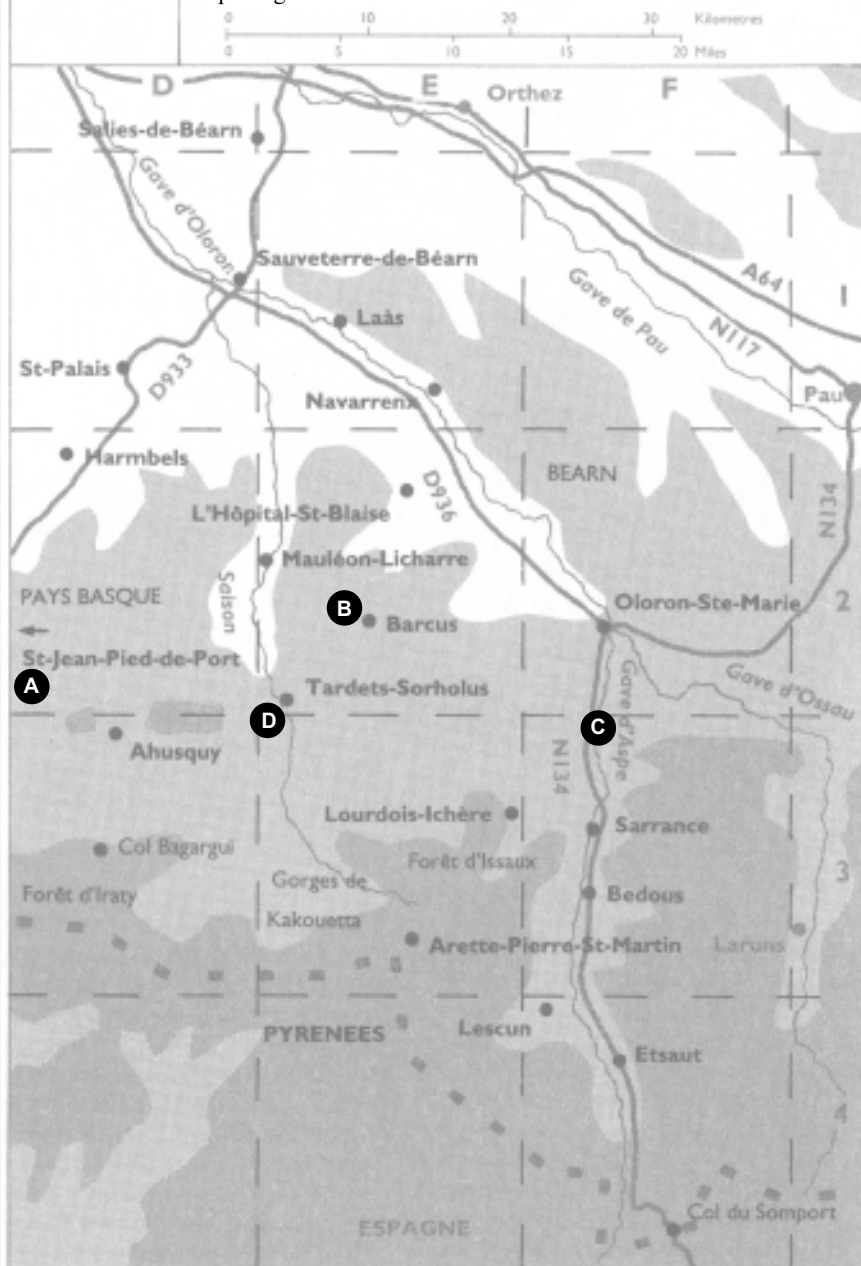


42

Pays Basque & Béarn: noble beeches, *gaves* and Hard Knott. Pelota courts and *maisons médiévales*. Solitary walking. Sports galore. Wild flower wonderland.



As the years creep by I find myself turning my back on the major *vaut le voyage* and *mérite un détour* French towns and cities. The more I get off-the-beaten-track the more I appreciate the surprises which lie around every corner. In the past I've swarmed, with other tourist bees, to the Biarritz, Bayonne and St-Jean-de-Luz honeypots. Now I look elsewhere for scenic refreshment. Leave the coast and head for the eastern corners of the **Pays Basque** (map's left side) and the western edges of **Béarn** (right side).

Where can we start? Of the many approach roads I think I would choose the **D933** (D1). I would dive down into **Salles-de-Béarn** (north of D1/E1) from the bypass: the thermal spa, protected by low hills, has a Swiss feel. Famed for its brine, there's a Musée du Sel and a salt festival is held on the second Sunday in September. Continue south across the foothills to **Sauveterre-de-Béarn** (D1): walk the narrow streets of the 12th-century *cité médiévale*; enjoy the views of the **Gave d'Oloron** (*gave* is river) and the Pyrénées panorama to the south.

North of **St-Palais** (D1) you will have the first of many typical Basque **Pyrénées** (D4/E4/F4) views: mountains and hills shaped in the form of ridges, humps, cones and moulds. (A similar but even better vista is from the D347 midway between **Tardets-Sorholus** and **Barcus** (E2). But, please, don't drive to the viewpoint at La Madeleine: Michelin maps show a 'goer' – no way, you'll wreck your suspension.) At St-Palais you're in Basque terrain: the clues are whitewashed houses with red shutters, signs for *gâteau Basque*, *pelota* courts and men wearing their traditional berets. 'Amaizingly', maize seems to grow in every field; chuckle, too, at the odd palm tree – courtesy of the Gulf Stream.

Head south-west on the D933 and you'll see one of the area's many signs with the shell of St-Jacques; in centuries past pilgrims came this way on their way to Santiago de Compostela in Spain. Accept the sign's invitation to visit the 12th-century church of St-Nicolas at Harnbeltz (D2: **Harnbels** on the map). Drive up the wooded valley, past gorse and heather, to the minute chapel maintained by the local community and not by the state, the norm in France. The decrepit exterior hides an extravagantly decorated interior (ask for key at farm).

St-Jean-Pied-de-Port (west of D2) is a busy place. This is where the numerous pilgrimage routes converged; today, most visitors seem to come from the opposite direction, as the majority are Spanish. The cobbled lanes of the old town, the *maisons médiévales*, the houses with their balconies overlooking the River Nive, the citadel designed by the wily Vauban: all combine to please. If you want to see St-Jean sitting down take the motorised train. (Monday is market day.)

In the past I've driven both the D18 east from St-Jean to the **Col Bagargui** (D3) and the D417 to **Ahusquy** (D3). Some years ago, for the first time, I drove the D301 south from **St-Jean** (west of D2), alongside the Nive, crossing on to map 42 just north of the **Forêt d'Iraty** (D3). What an electrifying drive the mountain road proved to be.

Initially, the D301 runs through the wooded Nive Valley with verdant fields and caramel-hued cattle. You pass signs inviting you to buy *brebis* cheese and *foie gras*. Soon the road becomes steep and there's many a sharp hairpin. I found the D301 reminiscent of the Lake District's Hard Knott Pass and the scenic aspects are similar to many a vista in Cumbria. The road climbs to over 1100 metres and there's a never-ending panorama to the north – one which seems to unfold, scene by scene, as you climb higher. The contrasts are startling: woods, barren peaks, gorse and heather, emerald pastures, bracken and ferns, and flocks of sheep (some with bells). You'll see rock faces, birds of prey, horses grazing freely and *Ardi Gasna* (*brebis*: ewe) cheese for sale at remote farms. Another gilt-edged bonus: you'll have the road to yourself.

That's not all though. The D301 forms a junction with the D18/D19 near the Chalet Pedro (D3); study the board which details six walks in the area. (One walk, using the GR10, takes you to the top of the Sommet d'Occabe at 1456 m.) Now drive south into the heart of one of France's most noble beech forests, the Forêt d'Iraty, at an altitude of between 1000 and 1300 m. In October the trees are a heart-stopping sight; the autumn shades are gargantuan sheets of smouldering colour. Walks abound; there's a café at the Chalet Pedro (you can also buy *brebis* cheese, mountain ham, *confits* and *gâteau Basque*); and a couple of idyllic picnic spots at two lakes – one at the junction, the second as you climb the 1327 metre-high Col Bagargui. As you ascend the western slopes, through beech woods, look out for ponies, roaming freely.

If you use the easier D18 from St-Jean, don't bypass the huge Chapelle St-Sauveur (D3). There are numerous chalets on the climb of the Col Bagargui; many can be rented (details from the local tourist offices). If you want a further dose of a road to yourself then follow the small brown signpost at the col announcing '10 km Ahusquy'. The track is stone based and is adequate enough. The views north are more akin to looking down on a relief map. **Ahusquy** (D3), another pretty spot, is at a lower altitude but is peaceful, pastoral and, scenically, richly eye-pleasing. Here you are at the centre of a large circle of country called the Pays de Soule – from **Mauléon-Licharre** (E2), the capital, south to the Spanish border. The eastern descent of the Col Bagargui is long and steep; the best views are from a point just east of the summit.

The map highlights two natural landmarks: the Crevasses d'Holcarté (D3) and the **Gorges de Kakouetta** (E3). Both are 200 metre-deep, narrow slashes in the limestone cliffs, carved out by water over millions of years. Both involve long hikes. Kakouetta is more accessible (in places the *crevasse* is just a few metres wide) and there's a car park on the D113. Note, too, the tiny emerald pool just below the start of the walk and, to the east, the Romanesque chapel at Senta.

Two further high cols are beyond Senta: the Col de Suscousse (1216 m), at the head of a wooded valley; and the Col de Soudet at the junction of the D113 and D132 (E3). The latter is 1540 metres high. Continue up the dead-end road to the

ski resort of **Arette-Pierre-St-Martin** (1640 m), out of season a ghostly white lunar landscape under the cone peak of Pic d'Anie. The views north are sensational.

Similar views can be seen from the road between the Pas de Guilhers and the Col de Labays (E3) – the terrain which provides such a memorable vista from the D347 (south-west of **Barcus**: E2). At the Col de Labays strike out east again, through the dense **Forêt d'Issaux** (E3) – another vast, mainly beech and fir forest. The road is narrow and, at Osse-en-Aspe (F3), the church acts as a road island.

Now we are in the Vallée d'Aspe (F3/F4). Make your first port of call the tourist office on the west side of the **N134**, south of **Bedous** (F3). Some of the best Béarn *pays* is in the high mountains straddling the **Gave d'Aspe** (F3/F4). For the sporting enthusiast there's rock climbing, hang-gliding, white-water rafting and mountain biking. For the more relaxed among us there are endless opportunities for solitary walking. From April to June the high altitude meadows are a wonderland of wild flowers. For example, drive up to **Lescun** (F4), ringed to the west and south by a *cirque* of peaks. Drive the roads as far as they go, park, and then set off on foot: for example the Labadie Valley.

Alternatively, drive to the historic **Col du Somport** (1632 m) with its invigorating mountain and valley views (F4). Try two walks: the easier one, from a point 300 m below the summit, heads west alongside the frontier. The longer hike starts three km below the col; park at the Chalet Cadier and head north on the marked walk; at the point just north of the 2034m peak the mountainside is known as the Plateau de la Gentiane – renowned in late Spring for just that!

Simpler pleasures are the two Pyrénées bears, Antoine and Segolene, which can be seen at Borce (F4: open every day summer; weekend only mid Sept to mid June). At nearby **Etsaut** (F4) there's a *maison du parc* for the Parc National des Pyrénées; call for information about the park's famed flora and fauna. Further north detour west to the *ecomusée*, the Maison de Lourdios, at **Lourdios-Ichère** (E3) – an exhibition which evokes the life of a village in a remote Pyrénées valley.

What else is there to see on map 42? I'll detail some man-made sites. As you travel north up the Vallée d'Aspe stop awhile at **Sarrance** (F3); a medieval *église*, cloisters and *musée* are the magnets here. **Oloron-Ste-Marie** (F2) has a rich treasure in the shape of the Eglise Ste-Marie, built in the 13th century; the west door is a stunning sight with its intricate stone carvings. See, too, the nearby Musée du Haut Béarn. Remote **L'Hôpital-St-Blaise** (E2), in the Pays Basque, is the home of a tiny 12th-century Romanesque/Byzantine *église*. **Navarrenx** (E1), on a great site above the Gave d'Oloron, is a medieval *bastide* with solid and formidable ramparts. **Laàs** has an ivy-covered, 17th-century château, more like a small manor house with a lived-in feel (open a.m. and p.m. Apl to Oct – but not Tues). Finally, busy **Pau** (east of F1): its château, Musée des Beaux-Arts and the incomparable vistas south from the Boulevard des Pyrénées.

Anything else? Yes, there are no end of attractions both to the east and west of map 42 – but that's another story.