so hadn't bothered to install either water or electricity. Yvonne was a human treasure chest of both vitality and knowledge. In her own inimitable way she told me much about the church and urged me to visit some other local, not-so-obvious treats.

Back to the map and I'll begin the difficult task of listing the gems, both natural and man-made, which you must seek out on your travels. Tournus is the place to start (C1). The great abbey of St-Philibert, built in the 11th/12th centuries, is majestic: towers, nave, crypt, the St-Michel Chapel with its surprise view of the nave – all please enormously. The Romanesque churches in Mâconnais are built of *calcaire* (limestone), a light-coloured stone; further west and north-west the *églises* are constructed from the local *granit rose* (pink) stone (example Gourdon: A1). At St-Philibert, both have been used.

Do not desert Tournus yet. Visit the Greuze Museum (devoted to the painter) and then call at the nearby tourist office. Ask for the street map showing the location of numerous Renaissance houses. Many hide the most handsome of surprises. Wherever you can open the street door, enter and marvel at the courtyard at the heart of each house. For example, immediately opposite the tourist office is No 12 rue de la République (42 on the map) – a courtyard with half-timbered galleries and spiral stone staircase; at No 16 (41 on the map) is a triple gallery and spiral stone staircase. You could spend a day alone following the architectural wonders on the map's marked trail.

Into the hills again. Don't rush through Martailly-les-Brancion on the D14 (B1). Look out for Monsieur Leta, another fascinating individual, and his sculptures of stone and wood. By now you will have realised this is a land of perfumed old roses (invariably climbers and ramblers), vines, Charolais cattle (white ghosts in the twilight), woods, pastures, hills and those characteristic houses I described earlier. At **Brancion** (B1) park and walk to the medieval village. There's an austere *église Romane* masterpiece at the end of the promontory overlooking the **Grosne** Valley; a feudal castle (which you can visit); and vine-covered, ancient buildings – all a world away from the N6 and A6 (C1).

The Mâconnais area is endowed with numerous ecclesiastical riches. **Cluny** (B2) is the most important by far. Once the spiritual hub of the Christian world, the abbey, until St-Peter's was built in Rome, was the largest Christian church in Europe. Little remains of the abbey today but the site still merits your attention; apply your imagination as you tour the grounds. Cluny's influence on religious architecture and sculpture in the 12th century was enormous – as were the hundreds of Cluny's 'children' (dependant abbeys and priories) which kept alive the Christian faith throughout France and Europe, not just Burgundy, in the days when Christianity almost came close to dying.

The hills are full of superb Romanesque churches. Chapaize and Brancion have already been mentioned. Nose out also the *église* at Malay (B1: hard to find as there are no signposts in the village) – a perfectly proportioned structure with a series of differently-shaped exterior levels; **Massy** (A2) – a miniature version of Chapaize with an honour guard of five lime trees below the tower; **Blanot** (B2) – again different and with an unusual top-hatted tower with a Lombardian influence; and **Berzé-la-Ville** (B2) – where, just below the village, the priory chapel of the Château des Moines hides, within its interior, glorious murals reminiscent of Byzantine art.

Another 20th-century ecclesiastical site is at **Taizé** (B1: north of Cluny), a world-famous community founded by Brother Roger in 1940. Each year tens of thousands of young people, of all nationalities and denominations, spend time at the tented village camp. At first glance the 'church' resembles a concrete bunker; but what a transformation takes place when you enter the dark interior. Peace and an overwhelming feeling of faith grips your heart. Three services of song and prayer are held every day (for details and times tel 03 85 50 14 14).

Now for something unusual. Locate Bissy (B1), just north-west of Chapaize. Opposite the war memorial there lies a stunning secret, lurking behind the door to what appears to be a concrete bunker. Inside is an ancient oval-shaped *lavoir* with craftily-designed roof which gives both protection to those washing and also allows rain to fall into the pool. Note the *granit rose* edgings around the pool.

There's another version, not anything like as fascinating, near Berzé-la-Ville (B2). Follow signs from the *village fleuri* which say *lavoir fleuri*. These lead you to Le Vernay to the north. Colourful both the *lavoir* and the hamlet most certainly are.

Other man-made treats are worth noting. One, the most obvious, is the TGV railway line from Paris to Lyon. Hereabouts you'll grasp, at first hand, what steep gradients the track climbs. Put aside 20 minutes or so at one of the bridges and gasp at the sight of a bullet train flashing past. At Blanot (B3) follow signs to the 'Poterie' at the top of the village and admire some fine glazes (open from 2.30 p.m.).

Three châteaux deserve your attention. First, the smallest and least well known, at **Sercy** on the D981 (B1). The quartet of varyingly-topped towers appeal and so does the pool in front of the structure; to this day I can recall, over 10 years ago, the grunts of the frog orchestra tuning up in the water. **Cormatin** (B1) is something else: truly representative of the image we all have of the word 'château', with moat, gardens and extravagantly rich paintings, tapestries and furniture. Berzé-le-Châtel (B2) is a strategically-sited feudal castle, built to protect the southern approaches to Cluny.

Nature has a significant say in the wooded hills and valleys. Two renowned caves will please those who seek adventure underground: the grottoes at **Blanot** (B1: north of the village) – an extensive network of caves with huge examples of stalactites and stalagmites; and **Azé** (B2) – prehistoric caves combine with a subterranean river and museum where remarkable finds are exhibited. For those who prefer panoramas and lots of fresh air, then numerous viewpoints are identified on the map: among them Mont Romain (B1); Butte de Suin (A2); and Mont-St-Vincent (A1). The southern panorama from the hills above **Berzé-la-Ville** (B2) is also terrific and provides the ideal first view of Beaujolais.

Over the decades, as I've revisited many times the terrain to the west of the River **Saône**, from **Mâcon** (B2) down to Lyon, the strongest visual memories I have of the Beaujolais hills are the ones made up of upturned moulds of hills, studded with clusters of trees and filled in with vineyards and numerous increasingly prosperous villages. Flowers and roses are especially profuse. This is a land of wines and roses – literally. Immediately behind the Beaujolais 'moulds' are the higher hills of Charolais country: forested, cool, emerald terrain ignored by all but a few enterprising tourists.

Locals say there are three rivers: the Rhône, Saône and the Beaujolais. Absolutely right. There are hundreds of *vignerons* who will gladly sell you their fruity red Gamay wines. Look out, too, for rarer white and *crémant* varieties. I suggest you ask the many chefs in my various culinary guides for advice on where to buy the best wines.

One supplier is Antoine Pein at **Theizé** (south of B4). Buy his reds and cross your fingers that he has sparkling and sweet wines in stock. The terrain around Theizé sparkles in another way – known by the colourful phrase of *au pays des pierres dorées*. Buildings are constructed of the local stone – a golden-textured, warm material, much darker than Cotswold stone. Villages glow with good health – especially in the late afternoon. Enjoy Theizé, perched high at 1600 ft above sea-level and with views south to the Monts du Lyonnais and Mont d’Or, Lyon’s northern guardian; nearby **Oingt** – once a strong fortress and on the first weekend in September the home of France’s oldest mechanical organ festival; further west is **Ternand** (south of A4) – a minute, centuries-old perched hamlet; and to the north, at **Vaux-en-Beaujolais** (A4), soak up the charm of Gabriel Chevallier’s *Clochemerle pays*.

There’s much else to distract you in Beaujolais as you meander through the wine villages (**Fleurie** is my favourite: B3) – from one *dégustation* to another. Drive up to the crests above the villages. Large-scale maps show many a viewpoint: the most renowned is La Terrasse, just west of Fleurie where, on clear days – rare in summer – there are vast views east, to the Jura and the Alps. Mont Brouilly, too (B4), is worth a detour; descend by the lane to the east, down to St-Lager.

Solutré (B3) is a good starting point if you enter Beaujolais from the Mâconnaise hills. You’ll get your first views of the startling perpendicular cliff from the slopes above Berzé-la-Ville. Make the navigation effort to drive the lanes which encircle the historic rock face; then be certain to spare time for the first-class Musée de Solutré which explains the intriguing prehistoric finds made in the area and especially those at the foot of the high limestone outcrop.

A handful of châteaux are located in the hills: among them Corcelles (B3), south-east of Fleurie – more a fortress with several towers, each with sharply-pointed roofs; Pierreclos (B2), north-west of Solutré – with Romanesque church, medieval kitchens and bakery, gardens and wine museum; nearby St-Point (to the west) – a 12th-century and neo-Gothic mix of architecture; and the park and 18th-century Adour château south of Dompierre-les-Ormes (A2). (Note, too, the 45-acre arboretum and lake at nearby Pezanin – with over 400 varieties, many from the Far East.) As a contrast there are two automobile museums: one at **Chauffailles**; and another collection at **La Clayette** château (both west of A3) – the latter building a mix of 14th century and 19th-century Gothic bordering a large lake (the site of a famed *spectacle* in July and August; for details tel 03 85 28 23 02).

What lies to the east of the River Saône? Called La Bresse, the contrast in landscape is remarkable. South of the **A40 autoroute** is **La Dombes** – terrain peppered with *étangs* (pools or ponds). Around **Vonnas** (C3), a four-star *village fleuri* with trees and fountains, the land is gently undulating and wooded; further south the countryside is flatter and there are pools by the hundreds.

The latter area is a birdwatchers’ paradise. Where better to start than the magnificent Parc Ornithologique at **Villars-les-Dombes** (C4); the reserve houses many hundreds of species, some on pools and others in large, open cages. There’s a Maison de la Dombes (and tourist office) at the park (open Fri/Sat/Sun). Ask them for a copy, in English, of the Dombes Lakes Route (if closed, the leaflet is on display in the window). This sets out two routes around the *étangs*: I cannot recommend them enough – even if you only do them in part. For example, near Bouligneux (C4), the site of a small red-brick château with lop-sided tower, are two *étangs*: north of the village is the Etang le Château; and to the south, the especially nice Etang Forêt. At every *etang* on the two routes boards provide details of each pool.

Both north and south of the A40 are numerous *villages fleuris*. Don’t miss St-Jean-sur-Reyssouze (C2), south-east of **Pont-de-Vaux**; St-Didier-d’Aussiat (C2), between St-Jean and **Vonnas** (C3); Vonnas itself; and another four-star winner, **Châtillon-sur-Chalaronne** (C4). Enjoy the pleasures of ancient timbered buildings (especially the 14th-century covered market), the eye-catching river through the town, the Saturday morning market, and the *triptych* (1527) in the town hall (enter and ask to see the handsome paintings).

What of the area to the north of the A40? There are more than 30 superb examples of Bressane farmhouses with *cheminées sarrasines* (Saracen chimneys). Apart from the multi-varied chimneys, each built in a different style, some of the farms have other interesting features. Because so many of these farms are on map 22 I have discussed the subject in the chapter which follows. But, if time allows, navigate the lanes to spots utterly ignored by tourists: Bâgé-le-Châtel (C2), once the capital of La Bresse, with a château and *église*; nearby St-André, with a Romanesque church; Crottet (C3), south of the A40, where there’s another *église*; the 13th-century Tour de l’Horloge (clocktower) at Pont-de-Veyle (C3); and, to finish, something colourfully different, the modern Château d’Epeysoles, on the north side of the D26C between Vonnas and Mézeriat – with its own *étang* and gazebo.

I’ve devoted five pages to map 21 terrain and I finish knowing that I have only scratched the surface. Many a site has been missed and, worse still, I have made no mention of the bountiful larder that awaits you – especially in La Bresse: my *French Leave* guides give you all the mouthwatering details.