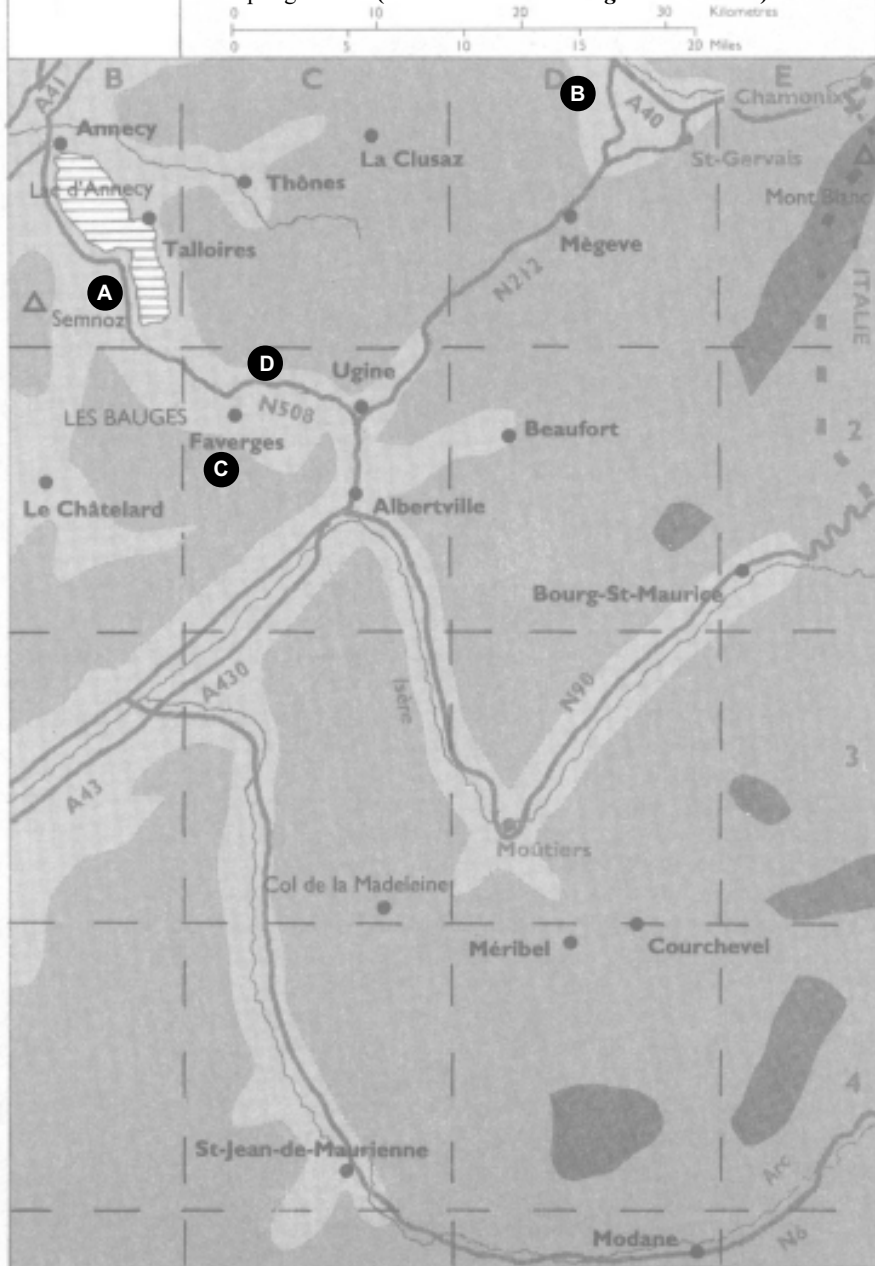


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Lac d'Annecy, Bauges, Baroque exuberance and *tomes*.
Chants. Sky-high ski stations. Wild flowers by the million.
Tempting Tamié. (Refer also to *Les Bauges* on website.)



By now you will have realised that I am in my element in mountain country; the Alps are where rallying mapaholics have the time of their lives. There's much to write about – so let's get motoring.

Start with a flourish. Climb to the Crêt de Châtillon on the heavily wooded **Semnoz** mountain (B1). The 5574 ft-high summit is a breathtaking viewpoint: below you is **Lac d'Annecy**; to the far south the icy peaks of the Massif des Ecrins shimmer in the sun (33:C2/C3); and, to the east, the snoozing dome of **Mont Blanc**, Europe's highest mountain (E1: see map sheet chapter 23), dominates the horizon.

In early June the marshy pastures one km south of the Crêt are dotted with lapis lazuli-tinted gentians. On the night of 15 April 1943, these same pastures, identified by bonfires, were witness to a daring wartime mission. Peter Churchill, a British SOE agent, parachuted from a Halifax and landed on the Semnoz – to be met by his future wife, the legendary Odette Sansom, and a group of local *maquis*. Within hours, disaster struck: the couple were captured at nearby St-Jorioz (B1).

Now head south to the largely ignored mountain fortress of **Les Bauges** (B2/C2). Call first at the local tourist office or write to Syndicat d'Initiative des Bauges, 73630 **Le Châtelard** (B2) for several useful leaflets (tel 04 79 54 84 28). One, in English, details 'Strolls and summits in le Massif des Bauges'; another, far more interesting, concerns the Réserve Nationale de Faune du Massif des Bauges. This super *dépliant* explains the background to the Alpine reserve which lies between **Le Châtelard** (B2) and **Albertville** (C2). The map in the leaflet identifies 17 marked trails, of varying lengths and difficulty, which snake into the heart of the small circle of high protected terrain.

I'll identify a handful of walks. The first is the drive up the Vallon de Bellevaux (B2), a dead-end wooded valley with roaring river and the start of several walks. Next, access the reserve from Doussard (B2); drive to and then walk in the similarly forested Combe (Valley) d'Ire, to the south. The St-Ruph Valley is reached from **Faverges** (C2); here there are more woods, a river landscape and, at Seythenex, a waterfall and subterranean promenade. From the Abbaye de Tamié (C2), further south, two walks take you into the forests above the monastery.

Before leaving Les Bauges be sure to drive the D206 in the Aillon Valley (B2); and rise early one morning to see for yourself the relentless life led by Paul Bogey at his Fromagerie de Doucy-en-Bauges, east of Le Châtelard (B2). Paul is the only remaining cheesemaker of the huge *Gruyère des Bauges* variety still working in the *massif*. Arrive between 8.30 and 9.00 a.m. to watch him at the critical stage of his daily production of three 40-kg 'wheels' (1,500 litres of milk are needed). The much smaller 1 to 1½ kg *Tome des Bauges* is made at several farms; ask for a list at Le Châtelard SI. Finally, a tasty treat: for authentic regional specialities (*farçon*, *gratins* and *risolles*) visit Mme Chatelain at Chez Chatelain in La Compôte-en-Bauges, south-east of Le Châtelard (every day lunch only: telephone ahead 04 79 54 82 53).

Annecy (B1) is a traffic-jam most of the time. Nevertheless I, would still head for the shady parks and gardens by the *lac* (the Jardins de l'Europe, between the town hall and lake, are delectable); I would also not miss the old arcaded streets on either side of the River Thiou and the nearby château with its regional museum. A lake cruise would be a restful pleasure; for the energetic there are all sorts of watersport amenities and, as the map indicates with blue spots, there are many *plages*. Walks abound: try the lakeside promenade from St-Jorioz to Duingt (B1) or the walks around **Talloires** (B1) on the eastern bank. The latter has an exquisite setting; no trains and no busy main road are big pluses. Explore, too, the 200-acre wooded *marais* at Bout-du-Lac (B1), at the southern end of the lake.

For a different approach to Talloires why not climb the Col de La Forclaz (B1:C1) from the south and drive along the road high above the lake? At the summit you are offered the chance to 'Fly like a bird on two-seat hang glider with Instructor'. Better you than me. Don't pass by the Ermitage de St-Germain: the 11th-century Benedictine saint returned here after a pilgrimage to the Holy Land; likewise St-François de Sales came here in 1621 to see out his days. The view is superb. To the north of Talloires is the striking and historic Château de Menthon-St-Bernard.

Another religious site is a must: Tamié Abbey (C2). A new Centre d'Accueil has been built; an audio visual presentation explains the history of the Cistercian monastery; you can buy the tasty cheese made at the abbey; and you can purchase tapes of the chants recorded by the monks in their church. Try to find time for one of the daily services: Vespers is ideal (summer weekdays 18.15; Sun 17.00).

Faverges (C2) market is on Wednesday. A better version is the Saturday morning market at **Thônes** (C1) – an unprepossessing town with arcaded shops and an *église* with a Baroque interior. Detour three km north-west to the cemetery where many hundreds of *maquisards* are buried – Resistance fighters who died on 26 March 1944 in the hills to the north. From Thônes use the D16 to the Col de la Croix Fry and Col des Aravis (an exciting run which misses the eye-sore of **La Clusaz**: C2); you'll note how Mont Blanc looms closer and closer. Around Thônes and Flumet C1/D1) you'll have many a chance to buy *Reblochon* cheese.

Descend to the Val d'Arly. **Megève** (D1) is a winter and summer resort and has not been spoilt like many of the high-altitude ski stations. Drive the taxing corniche road from ugly **Ugine** (C2) in a clockwise direction to the Col de l'Arpettaz and down to Héry. From Ugine take the D67 and a series of forestry roads high above the Doron Valley (D1) to the Signal de Bisanne (D2): the panorama is astounding. An easier approach is the Col des Saisies climb from the Val d'Arly.

Now south into Le Beaufortain – centred on the village of **Beaufort** (D2), a name synonymous with a Gruyère-like cheese (but no holes). Head south to Arêches (D2) and then climb up to the Col du Pré, passing many old, traditional chalets. The Roselend lake and dam are formidable civil engineering works; the Cormet de

Roselend (D2) climb is less impressive. Far more spectacular is the Col de Petit St-Bernard which zig-zags up from **Bourg-St-Maurice** (E2) in La Tarentaise; the views of the southern wall of the Chaîne du Mont Blanc are stunning.

I cannot find any kind words to say about the **Isère** Valley from Albertville (C2) to Bourg-St-Maurice (E2). Industry and winter sports dominate the economy of the Isère and Les Trois Vallées (D3/D4). In the summer months the high-altitude ski resorts are monstrosities: take **Courchevel** (D3) as one example. Man has ruined the landscape. Thankfully Nature still wins hands down – if you get away from the hundreds of hotels and ski-lifts: great forests, super views and exciting walking. One worthwhile drive is the roughish forest road from the Olympic ski jumps at Le Praz (D3) to **Méribel** (D4); the latter is nothing like as hideous as some of the other resorts.

Nor can I find much to praise in La Maurienne, the terrain straddling the **Arc** Valley from the Italian border through **Modane** (south of D4) to **St-Jean** (C4). However there are some redeeming religious treasures in both La Tarentaise and La Maurienne: the stunning Baroque interiors hidden behind the often decrepit walls of scores of churches. I'll give you details of just two where the doors are always open. Bozel (D3) is north of Courchevel. The interior of the Eglise St-François de Sales has wonderful panelling and choir stalls, a handsome pulpit with glorious carvings and a fine roof. The *église* at St-Bon-Tarentaise, on the climb to Courchevel, has a plain façade with the only colour courtesy of nine large bowls of bright flowers. The interior has intricate stained glass windows, marvellous panelling and wood carvings. For further information on other churches, their opening times and guided tours contact: Espace Baroque Maurienne, 73480 Lanslebourg-Mt-Cenis (tel 04 79 05 90 42); Espace Baroque Tarentaise, 73600 Moûtiers (tel 04 79 24 04 23). La Tarentaise and La Maurienne share another superb asset: the wondrous wilderness world of the high-altitude Parc National de la Vanoise (E3/E4). Trace the park's green dotted line border and you'll soon grasp why this is a flora and fauna wonderland.

What I can rave about is the **Col de la Madeleine** (C3), the only road link between La Tarentaise and La Maurienne. As you climb the 6562 ft pass from the Isère (C3) detour to Bonneval – in a time warp and a million miles away from the ski resorts: a mix of old and new, roses and flowers, a tiny school, church, peace and quiet, walks, trees, birds and butterflies. Further south, as you ascend the unspoilt wooded valley, note the steep cobbled and stepped alleys in La Thuile.

At the summit stop and absorb the wondrous scene: Mont Blanc to the north-east; the Ecrins to the south. In June, on the northern side of the col, I was spellbound by myriad gentians, pansies, trollius, orchids and other wild flowers; above me skylarks sang in the clear air. On the southern slopes there were wild flowers by the million and thousands of orchids. Truly, a fantasy land sent from heaven.