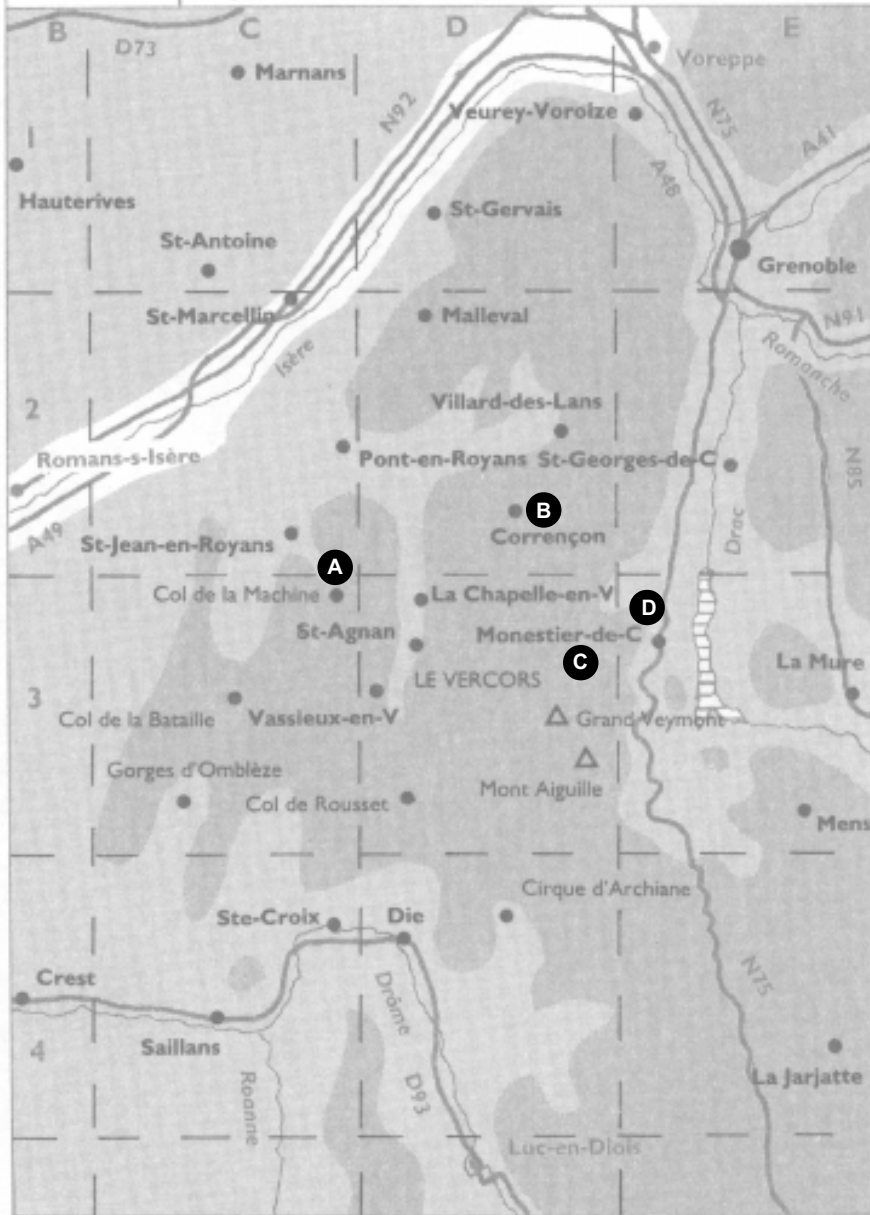


32

Vercors: a chisel head, cooing doves and bungee jumps.  
 Legendary Resistance citadel. Engineering marvels.  
 Box-hedge trimmer. (Refer also to Vercors on website.)

0 5 10 15 20 Kilometres  
 0 5 10 15 20 Miles



(Please ensure you also read the website's updated *Vercors* chapter.)

The mountain terrain at the heart of map 32 – **Le Vercors** – is a part of France I love as much as any other. The Vercors – a triangular limestone mass of mountains, 40 miles long by 25 miles wide at its base – is a natural fortress of eroded, rampart-like peaks, isolated from the French Alps by three rivers which all but encircle the *massif*: the **Isère** (C1/D1/E1), **Drac** (E2/E3) and **Drôme** (C4/D4).

Access to the Vercors is difficult: a few tortuous lanes wind up in steep zig-zags from the valleys. Within the *massif* two torrents, the Bourne and Vernaison (D2), create an even more remote inner sanctuary. This secret heart of Vercors wears a vast cloak of dense pine forests, cool in summer and a dark cover in winter. No wonder then the Vercors became a citadel of the Resistance and, later, such a legend.

Two days after the D-Day landings on 6 June 1944, the tricolour flew on numerous flag-poles in the Vercors. One of the proud flags fluttered above St-Nizier-du-Moucherotte (E1), atop the rock needles called Les Trois Pucelles and in full view of **Grenoble** (E1) far below. Inevitably the Wehrmacht were incensed and, during the weeks which followed, the Germans threw 20,000 troops into the mountains – bent on revenge because the Vercors *maquis* had long been a thorn in their sides.

The *maquisards* had counted on relief coming from the air and from the anticipated Allies' landing in Provence. The uprising came too soon, help arrived too late. Hundreds died defending the citadel and, by July, the Germans had full control of the Vercors.

As you travel the mountain roads you will see numerous monuments in memory of those who gave their lives in 1944. *Mort pour la France* say the carved words on the proud monuments: are there any finer for an epitaph? Spare time for the cemetery at St-Nizier (Les Trois Pucelles are to the south); the national cemetery at **Vassieux-en-Vercors** (D3) where there's also an evocative Resistance museum; the striking monument at **Malleval** (D2) at the top of the taxing Gorges du Nan climb; and drive the narrow D215C/D221 which wind west from **Villard-de-Lans** (D2) through dense pine forests towards Valchevrière – past numerous small memorials to *maquisards* who died as they fought valiantly, in retreat, to keep the Germans at bay. But perhaps the most poignant of all is the monument at the entrance to the Grotte de la Luire (D3), south of **La Chapelle-en-Vercors** (D3), used by the Resistance as a hospital. The memorial's simple words carry an undemanding plea: *Thou that comest here – Bring thy soul with thee*.

The retribution and carnage reeked out by the Wehrmacht and, worse still, French collaborators, was hideous. (Most French people collaborated passively during the war. We shouldn't be too smug: what would have occurred here if Germany had over-run Britain?) Hundreds of men, women and children were murdered in cold blood. Villages were razed to the ground; new buildings in places like Vassieux and La Chapelle are a salutary reminder of the sadistic punishment meted out.

There are numerous scenic sights. Leave the **A48** at **Veurey-Voroize** (E1), climb to La Buffe and, just before the Tunnel du Mortier, admire the view below and ahead of you. Detour south to the grassy plateau at La Molière for more extensive views east to the Chamrousse (east of Grenoble). A little further north is the Gouffre Berger, the deepest and most dangerous pot-hole in France. (Much safer, and worth a visit, are the Grottes de Chorance (D2) in the Gorges de la Bourne – noted for rare pencil-thin stalactites; there’s also an open-air museum.)

Another exciting access is a southerly one: starting at **Die** (D4), the **Col de Rousset** (D3) is a memorable climb of numerous hairpin bends. The best views are from the mouth of the old tunnel. The **Col de la Bataille** (C3) is the easiest entry route; views, north and south, are the highlight. The most exhilarating, frightening for some, is the engineering marvel which climbs from **St-Jean-en-Royans** (C2) up the west side of the Combe de Laval, a vast amphitheatre of rocks, to the **Col de la Machine** (C3); the final stretch is a series of tunnels gouged out of the vertical mountain face. Another thrilling northern entry is from **St-Gervais** (D1), up the taxing D35 and then south on the Route des Ecouges (D2).

Within the *massif* other man-made marvels combine with some of Nature’s more violent sculptures. One is the amazing Grands Goulets (D2) where the tiny, but powerful Vernaison punches through a rocky barrier. Somehow, 150 years ago, the Jouberts (father and son) built a leech-like road alongside the torrential stream which hurtles ferociously down the narrow ravine. Equally unusual is the road that hugs the floor of the dark Gorges de la Bourne (D2) at its eastern end; steep cliffs overhang the claustrophobic Tarmac ribbon. Both the above roads lead to **Pont-en-Royans** (C2); be sure to see the colourful tall houses beside the Bourne. Something quite different is the Réserve Naturelle des Hauts Plateaux du Vercors – an exceptional high-altitude nature reserve with no roads. Information points on access to this flora and fauna paradise are at **Corrençon** (D2) and **St-Agnan** (D3).

The outer rim of the *massif* has many a natural splendour. For example, the **Gorges d’Ombèze** (C3), a dead-end with cascades and solitude as your rewards. Another, even more spectacular dead-end, is the D224 which takes you into the heart of a superb *cirque*. Here the **Cirque d’Archiane** (D4) is a stunning sight: a mammoth semi-circle stone wall rears high above the valley. Who trims the box hedges?

The best sight of all is on the descent of the Col de Menée (E4), east of the *cirque*. Ahead is the hypnotic, tilted, table-top mass of **Mont Aiguille** (D3), one of the most startling sights in France. Or approach from the north, using roads which are renowned Monte-Carlo Rally stages – the Col de l’Arzelier (E2), St-Guillaume (E3) and Gresse-en-Vercors (D3): wooded terrain, valleys, unspoilt villages, gorges, views, streams and cols. And, at La Bâtie, the northern aspect of Mont Aiguille looms menacingly above you – a giant vertical orange and cream chisel head rising high into the sky. To the right is the grim line of **Grand Veymont** (D3), the highest Vercors peak (almost 8000 ft).

What else is there other than the Vercors? **Grenoble** (E1), an almighty traffic jam, has several fine museums. But I would go elsewhere. Start to the south of Grenoble, on the Corniche du Drac road from **St-Georges-de-Commiers** (E2), past the sturdy château at La Motte-les-Bains, through Marcieu, to approach **La Mure** (E3) from the south-west. The man-made lake is turquoise and, as the road runs further south, the surface below falls further and further away. At the D529/D116B junction the lake and mountain panorama is magnificent; at Les Côtes even more so. Gasp at the drop below you. The acoustics are intriguing: I heard doves cooing from a farm far below me on the other side of the Drac.

An alternative, easier-on-the-driver way of seeing the Vercors wall and lake is the Chemin de Fer de la Mure which runs from a prim station at **St-Georges** (E2) to **La Mure** (E3). The metre-gauge line (18 tunnels and six viaducts) was opened in 1888 and was the first to use high-voltage DC current. (From one to four trains every day from mid Apl to mid Oct.) Another way of enjoying the lake is a cruise from Treffort (E3), northeast of **Monestier-de-Clermont** (E3: June to Oct: tel 76 34 14 56).

From La Mure use the D526 and the Pont de Ponsonnas across the Drac. The bridge is an official ‘*Saut en Elastique*’ centre. I saw several young men make bungee jumps from the bridge, leaping hundreds of feet into the gorge. What nerves of steel they have.

The circle of terrain around **Mens** (E3) is called Le Trièves – hills (one a pyramid), woods and fields with a backdrop of high rocky *têtes*. Mens is a ‘working’ village; from afar the most pleasing aspect is the rich, earthy hues of the *lauzes* (roof tiles). Further south, beyond the Col de la Croix Haute (E4), drive up the Buëch Valley to **La Jarjatte** (E4): a miniature Chamonix Valley with a jagged jaw of sharply-pointed peaks, wild flowers and a crystal-clear stream.

The River Drôme is at its best west of **Die** (D4). Savour tiny **Ste-Croix** (C4), with its vineyards (Clairette de Die sparklers) and walnut trees, and the river view from Pontaix. Do not rush past either **Saillans** (C4) or Aouste-sur-Sye (B4); relish the colourful village vistas from the left bank of the river. **Crest** (B4) has a notable architectural sight: the Tour de Crest, a formidable medieval dungeon, is reckoned to have the highest walls in France. Every Wed and Sat (15.00) the tower is used as spine-chilling abseiling wall.

Finally, some sights north of the Isère (C2). Visit **St-Marcellin** (C2), famed for its small, mild-flavoured disks of cow’s milk cheese. There’s a Musée du Fromage (a.m. and p.m. except Mon a.m.). Next, the Gothic basilica at **St-Antoine**, to the north-west, has some sumptuous treasures; see, too, the Musée Départemental de Ste-Antoine l’Abbaye (both March to Nov; not Tues). On to the tiny Romanesque Eglise St-Pierre at **Marnans** (C1), north of Roybon. Then chuckle and marvel at the Palais Idéal at **Hauterives** (B1) – built of pebbles and stones a century ago by the town postman, Ferdinand Cheval.