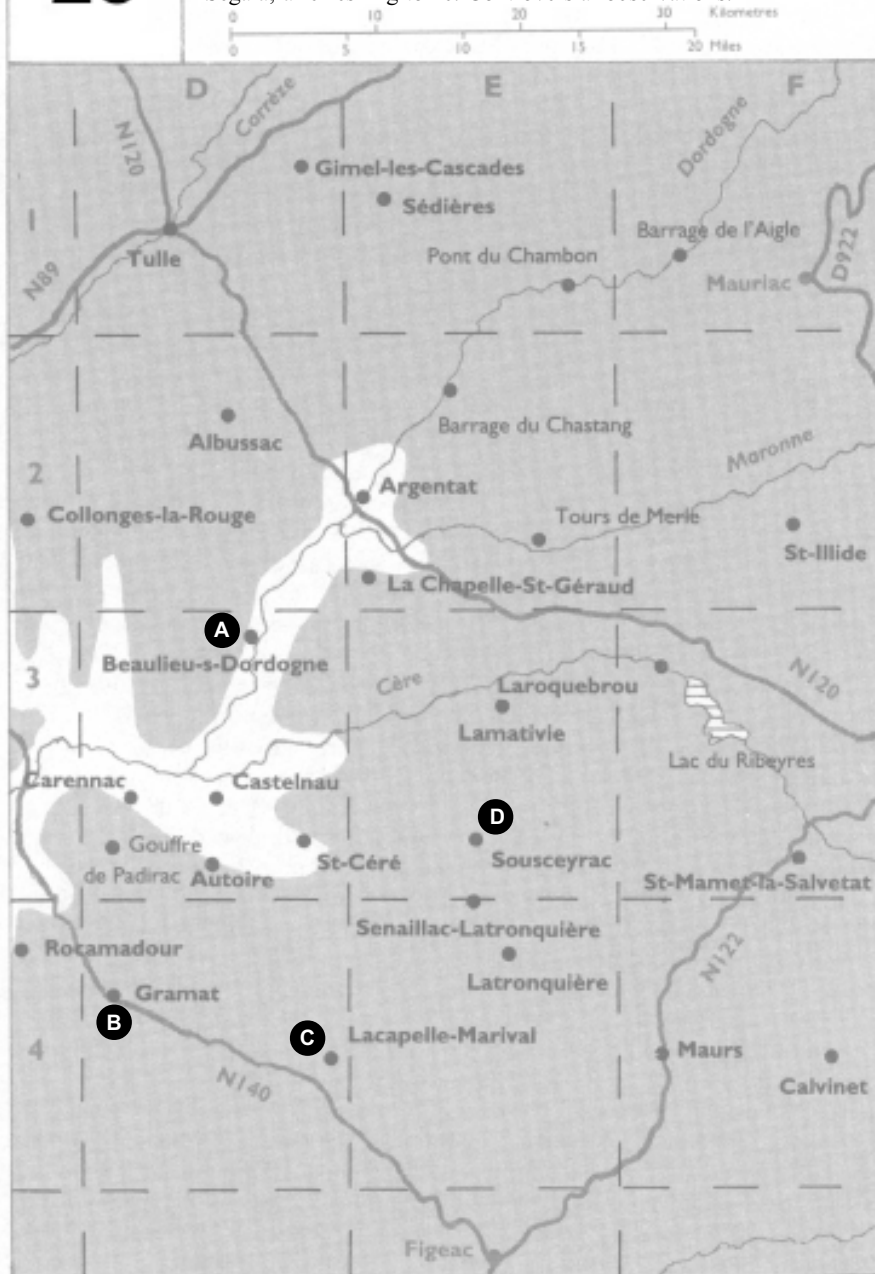


28

Corrèze cocktails, flat bottoms, chestnuts and honey pots.  
A cascade trio. La Xaintrie and 200 calvaries.. Le Jardin du Ségala; a refreshing tonic. Controversial observations.



One spot, more than any other, is the perfect entry to the captivating country on map sheet 28 – the antithesis of the two Michelin three-star honeypot sights at the end of the chapter. I suggest you start by seeking out the dead-end lane which leads to the 15th-century château at **Sédières** (E1), north-west of Clergoux. Here a natural cocktail refreshes the senses: silence; cool, still air, broken only by a cock's crow or a bird's song; mixed woods; and ferns, heather, butterflies and *étangs*. An austere small château, with Resistance links, sits contentedly in the middle of the watercolour (open every day July/Aug).

Let's stay in the *département* of Corrèze (most of the top half of the map). Later, we'll visit Cantal (the eastern edge) and we'll finish in Lot (the bottom left-hand corner). But where next in Corrèze? To **Gimel-les-Cascades** (D1), north-east of **Tulle** (D1). Three separate waterfalls put on an extrovert show of fury and foaming sound. Walk the many steps to the bottom; but remember the steep return climb.

Corrèze remains as unspoilt as ever. Drive the myriad lanes which spread like veins through rejuvenating forests. Seek out **Albussac** (D2), south of Tulle (D1): to the east are the Cascades de Murel; to the west the observation table atop the Roche de Vic, a short hike from the D940. Detour to the 15th-century *église*, with its four-bell bell-tower, at Neuville, south of Albussac; and the church at St-Chamant, east of Albussac, with fortified tower and super stone carvings.

What of the more renowned sites? **Collonges-la-Rouge** (west of D2) is almost too good to be true with every building constructed from the local dark red sandstone. The place is so busy you have to park on the D38. Do just that and then walk the evocative streets which weave past medieval manor houses, old *maisons* and Romanesque church.

On the way to **Beaulieu-sur-Dordogne** (D3) detour to Curemonte, to the west of the town. Enjoy the ramparts, châteaux and *église* – all medieval eye-pleasers. Beaulieu has a pretty setting beside the River **Dordogne**; the Romanesque Eglise St-Pierre is the town's great magnet, especially the magnificent sculptures on the south portal. The D12 riverside run to **Argentat** (E2) is Corrèze at its most bewitching.

Argentat has a particularly eye-soothing riverside setting, one best seen from the older bridge to the east of the brand new N120 bypass. Relish the old houses with their wooden balconies and roofs of *lauzes* (local stone tiles laid on wooden slats). Until 100 years ago the upper Dordogne, untamed by gigantic modern dams, was a dangerous waterway, the vital link in getting Limousin's oak trees to the wine barrel makers in Bordeaux. Flat-bottomed barges called *gabares* did the donkey work. Each craft made only one trip downstream; at journey's end the *gabare* was scrapped. Today *gabares* are used to ferry tourists along the placid river: trips can be made from the **Barrage du Chastang** (E2) or from the **Pont du Chambon**, further upstream (E1).

The wooded hills to the east and south of Argentat are in an area called La Xaintrie – where locals claim there are over 200 calvaries. (I counted 20 without trying.) Access La Xaintrie on the D33 south from Argentat: the views west, where the River **Maronne** joins the Dordogne (E2), are gorgeous. At **La Chapelle-St-Géraud** (E2) there's a tiny *église* and the most handsome water tower I've ever seen.

The supreme treat in La Xaintrie is the wooded site of the **Tours de Merle** (E2). The best approach road is the D13 from Goulles. What a mysterious and compelling picture lies below and ahead of you: high ruined towers on a rocky outcrop with the river flowing in a double meander far beneath the remote 13th-century fortress. In July/Aug *animations médiévales, spectacles* and *son et lumière* shows are held (details from Mairie, 19220 St-Geniez: tel 05 55 28 22 31).

Leave Corrèze by heading south to the Gorges de la **Cère** and **Lamativie** (E3). The descent and ascent are more like an Alpine hill-climb. The woods are dense and you'll notice two examples of man's more modern endeavours: a rail line and power station.

What does Cantal offer? **Laroquebrou** (F3) is a valley town with a château and *église* – and humming Cère weir. If you go north be sure to use the D43 from St-Santin-Cantales to **St-Illide** (F2); the Soulane river crossing is a delight with wooded hillsides and emerald pastures on the flat-bottomed valley floor. St-Illide has a squat central-towered Romanesque *église*; the church at St-Martin-Cantalès, to the north, is a smaller building with a spire and Romanesque portal. The Gorges de la Maronne is another wooded river crossing but is not as interesting as the Cère version. Much further north is the huge **Barrage de l'Aigle** (F1), damming the Dordogne on its way south.

If you head south-east from Laroquebrou the winding arms and wooded banks of the **Lac du Ribeyres** (F3) will please; for the sports enthusiast the lake has a beach (see the diamond signs on all Michelin's maps), canoes, *pédalos* and other watersport facilities. One must is **St-Mamet-la-Salvetat** (F3). Drive to the small park on the Puy St-Laurent above the town (771 m): there's an observation table on top of the water reservoir and the views east of the Cantal mountains are fabulous. Now south to Vitrac (F4) and the D17 which follows the Rance Valley to **Maurs** (F4).

The Rance Valley is delectable: woods, river, pastoral views and, at the lower end, 100/150 ft-high cliffs covered in heather. Use the D319 north-west from Maurs and also enjoy the densely wooded Veyre Valley. This part of Cantal (the bottom right-hand corner of 28) is tagged La Châtaigneraie. Chestnut trees are everywhere; I remember crushing thousands on a windy October day *en route* to **Calvinet** (F4).

I'll finish in the bottom left-hand corner of 28, Le Haut Quercy – part of the Lot *département*. The terrain between **Sousceyrac** (E3), **Latronquièrre** (E4) – both non-descript towns – and **Lacapelle-Marival** (D4) is called Le Jardin du Ségala.

You may consider that pretentious: not so, as the hilly, wooded circle of *pays* is a refreshing tonic from the dry-scrub *causse* (plateau) to the west. The views are extensive: for example, on the D48 north from Lacapelle to **St-Céré** (D3). Nose out the new Lac du Tolermé, west of **Senailiac-Latronquièrre** (E3/E4): an attractive setting, beach, children's playground and other facilities appeal.

Now head for the honeypot sites always buzzing with tourists. The Château de **Castelnau-Bretenoux** (D3) sits majestically above the Cère and Dordogne confluence; the fortress is built of ochre and caramel-shaded stone and there are numerous turrets and towers. **Carennac** (D3) has a riverside site: the combination of fortress château, 12th-century church and old houses is breathtaking. Don't miss the cloisters, Romanesque tympanum, the 16th-century life-sized carved Entombment of Christ and the views of the village from the north-west.

Medieval Loubressac (D3) has a high perch on a rocky outcrop: the dominating 15th-century château is privately-owned but savour the views, the *village fleuri*, the shaded *place*, and the stone houses with attractive balconies. Relish nearby **Autoire** (D2), a handsome village where the houses have dark-tiled roofs; to the immediate south is a small *cirque* where a cascade and colourful rock faces add extra interest. The small 16th-century Château de Montal, west of **St-Céré** (D3), is made of light, coffee-hued stone and has varying shaped towers; the most notable feature is a Renaissance stone staircase. The best of St-Céré, a town overlooked by the two sentinel towers of St-Laurent, is around the church: see the cone-topped stone towers and medieval half-timbered houses with their small red bricks and stout oak beam corbels. Visit the Jean Lurçat *musée* at St-Laurent, where you can admire varied tapestries, paintings, rugs and plates created by the celebrated artist who lived in the town from 1945 until his death in 1966.

Finally, a controversial observation. Approach **Rocamadour** (west of D4) from the south, along the D32 and past dry-stone walls and stunted oaks. Below you is the Alzou Valley with rock cliffs of pearl grey, russet, jet black, apricot and terracotta shades. Then you'll see the legendary pilgrimage town for the first time: tiers of houses with their high walls, towers and steep roofs of *lauzes* clinging to the rock faces. Visit the famed sites but, as you fight your way through the crowds and past the multitude of shops flogging junk, you'll conclude that this is commercial tourism at its most rampant. This is just as true at the **Gouffre de Padirac** (D3) – spectacular caves where you can travel hundreds of metres on a subterranean river far below the limestone *causse* (take warm clothes). You leave feeling as if you've just dropped off a fast-moving tourist production line where, at every turn, you're asked to put your hand in your pocket.

(At Rocamadour use the motorised blue and white train to ease the strain of walking the streets; there are also evening excursions to view the illuminations from the D32. In the vicinity there's a park, the Forêt des Singes, where 150 Barbary apes mingle with visitors; the Rocher des Aigles where you can watch large birds of prey flying freely; and a small zoo at the Parc de Vision, south of **Gramat**: D4.)