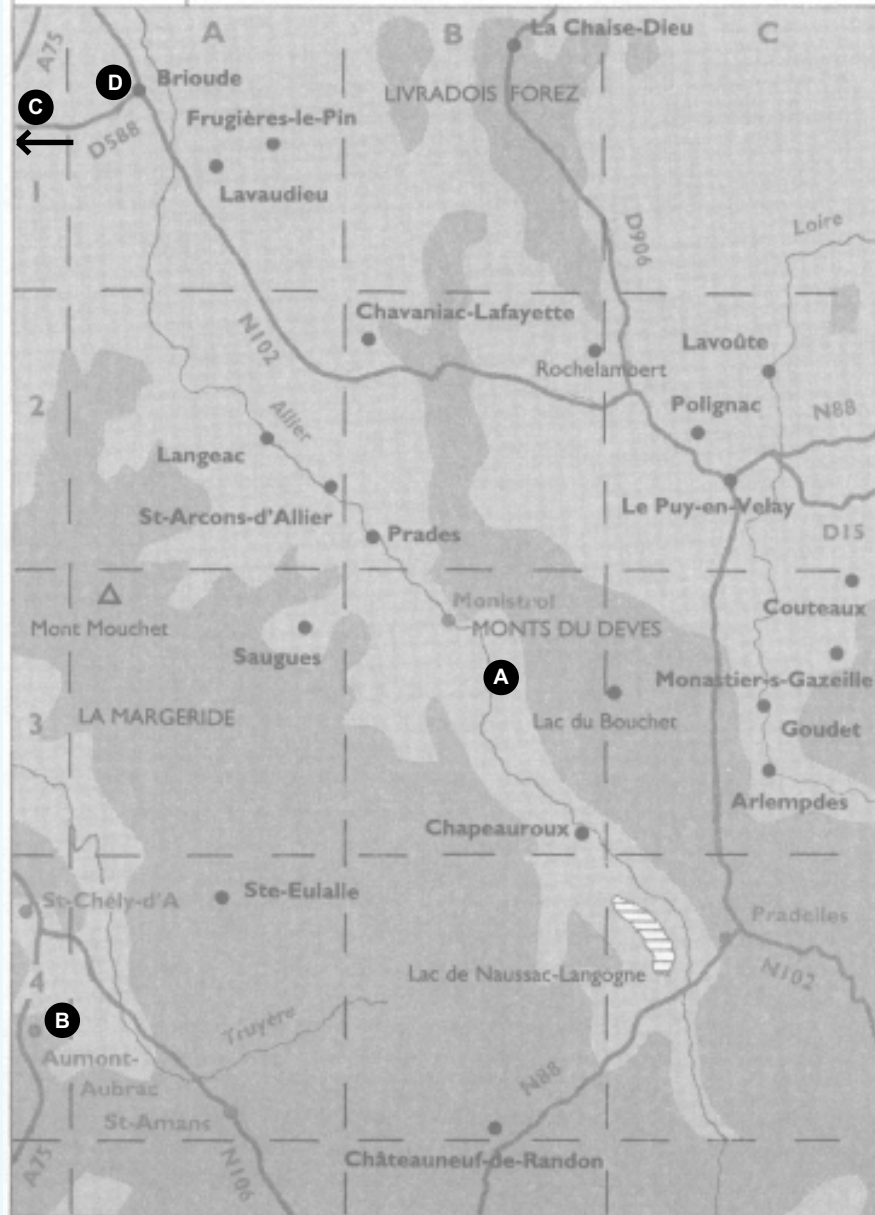
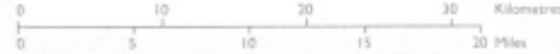


30

Le Puy, Velay Volcanique, *bois tourné*, echoes and donkeys. Byzantine and Romanesque. Mont Mouchet: 'Aux Maquis de France'. *Dance Macabre*. A Basilica shortcut.



Most tourists would probably decide that the terrain on map 30 is not worth a detour – although those who know of unique **Le Puy-en-Velay** (C2) would disagree with such a harsh judgement. How wrong the majority would be because, for those enterprising enough to make the map-reading effort, there's many a pleasing surprise awaiting them.

I'll divide the map into three vertical slices: the Vallée de la **Loire** on the right edge; the middle tranche, Velay Volcanique, which includes the wooded hills of **Livradois Forez** (B1) and the **Monts du Devès** (B2/B3); and the western third, the Haut **Allier** Valley (A1/A2/B2/B3) and the forested **La Margeride** (A3/A4).

Let's begin at **Le Puy** (C2), arguably one of the most unusual towns in France. Sharp needles of volcanic rock rise on all sides. The most needle-like has the Chapelle St-Michel d'Aiguille at the top; there's a 268-step lung-bursting climb to reach the Romanesque chapel. Another outcrop has the huge statue of Notre Dame de France on the summit. However, for me, the cathedral is the strongest magnet. The building, a mixture of Byzantine and Romanesque, has glorious 12th-century cloisters. There's one snag about Le Puy: traffic. Park in the large pl. du Breuil, next door to the Office de Tourisme (43000 Le Puy-en-Velay: 04 71 09 38 41). Ask for their *guide pratique* which gives details of various walks around the town. Or, to avoid pain, take the motorised train.

Now head for the eastern slice of country. Much the most memorable first impression of both the upper Loire Valley and the Velay, the terrain circling Le Puy, will come when you drive the high lanes on the western edge of map 31 (east of 30:D2), south of St-Julien-Chapteuil (31:D2); the latter has an especially handsome 12th-century Romanesque *église*. Use the D49 south to Laussonne. The views west and north are magnificent: a landscape of wooded, volcanic cones and mounds, the Pays des Sucs. Just west of Laussonne is **Cousteaux** (C3) where, carved out of the red volcanic soil, are numerous old troglodyte homes. Further south, at **Le Monastier-sur-Gazeille** (C3), there are more extensive views west. This is the village where Robert Louis Stevenson started his memorable travels in 1878 with Modestine, made famous in his book *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes* (read the paperback).

Two exceptional sites upriver from Le Puy deserve your time. **Goudet** (C3) snoozes on the right bank of the Loire: there's a church, ruined castle and a bridge across the narrow river; paddling in the water is a hard-to-resist temptation. **Arlempdes** (C3) is on the opposite bank: here a church, ruined château, tiny *chapelle*, perched site, volcanic rocks, woods and pretty river vista combine to form a most beguiling picture. Once again, a paddle is a tonic for hot feet.

Downstream from Le Puy access to the Loire is much easier: the D103, a busy road, runs alongside the river's banks. The most striking man-made feature is the handsome stone-built Château de **Lavoûte**-Polignac (C2), atop a solid rock which rises from the very edge of the Loire's right bank. Built originally in the 13th century, and restored in the 19th, the Polignac family home is open from Easter to end October. Also see the village's Romanesque church. In the autumn the valley's trees are a joy: rich shades of red, old gold, russet and copper.

At **Polignac** (C2), north-west of Le Puy, rises an impressive basalt table high above the encircling fields. On the billiard table-flat summit are the ruins of a once impregnable medieval fortress; the views are terrific. Once more seek out the Romanesque *église*.

Within the central tranche of countryside, the Velay Volcanique, is a varied mix of scenic sights. As you drive west from Le Puy you cross the **Monts du Devès** (B2/B3), a long spine of wooded summits; the views east are similar to the ones I described in the area around St-Julien-Chapteuil. At the southern end of the Chaîne du Devès (a much better name), just west of the **Lac du Bouchet** (C3), the views both to east and west are equally memorable; no wonder, as the road is 4000 ft above sea-level. The circular Lac du Bouchet, once a volcanic crater, is hidden in a delectable wooded setting; walk the circuit around the lake.

Of the man-made attractions in this middle slice three are well worth nosing out. Two are in the Borne Valley, north-west of Le Puy: the medieval fortress at St-Vidal (C2) with substantial towers at each of the castle's four corners; and the 16th-century Château de la **Rochelambert** (B2). Built from dark volcanic stone the château looks more like a lived-in home; two slim towers, topped off most attractively with tiled cone-shaped roofs, add extra architectural appeal.

La Chaise-Dieu (B1) is famous for two reasons. First, the 14th-century *église*, a stern structure with thick stone walls and, in the interior, a choir of no less than 144 sculptured oak stalls; 16th-century Flanders tapestries; and a mural, created in 1460, of the *Dance Macabre*, the inspiration for Honegger's musical composition. Second, the annual music festival held during the last week of August and the first ten days in September (details: Office de Tourisme, 43160 La Chaise-Dieu). An amusing diversion is the Salle de l'Echo, where I and another visitor stood facing the wall at opposite corners of a large room; talking in the quietest of whispers, we could hear each other perfectly.

A drive south-west from La Chaise-Dieu leads us conveniently from the central section to the westernmost slice of *pays*. Follow the wooded Senouire Valley (B1). On the D4 near Ste-Marguerite a sign announces an 'Artisanat Bois Tourné'. I defy you not to buy something from Michel Estienne's showroom, full of skilfully-crafted wooden creations.

The château at **Chavaniac-Lafayette** (B2) was the birthplace of the Frenchman La Fayette, George Washington's second-in-command from 1777 to 1781. Visit the château and try to assess what motivated this French and US folk hero to marry at 16 and offer his services to Washington at the tender age of 20 (open every day Easter to end Oct).

Lavaudieu (A1), south-east of **Brioude** (A1), is the site of a Bénédictine monastery with remarkable 12th-century cloisters, recently-uncovered frescoes and a small museum of traditional local life – all in the most rural of settings.

Brioude's Basilica of St-Julien is a must: hemmed in by buildings, the church is an architectural wonder with dozens of different shades and types of patterned and layered stones. The stone and pebble floor is vast; amusingly, locals use the north and south doors to cross the nave as a shortcut between two streets.

Perhaps the best way to approach the Haut Allier – the river and the *gorges* – is the descent on the D130 to **St-Arcons d'Allier** (A2). In early summer the Allier is at its most alluring; you'll catch many a glimpse of fishermen in midstream working the river. Upstream from St-Arcons, just before the bridge at St-Julien-des-Chazes, take the unmarked road to the isolated stern-looking Chapelle Ste-Marie. (The Allier Valley has a handful of dark-stone, sombre churches. Three are downstream from **Langeac** (A2): Blassac, Aubazat and Peyrusses (all A2); Chanteuges (A2) is upstream. All have fine views.) At **Prades** (B2) there's a fearsome rock face on the Allier's right bank.

From Prades follow the road due south: stop often to enjoy the views, both east and west over the Seuge Valley; walk the short detour to the 12th-century chapel, Notre Dame d'Estours; and watch out for birds of prey hovering high above the ridge. The Ance Valley (B3) is densely wooded; upstream from the dams there's plenty of white water. Use the D33 to reach **Saugues** (A3), dominated by the massive 13th-century Tour des Anglais; another impressive tower, built on top of a huge rock, is at La Clauze, on the D335 south-west of Saugues. Continue south to the 500-acre bison park at **Ste-Eulalie**, claimed to be unique in Europe (A4: open every day; 04 66 31 57 01). Here you are in the remote fastness of **La Margeride** (A3); you'll have the mountain lanes to yourself.

Please do not miss the drive along the Chapeauroux, a tributary of the Allier, from **Châteauneuf-de-Randon** (B4) to **Chapeauroux** (B3). The drive is an eye-teasing visual confection: in spring the fast-flowing stream is a tonic; in the autumn a 20-mile drive past a seemingly uninterrupted honour guard of colourfully-cloaked broadleaved trees. And be sure to climb to the *place* at the heart of Châteauneuf-de-Randon, a medieval treasure. If watersports are your passion, then seek out the man-made **Lac de Naussac-Langogne** (C4).

Finally, two musts. Visit the Musée de la Résistance 'Joseph LHomenède' at **Frugières-le-Pin** *gare* (A1: south-east of Brioude). The museum is fascinating, filled with memorabilia of every imaginable type. Joseph was the leader of the Livradois *maquis*; his home was the adjacent Café Fayolle. Ask for access at the café. The lady who opens up the museum is Jacqueline, Joseph's daughter. Further south, on the western slopes of wooded **Mont Mouchet** (A3), in the high Margeride, is France's national monument, '*Aux Maquis de France*'; there's also an adjacent museum which explains the history of the Auvergne Resistance (see Michelin maps where marked MF). Access to this place of pilgrimage is easier on the D4 from the west, alongside which there are numerous individual memorials to the brave souls who died fighting for France.