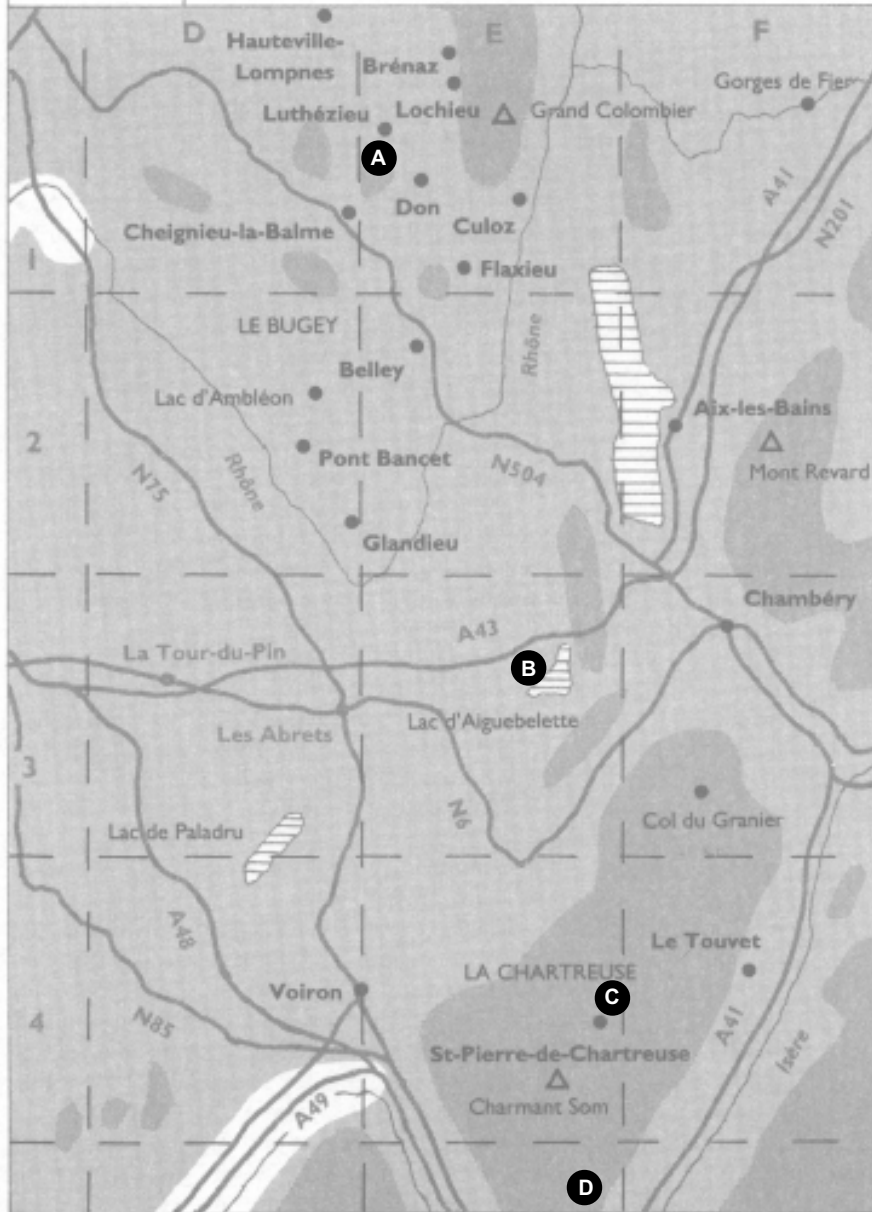


26

Bugey and Chartreuse: *fours*, *vignerons* and heady elixirs.
Seigneurs and Brillat-Savarin. Carthusians' liqueur.
 A mountain 'window'. (Refer also to *Valromey* on website.)

0 10 20 30 Kilometres
 0 5 10 15 20 Miles



Mapaholic readers of my previous French books will immediately recognise that map 26 allows me to enthuse about two of my favourite parts of France: **Le Bugey** and **La Chartreuse**. Three 46-line pages will never do justice to my passion for these two seductive corners.

“Where is Bugey?” I hear you ask. The mountains and valleys between the River Ain to the east (map 22:E4), the A40 to the north (map 22:F3) and, to the south, the great ‘V’ formed by the River **Rhône** (D2/E2).

Where do you start? At **Culoz** (E1) where the D120 scrambles up rocky slopes and then through woods to the **Grand Colombier** (E1: 5003 ft). On the way up detour to Fenestrez (E1), a ‘window’ 3000 ft above Culoz. The view is stunning and the acoustics sensational: the chimes of a clock, a dog barking, or a boat chugging along the Rhône – all are many km away but seem to come from a point 20 ft below you.

The views from Grand Colombier are magnificent: Mont Blanc, the Rhône and the Lac du Bourget (E2/F2) are only part of the panorama. To the immediate west is Valromey, a wishbone-shaped valley 100 square miles in size. Visit Valromey in spring and you’ll gasp at the wild flower lakes which flood the pastures between the Col de Bérentin (22:F3) and the Crêt du Nu (22:F4); see my notes in map sheet chapter 22.

But whenever you go make the most of the lanes which tumble down from the Grand Colombier and twist north to the Col de Richemont (22:F4). Walks abound and there’s many an invigorating visual tonic. At the col you’ll see the first of many memorials to the Bugey *maquis*. The Valromey Resistance group was one of the most courageous. Their poignant memorial is beside the D8, west of **Luthézieu** (E1): ‘*Nous avons combattu avec un tronçon d’épée*’ (We fought with a broken sword).

To discover more about Valromey and its brave people visit the Musée Rural du Valromey at **Lochieu** (E1). The museum, once a 16th-century fortified house with unusual medieval windows, has a rare collection of local rural treasures (a.m. and p.m.: mid Apl to mid Oct).

Centuries ago every Bugey village had a *seigneur* and one of his many perks was the right to own the sole oven (*four*). Many are still used. There’s an oven at **Don**, north of Artemare (E1); another at Vaux-Morets on the D131D just north of Don; and at Belmont, to the west.

Water and wine have always played an important part in Bugey. First water. Visit four sites. The 300 ft-high Charabotte *chute* (D1), southwest of **Hauteville-Lompnes** (D1); the nearby Gorges de l’Albarine is also an exciting thrill. Next, the Source du Groin, north of Don (E1); park at Vaux-Morets and walk to the weird 30 metre-deep hole from which gushes water absorbed elsewhere in Valromey. The Cerveyrieu cascade is a 200 ft-high waterfall; access is from the D31 west of Don. The Pain Sucre is another unusual sight, a stalagmite formed by a waterfall below the D30, south-west of **Brénaz** (E1).

Wine? Visit **Flaxieu** (E1) where Camille Crussy supplies many famous restaurants; and Le Caveau Bugiste and Eugene Morin et fils at Vongnes (E1). Savour sparklers, Chardonnay whites, various varietal reds and *rosés*. The Lac de Barterand (E2) is nearby – best seen from the north where several hilly humps provide a wooded backdrop; there's also a good *plage*. Another famed vineyard produces Manicle, the favourite tippie of Bugey's most illustrious son, Brillat-Savarin. He was born at **Belley** (E2) in 1755; read his *La Physiologie du goût – The Philosopher in the Kitchen* (Penguin p/b). (Read, too, Elizabeth Ayrton's *The Cook's Tale*; an imaginary account of a family and their Belley hotel.) The Miraillet family are restoring Manicle's reputation; their *cave* and home is near the church at **Cheignieu-la-Balme** (D1).

There's more. Nearby Contrevoz (E1) also has a *four* and on the first August weekend there's a mechanical organ fair (biennial: even years). Visit the Château d'Andert, just off the D32 to the south-east: for a 360-degree panorama; the 17th-century château; and a top-notch range of home-made *cassis* products (open every day).

Climb south-west to the **Lac d'Ambléon** (D2); the lake is an emerald gem and there's a super picnic spot; have a look, too, at the *maquis* memorial with a graphic stone carving. Something quite different is the tiny museum, Les Amis des Dinosaures, at Marchamp (D2: p.m. Sun mid Apl to mid Oct; every day summer school hols). In June the roads hereabouts pass through fields full of orchids and wild flowers. Several *vignerons* produce and sell their Bugey wines on the western flanks of the high range overlooking the Rhône: perhaps the most interesting is Les Caves de Groslee at the small medieval Château Vareppe at **Pont Bancet** (D2). Finally, the cascades at **Glandieu** (D2) are best seen from the village and not the road above.

Now to the self-contained visual joys locked within the secretive Chartreuse (E4/F4). I've driven every road in the *massif*; I've visited the mountain fastness in every season. In the spring I've relished the first hints of woodland green and the foaming rivers; in September I've been beguiled by lilac-tinted autumn crocuses and, in October, my eyes have feasted on the rich shades of dying leaves.

There are a dozen or more spots you must seek out. The northern entrance, the **Col du Granier**, is under the brooding eye of the gigantic rock slabs of Mont Granier (F3). To the south-west the deserted D45 road through Corbel (E3); views are ten a penny. The Gorges du Guiers Vif (E4/F4) thread a steep course through rock walls from the river's source at the Cirque de St-Même (don't miss the latter). The Gorges du Guiers Mort (E4) is an equally spectacular route. The forestry road from the latter to the Belvédère des Sangles is a taxing but rewarding climb. Better still is the ascent from the Col de Porte to the dead-end just below the fabulous viewpoints on the **Charmant Som** (E4).

Locate the Couvent de la Grande Chartreuse (E4) – a barracks-sized monastery hidden in a wooded fold of mountains. No wonder St-Bruno chose the isolated site

over 900 years ago as the first home of the Carthusian Order. Some of Europe's first iron and steel foundries (using charcoal) were located in the Chartreuse, created and run by the Carthusians. With the advent of coke-burning smelters, 250 years ago, the mountain industry died. The monks turned to distilling what is now the world's most famous liqueur, Chartreuse. The recipe for the elixir, made from over 100 mountain plants, has been under the guardianship of the Carthusians for over 200 years: today the green and yellow liqueurs, and other varieties, are made at a distillery in **Voiron** (D4/E4: every day Easter to Oct; weekdays only rest of year). The monastery cannot be visited but La Correrie, at the southern entrance, is a museum which depicts the Carthusians' way of life in an informative way (Apl to Oct). Another, quite different, religious site is the Eglise de St-Hugues, south of **St-Pierre-de-Chartreuse** (E4). The church is a striking celebration of contemporary sacred art; the artist, Arcabas, created the paintings from 1953 to 1973 (Mar to Nov; closed Tues).

Drive the recently metalled road over the Col du Coq (F4). Enjoy the high mountain views east from the D30 and, on your descent, seek out **Le Touvet** (F4) where the château, with a man-made stepped water cascade, is a miniature Chatsworth (p.m. every day July/Aug; p.m. Sun only Easter/June and Sept/Oct). An alternative descent to the Isère is the funicular which runs between Lumbin and St-Hilaire (F4: every day June to mid Sept; weekends Apl/May and mid Sept/mid Dec).

Lack of space is proving a problem. Head east from Bugey through the Val du Fier (E1/F1) where both man and Nature have cut large slices from the rock face above the river. Further east the impressive Château Montrottier matches the **Gorges du Fier** (F1) for splendour. Visit the château, then park at the bridge over the river and descend on the protected path: first views are of woods, white rocks and water; later, beyond the café terrace, the walkways cling to the side of the rock, as the Fier slices a way through the narrowest of slits.

Visit **Aix-les-Bains** (F2), a four-star *ville fleuri* and a lakeside resort and spa (hot water springs). Across the lake is the gloriously situated Gothic-styled Abbaye de Hautecombe (E2); as peaceful as the settings are the chants of the Bénédictine monks are even more restful. Climb the zig-zag road across the Mont du Chat (E2) and descend to the tranquil and triangular **Lac d'Aiguebelette** (E3); have a swim in the warm water. Continue south-west to another of my favourite lakes, the **Lac de Paladru** (D3). Here two sites are exceptional: the underwater archaeological workings (Fouilles Archeologiques de Colletière) north-east of Charavines (D4); and the Maison de Pays du Lac de Paladru which explains the workings and the history of the villages in neolithic and medieval times (a.m. and p.m. June/Sept; p.m. Sat/Sun mid Apl/end May and Oct/Nov).

Chambéry (F3) can be a traffic nightmare. Shed no tears if you bypass the old town, the château with its Ste-Chappelle, and the Musée Savoisien. Head east towards map 27 and enjoy the renowned hill climb of **Mont Revard** (F2), high above Aix: 360-degree views and, to the east, the bypassed Les Bauges. See you there over the page.