



Forgive me if I devote most of this chapter to the bottom half of map 43. Here you'll enjoy exhilarating mountain terrain which, for the most part, tourists seem to ignore.

The small map to the left covers most of the Ariège *département*, literally a cross-section of the **Pyrénées** at their best. As you approach from the north the initial landscape is one of gentle, 'duvet' hills, rising to higher peaks, mainly wooded, and cut by valleys famed for caves and castles. Further south, on the Spanish border, there are many stark, lofty peaks, some rising to near or over 10,000 feet.

I'll start right at the heart of the high mountains, in the Pays du Haut Couserans – near **Oust** (B3). New roads from **St-Girons** (B2) make access to the Salat Valley easy. At **Seix** (south of Oust), on my last autumn visit, and after weeks of heavy rain, the river was fuming and foaming; the village has a *château*, large *place* and a church with an ornate four-bell bell-tower. As I headed upstream the river laid on a stupendous show – with white water catching the eye and, here and there, turquoise pools providing restful contrasts. Wild buddleia, with their mauve spikes, seemed to be everywhere (butterflies must love them) and broadleaved trees made a refreshing backdrop.

Continue south to **Salau** (B4). In the summer the river is a hospitable friend; in late October and early November the Salat can be a murderous, bludgeoning enemy. Many times over the centuries torrential rain, falling over several days, has siphoned into the three mighty *cirques* to the south and then comes roaring down the valley, flattening parts of the village and killing inhabitants. The last inundation was on 7/8 November 1982 when parts of the church were washed away. The nave and apse of the small 12th-century Templars' *église* were still being rebuilt 10 years later. In the village (from the first house beyond the church but on the east bank) buy a fascinating booklet, *Huit siècles d'histoire à Salau*, which tells the story of the indefatigable village.

At the far end of Salau park at Anita and Marc Van Oest's Hôtel Les Myrtilles. Tell them you're doing so. Now follow the signposted path from the side of the hotel to the Cirque d'Anglade (1115 m). In spring a one-hour walk will take you to a marvellous display of wild flowers; a two-hour hike will reward you with a breathtaking show. On your return I'm sure you'll want to rest awhile in their café.

There's much more to come. Now head west to one of France's greatest dead-end roads, the **Col de Pause** (B4). I'll be frank and say now that the last few km to the col (you're forbidden to drive beyond the pass) are very rough and require very slow, very careful driving. At the 1527 metre-high col summit you've entered the lofty and remote Réserve du Massif du Valier – truly a rich kingdom for flora and fauna, one that is renowned for birds of prey and *izards* (cousins of the *chamois*). Needless to say, in June, the wild flowers are stunning.

If you prefer not to drive the last steep few km then at least climb as far as the Bergerie de Capvert (1100 m) where the tarmac is still smooth. Danièle and Gilbert

Gilles will give you a friendly welcome. Buy cheese, *charcuterie*, jams, honey, milk and other *produits fermier*. Better still, ring 24 hours ahead (tel 05 61 96 55 02) and order a picnic: then walk to your heart's content in any part of the regal Salat Valley.

Another mouthwatering 'shop' is the easy-to-find Confiture Artisanale des Pyrénées of Daniel and Anne-Marie Boudet. The modern building is near the Elf garage, on the D3, just north of **Oust** (B3). The range of home-made *confitures* and *gelées* is saliva-stirring; I spent months tucking into the various bottles we bought. (Other produce also available.)

The high peaks surrounding **Aulus-les-Bains** (C4) are another strong magnet. The small spa (780 m) is in a wooded, *cirque*-like valley. Old-world hotels sit side by side with modern thermal baths, behind which is a newly-created park. There are numerous walks and several excellent notice boards in the valley give details of just where they go and how long they take. The spectacular Cascade d'Arse (Arse on map), the Etang du Garbet and, higher still, the Etang Bleu are recommended. In late spring, at altitude, wild flowers are profuse.

Aulus can be approached from four directions. The Vallée du Garbet, to the north-west, is the easiest: wooded, extensively cultivated and with numerous dwellings. The Vallée d'Ustou, to the west, is more rewarding scenically. The ascent from Ustou (B4) provides attractive views of the wooded valleys climbing south towards Spain. Use the new D68 road, built for skiers, which climbs to **Guzet-Neige** (B4) and continue south, ascending on the not-too-rough road towards the Col d'Escots. At the gate two km from Guzet stop and take in the vista of the Garbet Valley far below you. Vast views abound in all directions.

A third approach is from **Massat** (C3), south along the D18 and climbing a wooded valley. Just below the Col d'Agnes, 1630 m on the sign, there's the small Etang de Lers which looks for all the world like a Lakeland tarn; the rocky cradle of mountains has a touch of Cumbria too. From the col there's a panorama to the south of a long line of bare-topped high peaks with several 'bowls' gouged out below the summits. The tree-line starts at about 5000 ft and, in summer, there are no signs of snow. The fourth access is from **Vicdessos** (C4); this steep, wooded ascent climbs the Port de Lers pass, east of the *étang*.

The valleys south of Vicdessos and Auzat (C4) lead you to another high-altitude world of flora and fauna among the mountains and mostly man-made *étangs*. There's also plenty to keep outdoor enthusiasts busy: riding, canoeing and hang-gliding as examples. Contact the Maison du Tourisme at 09220 Auzat for details (tel 05 61 64 87 53).

Before heading east I'll detail some of the country to both the west and in the centre of map 43. I'll begin at **Massat** (C3) where the valley is especially pleasing with wooded domes and high ridges. The village *église* is an austere 15th-century building. One scenic aspect is all too obvious in the terrain to the north: the hills

are almost exclusively wooded. One road, the D17, east and west of Burret (C3), is tagged the Route Verte. The route is just that, wooded every inch of the way.

Spend some time north-east of Massat. Use the D618 east and then the steep lane that connects the Col des Caougnous and Col de Péguère. Don't make the short, sharp climb to the Tour Laffont (Laffon on map): trees have outgrown the tower ruins and obliterate the views. At the Col de Péguère the acoustics are unusually entertaining: still air allows distant sounds of cockerels, birds and cow and sheep bells to be heard distinctly. Enjoy the 360-degree views from the high roads and from the 1485 m **Sommet de Portel** (C3), a short hike from the D72.

Be certain not to miss two sites on 43: the 12th-century cathedral at **St-Lizier** (B2), north-of St-Girons, with octagonal bell-tower, frescoes, fine woodwork and impressive two-tier cloisters; and the Grotte du **Mas-d'Azil** (C2) where a river has carved out a vast tunnel – and also formed prehistoric galleries where man lived tens of thousands of years ago (there's also an excellent *musée* at the site).

Now head eastwards. **Foix** (D3) sits below a medieval fortress with three different-shaped towers. North and south of the town are more underground attractions. To the north-west is the subterranean river at **Labouiche**: 60 m below ground the river is navigable by boat for 1500m of its six km length. To the south of **Tarascon-sur-Ariège** (D4) is the massive Grotte de Niaux, famous for cave drawings of bison, horses, deer and goats. Around the corner, in the **Ariège** Valley and near the thermal spa of **Ussat-les-Bains** (D4: with handsome old-fashioned *thermes*), is the Grotte de Lombrives, Europe's largest; access is by a small train which takes you through a succession of galleries and halls with stalactite formations.

There's plenty to see east of Foix. Use the D9 which provides pretty views south-west and leads to **Roquefixade** (D3); there's an arduous hike to the ruins of the Cathar castle high above the village. Climb the Col de **Montségur** (E3) and park below the east side of the pass. You're faced with a lung-testing 30-minute walk to the ruins of the Cathars' last stronghold. I shall write about the Cathars and **Montailou** (E4) in map chapter 44. (Both the ruins and archaeological *musée* in Montségur are closed from Dec to Feb.)

East of Montségur Nature offers two super contributions: the Fontaine de Fontestorbes – a resurgent source, intermittent in nature, where 1,800 litres of water a second can flow from the cave. The **Gorges de la Frau** (E4), an ever-narrowing valley, is a mix of dense broadleaved woods and a striking mix of rock shapes.

What else? The bustling spa of **Ax-les-Thermes** (E4), where hot water bubbles out of the ground into baths once used by Romans. To the southeast, in the Vallée d'Orlu (two km past the Forge), is the start of the Réserve Nationale d'Orlu, a wildlife paradise particularly reputed for *izards*. **Mirepoix** (E2) is a *citée médiévale* with a 15th-century cathedral (and largest nave in France) and exceptional 12th-century timbered arcades under half-timbered (*colombages*) houses.