

**WIN!**  
Three bottles  
of wine

**OUT AND ABOUT IN CAHORS**  
WANDER THROUGH THE CAPITAL OF LOT

**ICONS UNCOVERED**  
THE HISTORY OF THE CITROËN 2CV

# FRANCE

TRAVEL | FOOD & WINE | CULTURE | HISTORY

September 2017 | Issue 228

## ROAD TRIP

Head for the hills in  
the Hautes-Pyrénées

**TAKE A GOLF SAFARI**

along the Atlantic coast

### WINE

- Where to stay
- Champagne by train
- Find a wine festival
- Enjoy muscat

*Green and  
pleasant*

Beautiful Jura uncovered

### URBAN ESCAPES

EXPLORE THE ART DECO  
SPLENDOURS OF PERPIGNAN

### COOK A CLASSIC

PERFECT PROVENÇAL PANISSES:  
A CÔTE D'AZUR FAVOURITE

Britain and North America's  
best-selling magazine about France



9 770958 821033

0 9  
£3.99



# The hidden gems of JURA

Love the mountains in summer, but want to escape the crowds? Look east to find outdoor escapism at its best, says **Sophie Gardner-Roberts**

The Plus Beau Village of Baume-les-Messieurs

When thinking of French mountain ranges, you may conjure up images of the towering summits and mysterious valleys of the Alps, the jagged peaks of the Pyrénées or the ancient volcanic domes of the Massif Central.

Less familiar are the Jura Mountains, a natural eastern border between France and Switzerland. Here lies a fascinating mountain range, a sort of offshoot of the Alps, with lower summits but breathtaking landscapes. The land is dotted with blue lakes, small villages and historical forts. Peaks rise dramatically, creating bucolic valleys, while the earth is

carved from within by cave networks. It is home to cattle-farming folk who have preserved a heritage of agriculture and artisanal production in the high pastures.

You will find ever-changing scenery that brings a surprise at every turn of the twisting mountain roads. You will cross the paths of cyclists, walkers and bikers, and perhaps the occasional herd of cows. You will eat your way through hearty cuisine and traditionally made cheeses, whose recipes remain a well-kept secret. You may even discover the truth behind the legendary absinthe spirit.

These were just some of my experiences on a packed tour of the

Montagnes du Jura, where I was charmed by the natural beauty of the area and the treasures it held, hidden from the well-trodden path of summer tourism in the French mountains.

The Jura Mountains are a defined holiday area that covers the Haut-Jura regional park and three *départements*: Doubs and Jura in Bourgogne-Franche-Comté and Ain in Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes. It is a natural playground for active travellers who love to hike, cycle, swim, paddle or climb.

As the Jura range is relatively modest in height, climbing and other rock activities such as *via ferrata* are very

popular, combining the adrenalin rush of the mountains at a lower altitude. One such *via ferrata* scrambling route is located on the southern edge of the regional park, right by the border with Switzerland.

## Thrilling ascent

Just outside Bellegarde-sur-Valserine perches Fort l'Écluse, an old fortified bastion overlooking the River Rhône. I was peering up at it, pleasantly taking in the scenery, when Étienne, our guide from Rock'n Jump Adventure, pointed at the upper fort some 200 metres above and said: "That's where we're going."

"Sure we are," my brother and I laughed, thinking it was a joke. It was not. Trying to ignore the jolt of fear in our stomachs, we began the ascent in the sweltering heat, Étienne leading the way.

Little metal footholds were bolted into the cliff, providing firm grips and steps for our hands and feet as we climbed at a steady pace. Suddenly, Étienne stopped and hooked his safety line on to one of the rigid staples sticking out of the rock and sat comfortably into his harness.

"Enjoy the view!" he grinned. Doing the same, we turned away from the cliff to take in the jaw-dropping panorama. The Rhône glinted pale blue down below,

while forest-covered mountains rose on either side of us. It was spectacular. We carried on, gaining confidence with every step, stopping occasionally to drink water and enjoy the views. It was a physically tiring yet thrilling ascent. We reached the base of the upper fort relatively quickly, feeling hot and bothered, but happy and giddy from excitement.

Those who are not keen on vertical ascents will find plenty of gentler activities. I enjoyed a pleasant walk through the wooded landscapes of the Pertes de la Valserine in Bellegarde. A path follows the River Valserine before the waters pour into impressive canyons ➡

PHOTOGRAPH: MICHEL JOLY/BOURGOGNE-FRANCHE-COMTÉ TOURISME



that have been shaped by erosion. It makes a perfect picnic spot and is a great place to slow down and enjoy the surrounding nature.

The summer heat was intense, so, later in the trip, I was relieved to stop in Saint-Point-Lac, a charming *commune* on the banks of Lac Saint-Point, France's third-largest natural lake. After a lengthy swim, I watched people pass by the small beach in kayaks and canoes, while sails from boats further out flashed white. The lake reflected the vivid blue of the sky, edged by dark forests. Hotels and villages clustered on the banks but all was quiet, except for the soft splashes of water from swimmers and paddles.

### Spectacular setting

The area's beauty is not limited to nature. The *Plus Beau Village* of Baume-les-Messieurs is nestled deep in a lush valley and encased by the spectacular Cirque de Baume; its abbey and quaint houses are as charming as can be.

The abbey was founded in the 9th century and it was from here that, in 910, Bernon set out to become the first Abbot of Cluny. The next 1,000 years saw the abbey swing between decline and regeneration, with its peak being reached in the 16th and 17th centuries. The architecture reflects the different periods and features a beautiful medieval sculpted doorway.

I happened to be there on a legislative election day and the village square was busy, but overall, the village appears frozen in time, with old stone houses, lined with brightly coloured roses, in quiet cobbled streets.

Another testimony to times past is the Château de Joux, perched precariously on a high cliff overlooking the village of La Cluse-et-Mijoux. The drive up winding roads is worthwhile for the panoramic views. The fort itself is bare inside, although it has an interesting history as a state prison, with famous inmates including revolutionary leader Count Mirabeau and Toussaint L'Ouverture, who led a slave revolt in Haiti.

I revelled in exploring the outdoors, but also had the chance to discover the region's underground treasures. The caves of Baume-les-Messieurs are tucked away

in a *reculée*, a geological term designating a narrow but deep valley that ends in a natural cul-de-sac.

Access to the caves is by a metal staircase hugging the cliff, as the entrance is not level with the ground. The guided tour lasts about an hour and takes visitors through a network of galleries emerging into large, cavernous 'rooms'. Some sections are very low and narrow, so you have to bend over to complete the visit, although our young guide, Pierre, was very accommodating with all the visitors.

The cave was discovered in 1610 and explored properly from 1893-1895 by Alfred Martel, considered the founder of modern speleology. It boasts impressive formations and a jittery resident bat population, but the simplicity of the installations – metal steps and clever lighting – allowed us to take in fully the grandeur of the caves and its ancient fault lines.

In a different style, the Grottes du Cerdon, in Ain, are perhaps more

impressive as they contain spectacular stalagmite and stalactite formations, including a 'cascade' which looks as if the running water had frozen instantly. Visitors can take a guided tour, or go it alone with the help of a waterproof booklet inviting stops at certain points to read the explanations. The visitors' centre has plenty of amenities and holds educational workshops where children learn about archaeology, pottery and even archery.

### Cheese galore

Once you have burned all those calories climbing mountains, diving in lakes and exploring the underworld, you will be pleased to know that the local cuisine consists mainly of delicious cheeses.

The region's claim to fame, Comté, has a fascinating background. The first records of production date from the Middle Ages, when farmers pooled resources, particularly milk, to have enough food for the winter. The amount of milk they collected enabled them to

ABOVE: The River Valserine in full flow near Bellegarde; LEFT, FROM TOP: The Château de Joux; Sophie nears the end of her *via ferrata* climb

make large wheels of cheese. Comté is still produced in the same collaborative way, using milk from several farms to make each wheel; you need 400 litres to make a 35-40-kilogram Comté cheese.

Perhaps the best place to understand the process is Fort Saint-Antoine. The 19th-century building lies partially underground (beneath six to eight metres of earth) and was barely used for its intended military purpose. Marcel Petite, a successful Comté producer from nearby Pontarlier, recognised the fort's potential – with its constant temperature of around 8°C and 80-90 per cent humidity – as the ideal place to age his cheeses, and took over the premises in 1966. Today, 100,000 wheels of Comté age slowly in every nook and cranny.

You get to taste one of Marcel Petite's most popular cheeses, a creamy 12-month-old Comté, during the guided visit. The highlight is the large Cour d'Honneur, which shelters thousands of Comté wheels, all neatly aligned on wooden shelves. A strong smell of ammonia, secreted naturally by the aging cheeses, catches you by surprise but you get used to it.

Employees, we are told, think it makes them rather euphoric.

The Jura Mountains are home to several cheese AOCs: Comté (since 1958), Mont d'Or, Morbier and the less-well-known Bleu de Gex. The latter is a creamy blue cheese which is only made in four *appellations*. One of them, La Fromagerie de l'Abbaye in Chézery, is open to the public. Thanks to a raised platform with glass walls, visitors can watch the cheese makers at work. Milk comes from Montbéliarde cows, which graze high up in the mountains, eating flowers that give the cheese a peppery taste. It is aged for a minimum of three weeks and holes are poked through the top to let the air reach the centre and allow fermentation.

It was strangely mesmerising to watch the workers plop the lumps of milk into buckets and place plastic letters on the soft cheese so that GEX is engraved in the crust once the cheese has aged enough.

One of the more mysterious products of the Jura mountains is absinthe, the once-illicit, highly alcoholic 'green fairy' notorious for pushing artists to madness. The spirit was invented in Switzerland but mass-produced in Pontarlier

in the 19th century because of high Swiss taxes. The drink became hugely popular from around 1830 after French troops, having used absinthe to purify water in the colonies, returned home and introduced it to the public.

By 1900, the golden age of cabarets, French can-can and artists' parties, Pontarlier had 25 distilleries and 111 bistros serving the aperitif. Consumption was so high that people were falling ill, even becoming blind. At the outbreak of World War I, the wine industry and political lobbies fought to get rid of the drink. In March 1915, absinthe was banned in France and the myth grew up about the spirit's lethal qualities.

Another age started, that of illegal absinthe production and clandestine consumption. Producers in Switzerland made absinthe, under names such as '*lait de vache*' or '*lait de tigre*', until 2005 when the ban was lifted. The French had to ➡

### DID YOU KNOW?

You can recognise a good Comté by a colour-coded band, stuck on to the crust: brown means it scored 12-13/20, green 15-20/20.

### DID YOU KNOW?

Bleu de Gex was the favourite cheese of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (1500-1558).



wait until 2011 for absinthe to be legalised, but the drink retains some of its mystique and sense of danger.


Today, absinthe is celebrated as part of the local heritage and a symbol of Franco-Swiss collaboration. The *Route de l'Absinthe* crosses the border from Pontarlier to the Val-de-Travers, the heart of absinthe country. The Distillerie Les Fils d'Émile Pernot, the most important producer in the early 1900s, still stands today in La Cluse-et-Mijoux. You can visit the distillery for free and buy some of its iconic bottles; the family-run business has revived the art-deco labels, producing some beautiful designs from the golden age of absinthe.

Tasting the local produce is as much an exploration of the Jura Mountains as



**ABOVE:** Classic absinthe labels at the Distillerie Les Fils d'Émile Pernot in Pontarlier

climbing the peaks or wandering around the villages. If, like me, you do not ski but love the mountains, you will find happiness in the forests, lakes and valleys. I share my experiences with some

hesitation, as although I would love you to discover this underrated area of France, part of me also hopes to preserve its authenticity by keeping its right to remain one of *l'Hexagone's* best-kept secrets. 

## Francofile

*Enjoy the outdoor life in the Jura Mountains*

### GETTING THERE

**By rail:** Sophie travelled with Voyages-SNCF. The journey from London to Pontarlier via Paris and then on to Frasne takes about 8hr (tel: 0844 848 5848, voyages-sncf.com). Car hire is available from Pontarlier with Europcar (europcar.co.uk). See page 25 for other travel information.

### WHERE TO STAY

Sophie stayed at: **L'Ecrin du Lac**  
2 Route de Malpas  
25160 Saint-Point-Lac  
Tel: (Fr) 3 81 69 67 47  
l-ecrin-du-lac.fr  
Comfortable family-run B&B housed in a renovated farmhouse 350 metres from Lac Saint-Point and its small beach. Doubles from €80.

### La Maison d'Ambronay

46 Grande Rue  
01500 Ambronay  
Tel: (Fr) 7 82 32 90 79  
lamaisondambronay.fr  
Owner Nathalie Schlienger has transformed the

village school into a boutique B&B where each room has its own atmosphere and decor, reminding guests of their school days. Rooms from €90, breakfast included.

### WHERE TO EAT

Sophie dined at:  
**La Mainaz**  
Route du Col de la Faucille  
Le Creux de La Mainaz  
01170 Gex  
Tel: (Fr) 4 50 41 31 10  
la-mainaz.com  
Beautiful four-star hotel with two restaurants at an altitude of 1,250 metres, with breathtaking views of Lac Léman (Lake Geneva), and Mont Blanc on the horizon. Young chef Mathieu Sagardoytho oversees both the gastronomic restaurant La Table de la Mainaz (mains from €48) and the more laid-back Brasserie Le Panorama (mains from €23).

The food is exquisite and the service very friendly.

### Auberge de l'Abbaye

47 Place des Anciens Combattants  
01500 Ambronay  
Tel: (Fr) 4 74 46 42 54  
aubergedelabbaye-ambronay.com  
One-Michelin-star restaurant where chef Ivan Lavaux serves refined dishes using local and seasonal produce (fish and vegetables, but not meat). There is no à la carte; the friendly and unpretentious staff explain the no-choice menu at the table.

### WHERE TO VISIT

**Fort l'Écluse via ferrata**  
Route de Genève, Longera y  
01200 Léaz  
If you have your own gear (harness, snap hooks, straps and helmets) and are experienced at climbing,



**ABOVE:** Comté cheeses maturing at Fort Saint-Antoine

you can take the route on your own, as it is open to anyone. If you choose a guided *via ferrata*, Rock'n Jump Adventure provides the climbing gear. Prices from €40.

Tel: (Fr) 6 77 89 00 04  
rockn-jump-adventure.com

### Fort Saint-Antoine

Cave d'affinage  
Marcel Petite  
Fort de Saint-Antoine  
25370 Saint-Antoine  
Tel: (Fr) 3 81 49 14 34  
comte-petite.com

### Grottes de Baume-les-Messieurs


39210 Baume-les-Messieurs  
Tel: (Fr) 3 84 48 23 02  
baumelesmessieurs.fr  
Adults €8.50, 6-12s €5.

### Grottes du Cerdon

Parc de loisirs préhistoriques  
01450 Labalme  
Tel: (Fr) 4 74 37 36 79  
grotte-cerdon.com  
Adults from €9.50, 4-12s €6.50.

### Distillerie Les Fils d'Émile Pernot

18-20 Le Frambourg  
25300 La Cluse-et-Mijoux  
Tel: (Fr) 3 81 39 04 28  
fr.emilepernot.fr

 **TOURIST INFORMATION:** Montagnes du Jura, tel: (Fr) 3 81 25 54 55, [montagnes-du-jura.fr/en](http://montagnes-du-jura.fr/en); Bourgogne-Franche-Comté tourisme, tel: (Fr) 3 81 25 0800, [en.bourgognefranchecomte.com](http://en.bourgognefranchecomte.com); Ain tourisme, [ain-tourisme.com](http://ain-tourisme.com); Jura tourisme, tel: (Fr) 3 84 87 08 88, [jura-tourism.com](http://jura-tourism.com); Doubs tourisme, tel: (Fr) 3 81 21 29 99, [doubs.travel](http://doubs.travel)