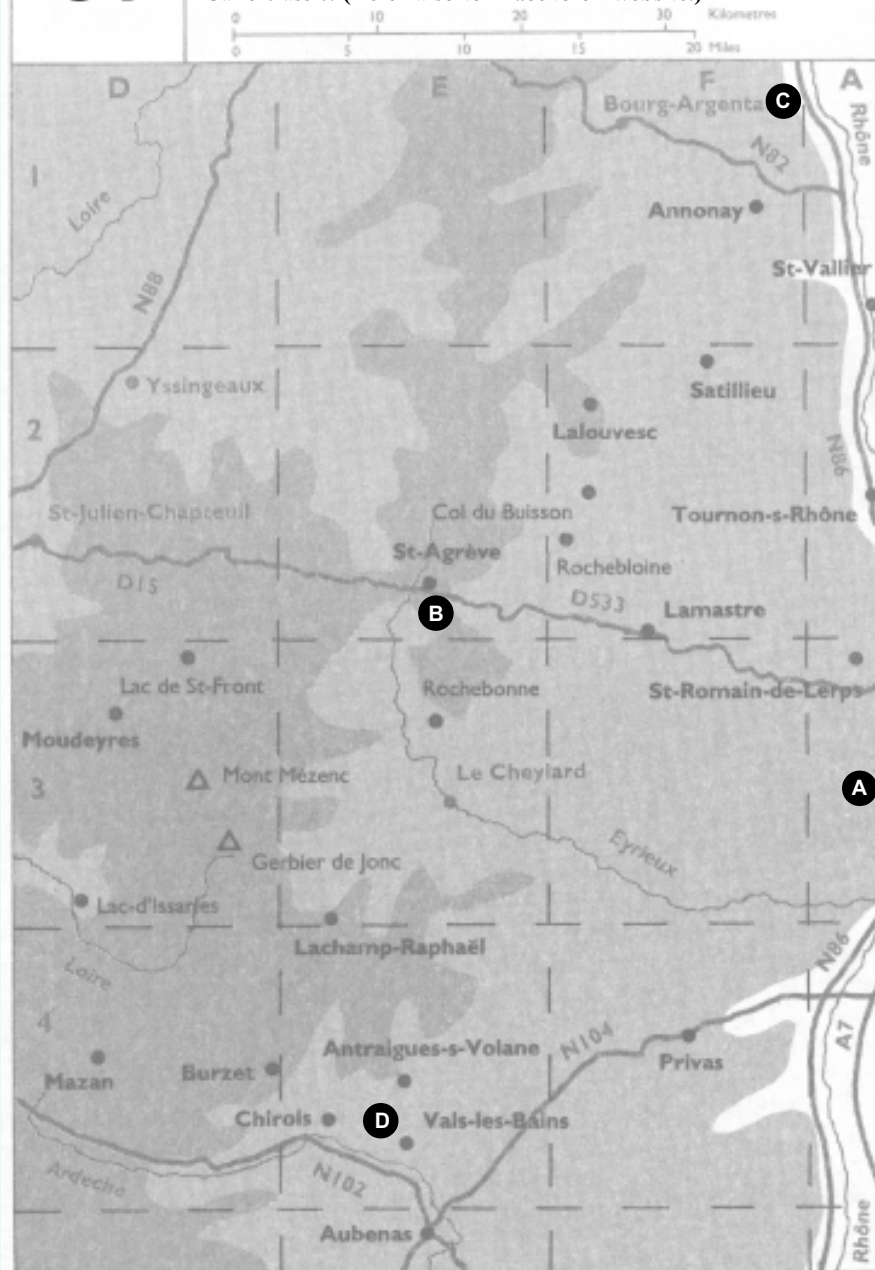


31

Vivarais (Ardèche): wild flowers, rail buffs and orchestras. Goichot tables. Chave: wine-maker *extraordinaire*. Monte-Carlo classic. (Refer also to *Ardèche* on website.)



The majority of tourists, speeding south on the **A7 autoroute**, will give just a passing glance to the wooded hills on their right-hand side beyond the River **Rhône** (A1-A4). Some may realise that the distant summits are in the Ardèche *département*. But most drivers and their navigators, armed with small-scale maps and hell-bent on reaching the Med, will have no idea of the endless pleasures hidden in the adorable Ardèche.

Mapaholics know better. They will have the right large-scale maps and will be only too eager to cross the Rhône and head west into the Ardèche or, to give the *département* its ancient name, the Vivarais. Further west, circling Le Puy-en-Velay (30:C2), is the volcanic land of Velay. Combine map sheets 30, 31 and 36 and you'll have a global cartographic view of Velay, Vivarias and most of the captivating Cévennes (see map sheet 35 for the rest of the latter).

I cannot say I find the Rhône Valley attractive; awful would be a more suitable adjective. The only redeeming features in the valley are the profuse roses, the extensive peach and cherry orchards and the vineyards – especially those of Gérard Chave, wine-maker *extraordinaire*. His *cave* is at Mauves (A2), south of **Tournon-sur-Rhône** (A2); across the river, on the Hermitage hillside, is the site of his priceless vineyard. The Chave business has been handed down, from father to son, for the past 530 years, an almost unbelievable *vignerons* family history.

There are many ways you can leave the Rhône behind you and I'll start by suggesting one of the least likely of the many Ardeche *entrées*. Just north of **St-Vallier** (A1) is the Cance Valley. Use the narrow D270 and follow the river upstream; the valley is wooded almost every inch of the way and there are few houses. In early June, when I last saw the valley, the banks alongside the twisting road were a riot of wild flowers; I counted a couple of dozen different species, including some I had not seen before. Many rock faces were as good, if not better, than deliberately planted rock-gardens back home. Another big plus: in June the Cance is full of fast flowing water.

Continue south-west from **Annonay** (F1), past **Satillieu** (F2), and climb, through woods and past dollops of broom, to **Lalouvesc**, 1050 m above sea-level. The twin towers of the 19th-century basilica are a notable landmark, perched as they are on the edge of a high wooded cliff; enjoy the views from the east side of the church. Panoramas are the supreme feature of the D236 as you head south: the views over the Doux Valley – forested hills sharing space with sunny-side-up splashes of broom – are especially fine. At the **Col du Buisson** (F2) spare a few minutes (that's all you'll need) for the flower-filled Village Miniature, aptly named as the stone buildings are minuscule.

Shortly afterwards, when you see a track to the right marked **Rochebloine** (F2), park and walk from the D236 up the not-too-steep bluff to the just about visible ruins of the Château de Rochebloine. The eagle's eye panorama, over the Doux Valley, is breathtaking.

Another unusual Ardèche *entrée* is one or other of the steep lanes that snake up into the hills from Châteaubourg (A2) or St-Péray (A3) to the viewpoint at **St-Romain-de-Lerps** (A3). The views east are vast; just as intriguing are the two semi-circular observation tables, each one made of 19 ceramic tiles and hand painted by Paul Goichot from 1940-43. A third terrific access road is the steep climb north on the D266 from St-Laurent-du-Pape (A3) to the Château de Pierre-Gourde (also A3). Use the non-metalled track to reach the mound of stones; the view west, of line upon line of hills, is well worth the drive.

For railway buffs (including me), not one of the above suggestions bears comparison with the most exciting of the Ardèche *entrées*. You need to put aside a whole day and to leave your car in the Rhône Valley. Revel in France's best privately-owned railway line, the Chemin de Fer du Vivarais, a metre-gauge run of 33 km which climbs 250 metres from Tournon-sur-Rhône (A2) to **Lamastre** (F2). The railway celebrated its centenary in 1991. During the summer there's a 10.00 a.m. 'steamer' from Tournon, arriving in Lamastre at midday. For a timetable write to CFTM, 8 rue d'Algérie, 69001 Lyon.

There's one scenic motoring route in the Ardèche which I would not miss under any circumstances. Start at **Vals-les-Bains** (E4), a small, sleepy, old-fashioned spa. Use the D253 to **Chirols**, to the west. In the past, on a wild and windy day, I've relished the views of serried ranks of hills; the air was so clear you felt you could reach out and touch them and, far below, the River **Ardèche** sparkled. Take the D26 to **Burzet** (D4). After heavy rain the turbulent river vistas in the village will literally stop you in your tracks. The Ardèche is classic Monte-Carlo Rally country: one of the best hillclimbs is the seven km drive up the D289 (D4). The road winds and climbs 2600 ft from Burzet in that short distance – a match for anything in the Alps.

Return to Burzet and head north on the D215, up the well-named *Vallée des Myrtilles* (bilberries/blueberries). Park and do the not-too-demanding 15-minute walk to the Ray-Pic cascade. Then drive, through woods, to the marshy plateau south of **Lachamp-Raphaël** (E3), to one of the most exhilarating of sights. In May I have gasped at the sheets of wild daffodils, interlaced with large yellow marsh buttercups, numerous orchids and scores of other wild flowers. A few weeks later, in June, I've been stunned anew by the same colourful pastures when pillows of intensely dark purple violas have competed with wild narcissi and myriad other wild flowers to capture our attention.

Tear yourself away and continue north-west to the lava cone of **Gerbier de Jonc** (D3); if your lungs are up to the test then make the short but very steep climb to the top. Below you is the source of the River **Loire** and, around you, an extensive panorama. But I'll lead you to an even better one, without any stiff muscle-testing exercise.

Use the D378 and D400 to the Croix de Boutières (D3), at the tail end of the sleeping dog **Mont Mézenc** (D3: at 5751 ft the area's highest). The immediate vista to the east is remarkable for the many volcanic humps and lumps and their

interconnecting wooded ridges and valleys below you; this is how a child would draw a mountain landscape. The panorama, explained by an observation table, is stunning.

In June the pastures between Les Estables and **Moudeyres** (D3) resemble snowfields; in reality wild narcissi. Hidden among them are dense pockets of purple pansies. Stop and chuckle at the entertainment provided by a meadow orchestra of skylarks and crickets. In June, on yet another visit to the seductive plateau, we've picnicked alongside the circular **Lac de St-Front** (D3: 75 acres, three km circumference and 10 m deep) with no-one else for company except a skylark and cushions of wild trolilius, wild garlic, vetch, orchids and other bright flowers. I also recall a picnic on the slopes above the ruins of the Château de **Rochebonne** (E3), on the D478 south of **St-Agrève** (E2), where ruined walls appear to be part of the rocky and isolated strategic perch.

For motorists the countryside is heart-stopping stuff. For walkers the terrain is paradise. Let me commend to you a series of *pochettes*, each one of which contains superlative details of several different walks with maps and interesting notes for each suggestion. For details contact the Comité Départemental de la Randonnée, 12 boulevard P. Jourde, B.P. 198, 43005 Le Puy-en-Velay (04 71 05 56 50).

Now for something different. If you like the idea of walks accompanied by a pack donkey then nose out the following: Roselyne Girard at **Antraigues-sur-Volane** (E4: a village worth seeing; 04 75 88 24 76); or Alex and Camille Ristor at **Chirols** (E4: 04 75 94 48 39).

There's so much to tell you about and not enough space to do justice to the varied charms hidden on map sheet 31. I'll list a few in random order. The azure **Lac-d'Issarlès** (D3), nestling in the crater of an extinct volcano. The isolated ruins of the 12th-century Cistercian abbey at **Mazan** (D4). **Aubenas** (south of E4), perched high at the divide between Vivarais to the north (chestnut trees galore and cooking in butter) and the Cévennes to the south (olive trees and cooking in oil), has a castle with fine ramparts and an 11th-century tower. And for the children, the Safari park at Peaugres (F1), north-east of **Annonay** (F1); 800 animals seen both from your car and on foot (open all year).

Seek out some museums. The Ecomusée du Moulinage (mill machinery) at **Chirols** (E4: p.m. June to Oct; not Tuesday). The Musée Vivarais César Filhol (Vivarais folk history) at **Annonay** (F1: p.m. every day July and Aug; p.m. Wednesday and weekends rest of year). The Musée Archéologique (150,000 years of history and an active dig) at Soyons (just east of A3), south-west of Valence (Wednesday to Sunday May to Sept; p.m. only Wednesday, Thursday and weekends rest of year). The Château de Tournon Musée du Rhône (A2) brings the river's past to life (p.m. April, May, Sept and Oct; June to Aug a.m. and p.m. but not Tuesday). Two museums at **Privas** (F4): the Musée de la Terre Ardéchoise (geology and archaeology of Ardèche: p.m. Wednesday to Sunday); and the Chapelle des Recollets (Musée d'Art Religieux: p.m.).