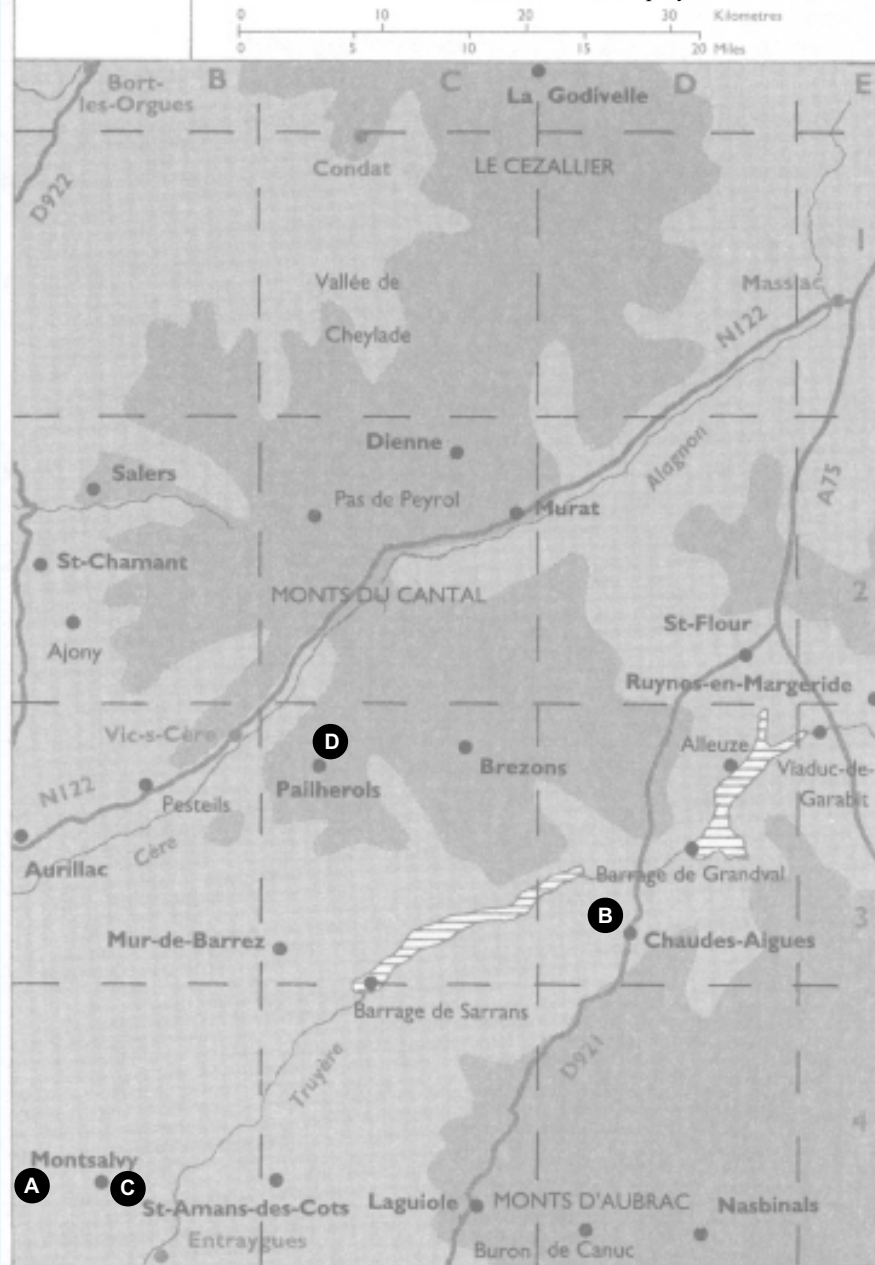


29

Aubrac, Cantal cones, salt-glaze, hot water, *aligot burons*.
Eerie ruins. Eiffel's other creation. Porkies' palace.
A basalt table. Route des Crêtes and birds of prey.



If you value seclusion and your own company then head for Cantal-Aubrac. Not that the area is remote these days. The new **A75** toll-free *autoroute* (E2) arrows south into the very heart of the Massif Central.

The area is one of strong visual contrasts: the volcanic cones of the **Monts du Cantal** (B2/C2) are separated from the desolate **Monts d'Aubrac** (east and south-east of **Laguiolle**: C4) by one of France's most striking wooded valleys, the **Truyère** (D3 to B4).

On one memorable October visit I entered Cantal from the south, crossing the River Lot north of Conques (34:B1). A gale-force wind was whistling away and puff-ball clouds scudded across the sky. The air was pure and clear and every view crystal sharp; some panoramas extended 50 miles and more. Near **Montsalvy** (B4) the lanes were strewn with carpets of sweet-chestnuts and the pastures were emerald dazzlers.

My first port of call was the isolated home of Suzy and Nigel Atkins, the Poterie du Don, west of Montoursy (B4), a hamlet south-west of Montsalvy. Suzy, one of Europe's most gifted potters, produces breathtaking work: salt-glazed ceramics include both functional ware and a range of individual pieces decorated with stunning gold and metallic lustres. Some good news: the once roughish steep descent into the Auze Valley now has a tarmac surface. (Open every day.)

Stop press: by late spring/early summer 2007, the Atkins duo should have moved to a striking new mountain-top home ('a Bilbao Guggenheim composition' – five huge inclined tambourines). The new buildings are off the D573 Le Fel road, 3 miles south of Montsalvy when using the D920. Utterly fabulous views. (The Auberge du Fel at Le Fel is highly recommended by the Atkins. Ideal for maps 29/34/35. <info@auberge-du-fel.com>.)

I headed north to **Aurillac** (B3), a bustling modern *ville*, and then followed the signposted D35 'Route des Crêtes' north-east. After a few miles the vista to the north stopped me in my tracks: the varying patches of rapidly-changing light and shade on the Cantal peaks were reminiscent of Cumbria's fells. I took two hours to reach **Salers** (B2), following the D35 over the Col de Legal and the D135 through Le Fau. No wonder: I counted a dozen birds of prey gliding in the strong winds and I marvelled at the tiniest of tricoloured pansies glistening in the autumn air – together with campion, scabious, harebells, wild lavatera, hardy cranesbill and verbasicum. And I was quite alone.

Salers is a stern, forbidding place, snoozing atop a basalt plateau bed. Explore the narrow medieval streets and the turreted basalt houses lining the Grande-Place; the fountain adds a sparkling touch. On the mountain roads you will have noticed the reddish-brown Salers cattle; their milk is used to make both *Cantal* and *Salers* cheese.

Next, I went east, to the **Pas de Peyrol** (C2: 5190 ft high). For once the mountain views came a poor second; the easy winner was the luminous beech forest clinging to the southern side of the Cirque du Falgoux (B2). At the col I detoured south, into the Vallée de Mandailles (B2). Here, too, the burnished woods were a thrilling

sight. Much the most unusual of French beech forests, the Cantal versions resemble mammoth drapes and swathes of golden cloth, 2,000 to 3,000 ft long, flung down by the gods from the volcanic summits.

Continuing north-east towards **Diene** (C2) I ran out of adjectives to describe the view ahead of us: a Capability Brown valley with long lines of chestnut, beech, maple and other trees, all wearing their autumn capes. (At other times, in April and May, I've see the same valley, and the **Vallée de Cheylade** (C1) to the north, covered with yellow jonquils and, later, peppered with white narcissi.)

From **Murat** (C2) I drove south, on the D39, to **Brezons** (C3). The high wilderness of the Prat de Bouc (C2) is a paradise for both botanists and ornithologists: locals claim that over 80 species of birds can be seen and we can vouch for the yellow gentians, lilies and other wild flowers we've encountered on our spring visits. The views north of Brezons, not mentioned in any guidebook, are show-stoppers.

The next day saw us lingering in the lanes south of **Pailherols** (C3) and beyond the Truyère, towards Laguiole (C4). Look out for several architectural treats: the open bell tower on the 13th-century *église* at Jou-sous-Monjou (C3); the château at Croprières, alongside the D59; the marvellously-sited château at Messilhac (B3), clearly visible from the D600 three km north of **Mur-de-Barrez** (C3); the bell towers at Brommat and Albinhac, east of Mur-de-Barrez; the engineering marvel of the **Barrage de Sarrans**; the terrific château at Orhaguet (C4) with a variety of shaped towers, including one with four bells; and the *église* at Ste-Geneviève-sur-Argence (C4).

The Truyère is one of France's finest river gorges; the steep sides are wooded almost every inch of its entire length. The river is dammed at several points: the biggest of the snake-shaped lakes is to the east of the **Barrage de Grandval** (D3). The eerie, haunting ruins of the Château d'**Alleuze** (D3), atop a rocky pyramid, compares starkly with two other modern man-made marvels: the elegant and massive **Viaduc-de-Garabit** (E3) built by Eiffel to carry the railway line south; and the huge newly-completed A75 concrete bridge. A swish craft cruises on the lake from its Pont de Garabit mooring.

Now for a series of notes on other places to visit. First **Laguiole** (C4) and the high plateau to the east. The town has been considerably spruced up during the last decade: over 1,000 metres high, Laguiole is famed for its cattle, knives (until recently production had ceased in the town but a new factory, on the D15, is now open to the public) and cheeses (*tome*, or *tomme*, is the fresh cow's milk version, used to make *aligot*; *jeune* is a hard variety, two to four months old; and *vieux* which matures for eight to twenty months). Further east, as you climb the D15, the views south, west and north are prodigious. Note too, 4m from Laguiole, the space-station hotel/restaurant of Michelin three-star chef, Michel Bras.

Head for remote **Nasbinals** (D4). Nose out the *charcuterie* of André Souchon in the middle of the village – a porkies' palace; then, 20 metres away, the Chassang-Brunel *boulangerie* (no sign) where you should treat yourself to a slice of the

crown-shaped *fougasse* bread (they insist you should not call the *pain* a *brioche*) made from flour, fresh eggs, butter, salt, sugar, yeast and orange-flower water.

In Aubrac's restaurants you are likely to be served *aligot* – a *purée* of potatoes with *Tomme de Cantal* cheese, cream, garlic and butter. But, if you want to savour *aligot* in its authentic, rustic glory then seek out one of the few remaining *burons* (there was a time when all the local cheeses were made in these remote, high-altitude stone-built structures). I had a memorable *aligot* lunch at the **Buron de Canuc** (no sign), three km north of Aubrac (35:D1) and on the west side of the D15 at the '57' km stone. Be prepared for a culture shock: this is not for the sophisticated or faint-hearted. Don't be put off; I would return tomorrow for the superb *aligot*, with its rubbery consistency, prepared in front of my eyes. (Important: ring 05 65 42 29 02 the evening before, or between 8.00 and 9.00 for lunch that day – June to August.)

What else is there to see? **Chaudes-Aigues** (D3), a small spa, claims to have the hottest waters in Europe (82C). Explore the terrain to the west of Laguiole, around **St-Amans-des-Cots** and the Lac de la Selve (both C4); I've even seen an oxen-drawn cart in the lanes. The views from the Puy de Montabès (B4) are worth the detour.

Aurillac (B3), for me, is no great shakes and not worth the detour. But don't miss a handful of châteaux on the western edge of my draft map. **Anjony** (B2) is so evocative of the Auvergne: tall, narrow, stern, and, at each corner, four forbidding towers; the 16th-century frescoes are remarkable (p.m. Palm Sunday to All Saints Day); and see, too, tiny Tournemire. Conros, south of Aurillac, much less forbidding, has been in the same family's hands for over four centuries (p.m. mid July to end August). **Pesteils** (B3), north-east of Aurillac, has a Disney look and an imposing 35 metre-high 13th-century keep (a.m. and p.m. July and August; p.m. May/June/September). **St-Chamant** (B2), north of Anjony, is more a fortified manor (p.m. mid June to mid September).

St-Flour (D2) has many man-made highlights, among them the cathedral and museums, and an impressive site atop a 100 metre-high basalt table. To the south-east is something altogether more down-to-earth: the Ecomusée de la Margeride based at four sites around **Ruynes-en-Margeride** (E2: open mid June to mid September), set in wooded hills (also see 30:A3). At the museum there's an evocative garden by the old tower in the village. At Signalauze, to the south-west, a tiny school classroom has been kept in its 1931 state. At Loubaresse (E3), just off the N9, the Ferme de Pierre Allègre evokes a farm of a century ago (by the church with tower and three bells). At Longevialle, north of the farm and beside the Truyère, the Domaine de Longevialle chronicles the story of the men who built the Viaduc-de-Garabit.

Finally, seek out the remarkable wilderness of **Le Cézallier** (C1:D1) – remote high plateaux, their volcanic lava pastures the home of Salers cattle and yellow gentians, and with extensive watery peat bogs. Visit **La Godivelle** (north of C1:D1) and the nearby crater lake.