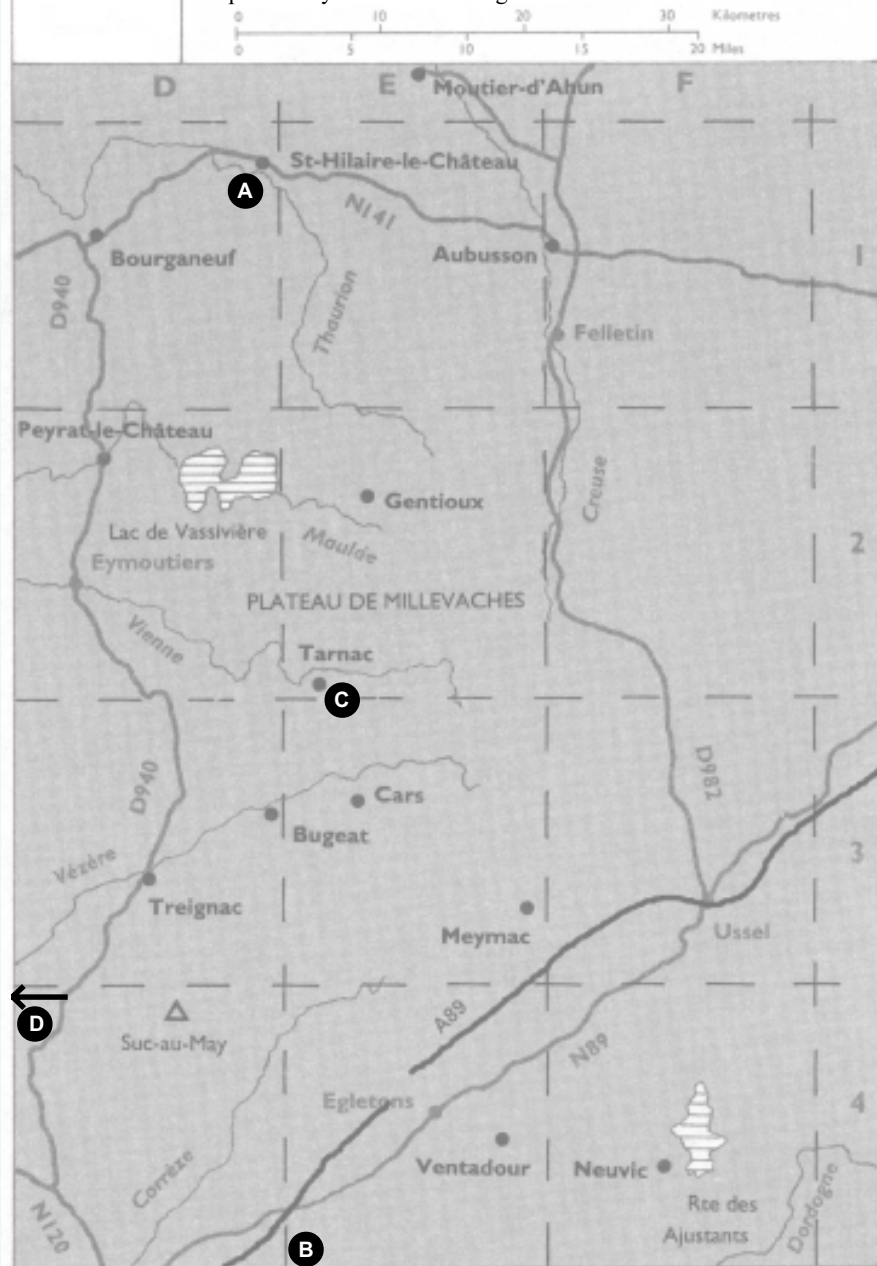


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Limousin. Millevaches. Trees, mod-cons and walls of colour.
Troubadours. Route des Hêtres. Lac and Ile de Vassivière.
 Tapestries by the ton. Scuttling hens and milk chocolate cattle.



If you travel to every corner of France for almost 50 years and drive a high six-figure number of miles along the nation's minor roads, as I have done, you will eventually grasp that there is no shortage of trees. I read last year that 27% of France's land mass is tree-covered – as against 7% in England. I'll not quibble over those statistics as I've seen the evidence for myself. Here, on map 24, and also in the *pays* to the south, I reckon well over half the terrain must be tree-covered – a veritable arboretum of every variety imaginable: beech, oak, chestnut, silver birch, walnut, poplar, pine and numerous others.

Map 24 leads you to the very heart of Limousin, a region of three *départements*: Haute-Vienne, Corrèze and Creuse. The map includes the southern corners of the pastoral Creuse and the northern parts of the forested Corrèze. If you look at the centre of the map sheet you'll spot the words **Plateau de Millevaches** (E2) – a large circle of country which is the very essence of unheralded Limousin.

Plateau de Millevaches: was there ever a name more likely to put off tourists? Millevaches, in this case, does not translate as a 'thousand cows'. The word *vaches* derives from the Celtic *batz*, meaning spring or source. The plateau, and much of the encircling terrain, is a vast granite table, topped with an absorbent covering of springs, streams, myriad trees, broom, heather, peat bogs and, here and there, long fingers and knuckles of soft, wooded hills. Many great French rivers rise on the plateau: the **Vienne** (source E3) and **Creuse** (F2) flow north to the Loire; the **Vézère** (E3) and **Corrèze** (E3) wind south to the **Dordogne** (F4). Dozens of lesser streams feed these important tributaries.

This is a landscape of sunshine and showers and self-effacing charms. The *pays* is for dawdling, for walking, for cycling and for relishing both flora and fauna. You and Nature will be quite alone. Sophisticates, searching for the high life, must seek 'chic' elsewhere.

Make a start in the bottom right-hand corner where the **Dordogne** cuts a deep, placid course, courtesy of man-made dams, through wooded hills. From the D982 take the D168, the **Route des Ajustants**, to the Belvédère de Gratte-Bruyère (F4). In September enjoy the heather beside the road; in October the autumn tints. At the rocky viewpoint stand and listen. No traffic, no trains and no houses; just bird calls. Similar eye-catching vistas of an impotent lake can be enjoyed from the Site de St-Nazaire (east of F4), beyond the Barrage de Marèges (F4).

Seek out the Lac de la Triouzoune, east of **Neuvic** (F4). A wooded lane encircles the lake; there's a beach and watersport facilities. The Puy de Manzagol is a 693 metre-high viewpoint with a *table d'orientation*: what a pity trees and shrubs spoil some of the views. In Neuvic nose out the Musée de la Résistance Henri Queuille, 100 m south of the *mairie*. Henri Queuille, twice prime minister of France, was born in the town and the museum occupies what was once the family home. The museum tells the story of the Haute-Corrèze *maquis* (and the wretched *déportations*); there are numerous exhibits, pictures and links with RAF crews (a.m. and p.m. every day May to Sept; p.m. only every day in Oct).

West on the D991. The ruins of the Château de **Ventadour** (E4) are worth the detour – just. The 12th-century castle, once impregnable, had links with the revolutionary *troubadours* (Bernard de Ventadour, a baker's son, was one of the finest masters of the lyrical and literary art form) and the Hundred Years War. Little remains of the fortress and what does is in a dangerous condition. Use your imagination to conjure up an image of the castle, in all its glory, centuries ago.

North-west to the **Suc-au-May** (D4), in the richly wooded Massif des Monédières. Do a clockwise circuit and then climb to the observation platform atop the 2989 ft summit. The panorama is superb: surrounding you is Limousin and, to the east, the volcanic cones of Auvergne line the horizon. In August the *massif* is renowned for heather and *myrtilles* (bilberries). **Treignac** (D3), to the north, has a splendid site above the Vézère and many evocative medieval buildings.

One of the most amazing roads I have ever seen in France is the D979E from **Meymac** (E3: see the Romanesque *église* and the nearby old houses) to **Bugeat** (D3), signposted as the 'Route des Hêtres'. The road climbs and winds and, for 13 miles of the route, 200-year-old beech trees run more or less uninterrupted, on one side or other and often on both flanks. Napoléon's legacy of tree planting may not have benefited his armies much, but modern generations reap a rich dividend. In October the run is akin to driving past an honour guard of thousands of giant soldiers cloaked and hatted in shining gold and copper uniforms. (Alas, in the final 8m many trees have been lost in building the 'new' D979.)

Six km before Bugeat detour north to the Ruines Gallo-Romaines des **Cars** (E3). There are two sites. The first, Le Sanctuaire, is the granite ruins of a temple and mausoleum. 300 yards away, down a track, is the more interesting L'Habitat du Vallon, once a residence with all sorts of 2nd-century luxury mod-cons; note the huge stone reservoir.

Many minor roads provide ideal spots for picnics – especially those with streams running alongside them. One is the Vézère beside the D164 from St-Merd-les-Oussines (E3) to **Bugeat** (D3). Another is the infant **Thaurion** flowing under the D16 north of **Gentioux** (E2); here the added plus is the ruins of what was once a Roman bridge.

Tarnac (E2) is a smasher: a tiny 12/13th-century church; two oak trees – one planted in 1605 and recently pruned, the other in 1848; attractive lanes spread spider's legs in all directions.

The **Lac de Vassivière** (D2) is one of the better man-made lakes. Much of the charm of the 2,500-acre sheet of water comes from the series of coves and inlets, from the forests surrounding the lake, and from the sensible way the amenities and camping sites have been commercialised. For sports' enthusiasts there's much to enjoy: several beaches, riding, sailing, canoeing, *pédalos*, wind surfing and water skiing. For the less energetic there are gentle walks, motor boats, fishing and even water bus trips in craft based at the western end of the lake.

Do walk across a long concrete bridge to the wooded parkland on the Ile de Vassivière. There you'll see numerous modern sculptures, created by chiselers from around the globe, set out on both the grassy slopes and in the woods. You'll chuckle; you'll scratch your head; you'll possibly boo. Somehow though the lumps of stone graft well onto the verdant scene. One sculpture, by Andy Goldsworthy, is worth the long walk: a giant stone figure 8 with closely-planted mature trees in one of the loops, the other sloping down to the water and disappearing under the surface; the piece of work is enormously imaginative. Some years ago a new centre for contemporary art was opened on the island.

To the north of the lake is one of the most alluring enclaves of *pays*. A combination of factors gel to create a perfect rural landscape: streams, waterfalls, hidden valleys, distant views, old farms and smart houses, contented villages, birds of prey, brown hens scuttling away, milk chocolate Limousin cattle (you may even see two oxen hauling a cart full of logs – as I once did), differing-shaped churches and numerous woods with beautiful trees. Start at **Peyrat-le-Château** (D2): use the D68, D51A, St-Martin-Château (D1), D51, D13, St-Pardoux-Morterolles, D58, St-Pierre-Bellevue, D34, and finish at **St-Hilaire-le-Château** (D1). Don't miss the walk, through the trees, down to the Cascade des Jarreaux (signs say Jarrauds), north of St-Martin.

At St-Hilaire you could make the short dash west to **Bourgageuf** (D1: market day Wed a.m.), once the regional capital of the Templars and renowned for its medieval tower which was the prison for Prince Zizim, an Ottoman prince, held captive by the knights in 1483.

East to **Aubusson** (F1) and the Musée de la Tapisserie, dedicated to Jean Lurçat (1892-1966) who, from the mid 30s to his death, did so much to revitalise the ancient skills of the town's weavers. The museum houses both traditional and modern tapestries in its spacious, well-lit halls. Some modern tapestries, created from today's complete spectrum of wools, not available in the past, are stunning walls of colour. During the 80s I was enthralled by the modern work of Lurçat, Dom Robert, Marc Saint-Saëns, Gaston Thiery and others. (Closed Tues.)

Use the D18 from Aubusson and follow the seductive left bank of the Creuse downstream. Stop at the medieval church of La Rochette (E1), with its black-spiked 'hat' tower. Continue on the D18, D18A and C3 to a delectable picnic spot, on the map just below the 'C' in Les Chambons. Is there anything better for a picnic than the sound of running water, relaxing under the shade of a large tree, and watching two hoopoes at work and play? I was lucky indeed that glorious day.

Finish with a crescendo. At **Moutier-d'Ahun** (north of E1) seek out the 15th-century *église*, part Romanesque, part Gothic (open 9-12 and 14-18 hours). Within its interior is an exceptional treasure: the wooden sculptures, carved 300 years ago, of the choir stalls and altar surrounds. The oak shines as proudly as do the sculptor's skills: there are hundreds of carvings – of faces, figures, flora and fauna.