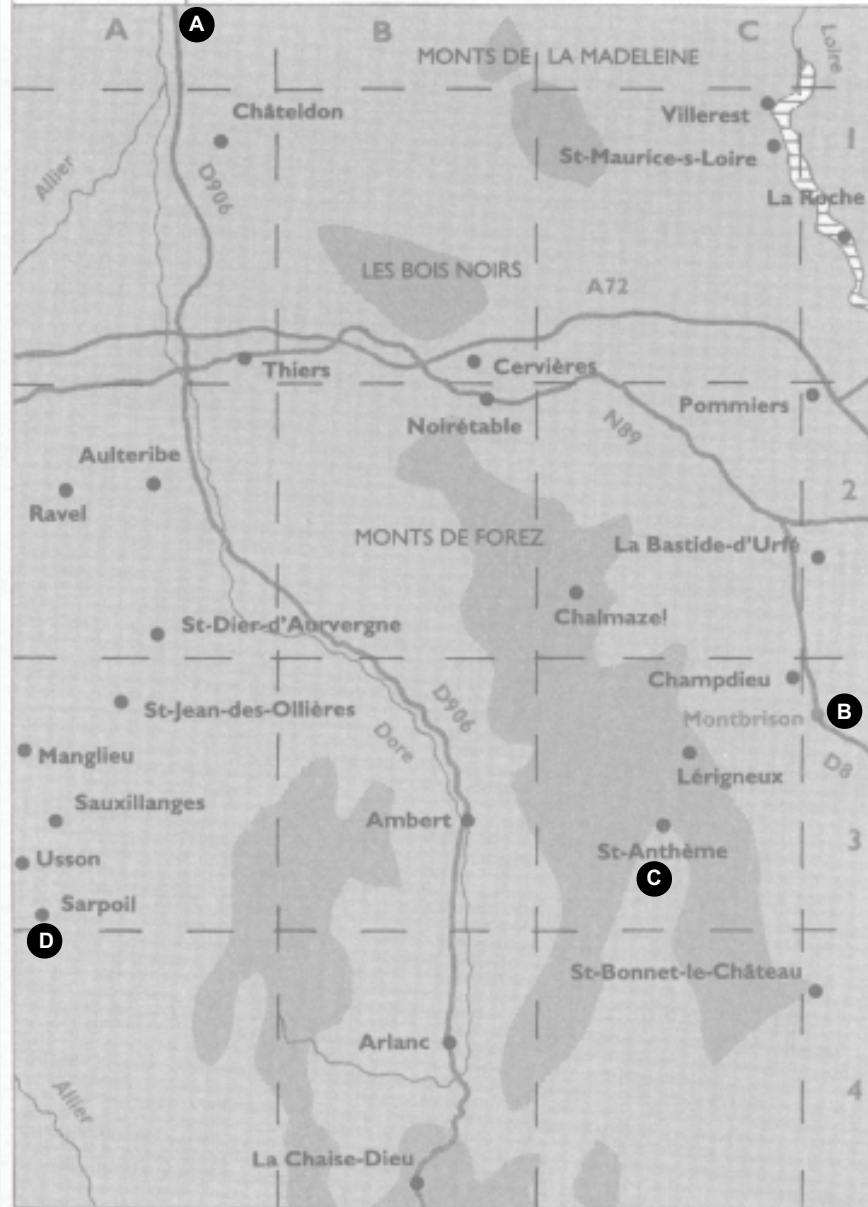


25

Livradois and Forez: *balcons*, *pissoir* and an eerie twist.
Wild flower extravaganza. *Fourmettes du Livradois*.
Renaissance structure. (Refer also to Loire on website.)

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



Can you drive for three days through some of France's most unspoilt corners without seeing more than a handful of non French-registered cars? Yes, you can: this chapter will confirm my claim. I shall also prove another aspect of my mapaholic philosophy: get off the beaten track and you'll be rewarded by a rich harvest of surprises.

Start with a view of some of the terrain you're about to explore. Drive up to **Usson** (A3) and then walk to the Statue de la Vierge on top of the basalt peak: the wooded Livradois hills to the east will be your first target. Before you leave see the 15th-century *église* and the photographic museum (May-Sept).

The Livradois is endowed with many Romanesque churches. Before heading north-east detour a few km south to the 12th-century *église* at Mailhat, south-west of **Sarpoil** (A3). The small church is a mix of elegant and ornate and austere Auvergne Romanesque; note the scallop shell of St-James. North to **Sauxillanges** and **Manglieu** (both A3) and their Romanesque *églises*; the latter's abbey church is a really fine example.

Now for a panoramic view of a small semi-circle of *pays* which I want to use as a classic example of the point I made in the first paragraph. Drive to the Pic de la Garde (A3), east of Manglieu. Leave the D253 and drive as far as you can; then walk the last 300 m. The 360-degree view is superb; the only blot on the landscape is the ugly quarry below you. At the summit there's another statue of the Virgin Mary and an observation platform created in 1955 by J. Roches. To the west is a long line of high volcanic cones; to the east the wooded Monts du Forez; to the south the Monts du Livradois (A3/B3). Our target is immediately to the north.

Start at **St-Jean-des-Ollières** (A3). Leave your vehicle in front of the small but immaculate Romanesque *église* (the car park doubles up as a basketball court); ask for the key at *l'épicerie*. Relish the gorgeous window and seek out '*Je suis la roue des siècles*'. Later, call at the tiny *boulangerie*. See and taste some of the breads: the large *couronne* and very tasty *seigle* (a slice or two of this rye *pain* is ideal with cheese or *charcuterie*). On to Fayet-le-Château (A2): note the beehive stone reservoir, old weighbridge and modern green bottle bank (there's always one in the remotest of spots) as you pass through. The château is to the west: the handsome tower, in such a commanding position, would make a great oversized chess piece. Now north to Mauzun (A2) and the imposing dark grey stone walled ruins of the strategically sited 12th and 13th-century castle high above the village.

As you drive the lanes among the hills note the *étangs* (pools) and the cemeteries, always 500 m or so from the *église*. South-east now to **St-Dier-d'Auvergne** (A2). Hidden behind the main street is an exquisite 12th-century fortified Romanesque church; ask for the key at the vine-covered house opposite. In the church make a point of looking at the 14 carved stone 'pictures' which tell the story of the crucifixion. South of St-Dier detour off the D997 to the small, self-contained Château des Martinanches (A3) with a chapel, moat and woods (p.m. summer only; out of season pop down the drive anyway).

Now I would like to recount a memorable Midsummer's Day I enjoyed some years ago in the **Monts du Forez**. I headed east from **Ambert** (B3), notable only for the stone-built, circular *mairie*. Much more interesting was the Moulin Richard-de-Bas, still producing hand-made, heavy paper and with an absorbing museum on paper making (open every day). From the *moulin* I climbed north on the D67 (chuckling at the scarecrow wearing a crash helmet), past Rimbaud and Valcivières, and then on the D106 towards the Col des Supeyres (C3: 4481 ft). Looking back the terrain resembled an upturned jelly mould of rounded hills, covered with broadleaved and evergreen trees.

I stopped near Perrier, just west of the col, startled by the colourful meadows straddling the road. There were scores or more of wild flowers: among them dog roses, orchids, marguerites, various-hued field scabious and columbine. Minutes later came another visual extravaganza: at the Col des Supeyres, above the tree line, I was thrilled by the sight of pastures whitewashed with wild narcissi and speckled with blue violas, wild geranium cranes-bill, cornflowers and pink polygonum.

For botanists and ornithologists the 'Hautes Chaumes', a narrow strip of terrain running north to south above the tree line, at an altitude in excess of 4200 ft, has much to offer: Alpine plants, birds of prey and solitude. Access on foot to this high upland is easy from both the Col des Supeyres and the Col du Béal (B2), further north.

The map identifies many *jasseries* in the Hautes Chaumes. These low, stone-built structures are relics of the past. Once they were used for the making and maturing of the blue-veined cow's milk cheeses called *fourmes*. Now modern methods prevail in factories at lower altitudes. The most respected Forez *fromager* is Roger Col. Don't bypass his Fromagerie de la Genette, 1.8 km south of **St-Anthème** (C3) on the left of the D996. Buy his new creation: a mini *fourme*, 'Fourmette du Livradois' – a small one-pound cheese, perfect for picnics (Mon to Sat midday).

The *départemental* tourist office makes a song and dance of a noteworthy scenic idea, La Route des Balcons. The only snag is that neither the maps nor any signposts identify the run. On another visit last year we drove the 'balcony road' which runs along the eastern flanks of the Monts du Forez. We started at **Cervières** (B1), near the north-eastern edge of the Livradois-Forez regional park and two km from exit 4 on the A72 *autoroute*. The tiny 12th-century hamlet is in a time warp. Walk the single street and the lane behind the houses to the north; from the latter enjoy the views of the brooding **Bois Noirs** (B1) and, behind them, further north, the **Monts de la Madeleine** (north of B1/C1).

I'll give you a list of road numbers and village names, in north to south order, which will allow you to trace the balcony road on map 25. Cervières, D24, **Noirétable**, D53, D101 (detour to N-D l'Hermitage), Jeansagnière (C2), attractive **Chalmazel** (with dominating five-sided fortress), D101, St-Bonnet-le-Courreau,

D20, D44, **Lérigneux** (C3), D44, D496, La Bruyère, then a minor road to Chazelles-sur-Lavieu (superb views from the Fortunière crest), Gunières, D44, St-Jean-Soleymieux, D5, Marols (C3), Montarcher (C4), D14, **St-Bonnet-le-Château** (just east of C4: see the old houses by the church).

What else? There's a Musée de la Dentelle at **Arlanc** (C4), a delight for lace lovers (April/May/June/mid Sept to mid Oct: p.m. July to mid Sept: a.m. and p.m.). More noteworthy Livradois Romanesque churches lie to east and west of Arlanc (which has a magnificent large version of its own): Dore-l'Eglise to the south; Beurières to the east; St-Sauveur, Doranges, Novacelles, St-Bonnet-le-Bourg and St-Germain-l'Herm to the west. For details of **La Chaise-Dieu** (B4: see map 30).

Several châteaux are further north: **Aulteribe** (A2) claims to be one of the finest furnished in France; and both **Ravel** (A2), to the west, and Montmorin (A2), to the south, are 13th-century fortress-like structures. Busy **Thiers** (A1) has an exciting hillside site; the ancient timbered houses and Musée de la Coutellerie are the highlights (the town has been making cutlery for centuries). Drive deep into the sombre pine woods of Les Bois Noirs (B1); use the D64; follow the attractive Credogne Valley (A1); and seek out **Châteldon** (A1) with a stern castle looking down on some old timbered houses.

To the east of the Madeleine and Forez hills man has left a series of mixed legacies. The first is wretched: the flooding of the Loire south of **Villerest** (C1). The winding lake is not unattractive but the sight of a marina and ugly bridge below Bully is a shock. The 'new' lake view from **St-Maurice-sur-Loire** will please, as will the 12th-century *église*. But the 'island' château at **La Roche** (east of C1), appearing to float on the water, comes as a real poke in the eye.

Others are kinder legacies. The history of **Pommiers** (east of C2) dates back to Roman times: enjoy the photogenic site, austere 12th-century church, chestnut-shaded *place* and 15th-century bridge. The château at **La Bastie-d'Urfé** (east of C2) is a Renaissance structure partly constructed by Italian artisans; the two-level cloister-like terraces and gardens are especially appealing (April to Oct: every day. Rest of year: p.m. but not Tues). **Champdiou** (C3) has two treats: a formidable fortified *église*; and an elegant, covered structure combining toilets, *pissoir*, waiting room, telephone, clock and fountain.

Finally, an eerie twist to paragraph one. **Sarpoil** (A3): June 9, 1993; time 22.45. Pitch black restaurant car park with only a glow worm for company. Car with yellow headlights stops. Lady's voice asks "Je cherche pour La Chaise-Dieu." The driver, on her own, is an English lady, of a certain age, in a French-registered car; she's quite lost and is looking for 'God's chair' 60 km away. By chance I have a large-scale map in my hand. I soon set her on her way. Our meeting must have been a million-to-one chance: an Englishman, at dead-of-night, in the middle of nowhere, giving directions to an English lady to a spot he knew well. Who was she? Did she get there safely? Did I dream our meeting?