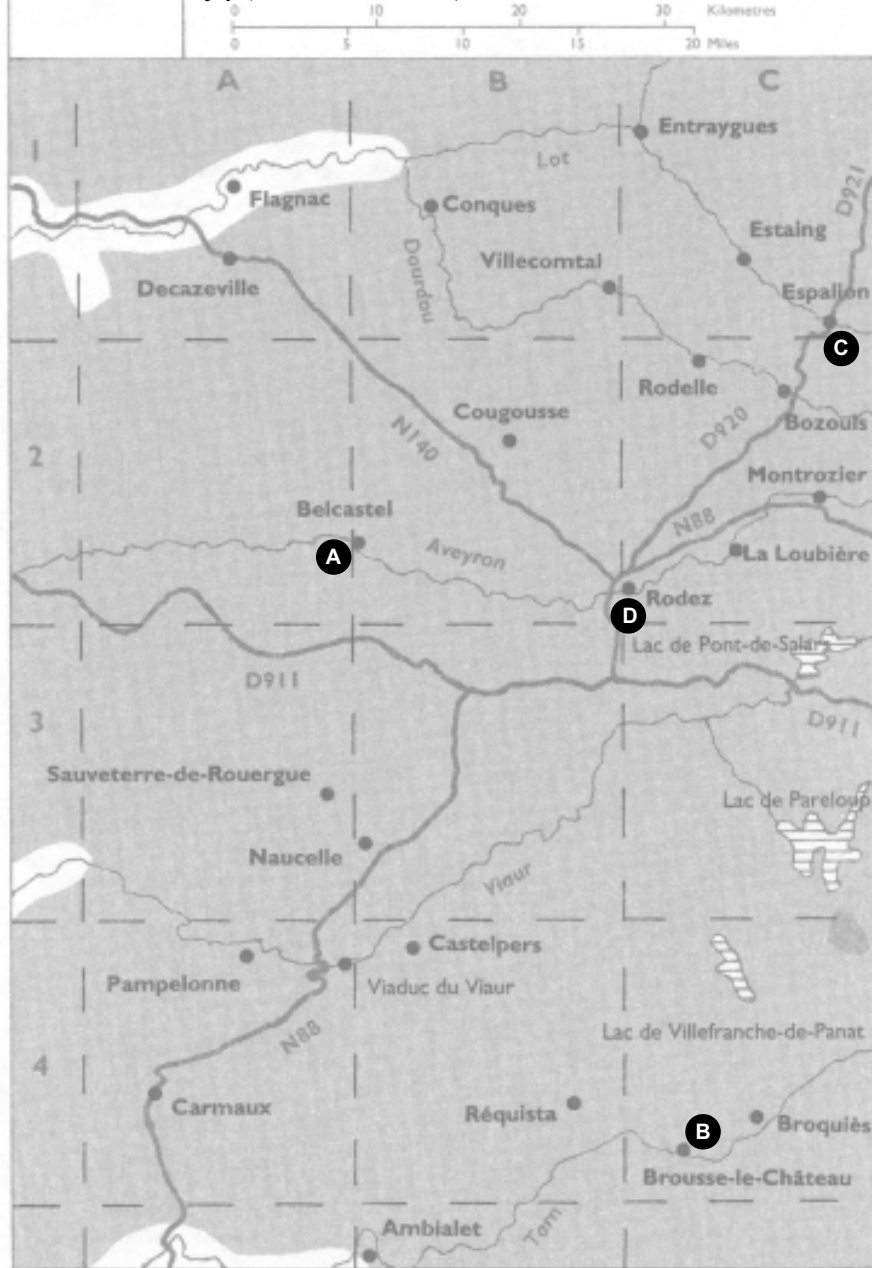


34

Tarn to Lot: a *trou*, ruby-hued *grès* and precious stones. Scenic *tour de force*. Ségala. Belcastel; a sumptuous visual joy (see cover illustration). Brousse: *calades* and cobblestones.



I would imagine that most tourists, crossing the heart of France, would dismiss much of map 34 as dull, uninteresting terrain. Once again, I shall try to prove to you the essential element of surprise, one which unfailingly rewards those who pocket their prejudices and travel instead with open minds and receptive hearts.

The landscape is dominated by river valleys. Five are especially notable: from south to north the **Tarn**, **Viaur**, **Aveyron**, **Dourdou** and **Lot**. I'll describe each valley, and the nearby countryside, in turn, giving most space to the lesser-known scenic attractions.

Start your exploration of an unknown stretch of the Tarn to the east of **Ambialet** (south of B4). The village and the aptly-named Presqui'île d'Ambialet are a scenic *tour de force* river sculpture. As you approach Ambialet you plunge into a short 20 metre-long tunnel; beware, there's a stop sign at the tunnel exit. Turn right at the cross-roads and follow the road up to the *prieuré*; walk to the viewpoint. Now you'll see what an unusual meander lies both behind and below you. The two curves in the river to the south almost touch; at the narrowest point there's a small ornate château-style building. In fact this is an electricity generating station; water is allowed to flow through an underground channel which bridges the 15 metre-wide gap and this is the reason why the loop to the north has such a dried-up look. I've also seen the Tarn, after monsoon rains, in flood – unsurprisingly the colour of red sandstone.

To the north of Ambialet, between the old coal-mining town of **Carmaux** (A4) and **Réquista** (B4), there's a long, high ridge of hills: the villages on the D91 and D903 are really not up to much – except for the beautiful lilies you see everywhere; the views, north and south, are extensive and exceptional. I would want to get back to the Tarn. After you've seen something of the Viaur (more of that valley later) dive south again to magical **Brousse-le-Château** (C4).

What a seductive spot Brousse is, sleeping contentedly on its perch above the Tarn and alongside the Alrance. Every wall of the half-timbered and stone houses appears to be rose-covered and, alongside the Alrance stream, are many colourful vegetable and flower gardens. There's a ruined castle with towers and ramparts high above the houses; a *pont roman*; narrow alleys (*calades*) paved with giant cobblestones; an *église* with an open three-bell tower; and a weir upstream on the Tarn.

From Brousse follow the D54 to **Broquiès** (C4). Stop at La Palisse farm (marked on Michelin maps): there's a magnificent vista to the south of the point where another Dourdou (not one of the five) enters the Tarn. The backdrop to the river picture is row upon row of hills to both south-east and east. The views remain excellent as you continue climbing north on the D25; the maps, quite correctly, show a particularly fine panorama at the junction with the D31, 728 metres high.

The **Lac de Villefranche-de-Panat** (C4) is a surprisingly pleasant man-made lake: the banks are wooded, there's a beach, plenty of reflections and *pédalos*. Do as I did and drive to the Tour de Peyrebrune (3000 ft above sea-level) for some fine views; there's a modern flight of stairs in the tower. We continued north-east, past Calmejane and, just west of the farm entrance to La Fraysse, we braked hard at the sight of a spectacle the like of which we had not seen anywhere else in France: a field to our right had such a dense covering of *orchis militaris* that the entire surface was washed with a dense pink colouring. No wonder the field is protected by barbed wire.

I've seen the **Lac de Pareloup** (C3) many times during the last 20 years but, in 1993, a sad sight greeted me. Disaster had struck the local hoteliers and traders: the entire lake had been emptied by EDF (the national electricity company) for 'cleaning'. The task of refilling the lake started again in 1994; when full the wooded inlets are an attractive bonus, as are the beaches and watersport facilities. On the eastern shore, at Les Vernhes, there's a new marina: normally you can cruise on the lake but last year the craft was high and dry. Further north, the **Lac de Pont-de-Salars** (C3) was full, looking quite smug in the June sunlight.

Back to the second river, the **Viaur**. I would happily give time again to the network of tributaries feeding the Viaur to the east of the **N88**, where the road crosses the wooded Gorges du Viaur (A4). Start at the grim-looking Château du Bosc (B3), associated with Toulouse-Lautrec's childhood, south-east of **Naucelle** (B3: open April to October). After your visit descend to **Castelpers** (B4), flower-filled and alongside the Céor. Follow the stream west to its confluence with the Viaur. Detour north to the viewpoint at Puech (hill) de Rouet and then back again to the Viaur, continuing downstream. This is heavenly country: roses blooming, cattle bellowing, water murmuring and lizards scuttling.

Just before the N88 man does his bit to impress: the 100-year-old **Viaduc du Viaur** (A4) spans the gorge 120 metres above you. The single arch railway bridge, an immense necklace of steel tubing and struts, is an engineering marvel. Further downstream two spots are easily reached. Below **Pampelonne** (A4) the D78 snakes down, through woods, to the valley floor; from the tower ruins at Thuriès you'll understand why the river is throttled downstream: courtesy of an EDF dam. Pont-de-Cirou, a few km to the west, is an isolated place; one quirk is the *département* and kilometre stone bang in the middle of the old bridge.

This is very much walkers' country; note the footpath which runs along the river's left bank from Tanus, on the N88, to Pont-de-Cirou, past the remote *église* Notre-Dame de Las Planques. Naturalists among you will appreciate the absence of roads among the trees and plants. Perhaps you'll be lucky enough to catch a glimpse of otters or herons.

Between the Viaur and the Aveyron (the third of the five rivers) is a *pays* called Ségala. At its high heart is an architectural treat: the small *bastide* of **Sauveterre-de-Rouergue** (A3). The arcaded *place* is a handsome square. Also worth looking out for is the *église* at **Naucelle** (B3) with fine stained glass windows. Another tip: one of the best fresh cow's milk cheeses I've ever tasted in France was made at Le Taurinol farm at Taurines (B3), east of the château at Bosc (see earlier reference).

The Aveyron, like the Viaur, has few roads alongside its banks. Certain spots are worth the detour. **Rodez** (C2) is the architectural highlight: the sandstone Cathédrale Notre-Dame is magnificent, especially the ornate high bell tower; see, too, *vieux* Rodez (south of the cathedral) with many splendid ancient houses, noted for their galleries and interior courtyards. Upstream from Rodez nose out tiny **La Loubière** with an *église* and pretty riverside aspect; that's true, too, of **Montrozier** (C2) with a sturdy looking Renaissance château. But the best site is **Belcastel** (A2/B2: west of Rodez) – a sumptuously scenic joy: a huddle of 15th-century houses, dominated by a castle high above the roof tops; cobbled *calades*; a bend in the river; and a medieval *pont* spanning the 20 metre-wide river.

Now to the fourth river, the **Dourdou** – the least well-known and I think perhaps the best of the five. Start at **Bozouls** (C2). From a viewpoint just yards from the D20 admire the astonishing *trou* below you: a wooded *cirque* where the river has formed a stunning loop. At the heart of the giant meander, above the river, is a Romanesque *église*, built from the local sandstone (*grès*). Continue north-west on the D20 and then drop south to **Rodelle** (C2): the deep wooded valley is the first major surprise; the village's rocky site, on a high spur, is the second. Continue downstream to the Lot. What a superb valley: by **Villecomtal** (B1) you will have noted that all buildings are made from the local *grès*, a rich ruby-hued sandstone; note, too, the shapes and shades of the *lauzes* (roof tiles) and admire the startling contrast of fallow emerald pastures and ploughed red fields.

Halfway down the Gorges du Dourdou, make the essential climb to **Conques** (B1). The 11th-century *église* is a Romanesque gem: the three spires, high nave, majestic sculptures of the peerless tympanum and the famed treasure (including the glorious gold-covered statue of Ste-Foy, enriched with precious stones) make Conques a three-star wonder.

I have never been much impressed by the Gorges du **Lot**, upstream from **Entraygues** (C1). The wooded river valley, downstream from Entraygues, is much more appealing (and the lanes which climb up from the Lot). I especially love the area around **Flagnac** (A1), the site of a simple but stirring annual *spectacle*: *Hier, Un Village* (details from Office de Tourisme, 12300 **Decazeville** (A1): tel 05 65 43 18 36). What do win hands down in the Lot Valley are the three Es (all C1) – Entraygues, **Estaing** and busy **Espalion**: old bridges, ancient houses, châteaux, ruined castles and *églises* combine to please.