



Vercors

However much time I spend in the majestic, mysterious Vercors I always leave reluctantly; the mountainous enclave, so steeped in 20th-century history, is a part of France I love more than any other.

Yet, for every motorist who detours to the Vercors, many thousands of others, rushing south in their cars on the A7 autoroute towards the Mediterranean sun, turn their backs on the distant, shimmering mountain range to the east of the Rhône Valley. Please don't make the same mistake because the magical *massif* merits the time of every visitor to France – a natural fortress, and a landscape both ferocious and spectacular and seductively calm and rejuvenating. Go: I implore you – and make the detour soon.

The Vercors is a triangular limestone mass of mountains – 40 miles long by 25 miles wide at its base - with eroded, rampart-like peaks (the highest, Grand Veymont and Mont Aiguille, rise to nearly 8,000ft) and isolated from the French Alps by three rivers which all but encircle the *massif*: the Isère, with a 90-degree loop to the north; the Drac – much of it a man-made lake – to the east; and the Drôme to the south.

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, 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 Resistance citadel during the Second World War and, in the decades since, such a legend: I'll tell you more of that stirring story later.

Perhaps the most exciting entrance to the scenic mountain fortress is from Die in the Drôme Valley. North of the town the Col de Rousset is a memorable climb of numerous hairpin bends. The ascent is one of the great hill climbs in the Alps; the view south from the old tunnel entrance at the summit is dramatic and extensive. To the south is a typically Provencal view; when you exit the new tunnel at its northern end the landscape is an alpine one.

A second exhilarating access, frightening for some, is the engineering marvel which snakes up from St-Jean-en-Royans on the west side of the Combe Laval, a vast rocky amphitheatre, to the col de la Machine; the final stretch is a series of tunnels gouged out of the vertical mountain face.

A third entry route is a good deal easier: the Col de la Bataille provides access from Valence – views from the pass summit, north and south, should not be passed-by under any account; be sure to stop.

A fourth breathtaking entrance starts in the Isère valley at the top of the limestone

triangle, from Veurey-Voroize, near the A48. Climb to La Buffe and, just before the Tunnel du Mortier, admire the views below and ahead of you. Detour south to the grassy plateau at La Molière for extensive views east to the Chamrousse (beyond Grenoble). A little further north is the Gouffre Berger, the most dangerous and deepest pot-hole in France.

Another access is the least well-known but offers many rewarding scenic benefits. Start at St-Gervais, on the north-western flanks of the Vercors. Just before the bridge over the Drévenne you'll catch sight of a majestic 50-metre-long waterfall high above you, where the river plunges over the black rock cliffs of the western escarpment. Park your car before the bridge and walk 200 metres to the bottom of the fall.

At the top of the climb the road passes through a one-way tunnel; at the exit don't turn right – continue the one-way loop to the left. The road hugs the rock face; stop and peep over the edge! Complete the circle and return to the tunnel exit; now turn right. Park in 50 metres for more exhilarating views of waterfalls, above and below you, in the Canyon des Ecouges.

I know some of you have yet to visit the Vercors because so many of the access roads are difficult, tortuous climbs. If you want to make the ascent as easy as possible then use the D531 which climbs from Sassenage, north-west of Grenoble, into the heart of the *massif*. This entry is not demanding.

Tragically, it was in the Vercors that the most emotional saga of the French Resistance unfolded over 50 years ago – during the 1944 summer.

Two days after the D-Day landings on 6 June 1944, the tricolour flew on numerous flag-poles in the *massif*. One of the proud flags fluttered above St-Nizier-du-Moucherotte, atop the rock needles called Les Trois Pucelles and in full view of Grenoble 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 dreaded French Vichy *miliciens* were also involved.

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 the end of 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. *Mort pour la France* say the carved words on the proud monuments: are there any finer for an epitaph?

Your first essential call should be at the newly-built Mémorial de la Résistance on the 4,384ft-high Col de la Chau, north-west of Vassieux-en-Vercors (open every day except from 13 November to 23 December). The austere, bleak, modern

building (rightly so in my opinion) – a huge, elongated concrete pillbox with its foundations and galleries dug deep into the mountainside – overlooks the Vassieux plateau. Below you is the *maquis*-constructed airfield which brought so much calamity to the area in July 1944; and also both the poignant Resistance cemetery and the heroic village of Vassieux which saw so much tragedy during that fateful summer.

The chilling memorial is, in reality, a museum where dramatic audiovisual presentations (headphones provide an English translation), in a series of windowless caverns, relate the events of March 1941 to August 1944. Brief it all is (an hour) and much of the story remains untold. I suggest you borrow a copy of Michael Pearson's *Tears of Glory* (shame on Pan for letting the masterpiece go out of print); badger your library to locate one. The paperback fills in all the missing details.

Other Resistance sites must not be missed either. The cemetery at St-Nizier (Les Trois Pucelles are to the south); the national cemetery at Vassieux and the village's evocative museum; and the most poignant of all the monuments at the entrance to the Grotte de la Luire, south of La Chapelle-en-Vercors, 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.*

Be sure, too, to make the climb from the walnut orchards (you'll have plenty of opportunities to buy them from farms beside the N532, for crackingly-good prices to boot) around Cognin-les-Gorges, on the Vercors north-western flanks, through the Gorges du Nan, to Malleval. The ascent is spectacular: a narrow road winds through beech woods and tunnels, past waterfalls and high multi-hued rock faces to the upland surrounding Malleval – where the only sound is a distant hum of running water.

Outside the hamlet, on a grassy bank dappled with orchids and wild flowers, is a monument to the *maquisards* and villagers who lost their lives here on 29 January 1944 during a German attack (eight of the dead were civilians burned alive by the Wehrmacht troops); others died in August the same year. Malleval was put to the torch. Few come this way; you will have the unsung, unspoilt terrain to yourself and plenty of time to ponder on times past. Instead of returning the way you came, continue south on the D31 to Presles and then descend to the Bourne Valley on the D292. The road is narrow, the views south and east utterly heart-stopping. Stop often and relish the vistas.

Finally, I implore you to travel the narrow D215C/D221 roads from Villard-de-Lans south-west through dense pine forests to St-Martin-en-Vercors. Stop at as many of the wayside memorials as you can; a series of battles were fought along these roads on 22/23 July 1944 as the *maquisards* retreated in the face of overwhelming German attacks. Don't rush by Valchevrière; the hamlet has been

left in its ruined state – destroyed by a massive mortar barrage on 23 July. Descend to the hamlet (the road is not rough), park and walk through the ruins to the rebuilt chapel; and sign the visitor's book alongside the altar. This is a spot where quiet contemplation is needed before you depart its heavy hand of melancholy.

During the last days of July numerous villages and hamlets – among them La Chapelle, Vassieux and tiny St-Julien-en-Vercors – were put to the torch and many inhabitants butchered. All the villages have been rebuilt – but not Valchevière, an emotional reminder of events which took place less than a lifetime ago. Maps show the location of both the ruined site and the tiny chapel, the only undamaged building (see the last paragraph).

La Chapelle-en-Vercors was particularly devastated. Last year, in June 1998, I was fortunate enough to be at La Chapelle during the weekend when the villagers “celebrated” (their word, not mine) the 50th anniversary of the start of the reconstruction of their village. There was little sadness in the air, rather a happy sense of thankfulness that 50 years of peace had been their reward. The old photographs showing the horrendous destruction, almost every house in ruins, brought one down-to-earth.

Within the *massif* man-made and natural marvels combine to amaze. One is the astonishing Grands Goulets where the tiny, but powerful Vernaison punches through a rocky barrier. Somehow, 150 years ago, father and son Joubert built a leech-like road beside the torrential stream which hurtles ferociously down the narrow ravine. Equally unusual is the road that hugs the floor of the Gorges de la Bourne at its eastern end; steep cliffs overhang the claustrophobic tarmac ribbon. (The Grottes de Chorance in the gorge are noted for rare pencil-thin stalactites.) Both roads lead to Pont-en-Royans; be sure to see the colourful tall houses beside the Bourne; be sure, too, to taste the tiny *ravioles de Royans* – on most menus in the Vercors.

At the heart of the *massif* is the Réserve Naturelle des Hauts Plateaux du Vercors – at over 40,000 acres the largest in France and most of which is over 5,000ft above sea-level. One access road to the flora and fauna paradise is the metalled *route forestière* (RF on maps) which starts from the D518 two km south of the Grotte de la Luire.

Drive steeply eastwards on an adventure ascent where, in parts, the views north are akin to being in an aeroplane. At the *maison forestière* (MF on maps) park and access the reserve on foot; the line of dots on Michelin maps shows the boundaries. Alternatively you can turn sharp left and continue north and east on the RF (the only road which crosses the park). At a spot almost 5,000ft high, just under the word “Fourmilière” on the map, you have a stunning view of the eastern Vercors wall, with Grand Veymont to the immediate east. I suggest you park and

soak in the tranquility. In May and June there's a richly-rewarding bonus underfoot: wild flowers and orchids galore. I've seen endless gentians, wood anemones, various orchids, lily of the valley and Solomon's seal – and I have colourful photographs to prove it. Continue north and west, descending to the D518 at Les Brunets.

The outer rim of the *massif* has many a natural splendour. For example the Gorges d'Ombly (north-east of Crest), a dead-end with cascades and solitude as rewards. An even more spectacular dead-end is the D224 which takes you into the heart of a superb *cirque* – east of Die. Here the Cirque d'Archiane is a stunning sight: an amphitheatre of massive rock faces rears high above the valley. One mystery: who trims the box hedges on the approach roads? On your way up to the *cirque* you'll notice, on your left, a fish farm; this is renowned for both its trout and *omble chevalier* – both appear on many a restaurant menu in the mountains of Savoie.

The best sight of all though is on the descent of the Col de Menée, east of the *cirque*. Ahead is the hypnotic, tilted, table-top mass of Mont Aiguille, one of the most startling sights in France. Seen from the north – in the heart-stopping terrain around Gresse-en-Vercors with wooded hills, unspoilt villages, gorges, views, streams and cols (used regularly on the Monte-Carlo Rally) – the alternative northern aspect of Mont Aiguille looms menacingly above you, a giant vertical orange and cream chisel head rising into the sky, a fitting natural memorial to the redoubtable Vercors *maquis*.

Where to eat and stay

Further details for the establishments listed below, and others, can be found in *French Leave Finesse*.

Au Sans Souci: St-Paul-lès-Monestier, 38650 Monestier-de-Clermont. Simple hotel. Quiet. Pool. Tennis. Gardens. 4th-generation owners, Frédéric and Michelle Maurice, do a sterling job. Classical/regional fare.

Le Chalet: 38650 Gresse-en-Vercors. Comfortable hotel. Pool. Gardens. Tennis. Tremendous site under the high eastern wall of the Vercors. Prayer family – mum, dad and son – are super owners. Neo-classical/regional treats.

La Petite Auberge: 26150 Die. Comfortable restaurant with rooms. Gardens. Classical pleasures from Patrick Montero; warm welcome from wife Maryse and dad Gaston. Super standard sweets.

Bellier: 26420 La Chapelle-en-Vercors. Quiet, comfortable chalet-style hotel. Pool. Gardens. Now run by younger members of renowned Bellier family. Cooking, of regional and classical dishes, is adequate only these days.

Hôtel du Col de la Machine: 26190 St-Jean-en-Royans. Modest *logis*, remarkable site and views, pool, seclusion and marvellous 5th and 6th generation owners, the Farvellon family. Regional grub.

Savoyet-Serve: 38160 St-Marcellin. Comfortable multi-floored modern hotel. Lift. Air-conditioned dining room. Classical dishes in Serve's family restaurant. More style? Try nearby La Tivollière, a château restaurant run by the same family; transport laid on if needed.