

Massif Central

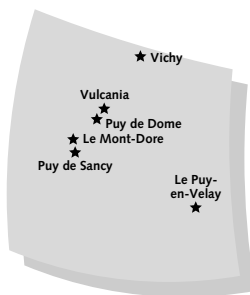
Between the knife-edge Alps and the green fields of the Limousin sprawls the Massif Central, one of the wildest, emptiest and least-known corners of France. Cloaked with a mantle of grassy cones, snow-flecked peaks and high plateaus left behind by long-extinct volcanoes, the Massif Central is a place where you can feel nature's heavy machinery at work. Deep underground, hot volcanic springs bubble into the spa baths and mineral-water factories of Vichy and Volvic, while high in the mountain massifs, trickling streams join forces to form three of France's greatest rivers: the Dordogne, the Allier and the Loire.

Deeply traditional and still dominated by the old industries of agriculture and cattle farming, the Massif Central and the surrounding Auvergne region is home to the largest area of protected landscape in all of France, formed by two huge regional parks: the Parc Naturel Régional des Volcans d'Auvergne and its neighbour, the Parc Naturel Régional du Livradois-Forez. With so much natural splendour on offer, the Massif Central is, unsurprisingly, a paradise for those who like their landscapes really rude and raw – whether that means hikers tackling the trails around the Chaîne des Puys, skiers plunging down the slopes of the Puy de Sancy, or paragliders launching themselves from the icy summit of Puy de Dôme.

But the Auvergne isn't just about the great outdoors. History buffs can delve into the belle-époque streets of Vichy or wander the backstreets of Le Puy-en-Velay, once one of the busiest pilgrimage cities in Europe, while gastronomes can stuff themselves silly with five varieties of trademarked cheese and some of the halest, heartiest food anywhere in France.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Staring out across the rooftops of **Le Puy-en-Velay** from inside the statue of Notre Dame de France (p602)
- Puffing your way to the summit of the **Puy de Dôme** (p592) for the finest views in central France
- Venturing inside the booming volcano at **Vulcania** (p592)
- Hiking the high-altitude trails around **Puy de Sancy** (p595) and **Le Mont-Dore** (p595)
- Soothe those bones and sample the waters at the spa town of **Vichy** (p588)



■ POPULATION: 1,310,000

■ AREA: 26,015 SQ KM

History

The historical province of the Auvergne derives its name from a Gallic tribe, the Arverni, who ruled the area until the all-conquering Romans arrived under the command of Julius Caesar. An Arverni chieftain called Vercingétorix put up the only real resistance to Caesar's legions. Despite several spirited victories, his armies were finally crushed near Alésia in Burgundy, and the Auvergne fell under Roman rule (Vercingétorix is commemorated with a statue in Clermont-Ferrand).

The Romans founded a number of settlements, notably the city of Augustonemetum (later Clermont-Ferrand). Following the fall of the Empire, the Auvergne entered a period of infighting between rival factions of Franks, Aquitanians and Carolingians, before being split into feudal domains during the Middle Ages under the powerful dukes of Auvergne, whose governmental seat was established in Riom.

After the French Revolution, the capital switched to Clermont-Ferrand, and the city became a focus of industrial and educational expansion, especially following the arrival of the industrious Michelin brothers and their rubber factories in the late 19th century.

Meanwhile well-to-do aristocrats flocked to the region's fashionable spas and built countless belle-époque mansions, notably in Vichy (p588) and La Bourboule (p596). During WWII Vichy became the capital of the collaborationist regime under Maréchal Pétain.

Getting There & Around

The region's only airport is in Clermont-Ferrand, a major Air France hub.

Though the TGV network hasn't yet arrived, there are regular trains to all the main towns and Paris is accessible in under four hours from Clermont-Ferrand.

The new A75 autoroute (sometimes called *La Méridienne*) has opened up high-speed travel to the south of France through the viaducts at Garabit and Millau, while the A89 (La Transeuropéenne) travels west all the way to Bordeaux.

Elsewhere the region's roads are twisty, slow and highly scenic: you'll need your own car to reach the more remote spots, as the bus network is almost nonexistent.

CLERMONT-FERRAND & AROUND

CLERMONT-FERRAND

pop 141,000 / elevation 400m

Sprawling around a long-extinct volcano, slap bang in the middle of the Massif Central, Clermont-Ferrand is the capital of the Auvergne and the region's only metropolis. The spiritual home of the roly-poly Michelin Man (known to the French as Bibendum) and the Michelin tyre empire, Clermont-Ferrand has been a thumping industrial powerhouse for over a century. Beyond the smokestack factories and suburban warehouses, you'll discover a soaring twin-spired cathedral, some interesting museums and one of the most atmospheric old cities in the Auvergne.

Orientation

The old town is bounded by av des États-Unis to the west, rue André Moinier to the north and bd Trudaine to the east. The commercial centre stretches westward from the cathedral to av des États-Unis and place de Jaude, then along rue Blatin.

Information

Laundrette (6 place Hippolyte Renoux; ☎ 7am-8pm)

Laundrette (rue du Port)

Lepton (22 av des Paulines; per hr €2.50; ☎ 10am-midnight Mon-Fri, 2pm-midnight Sat & Sun) Online games and internet access.

Main Post Office (rue Maurice Busset)

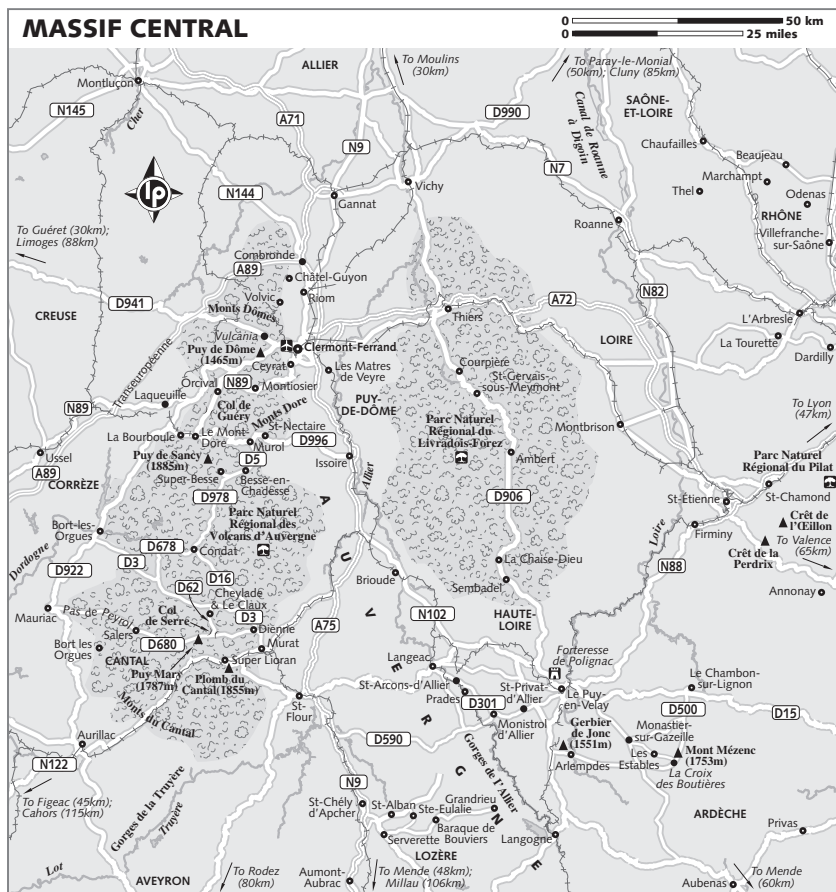
Tourist Office (☎ 04 73 98 65 00; www.clermont-fd.com; place de la Victoire; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-7pm Sat & Sun May-Sep, 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm & 2-6pm Sat, 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Sun Oct-Apr) Opposite the cathedral on place de la Victoire. There's a multimedia exhibition on the Auvergne's churches downstairs.

Visio2 (11 av Carnot; per hr €2.50; ☎ 10am-midnight Mon-Sat) Internet access.

Sights

OLD CITY

Perched at the top of the rue des Gras, the jet-black **Cathédrale Notre Dame** (☎ 8am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 9.30am-noon & 3-7.30pm Sun) looks like it's fallen from the pages of *The Lord of the Rings*. Carved from the inky volcanic rock



from the quarries of Volvic, it's one of the weirdest sights in the Auvergne, with its twin soaring towers and massive Gothic facade, partly designed by the architect Viollet-le-Duc. Constructed between the 13th and 19th centuries, the interior is a striking contrast of light and shade: murky chapels lurk along each side of the nave, lit up brilliantly by afternoon sunshine through the technicolour transept windows.

North of the cathedral is the early-16th-century **Fontaine d'Amboise**, with a panoramic view of the Puy de Dôme and nearby peaks. South is the café-filled place de la Victoire, and the city's **Michelin Boutique** (☎ 04 73 90 20 50; 2 place de la Victoire; 🕒 2-7pm Mon, 10am-1pm & 2-7pm

Tue-Sat), where you can pick up souvenirs ranging from roadmaps and restaurant guides to bouncy Bibendum key rings.

The twisting lanes of Clermont-Ferrand's **old city** circle outwards from the cathedral, dotted with mansions dating from the 17th and 18th centuries. The old street of rue Blaise Pascal is a jumble of antique-sellers, craft-shops and cafés. Nearby is the 12th-century **Basilique Notre Dame du Port**, a historic Romanesque chapel listed as a Unesco World Heritage Site. It's currently closed for refurbishment, but a neighbouring shop has been converted into an exhibition space, the **Basilique Renovation Exhibition**, where you can see how the work's coming along.

MUSEUMS & SIGHTS

Historic exhibits, from excavated Roman coins to neolithic wood carvings, are displayed at the **Musée Bargoin** (☎ 04 73 91 37 31; 45 rue Ballainvilliers; adult/under 18yr €4.30/free; 🕒 10am-noon & 1-5pm Tue-Sat, 2-7pm Sun), the city's main archaeological museum. Upstairs, the **Musée du Tapis et des Arts Textiles** has a collection of Oriental and Middle Eastern carpets, including examples from Tibet, Iran, Syria and China.

Just down the street, the **Musée d'Histoire Naturelle Henri-Lecoq** (☎ 04 73 91 93 78; 15 rue Bardoux; adult/under 18yr €4.30/free; 🕒 10am-noon & 2-5pm or 6pm Mon-Sat, 2-6pm Sun) is named after the celebrated pharmacist and natural scientist who lived in Clermont-Ferrand in the 19th century. A passionate student and compulsive collector of the flora and fauna of the Auvergne, Lecoq amassed a huge collection of rocks, fossils, plants and stuffed animals – look out for a stunning gallery of Auvergnat butterflies and a collection of over 50 native orchids.

Place de Jaude, the city's monumental square, has recently been pedestrianised. Criss-crossed by clanking trams and pottering pedestrians, the square is overlooked by a **statue of Vercingétorix**, the Celtic chief who nearly thwarted Caesar's conquest of Gaul.

A couple of kilometres northeast is the suburb of **Montferrand**, which joined forces with nearby Clermont in 1630 under the orders of Louis XIII, laying the foundations for the modern-day city. Montferrand is dotted with Gothic and Renaissance houses, especially around rue de la Rodade and rue des Cordeliers, but today it feels rather rundown and unloved beside its bigger, buzzier neighbour.

The main attraction in Montferrand is the **Musée d'Art Roger Quilliot** (☎ 04 73 16 11 30; place Louis Deteix; adult/under 18yr €4.20/free; 🕒 10am-6pm Tue-Sun), an ambitious fine-arts museum in a converted Ursuline convent. Exhibits range from the late Middle Ages to the 20th century: look out for significant works by Delacroix, the Ryckaert family and François Boucher, as well as work by local artists Maurice and Simone Combe. Jump aboard Tram A from place de Jaude or Bus 31 from the train station.

If you're visiting several museums, there's a three-museum pass for €8 available from the tourist office.

Sleeping

Hôtel Saint-Joseph (☎ 04 73 92 69 71; 10 rue de Maringues; s €38-45, d €43-50) Bargain-basement

hotel above a corner bar near Marché St-Joseph, and the best value for shoestringers in Clermont. Considering the knock-down prices, the rooms are decent: all have private bathroom or shower, satellite TV and sunny or stripy colour schemes, and there's even free wi-fi.

Hôtel Ravel (☎ 04 73 91 51 33; hotelravel63@wanadoo.fr; 8 rue de Maringues; s/d €40/48) With its mosaic facade and musty corridors, this budget family hotel has more character than most. It feels faded, with clunky plumbing and patchy wall-paper, but the rooms are well kept, clean, and have en-suite bathrooms, and the nicest overlook the busy St-Joseph morning market.

Hôtel Albert-Élisabeth (☎ 04 73 92 47 41; www.hotel-albertelisabeth.com; 37 av Albert-Élisabeth; r €49-57) Halfway between the centre and the station, this hotel is bland but makes a useful midrange base. Expect no surprises – functional rooms and chain-hotel fixtures are the watchword – but it's efficient and easily recognised at night thanks to its blinking neon sign. There's street parking opposite and wi-fi (both for a fee).

Dav' Hôtel (☎ 04 73 93 31 49; www.davhotel.fr; 10 rue des Minimes; d €50-58) The main draw at this alley hotel is the central location, steps from place de Jaude and a short uphill stroll to the Vieille Ville. The decor's sparse bordering on spartan, with plain soundproofed rooms equipped with the usual mod cons (hairdryer, satellite TV).

Volcan Hôtel (☎ 04 73 19 66 66; www.volcanhotel.fr; 6 rue Sainte-Rose; s €58-72, d €63-77) If it's midprice modernism you're after, then the Volcan is a good choice, plonked along a quiet street near the Vieille Ville. Charming it ain't: the style is flat-pack functional, with beige carpets, red-check bedspreads and cookie-cutter furniture, plus wi-fi and Canal+. Some have a mezzanine with old-city views.

Hôtel de Lyon (☎ 04 73 17 60 80; hotel.de.lyon@wanadoo.fr; 16 place de Jaude; r €69-95; 📶 📺 📺) You'll glimpse Vercingétorix from your window at this old-city crash pad, perched above a brasserie on place de Jaude. Despite its classic exterior, the rooms are motel-modern: expect check curtains, pine furniture and country prints, plus the best city views in town, with wi-fi and double-glazing to keep the late-night noise to a minimum.

Hôtel des Puy (☎ 04 73 91 92 06; www.hoteldespuys.fr; 16 place Delille; s €72-109, d €107-161; 📶 📺 📺) The exterior has all the charm of a municipal car park, but inside you'll find plush

three-star rooms, most with a balcony over trafficky place Delille. More cash buys extra space, separate sitting areas and big bathrooms, but the highlight is the panoramic breakfast room with views over Clermont's rooftops. Parking (€9) and breakfast (€13) are chronically overpriced.

Eating BUDGET

The area north of place de Jaude and around rue St-Dominique is full of cheap eateries, including lots of ethnic restaurants and inexpensive French bistros.

Les Goûters de Justine (☎ 04 73 92 26 53; 11bis rue Blaise Pascal; cakes €2-5; ☎ noon-7pm Tue-Fri, 2.30-7pm Sat) For afternoon tea and home-made cakes, seek out this snug little tearoom with its jumble of mismatched furniture and granny's-kitchen atmosphere.

Crêperie-Grill le 1513 (☎ 04 73 92 37 46; 3 rue des Chaussetiers; crêpes €3-8; ☎ daily) Ever-popular crêperie lodged inside the stone-vaulted cellars of a medieval mansion built in 1513 (hence the name). The usual selection of galettes and crêpes are on offer – for local flavours try the Galette Auvergnate, with local ham and St-Nectaire cheese, washed down with a bowl of cider.

Le Kalash (☎ 04 73 90 19 22; 10 rue du Port; mains €12-16; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Things are hot and spicy at Le Kalash, one of several decent Indian eateries around town, serving authentic tandooris and tikkas in an Eastern-themed setting. Turn up on the right night and you might catch a Bollywood epic projected onto the back wall.

MIDRANGE

Ah! St Tropez (☎ 04 73 90 44 64; mains €15-17; 10 rue Massillon; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat) A little corner of Provence in Clermont-Ferrand, decorated with painted murals and sunbaked colours, and stuffed with filling southern dishes such as grilled peppers, fish soup and crunchy figs with lavender. There aren't many tables, so booking's essential.

Bistrot Bancal (☎ 04 73 14 23 92; 15 rue des Chaussetiers; mains €15-17 ☎ dinner Tue-Sun) Half buzzy wine bar, half gastro-brasserie, this fine restaurant is one of Clermont's secret places to try hand-picked local wines accompanied by authentic *saveurs de terroir* (country dishes), charcuterie and cheese.

Le St-Vincent (☎ 04 73 90 63 45; 10, rue de la Coifferie; menus €24/29/37; ☎ Mon-Sat) Cosy, rustic and

reassuringly old-fashioned, this small restaurant feels like an antique shop, with a hotch-potch of haphazard beams, country trinkets and solid wood furniture. The three *menus* are dominated by Auvergnat dishes, with more choices as you clamber up the price scale.

Le Sisisi (☎ 04 73 14 04 28; rue Massillon; mains €25-35; ☎ Tue-Sat) Funky little café-bar-cum-bistro in an old-town location: the ambiance is scruffy-chic, but the food is top-notch, with a menu of fish, meats and salads, served either in the lively bar or the back-room bistro, dotted with contemporary artwork.

L'Amphitryon Capucine (☎ 04 73 31 38 39; 50 rue Fontgèze; menus €25-70; ☎ Tue-Sat) Gastronomic with a capital G, this much-vaunted restaurant is one of the best addresses in Clermont, but you'll need to dig out your glad rags – jeans and trainers certainly won't cut the mustard in the swag-draped dining room. Dress appropriately and you'll be rewarded with the city's finest cooking spread over several courses (including a belt-busting eight-course *menu gourmand*).

L'Alambic (☎ 04 73 36 17 45; 6 rue Ste-Claire; menus €26/36; ☎ lunch Tue & Thu-Sat, dinner Mon-Sat) 'The Still' has a formidable reputation for its traditional Auvergnat dishes, especially its charcuterie and gut-busting *aligot*, a local concoction of potato, garlic, cream and Cantal cheese.

SELF-CATERING

Looking like a modern-art experiment gone wrong, the Lego-brick facade of Clermont's **covered market** (☎ 6am-7pm Mon-Sat) is on place Saint-Pierre.

Drinking

Café Ballainvilliers (☎ 04 73 91 57 88; 18 rue Ballainvilliers; ☎ till 1am Tue-Sat) A lively bistro-bar that's popular for summertime alfresco drinking thanks to the outside terrace.

Bistrot Bancal (see left) One of the city's best-stocked wine bars, especially good for organic and locally grown Auvergnat wines.

Café Pascal (4 place de la Victoire) A good all-round street café, whether you're after big-screen sports or a quick aperitif. There are patio tables outside with views of the floodlit cathedral at night.

Le Distil (☎ 04 73 37 64 15; 8 rue de la Préfecture; ☎ 7.30pm-1.30am) Another good hang-out for oenophiles, this brick-and-wood wine bar has vintages by the glass, including both New World and French.

John Barleycorn (9 rue du Terrail; ☎ 2pm-2am Mon-Sat May-Aug, 5pm-2am Mon-Sat Sep-Apr) Traditional Celtic-themed boozier serving up beers, whiskies and wines in a laid-back, spit-and-sawdust atmosphere.

Entertainment

The pocket-sized *Le P'tit Bougnat* is the most useful guide to Clermont's after-dark scene (there's a digital version at www.cyberbougnat.net).

La Coopérative de Mai (☎ 04 73 14 48 08; www.lacoope.org; rue Serge Gainsbourg) One of Clermont's main gig and concert venues, a cavernous warehouse space that plays host to visiting bands (mostly French, but sometimes from further afield). Catch Tram A and get off at place du 1er Mai.

Le B-Box (☎ 04 73 28 59 74; www.bboxclub.com; av Ernest Cristal, La Pardieu; entry from €12; ☎ 11pm-5am Thu-Sat) Massive (in every sense), this city-sized warehouse contains one of the largest clubs in France, split into several levels: DJs spin everything from cheesy chart choons to house, jungle and hardcore.

Fans of *le septième art* can swing by the historic **Cinéma Les Ambiances** (☎ 08 75 56 09 46; www.cinema-lesambiances.fr; 7 rue Saint-Dominique; tickets €8.50), a wonderful art-house cinema dedicated to showing the latest flicks in *version originale* (nondubbed), with recent nondubbed releases also at the multiplex **Ciné Capitoile** (☎ 08 92 68 73 33; 32 place de Jaude).

Stadium bands and large-scale touring shows are hosted at Clermont's main arena, **Zénith** (☎ 04 73 77 24 24; www.zenith-auvergne.com), for up to 8500 spectators. Part of the Grande Halle d'Auvergne complex, it's southeast of the city centre.

SHORT FILM CENTRAL

Clermont's answer to Cannes is the annual **Festival International du Court Métrage** (www.clermont-filmfest.com), one of the world's foremost festivals of short film. Held every February since 1979, the festival celebrates the best and brightest shorts from across the world, with three competitions for international and domestic shorts, as well as a touring 'Coup de Cœurs' program that visits cinemas across the Auvergne.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Clermont-Ferrand Auvergne airport (☎ 04 73 62 71 00; www.clermont-aeroport.com; airport code CFE) is 7km east of the city centre. It's a major hub for domestic and European flights, especially for Air France; destinations include Nice, Marseille, Strasbourg, Paris Orly and Paris Charles de Gaulle. An airport shuttle (€4) runs around eight times daily (two on Sunday) from the centre via the bus and train stations. Bus No 20 travels to/from the airport four times daily Monday to Friday.

BUS

The **bus station** (☎ 04 73 93 13 61; place Gambetta) has an efficient information office. Bus 73 travels to Riom (35 minutes) six to nine times Monday to Saturday, and bus 1 serves Thiers (1¼ hours, eight to 12 Monday to Saturday). For other destinations, trains are faster and more frequent. The bus station also hosts Clermont's weekly **flea market** (☎ 7am-1pm Sun).

CAR

Car-rental agencies:

Avis airport (☎ 04 73 91 18 08); town (☎ 04 73 91 72 94)

Europcar airport (☎ 04 73 91 18 07); town (☎ 04 73 92 70 26)

Hertz (☎ 04 73 62 71 93) Located at the airport.

TRAIN

Clermont is the region's main rail hub. You can buy tickets at the two **boutiques SNCF** (SNCF ticketing offices; ☎ 08 92 35 35 35; 43 rue du 11 Novembre, 80 bd François Mitterrand) in the city centre.

Long-haul destinations include Paris' Gare de Lyon (€45.10 to €51, 3½ hours direct, six to 10 daily) and Lyon (€23.30 to €28.20, three hours via St-Étienne, more than 10 daily). The cross-Cévennes railway to Nîmes (€35.70, five hours, three daily), known as Le Cévenol, is one of the most scenic in France (and one of the oldest, built in 1870 at a cost of 520 million francs).

Short hauls run to/from Vichy (€8.80 to €12.40, half-hour, hourly), Le Mont-Dore (€11.70, 1¼ hours, four or five daily), Thiers (€7.70, 45 minutes, 10 daily) and Le Puy-en-Velay (€20.10, 2¼ hours, three or four direct daily).

Getting Around

Clermont's public-transport system is handled by **T2C** (☎ 04 73 28 00 00; www.t2c.fr; 24 bd Charles

de Gaulle; ☎ 8.30am-6pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-12.15pm & 2-5pm Sat). A single ticket costs €1.30 and remains valid for three onward connections within an hour on either tram or bus; a day ticket costs €4.20. Tram B is the quickest way into the city from the station, while tram A connects place de Jaude with Montferrand; both lines run between 5am and 11pm.

Moovicité (☎ 08 10 63 00 63; www.moovicite.com) rents bikes for a knock-down €2/3 per half/full day, plus a deposit of €150/225 for traditional/electric bikes. Rentals of up to one hour are free. There are two offices, **Moovicité Gare** (43 av de l'Union Soviétique; ☎ 7am-7pm Mon-Fri, 8am-7pm Sat) and **Moovicité Renoux** (20 place H Renoux; ☎ 7am-7pm Mon-Fri, 8am-7pm Sat). You can drop bikes off at either one.

NORTH OF CLERMONT-FERRAND

Riom

pop 19,300

During the Middle Ages, Riom was the capital of the Auvergne region. Mansions and *hôtels particuliers*, mostly built from dark volcanic stone, line the boulevards of the old quarter, and the town has a brace of museums and a landmark clock tower to explore.

The town's main thoroughfares are the east-west rue de l'Hôtel de Ville and rue St-Amable, and the north-south rue de l'Horloge and rue du Commerce. The **tourist office** (☎ 04 73 38 59 45; www.tourisme-riomlimagne.fr; 16 rue du Commerce; ☎ 9.30am-1pm & 2-6.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm Sun Jul & Aug, 9.30am-noon & 2-5.30pm Tue, Wed, Fri & Sat, 2-5.30pm Mon & Thu Sep-Jun) is on the west side of town, very near the pretty Romanesque church of **Église St-Amable** (rue St-Amable; ☎ 9am-5pm Oct-May, 9am-7pm Jun-Sep).

Riom's 15th-century **Tour de l'Horloge** (Clock Tower; rue de l'Horloge; admission €0.50; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-6pm Jul & Aug; 10am-noon & 2-5pm Tue-Sun Sep-Jun) has a wonderful view of both town and mountains from the upper stories.

To the east are the town's museums, **Musée Régional d'Auvergne** (☎ 04 73 38 17 31; 10bis rue Delille; admission €4.20; ☎ 10am-noon & 2.30-6pm Tue-Sun mid-May-Oct), which explores the customs and traditions of life in the Auvergne, and the **Musée Francisque Mandet** (☎ 04 73 38 18 53; 14 rue de l'Hôtel de Ville; admission €4.20; ☎ 10am-noon & 2.30-6pm Tue-Sun Jun-Sep, 10am-noon & 2-5.30pm Tue-Sun Oct-May), displaying classical finds and 15th- to 19th-century paintings.

South along rue du Commerce is the 15th-century **Église Notre Dame du Marthuret** (rue du

Commerce; ☎ 9am-6pm), which hold's Riom's treasured relics: a typically severe Vierge Noire (Black Madonna) and the tender Vierge à l'Oiseau, depicting the Virgin and Child accompanied by a fluttering bird.

Riom is 15km north of Clermont on the N9; to get there by bus, see p587.

Vichy

pop 26,900

Pootling pensioners, pocket-sized dogs and curative springs sum up the well-to-do town of Vichy, 70km northeast of Clermont-Ferrand. Famous for its volcanic mineral waters since Napoléon III and his entourage sojourned here during the 19th century, and later infamous as the seat of Marshal Pétain's collaborationist regime during WWII, these days Vichy is a curious mix of spa resort, provincial shopping centre and old-age retirement home. Its belle-époque heyday has long since passed, but there's still an air of understated grandeur about its stately streets and landscaped parks; and if you've got a dicky elbow or a dodgy knee, you can join the queues of *curistes* who flock to Vichy to try its therapeutic waters for themselves.

ORIENTATION

The heart of Vichy is the Parc des Sources, 800m west of the train station. Rue Georges Clemenceau, the main shopping thoroughfare, crosses the city centre. The busy ring-roads of bd du Président Kennedy and bd des États-Unis run along the Allier River south of the centre.

INFORMATION

Échapp (☎ 04 70 32 28 57; 12 rue Source de l'Hôpital; €0.07 per min; ☎ noon-midnight Tue-Sat, 2pm-midnight Sun) Internet access.

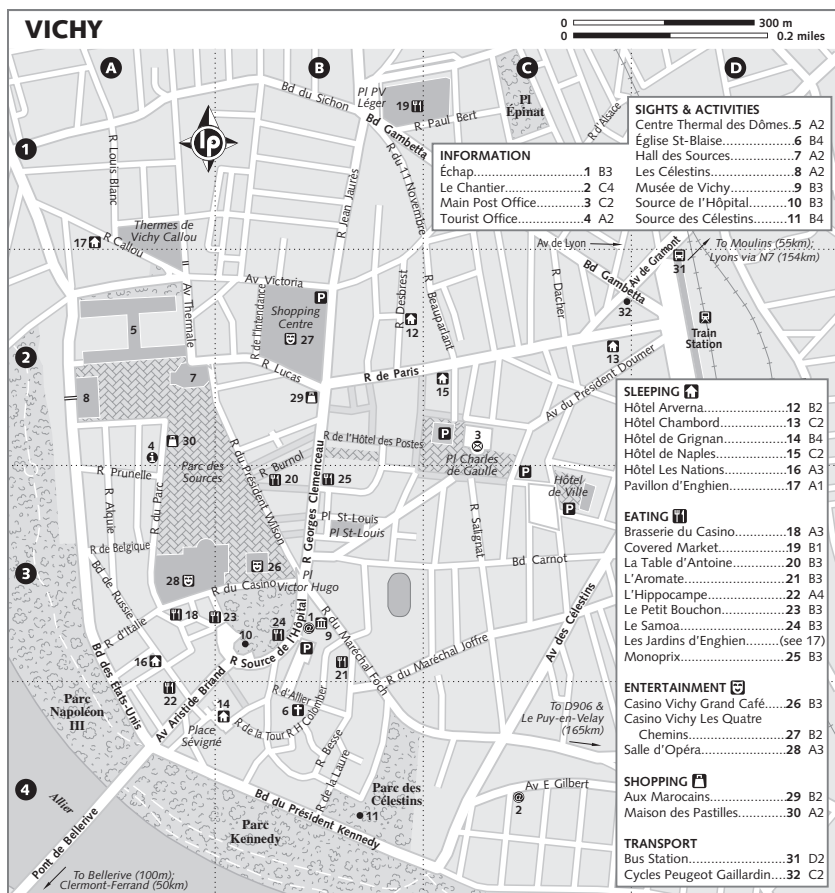
Le Chantier (☎ 04 70 32 10 04; 23 av E Gilbert; per hr €2; ☎ 9.30am-11pm Tue-Fri, noon-1am Sat, 10am-3pm Sun) Internet access in a funky art space, gallery and bar.

Main Post Office (place Charles de Gaulle)

Tourist Office (☎ 04 70 98 71 94; www.vichytourisme.com; 19 rue du Parc; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 9.30am-12.30pm & 3-7pm Sun Jul & Aug, 9am-12.30pm & 1.30-7pm Mon-Sat, 9.30am-12.30pm & 3-7pm Sun Apr-Jun & Sep, 10am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat & 3-6pm Sun Oct-Mar)

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

First stop in Vichy is the huge **Parc des Sources**, laid out by Napoléon III in 1812. Filled by chestnut and plane trees and encircled by a



wrought-iron colonnade (which allows *curistes* to perambulate the park without getting wet), the park's main feature is the **Hall des Sources** (☎ 6am-7.30pm Mon-Sat, 7.45am-7.30pm Sun, later in summer), an elegant glass hall that houses three of the city's natural springs. In the centre is an enclosed area where you can sample Vichy's waters, from the mild and bubbly Célestins to the hot and salty Chômel, which emerges at a natural temperature of 43.5°C. You can buy a plastic cup (€0.20) or fill your bottle for free with Célestins water, but for the more adventurous concoctions you'll need a pass (and a prescription!) from the nearby Centre Thermal.

The **Source de l'Hôpital** is across the park, while the **Source des Célestins** (bd du Président

Kennedy; ☎ 8am-8.30pm Apr-Sep, 8am-6pm Oct-Mar) is further south near the river. Over 60 million bottles of Célestins water are sold annually, but you can join the locals and fill up for nothing here from the brass taps, which are shut in winter to prevent frozen pipes.

North of the Hall des Sources is the **Centre Thermal des Dômes** (☎ 08 00 30 00 63; 132 bd des États-Unis; ☎ 8am-7.45pm Mon-Fri, 8am-7.15pm Sat, 8.30am-12.30pm Sun), with its Byzantine dome, Moorish arches and tiled towers. In Vichy's heyday, this complex housed the city's thermal baths, and the area was a lavish playground of upmarket boutiques, shops and cafés, but these days it's looking decidedly dowdy. The most luxurious of Vichy's three spas is **Les Célestins** (☎ 04 70 30 82 82; 111 bd des États-Unis), which offers pricey

THE BLACK MADONNAS OF THE AUVERGNE

The Auvergne has an astonishing number of **Vierges Noires** (Black Madonnas), dotted around its cathedrals and churches, including ones at Vichy (p588), Murat (p598) and Le Puy-en-Velay (p602).

No one knows quite how this strange tradition started: some historians believe it began during the Crusades, when Christian soldiers came under the influence of Moorish sculptors; others believe the figures are part of a much older tradition involving the Egyptian goddess Isis or even a pagan Mother Goddess. Controversially, some commentators have suggested that the Black Madonnas are actually an attempt to depict Mary's original skin colour, which was probably closer to the dark skin of African and Middle Eastern people than the light skin of modern Europeans.

Usually under a metre tall and carved from cedar or walnut, the figures' black colour is a source of considerable speculation: some believe that dark woods or varnishes were used to create the dark colouring, while others believe it's caused by natural ageing or even candle soot. Whatever the reason, the Vierges Noires are imbued with considerable sacred significance and miraculous powers: you'll see them being paraded around the Auvergne's streets on 15th August (Assumption Day) to mark the ascension of Mary's spirit to heaven.

treatments ranging from a *douche de Vichy* (four-hand hot-spring massage) to a *jet tonifiant* (a high-powered water jet).

Vichy's old city is small but worth a stroll, especially for the art-deco **Église St-Blaise** (rue d'Allier), built in the 1930s, with an austere concrete exterior, 20th-century stained glass and frescos of some of France's famous churches. The original chapel at the rear houses Vichy's miraculous Vierge Noire (see boxed text, above). The tourist office can supply you with information on some good walking tours around the old city and Vichy's belle-époque buildings.

Bizarrely for such a historic town, Vichy's only museum is the minuscule **Musée de Vichy** (☎ 04 70 32 12 97; 15 rue du Maréchal Foch; admission free; 🕒 2-6pm Tue-Fri, 2-5pm Sat), which houses local archeological artefacts, some Impressionist paintings and a set of letters and coins from the Pétain régime.

Vichy has some lovely parks, including the riverside **Parc Kennedy** and **Parc Napoléon III**. Look out for the Swiss-style 19th-century chalet houses along the parks' edge, which once lodged the city's visiting *curistes*.

SLEEPING

Hotel de Naples (☎ 04 70 97 91 33; www.hoteldenaples.fr; 22 rue de Paris; r €33-41; 📍) Luxury it ain't, but the Naples is fab for budget travellers, with about the cheapest sleeps in Vichy. The clean, spartan rooms are split between the main building and a quiet rear annexe overlooking the hotel's garden and car park. Wi-fi's available.

Hôtel Chambord (☎ 04 70 30 16 30; le.chambord@wanadoo.fr; 82-84 rue de Paris; s €42-50, d €48-60) Solidly

midrange in style and price, the Chambord is handy to town and station. The pick of the rooms on the top floors have city views and are a little more removed from the street noise.

Hôtel Arverna (☎ 04 70 31 31 19; www.hotels-vichy.com, in French; 12 rue Desbrest; s €45-50, d €50-65; 📍 📺 📶 📍) A seductive hideaway along a quiet side street, run by expat Parisians. Warm crimsons, checks and corn yellows fill the rooms, all with wi-fi and flat-screen TVs, and some have views over the creeper-covered courtyard garden.

Hôtel de Grignan (☎ 04 70 32 08 11; www.hotelgrignan.fr; 7 place Sévigné; s/d/q high season €50/77/90, low season €46/61/75; 📍) With its candy-coloured facade, pale blue balconies and stripy awnings, this is the prettiest place in the old city. Sadly the period charm doesn't extend to the over-modernised rooms (expect bland floral bedspreads and flock wallpaper). Nevertheless, the views over the old town's rooftops are sublime, and there's wi-fi and parking.

Pavillon d'Enghien (☎ 04 70 98 33 30; www.pavillon-denghien.com; 32 rue Callou; r €48-78; 📍) A converted mansion with bedrooms in soothing whites and creams, livened up with the odd splash of colour, funky lampshade or original fireplace. Ask for one overlooking the interior courtyard and cute pool.

Hôtel Les Nations (☎ 04 70 98 21 63; www.lesnations.com; 13 bd de Russie; s €49-101, d €55-101 depending on season) Smart hotel with touches of art-deco style, overlooking tree-filled place Général Leclerc. Green-wicker lobby chairs and wrought-iron gates set the swish tone, and the rooms don't disappoint: the more expensive 'Confort Plus' rooms are worth the cash, with their own sitting areas and power showers.

EATING

Le Samoa (☎ 04 70 59 94 46; 13 rue Source de l'Hôpital; mains €3-8) For a quick *croque* or an ice-cream sundae, the Samoa's the place, shaded by trees with a terrace by the bandstand and the Parc des Sources.

Le Petit Bouchon (☎ 04 70 31 21 04; 1 rue de Banville; mains €11-20; ☎ Tue-Sat) Forget haute cuisine – this ramshackle bistro dishes out totally authentic lyonnaise staples cooked in the time-honoured fashion. Checked tablecloths and wooden tables fill the dining room, and the menu's crammed with gems like *pavé de boeuf* (thick-cut beef steak) and *grenouilles de poulet*; afterwards you can even do as other diners have done and write your review on the wall. The €12 lunch menu is the best bang for your buck in Vichy.

Brasserie du Casino (☎ 04 70 98 23 06; 4 rue du Casino; mains €16-22; ☎ Thu-Mon Mar-mid-Oct & mid-Nov-mid-Feb) Prewar style haunts this ultra-Gallic brasserie, all shiny brass, faded wood and squeaky leather, with a wall of photos featuring the actors and *chanteurs* who've stopped by from the opera house. The food's substantial (duck *confit*, rabbit stew) and the feel unmistakably French.

Les Jardins d'Enghien (☎ 04 70 98 33 30; www.pavillondenghien.com; 32 rue Callou; menus €19-32; ☎ lunch daily, dinner Tue-Sat) The poolside garden at Pavillon d'Enghien (see opposite) makes a sweet spot for supper *al fresco*, with market-fresh ingredients and plenty of Auvergnat recipes.

La Table d'Antoine (☎ 04 70 98 99 11; 8 rue Burnol; menus €21-59.90; ☎ lunch Tue-Sun, dinner Tue-Sat) This high-class temple to French fine dining is a fave of the gourmet guidebooks. Abstract portraits and high-backed chairs create a boutique feel, and the food is seriously fancy, from coconut-poached chicken to langoustines and smoked fish.

L'Aromate (☎ 04 70 32 13 22; 9 rue Besse; menus €19.50-36, mains €18-20; ☎ lunch Thu-Tue, dinner Mon & Thu-Sat) The atmosphere's starchier than a nun's wimple, but you can't beat the Aromate for upmarket dining. Classical music tinkles and the cavernous dining room is filled with gilt mirrors and stone columns, creating a fittingly ritzy setting for the rich, classic food.

L'Hippocampe (☎ 04 70 97 68 37; 3 bd de Russie; menus €16-50; ☎ Tue-Sun) Appropriately enough for a restaurant called the Sea Horse, this place specialises in seafood – scallops, sole and oak-smoked sardines, not to mention a truly monumental *assiette de fruits de mer* (seafood platter).

Self-Catering

The **covered market** is on place PV Léger. There's also a **Monoprix** (rue Georges Clemenceau; ☎ 8.30am-7pm Mon-Sat, 9.30am-12.30pm & 2.30-7pm Sun).

ENTERTAINMENT

Vichy's turn-of-the-century **Salle d'Opéra** (☎ 04 70 30 50 50; rue du Casino), still hosts regular productions. The town's casino was one of the first to be opened in France, and Vichy is still a popular gambling getaway: one-armed-bandit fans should check out the **Casino Vichy Grand Café** (7 rue du Casino; ☎ 10am-3am) or **Casino Vichy Les Quatre Chemins** (☎ 04 70 97 93 37; ☎ 10am-4am).

Vichy Mensuel, a free monthly what's-on guide, can be picked up all over town.

SHOPPING

Vichy's had a sweet tooth since the 1820s, when the first *pastilles de Vichy* were created using mineral water mixed with sugar and flavoured with mint, aniseed or lemon. Octagonal in shape and stamped with the Vichy logo, you can pick some up at the **Maison des Pastilles** (☎ 10am-noon & 3-7pm Tue-Sat, 3-7pm Sun Apr-Oct) in the Parc des Sources.

Vichy's also well-known for its *confiseries* and *chocolateries*, including **Aux Marocains** (☎ 04 70 98 30 33; 33 rue Georges Clemenceau), chock-a-block with handmade sweets, petits fours and caramels.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Train destinations include Paris' Gare de Lyon (€40.70 to €47.10, three hours, six to eight daily), as well as Clermont-Ferrand (€8.80 to €12.40, half-hour, hourly) and Riom (€7, 25 minutes, frequent).

Cycles Peugeot Gaillardin (☎ 04 70 31 52 86; 48 bd Gambetta; ☎ Mon morning & Tue-Sat) hire bikes (half/full day €5/8) plus €80 deposit.

PARC NATUREL RÉGIONAL DES VOLCANS D'Auvergne

A vast tract of cloud-shrouded peaks, snowy uplands and jade-green valleys, the huge **Parc Naturel Régional des Volcans d'Auvergne** (☎ 04 73 65 64 00; www.parc-volcans-auvergne.com) occupies most of the western Massif Central, stretching for around 3950 sq km and 120km from base to

FIERY FURNACES

With its peaceful pastures and verdant hills, it's hard to believe that the Massif Central was once one of the most active volcanic areas in Western Europe. The area consists of three geological bands. The **Chaîne des Puys** and **Monts Dômes**, a chain of extinct volcanoes and cinder cones stretching in a 40km north-south line across the northern Massif Central, thrust up around 100,000 years ago. The central **Monts Dore**s are much older, created between 100,000 and three million years ago, while the real granddaddies are the **Monts du Cantal**, formed by a nine-million-year-old volcano which collapsed inwards, leaving only its caldera (fragmented rim).

Though the volcanoes have been silent for several thousand years (the last serious eruption occurred around 5000 BC), reminders of the region's turbulent volcanic past are dotted across the region. Deep beneath the earth, fiery forces are still at work: volcanic activity is responsible for the mineral waters of **Volvic**, north of Clermont, and the geothermal springs of **Vichy** (p588), **Le Mont-Dore** (opposite) and the spa town of **Châtel-Guyon** (www.ot-chatel-guyon.com). It also explains the distinctive black rock often used as a building material across the region, notably at Clermont-Ferrand's cathedral (p582) and the town houses of Riom (p588).

The multimedia theme park of Vulcania (below) is a fantastic place to get acquainted with the region's volcanic history.

tip. Its northerly area extends from the chain of extinct volcanoes known as the Chaîne des Puys and Monts Dômes, centring on the high point of Puy de Dôme (below). Further south are the Monts Dore and the snowy Puy de Sancy, a popular ski station and the Massif Central's highest point. The park's southern edge is marked by the wild, rugged Monts du Cantal, formed by an ancient supervolcano worn down over the millennia, and dominated by the lofty summit of the Plomb du Cantal (1855m).

Unsurprisingly, this is fantastic terrain for outdoor enthusiasts, including skiers, hikers and mountain bikers, as well as hang-gliders and paragliders who can often be seen drifting around the region's peaks.

PUY DE DÔME & AROUND

The ice-flecked summit of Puy de Dôme (1465m) looms 15km to the west of Clermont-Ferrand. Crested by snow between September and May, the mountain was formed by a volcanic eruption some 10,000 years ago, and was later used as a Celtic shrine and Roman temple, but these days it's more popular with *parapenteurs* (paragliders) and hikers. You can still visit the remains of the Roman temple, dedicated to Mercury, and the views from the summit stretch to the Alps in clear weather – the only drawback is the blinking TV mast and the 2000-odd other visitors you'll share the views with on a fine summer's day.

You can reach the summit either by the 'mule track' – a steep hour's climb from the

Col de Ceysat, 4km off the D941A – or by the 4km **toll road** (cars/motorbikes €6/4; ☎ 8am-dusk Mar–Nov). The road is closed to cars from 10am to 6pm in July and August and from 12.30pm to 6pm weekends in May, June and September, replaced by regular shuttle buses (adult costs €4). There are also daily **shuttles** (adult/child €5/2.50; ☎ July & Aug) from the station and place de Jaude in Clermont-Ferrand in summer; ask at the tourist office for times.

Vulcania

Surrounded by the plugs and domes of the Chaîne des Puys, 15km to the west of Clermont on the D941B, the volcanic theme park of **Vulcania** (☎ 08 20 82 78 28; www.vulcania.com; adult/child €21/13.50, 1 child free with 2 adults; ☎ 9.30am–7pm Jul & Aug, 10am–6pm mid-Mar–mid-Nov) brings the Auvergne's long-extinct volcanoes back to life in spectacular style.

Opened in 1992, the museum was dreamt up by French geologists Katia and Maurice Krafft, who were tragically killed in a volcanic eruption on Mt Unzen in Japan a year before the museum's opening. Controversially built inside the protected Parc des Volcans, Vulcania is designed to resemble a giant cinder cone: entry is via a glittering gold volcanic dome and a simulated crater, complete with billowing steam and booming eruptions. Spread out over three levels, the park is a combination of educational museum and thrills-and-spills theme park: alongside state-of-the-art multimedia displays exploring the role of volcanoes in earth's history,

attractions include the '4D' film *Awakening of the Auvergne Giants*, which depicts volcanic eruptions complete with air blasts and water spray; the 20m-high 'Grand Geysir'; a section about the Mount St Helens eruption in 1982, complete with rock samples and vulcanised artefacts; and a highly dubious new '4D' Dragon Ride – not very scientific, but good fun all the same.

ORCIVAL

pop 250 / elevation 860m

Halfway between Puy de Dôme and Le Mont-Dore is Orcival, a huddle of slate rooftops and tumbledown barns gathered around the banks of the Sioulet River. The birthplace of ex-French president Giscard d'Estaing, it's a traditional typically Auvergnat village, centred around the beautiful **Basilique Notre-Dame**. The church is renowned for its sober Romanesque architecture and elegant crypt, as well as the 12th-century **Virgin of Orcival**, which (as always in the Auvergne) takes its annual walkabout on Assumption Day. Look out for the rare decorative ironwork depicting apocalyptic scenes on the main door.

Orcival's tiny **tourist office** (☎ 04 73 65 89 77; www.terresdomes-sancy.com; ☹ 10am-noon & 2-6pm Tue-Sat) is opposite the church, and can supply you with suggestions for local hikes including trips to nearby Lac de Servières and Lac de Guéry.

North of the village is the 15th-century **Château de Cordès** (☎ 04 73 65 81 34; adult/student/child €4/3/2.30; ☹ 10am-noon & 2-6pm Easter-Oct), with rich 18th-century furnishings and formal grounds laid out by Le Nôtre, designer of the gardens of Versailles.

Sleeping & Eating

Camping de la Haute Sioule (☎ 04 73 65 83 32; www.camping-auvergne.info; St-Bonnet-près-Orcival; 2-person sites €12; ☹ Easter-Oct) Spacious hillside campsite with a choice of fixed chalets and tent sites in a shady park with views of the Chaîne des Puys. It's about 5km northwest of Orcival on the D27.

Hôtel Notre Dame (☎ 04 73 65 82 02; d €36-45; ☹ Feb-Dec) This simple hotel is right next door to the Basilique, so you can expect to be woken up by church bells on a Sunday. The seven refurbished rooms are snug, and No 26 even has its own miniature terrace. Hearty portions of *chou farci* (pork-stuffed cabbage) and *aligot* (see p600) are served up at the rustic restaurant.

Hôtel du Mont-Dore (☎ 04 73 65 82 06; fax 04 73 65 80 61; d from €40) More homely rooms (all with private bathrooms and simple furnishings) inside a converted town house, complete with its own turret.

COL DE GUÉRY

South of Orcival, the snaking D27 climbs up to the lofty pass of **Col de Guéry**, which offers fantastic mountain views on every side.

There's a car park from where you can admire the scenery near the **Maison des Fleurs d'Auvergne** (☎ 04 73 65 20 09; http://maisondesfleurs.free.fr; ☹ 10am-7pm mid-Jun–mid-Sep, 10am-7pm Sat & Sun May–mid-Jun), which presents colourful displays of the Auvergne's flowers and other plants in summer. In winter, as soon as the first snow falls, the surrounding area is a centre for cross-country skiing, organised by the **Foyer Ski de Fond Guéry-Orcival** (☎ 04 73 65 20 09; www.leguery.fr).

Beyond the pass is the chilly **Lac de Guéry**, the highest lake in the Massif Central and a haven for trout and perch fishing (even in winter – this is the only lake in France that permits ice-fishing!)

The **Auberge du Lac de Guéry** (☎ 04 73 65 02 76; www.auberge-lac-guery.fr; d €57; ☹ mid-Jan–mid-Oct) has an unbeatable position right on the lake shore and a fine country restaurant that serves up fresh fish straight from the lake.

LE MONT-DORE

pop 1700 / elevation 1050m

Winter skiers, summer walkers and spa bathers all make a beeline for Le Mont-Dore, nestled in a narrow wooded valley beneath the Puy de Sancy, 44km southwest of Clermont-Ferrand. The Massif Central's main winter-sports base is a good deal quieter than the adrenalin-junky resorts of the Alps to the east, which makes Le Mont-Dore a haven for hikers and skiers who prefer to explore the mountains in (relative) peace and quiet.

Information

Laundrette (place de la République; ☹ 9am-7pm)

Post Office (place Charles de Gaulle)

s@ncyber (☎ 04 73 65 28 84; sancyber@orange.fr; allée Georges Lagaye; per hr €4.50; ☹ 2-11pm Fri & Sat, 2-7pm Sun) Le Mont-Dore's cybercafé opens extra days during holidays and the ski season.

Tourist Office (☎ 04 73 65 20 21; www.sancy.com; av de la Libération; ☹ 9am-12.30pm & 1.30-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-12.30pm & 1.30-5pm Sun) There's a daily weather forecast and ski bulletin posted outside.

Sights & Activities

Long before anyone thought of hurtling down the hillsides strapped to a pair of wooden planks, Le Mont-Dore was visited for its hot springs, which bubble out at a temperature between 37°C and 40°C. The first bathers were (of course) the cleanliness-obsessed Romans, and you can still see traces of their original baths at the **Thermes du Mont-Dore** (☎ 04 73 65 05 10; 1 place du Panthéon; 🕒 9am–noon & 2–5.30pm Mon–Fri, 9am–noon Sat), where the pricey treatments range from hot-stone therapy to reiki massage. In low season, you can visit the 19th-century neo-Byzantine building on a guided tour (adult/child €3.20/2.20; 📞 phone for times).

Four kilometres to the south of Le Mont-Dore is **Puy de Sancy** (1886m), the highest peak in central France. The mountain's snowcapped summit can be reached by the **Téléphérique du Sancy** (adult single/return €5.60/7.30; 🕒 9am–7pm Jul & Aug, 9am–12.10pm & 1.30–5pm mid-Apr–Jun & Sep, 9am–12.15pm & 1.30–5pm weekends Oct & Easter holidays), originally built in 1936, followed by a short walk along the maintained trail and staircase to the top. With fabulous views of the northern *puy*s (volcanic hills) and the Monts du Cantal, it's a popular tourist attraction, and can be uncomfortably crowded in summer. Set out early or late to dodge the worst crowds.

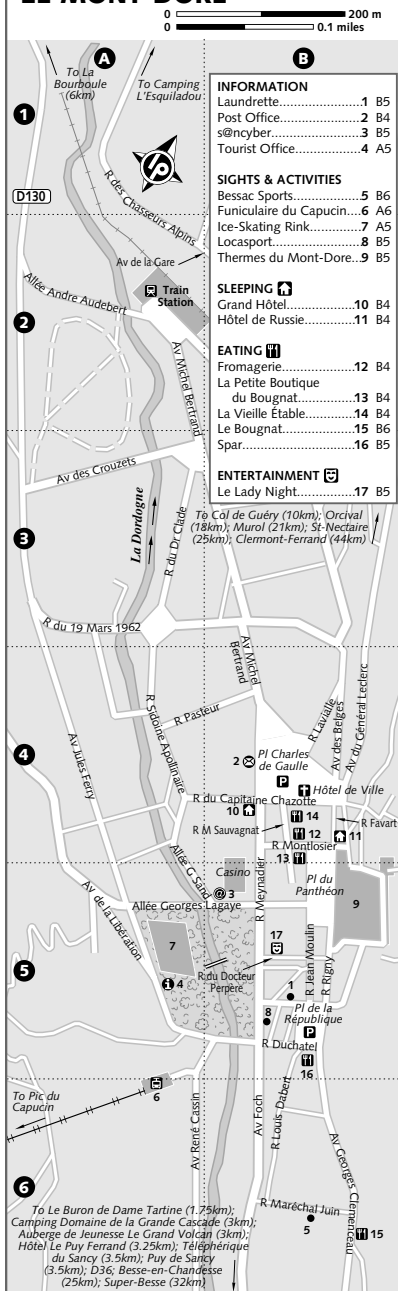
Built in 1898, France's oldest funicular railway (now a historic monument), the **Funiculaire du Capucin** (av René Cassin; single/return €3.30/4.20; 🕒 9.30am–6.40pm Jul–mid-Aug, 10am–12.10pm & 2–5.40pm Wed–Sun mid-May–Jun & mid-Aug–Sep), crawls at 1m per second up to the plateau of Les Capucins, 1270m above town. Various trails lead off the plateau, including the GR30, which wends southward towards the Puy de Sancy, continuing to the Pic du Capucin (1450m; about 45 minutes one way) or dropping steeply back to town.

If the weather's bad, escape to Le Mont-Dore's **ice-skating rink** (☎ 04 73 65 06 55; allée Georges Lagaye; 🕒 Dec–Aug) for a spot of skating (adult/child costs €6.35/5.05) or bowling (after 8pm €5.75, before 8pm €4.70).

SKIING

There are two ski fields near Le Mont-Dore: **Puy de Sancy** and **Super-Besse**, on the mountain's southeastern slopes, encompassing 85km of downhill runs, plus a further 40km of cross-country trails. A joint lift pass costs €24/63 for one/three days (€16.80/44 for children under 12, or €19.40/51 for children 12 to 18 years

LE MONT-DORE



TRAIL CENTRAL

The Massif Central is prime walking country, with a network of well-signed trails and as many as 13 GR tracks (including the north-south **GR4**) criss-crossing the region, supplemented by hundreds of smaller footpaths. Key areas include the Parc des Volcans d'Auvergne and the Monts du Cantal around Murat (p598), roughly circled by the **GR400**, and the mountainous area around Le Mont-Dore (p593), Puy de Sancy, and the Col de Guéry.

Routes range from day hikes to multiweek epics: hard-core hikers tackle the 290km **Traverse of the High Auvergne** through the Chaîne des Puys, via Volvic and the GR4; the **Robert Louis Stevenson Trail** from Monastier-sur-Gazeille via the GR70, tracing the author's famous routes through the Cévennes; and the **Via Podensis** (p602) pilgrimage route from Le Puy-en-Velay.

Good walking guidebooks include Lonely Planet's own *Walking in France*, and the French-language Chamina guidebooks (www.chamina.com), *Week-end dans le Massif Central* and *Week-end en Auvergne*.

There are also some excellent online resources: www.rando-massifcentral.com has a database of more than 400 Massif Central walks (described in French).

old). There are plenty of places to hire kit: try **Bessac Sports** (☎ 04 73 65 02 25; 3 rue Maréchal Juin) or **Locasport** (☎ 04 73 65 29 13; 67 rue Meynadier), which both also hire out mountain bikes and hiking equipment in summer.

WALKING

There are lots of walks around Le Mont-Dore, all superbly signposted and clearly marked on good trail maps such as Chamina's 1:30,000-scale map *Massif du Sancy* (€5.35) or the more extensive Massif du Sancy guidebook (€6.70), which outlines 30 hikes in the area.

CYCLING

You can't avoid the ups and downs (even though the Funiculaire du Capucin does allow bikes on board) but this is still great cycling terrain. The tourist office has a free mountain bike-trail map, *Circuit VTT: Le Mont-Dore Sancy*.

Sleeping

CAMPING

Camping Domaine de la Grande Cascade (☎ 04 73 65 06 23; colon.daniel@orange.fr; rte de Besse; sites for 2 people €10; ☽ Jun-early Sep) At a kilometre up, this campsite is always on the chilly side, but it's a grand spot to pitch a tent, peacefully sited near a 30m waterfall with wondrous views of the surrounding mountains. It's 3km from town on the D36.

Camping L'Esquiladou (☎ 04 73 65 23 74; camping.esquiladou@wanadoo.fr; rte des Cascades; sites for 2 people from €9; ☽ May-mid-Oct) This woody municipal site is less dramatic, but it's handy to town and

the train station, with Le Mont-Dore about 1.5km away along the D996.

HOSTELS & HOTELS

Auberge de Jeunesse Le Grand Volcan (☎ 04 73 65 03 53; le-mont-dore@fuaj.org; rte du Sancy; B&B €15.70; ☽ Dec-mid-Nov; 📺) Always jammed with skiers and hikers, this HI-linked hostel hunkers in the shadow of Puy de Sancy, 3.5km south of town. Two- to six-bed rooms all have their own bathrooms, and fun facilities include ping pong, table football and an in-house bar.

Grand Hôtel (☎ 04 73 65 02 64; www.hotel-mont-dore.com; 2 rue Meynadier; s €42-49, d €52-79, tr €62-69; ☽ mid-Dec-mid-Mar & mid-Apr-mid-Nov; 📺) Come sunshine or snow, this slate-roofed pile hotel is Le Mont-Dore's funkier sleep. Built in 1850, the hotel has been refurbished with imagination and lashings of style: deep-red leather sofas, Chagall-style wall murals and designer lighting in the lobby, plus boutiquey bedrooms with thick duvets, patchwork throws and deep tubs, including a few with balconies. Handmade jams, freshly squeezed juice and minipatisseries for brekkie complete the plush package.

Hôtel de Russie (☎ 04 73 65 05 97; www.lerussie.com; 3 rue Favart; d €49.90-69.90, q €69.90-135; 📺) Carefully modernised with dashes of designer style, this town hotel is a treat, from the scrubbed-up parquet floor and colour-washed walls to reclaimed wood and lobby lanterns. The rooms are lovely, finished in cappuccino browns and ice whites, with luxury touches including rattan furniture, wi-fi and flat-screen TVs: the duplex rooms are brilliant for families.

THIERRY DUPONT: PARAGLIDER

The Massif Central is a paradise for people who love nature and the great outdoors. I've always been into adrenalin sports – I started off skateboarding and BMXing when I was younger, and graduated onto mountain biking and rock climbing later on. But I always wanted to get higher, and I got into paragliding when I was about 17.

I try to get up to the mountains to fly at least twice a month in summer, but I can't always manage that because of work. It's the most amazing feeling, stepping out into the air and catching the currents on the mountain – it's the closest I'll ever come to real flying, unless I manage to grow my own wings! It gives you a whole new way of looking at the world, seeing the land beneath you and the sky above – it makes you feel tiny and massive all at the same time.

Hôtel Le Puy Ferrand (☎ 04 73 65 18 99; www.hotel-puy-ferrand.com; d €62-72, studio flats €72-82; 🏠 late Dec-Oct; 📍) A traditional chalet-style ski hotel, a quick stomp from the Puy de Sancy cable car. Wood-clad walls create the alpine atmosphere, and for skiers travelling *en famille* there are self-contained flats with kitchens, as well as a sauna, ski-drying room and a homely Savoyard restaurant.

Le Buron de Dame Tartine (☎ 04 73 65 28 40; www.auberge-dame-tartine.com; rte du Sancy; d €65-80, menus €18-32) This renovated *buron* (shepherd's hut) serves mountain recipes, including *truffade* (see p600) and *tartiflette* (a potato, cheese and meat gratin), in a suitably countrified setting. Stout stone, rough brick and hefty rafters fill the dining room, and the same rustic feel runs into the four rooms, with stripped pine furniture, polished floors and to-die-for mountain views.

Eating

Lots of Le Mont-Dore's hotels offer half board, often compulsory during ski season.

La Vieille Étable (☎ 04 73 65 20 49; rue Maurice Sauvagnat; mains €13-18) Rich mountain food and Auvergnat recipes rule the roost at this country crêperie, perennially popular for its fondues and *aligot* (see p600), as well as its house-special galettes – try the Montdorienne (with Auvergnat ham and *bleu d'Auvergne* cheese).

Le Bougnat (☎ 04 73 65 28 19; av Georges Clemenceau; mains €13.50-19) Hearty mountain dishes are the order of the day at this Savoyard-style restaurant, with stews and fondues served up at solid wooden tables.

SELF-CATERING

La Petite Boutique du Bougnat (1 rue Montlosier) sells a smorgasbord of local goodies, including sausages, hams and Auvergnat wine, with

cheeses available at the **fromagerie** (rue Montlosier; 🏠 9.30am-12.30pm & 3-7pm Mon-Sat) across the street. There's also a **Spar** (rue Duchatel; 🏠 7.30am-12.30pm & 3-7.15pm Mon-Sat).

Drinking & Entertainment

Le Lady Night (☎ 04 73 65 06 43; rue du Docteur Perpère; 🏠 11pm-5am Fri-Sun, 10pm-5am daily in high season) This dubiously named nightclub is the town's main *après-ski* joint, but it's supercheesy – expect chunky chart tunes and cheap booze aplenty.

Getting There & Around

From the sleepy train station, you can reach Clermont-Ferrand (€11.70, 1¼ hours, around six daily including some that change at Laqueuille) with connections to Paris' Gare de Lyon (€54.80, 5½ hours).

In winter, a free skiers' *navette* (shuttle bus) plies regularly between Le Mont-Dore and the Sancy cable car.

AROUND LE MONT-DORE**La Bourboule**

Seven kilometres downriver from Le Mont-Dore, **La Bourboule** is another well-heeled spa resort known for its hot-water **thermes** (☎ 04 73 81 21 00; www.grandsthermes-bourboule.com), rinky-dink casino and faded belle-époque buildings. Sometimes known as '*la station oxygène*', it's a lovely place to stroll the boulevards and drink in the clear mountain air. From the landscaped **Parc Fenestre**, filled with giant sequoias, pine trees and open-air games, you can catch a *téléferique* up the **Plateau de Charlannes** (1300m) to lots of summer hiking trails.

The **tourist office** (☎ 04 73 65 57 71; www.sancy.com; place de la République; 🏠 9am-7pm Mon-Sat Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 1.30-6pm Mon-Sat Sep-Jun) is in the Hôtel de Ville.

If you're staying, the **Hôtel Le Parc des Fées** (☎ 04 73 81 01 77; www.parcdesfees.com; 107 quai

Maréchal-Fayolle; s €49-56, d €61-67; ☒ (P) is a superior choice, mixing metro furnishings with belle-époque architecture: leather armchairs and potted plants in the lobby, a dedicated playroom for the kids, and cool shades in the rooms (insist on one with Puy de Sancy views). Wheelchair accessible.

Le Pavillon (☎ 04 73 65 50 18; www.hotellepavillon.fr; 209 av de l'Angleterre; d €47-62; ☒ (P)) Art-deco architecture meets boutique tweaks at this smooth hotel, offering recently redone rooms tweaked with caramel colours, soft lighting and plush throws, as well as a zingy **restaurant** (☺ dinner Fri, Sat & Mon, lunch Sat & Mon) and a book-filled lounge where you can curl up with coffee and magazines.

The train to Le Mont-Dore (€1.50, 10 daily) takes just eight minutes, with connections onto Clermont-Ferrand.

Muroil & Lac Chambon

About 10km east of Le Mont-Dore, the 12th-century **Château de Muroil** (☎ 04 73 88 67 11; adult/4-15yr €7.50/6; ☺ Sun-Tue, Thu & Fri Jun-Aug, Mon, Tue, Thu & Fri May, Tue & Thu Mar, Apr, Sep & Oct) squats on a knoll above the surrounding village. Once owned by both the Muroil and d'Estaing families, it's worth visiting for the intriguing keep and chapels, as well as the medieval guided tours, when costumed guides, scullery maids and jesters recreate daily life in the castle, and knights knock lumps out of each other beneath the keep. You'll need to book your places: there are usually five daily tours in summer, dropping to two or three in the low season.

About 1.5km west of Muroil is the popular water-sports playground of **Lac Chambon**, where you can rent out canoes and windsurf boards from several operators along the lakeshore.

Besse-en-Chandesse & Around

Lava-brick cottages and cobbled lanes make up the mountain village of **Besse-en-Chandesse**, 25km southeast of Le Mont-Dore, where life still ticks along at a laid-back country pace. Apart from its basalt architecture, best seen along the rue de la Boucherie, Besse is known for its *fromage* – a hefty proportion of the region's St-Nectaire cheese is produced on the surrounding mountain slopes. The town is also home to a small **ski museum** (☎ 04 73 79 57 30; admission €2.50; ☺ 9am-noon & 2-7pm school holidays), where you can browse vintage skis and Old World alpine kit.

The most interesting time to visit is during the **Transhumance de la Vierge Noire**, which marks the move of the local cow herds to and from the rich upland pastures on 21 July and the first Sunday after 21 September. To mark the occasion, the local Black Madonna is paraded from the Église St-André in Besse to La Vassivière chapel, near **Lac Pavin**, about 4km west of Besse, accompanied by street fairs and fireworks.

The popular ski resort of **Super-Besse** is about 7km west of the village, accessible by the D978 or via the GR30 trail in summer, with an optional detour to the summit of **Puy de Montchal** (1407m). A further 13.5km south along the D978 is **Eglise-neuve-d'Entraigues**, where you can wander around displays and demonstrations of traditional cheesemaking at the quirky **Maison du Fromage** (☎ 04 73 71 93 69; place du Foirail; admission €3.50; ☺ 10am-12.30pm & 2.30-7pm Wed-Mon Jul & Aug, 2-6pm Wed-Sun end Jun & early Sep).

St-Nectaire

Six kilometres to the east of Muroil is **St-Nectaire**, stretched out along the river beside the D996 road. The village is split into two sections: modern **St-Nectaire-Le-Bas**, with a smattering of belle-époque buildings left from the town's former incarnation as a spa resort; and the much older **St-Nectaire-Le-Haut**, reached via a steep switchback lane from the main road. Despite its well-known name, St-Nectaire's cheesemaking heyday has long since passed, and these days most of the famous *fromage* is produced by large dairy operations elsewhere in the Auvergne.

St-Nectaire's main architectural sight is the Romanesque **church** (☺ 9am-7pm Apr-Oct, 10am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Nov-Mar) in the upper village, famed for its multicoloured capitals and a fine 12th-century statue of the Virgin. You can also visit the remains of the town's Roman baths at the **Grottes du Cornadore** (☎ 04 73 88 57 97; adult/6-12yr €6.20/4.70; ☺ mid-Feb-Oct), and the interconnecting caves and medieval frescoes of the **Site Troglodyte de Jonas** (☎ 04 73 88 57 98; adult/6-12yr €6.20/4.70; ☺ daily mid-Jun-mid-Sep, Feb & Easter holidays, weekends in May, early Jun & Oct), 6km south of town.

St-Nectaire's hotels include an improbably huge Mercure, but a much better option is **Villa St-Hubert** (☎ 04 73 88 41 30; www.villasthubert.com; St-Nectaire-Le-Haut; d €40-72; (P)), a deluxe *chambre d'hôte* in a lavish mansion built by a Parisian émigré in the 17th century. It's an

LE CHASTEL MONTAIGU

Ever fancied staying in a fairy-tale castle? Then try this fabulously over-the-top **château** (☎ 04 73 96 28 49; www.lechastelmontaigu.com; Montaigu-le-Blanc; r €125; ☒ P) with its very own private hilltop. Rebuilt from ruins using authentic medieval materials, it's a regal residence through and through. Heavy stone, rich fabrics and antique wall hangings fill the four bewitching rooms, which range from the smallest Chambre Guerin (with rustic-tiled bathroom and reclaimed font sinks) to the palatial Chambre des Templiers, complete with its own private turret terrace. Needless to say, every room has blindingly good views across the valley, and you'll feel like a true *seigneur* wandering around the spiral staircases and medieval terraces. Montaigu-le-Blanc is 11km east of St-Nectaire on the D996.

utter spoil – patterned wallpaper, delicate lighting and deep, soft beds in the rooms, a gorgeous chestnut-shaded garden out back, and a seriously opulent dining room lit by chandeliers and a roaring hearth where you can tuck into local dishes courtesy of your hosts. *Oh là là*.

MURAT

pop 2300 / elevation 930m

Tumbling down a steep basalt crag topped by a statue of the Virgin Mary, Murat is an excellent base for exploring the Monts du Cantal. With a cluster of dark stone houses huddled beneath the Rocher Bonnevie, it's one of the prettiest towns in the Cantal and a popular hiking centre. To the west are the three lofty peaks of **Puy Mary** (1787m), **Plomb du Cantal** (1855m) and **Puy de Perse-Arse** (1686m), the last remnants of an exploded supervolcano that once covered the Cantal Massif.

Information

The **tourist office** (☎ 04 71 20 09 47; www.officedetourismepaysdemurat.com; 2 rue du Faubourg Notre-Dame; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 1.30-7pm Mon-Sat, 9.30am-12.30pm & 2.30-6.30pm Sun Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat & 10am-noon Sun Sep-Jun) is near the town hall, and has lots of info on walks and activities in the Cantal area.

Sights & Activities

Murat's fine old town, with its twisting streets and wonky stone cottages, makes a lovely afternoon stroll. The tourist office has an audioguide and pamphlet describing a good walking route, but for the best views you'll need to brave the lung-busting climb up to the top of the **Rocher Bonnevie**. Local fitness freaks often hold races up to the top, but ordinary mortals reach the summit after about 45 minutes. Follow the red-and-white

GR flashes northwestwards out of town, followed by signs for the Rocher.

Down in the town itself, the **Église Notre-Dame-des-Oliviers** is worth a look for its 15th-century bell tower and *Vierge Noire*, typical of many in the Auvergne. Budding entomologists will make a beeline for the **Maison de la Faune** (☎ 04 71 20 00 52; just above place de l'Hôtel de Ville; adult/child €4/2.50; ☎ 10am-noon & 3-5pm Mon-Sat, 2-6pm Sun), which houses over 10,000 insects, butterflies and stuffed beasts from the Auvergne to the Amazon.

Sleeping & Eating

Camping Municipal Stalapos (☎ 04 71 20 01 83; rue du Stade; sites from €6; ☎ May-Sep) Beside the Alagnon River, this attractive campsite is 750m south of the train station. Look out for food and folklore nights in high summer.

Aux Globe-Trotters (☎ 04 71 20 07 22; www.murat-hoteltrotters.com; r €35-41; ☎) The best budget choice by miles, this cosy place has a choice of brightly shaded rooms, some jammed up into the top-floor rafters, some overlooking the hotel garden, and some facing the lively street. All are cute and colourful, with plain pine and a choice of tub or shower.

Auberge de Maître Paul (☎ 04 71 20 14 66; www.auberge-paul.fr; 14 place du Planol; s €40, d €50-55, tr €65-70; ☎ closed last week Jun & 1st week Nov; ☒) In the middle of Murat, this jovial *gîte* is an old favourite for hikers and family travellers, with plain, peach-and-yellow rooms spread around the creaky corridors of a 16th-century house. It's warm, welcoming and child-friendly, with a reliable Auvergnat restaurant and planet-sized pizzas for the nippers. If you're hiking, ask nicely and the owner might even ferry your bags to the next stop.

Hostellerie Les Breuils (☎ 04 71 20 01 25; www.hostellerie-les-breuils.com; 34 av du Docteur Mallet; r €65-76.50; ☎ Feb & mid-May-Oct; ☎) Covered with slate

tiles and gabled windows, this 19th-century *maison bourgeoise* is crammed from top to bottom with Old World rooms, resplendent with polished floors, sleigh beds and original fireplaces (as well as original family furniture). Some have interconnecting doorways (perfect for travellers *en famille*). There's even a heated pool and a sauna.

Near the tourist office, **Caldera** (3 rue Justin Vigier) sells local cheese, cold cuts, honey, jam and liqueur.

Getting There & Around

Murat has northerly train connections to Clermont-Ferrand (€17, 1¼ hours, six daily), and in the opposite direction to Aurillac (€7.90, 45 minutes).

The countryside makes for splendid, if taxing, cycling. Both **Loisirs et Deux Roues** (☎ 04 71 20 06 54; rue Bon Secours) and **Ô P'tit Montagnard** (☎ 04 71 20 28 40; rue Faubourg Notre Dame) rent reliable machines.

PARC NATUREL RÉGIONAL LIVRADOIS-FOREZ

Blanketed in pine forest and hilly uplands, the nature park of Livradois-Forez is one of the largest protected areas in France, stretching from the plains of Limagne in the west to the Monts du Forez in the east. Formerly a centre for logging and agriculture, it's now a haven for nature-lovers and weekend walkers, but you'll need your own wheels to get around.

The **park information office** (☎ 04 73 95 57 57; www.parc-livradois-forez.org, in French; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 1.30-7pm Mon-Fri, 3-7pm Sat & Sun May-Sep, 9am-12.30pm & 1.30-5.30pm Mon-Fri Oct-Apr) is off the D906 in St-Gervais-sous-Meymont. It's stocked with leaflets, including the *Route des Métiers* (The Cottage-Industry Trail), detailing local honey shops, lace-makers and perfumers, and the *Guide de la Randonnée et des Loisirs de Plein Air*, indicating walking trails and mountain-bike routes linked in with IGN (Institut Géographique National) topoguides.

Getting Around

A lovely **train touristique** (☎ 04 73 82 43 88; http://pag.esperso-orange.fr/..agrivap/; ☎ Jul & Aug) runs through the park between Courpière (15km south of

Thiers) via Ambert to La Chaise-Dieu. There are a couple of routes, either aboard a double-decker *train panoramique* or a vintage steam train; contact the park office or the Ambert tourist office for details.

THIERS

pop 14,000 / elevation 420m

Hovering on the hillside above the Gorges de la Durolle, the industrial town of Thiers is the undisputed capital of French cutlery. For centuries this sober town has been churning out pocket knives and tableware, and though the industry has fallen on hard times, the town still produces some 70% of the nation's knives.

For an overview head for the **Musée de la Coutellerie** (Cutlery Museum; ☎ 04 73 80 58 86; 23 & 58 rue de la Coutellerie; adult/child Jun-Sep €6.30/2.70, Oct-May €5/2.50; ☎ 10am-12.30pm & 1.30-7pm Jul & Aug, 10am-noon & 2-6pm Jun & Sep, 10am-noon & 2-6pm Tue-Sun Oct-May), which is split over two buildings along rue de la Coutellerie. No 23 explores the historical side of cutlery-making, while No 58 houses the museum's unparalleled collection of knives past and present.

About 4km upstream from Thiers is the **Vallée des Rouets** (Valley of the Waterwheels; ☎ noon-7pm Jul & Aug, noon-6pm Tue-Sun Jun & Sep), an open-air museum dedicated to the knife-makers who once toiled here in front of water-driven grindstones. The admission price includes a ticket for the shuttle-bus trip from the town museum.

If you fancy picking up your own shiny souvenir, there are lots of knife-sellers dotted round the town's medieval streets – ask at the friendly **tourist office** (☎ 04 73 80 65 65; www.tourisme-thiers.fr, in French; 1 place du Pirou; ☎ 9am-1pm & 1.30-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-noon & 2-6pm Sun mid-Jun–mid-Sep, 9.30am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat mid-Sep–mid-Jun) for recommended shops.

Thiers isn't worth staying in overnight – it's easily reached by train from Clermont-Ferrand (€7.70, 45 minutes, every two hours).

AMBERT

pop 7700

In the 16th century, Ambert, 30km north of La Chaise-Dieu, boasted more than 300 water-powered mills supplying the demands of the French paper industry, but the town is better-known today as an agricultural centre and the spiritual home of one of the Auvergne's classic cheeses, Fourme d'Ambert.

The **tourist office** (☎ 04 73 82 61 90; www.tourisme.fr/office-de-tourisme/ambert.htm; 4 place de l'Hôtel de

COUNTRY COOKERY

Unsurprisingly for a region covered by so much lush green grass, the Auvergne has a long tradition of producing some of France's finest cheeses. The region has five AOC (Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée) cheeses: the semihard, cheddarlike **Cantal** and premium-quality **Salers**, both made from the milk of high-pasture cows; **St-Nectaire**, rich, flat and semi-soft; **Fourme d'Ambert**, a mild, smooth blue cheese; and **Bleu d'Auvergne**, a powerful, creamy blue cheese with a Roquefort-like flavour. For more info check out www.fromages-aoc-auvergne.com.

The Auvergne's traditional dishes include **aligot** (puréed potato with garlic and Tomme cheese), **truffade** (sliced potatoes with Cantal cheese), **chou farci** (cabbage stuffed with pork or beef) and **potée Auvergnate**, a rich bean, pork and vegetable soup-stew. There's also another AOC label to look out for, the **lentille verte de Puy** (green Puy lentil), often used in local sauces and stews.

Ville; (☎) 9.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-noon Sun Jun-Sep, 10am-12.30pm & 2-5pm Tue-Sat Oct-May) is opposite the Hôtel de Ville.

You can explore the town's paper-making past at the **Moulin Richard de Bas** (☎ 04 73 82 03 11; adult/child €5.50/3.60; (☎) 9am-8pm Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Sep-Jun), a restored 14th-century mill where paper is still made using strictly traditional techniques. It's 4km out of town on the D57.

Cheese connoisseurs will prefer the small **Maison de la Fourme d'Ambert** (☎ 04 73 82 49 23; 29 rue des Chazeaux; adult/child €4.60/3.70; (☎) 9am-7pm Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-7pm Sep, 9am-noon & 2-7pm Tue & Thu-Sat Oct-Dec, Feb & Mar, 9am-noon & 2-7pm Tue-Sat Apr-Jun), with displays on the history and manufacture of the town's trademark *fromage*.

The Thursday morning **market** is popular with local organic farmers, and it's also a great place to pick up Auvergnat cheeses.

LA CHAISE-DIEU

The sleepy village of La Chaise-Dieu, 42km north of Le Puy-en-Velay, is famed for its monumental church, the **Église Abbatiale de St-Robert** ((☎) 9am-noon & 2-7pm Jun-Sep, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Oct-May), built in the 14th century atop an earlier abbey chapel by Pope Clement VI, who served here as a novice monk.

Most of the sights are in the **Chœur de l'Église** (adult/under 7yr €3.70/1); the ticket office is through the right-hand door as you enter the cathedral, and left along the old cloister. Highlights include the massive 18th-century organ, Clement VI's marble tomb and some fine 16th-century Flemish tapestries, but the most celebrated relic is the chilling **Danse Macabre**, a weird fresco in which Death dances a mocking jig around members of 15th-century society. The church is also the centre for La Chaise-

Dieu's renowned **festival of sacred music**, held in late August.

Behind the cathedral is the **Salle de l'Echo** – an architectural oddity that allows people on opposite sides of the room to hear each other talking, rather like the Whispering Gallery in St Paul's; legend has it that the gallery was built to enable monks to hear lepers' confessions without contracting the dread disease.

Hotel de l'Echo (☎ 04 71 00 00 45; fax 04 71 00 00 22; place de l'Echo; menus €17, €29 & €46, d €49-70; (P)), peacefully positioned behind the cathedral in a refurbished stone town house, with prim rooms overlooking the square and the church, has a hearty restaurant lodged inside the old abbey kitchens.

Alternatively, **La Jacquerolle** (☎ 04 71 00 07 52; www.lajacquerolle.com; rue Marchédial; s €52, d €57-60) is a cute-as-a-button B&B run by a mother-and-daughter team, full of frilly rooms (all named after flowers) characterised by plush quilts, antique furniture and wood-panelled walls.

LE PUY-EN-VELAY

pop 22,000 / elevation 630m

Cradled at the base of a broad mountain valley, the lively town of Le Puy-en-Velay is one of the most striking sights in central France. Three volcanic pillars thrust skywards from the town's terracotta rooftops, crowned with Le Puy's trio of ecclesiastical landmarks: a 10th-century church, a soaring Romanesque cathedral and a massive cast-iron statue of the Virgin Mary and Child, which has stood watch above the town since 1860. Down in Le Puy itself, you'll discover a beautifully preserved old city and plenty of shops selling the town's trademark exports: lace and lentils.

LE PUY-EN-VELAY

0 300 m
 0 0.2 miles

	SLEEPING	Le Bistrot.....(see 25)	
1	INFORMATION	Auberge de Jeunesse.....12 C4	Le Croco.....22 B5
	Cyb'Air.....1 C4	Camping Bouthezard.....13 A2	
	Laundrette.....2 C5	Dyke Hôtel.....14 C5	DRINKING
	Main Post Office.....3 C5	Hôtel Bristol.....15 C6	King's Head.....23 A4
	Tourist Office.....4 B4	Hôtel Le Régina.....16 C5	La Distillerie.....24 B5
		Hôtel St-Jacques.....17 C4	Le Bistrot.....25 B5
2	SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES	EATING 	SHOPPING
	Cathédrale Notre Dame.....5 B4	Comme à la Maison.....18 B4	Boutique de la Lentille Verte du Puy.....26 B4
	Centre d'Enseignement de la Dentelle au Fuseau.....6 B4	Covered Market.....19 A4	Les Portraits du Velay.....27 B4
	Chapelle St-Michel d'Aiguilhe.....7 B2	Entrez Les Artistes.....20 A4	
	Children's Zoo.....8 B6	Fromagerie Coulaud (see 19)	TRANSPORT
	Cloister.....9 B4	Lapierre.....21 A5	Bus Stop.....28 B5
	Musée Crozatier.....10 B6		
	Rocher Corneille Entrance.....11 B3		

To Hôtel L'Ermitage (3km); N102 & Forteresse de Polignac (5km); Clermont-Ferrand (130km); Vichy (165km)
 To St-Germain Laprade & La Distillerie de la Verveine du Velay (6km); Le Monastier-sur-Gazeille (21km); N88 & St-Étienne (75km); Lyon (135km)
 To D589 & Monistrol d'Allier (25km); & D590
 To N88 & Mende (89km); Nîmes (185km)

Orientation

North of the main square, place du Breuil, lies the pedestrianised old city, its narrow streets leading uphill to the cathedral. Le Puy's commercial centre is around the Hôtel de Ville and between bd Maréchal Fayolle and rue Chaussade.

Information

Cyb'Aire (17 rue Général Lafayette; per hr €3.50;

☎ 11am-11pm Mon-Sat, 3-7pm Sun Jul & Aug, 11am-9pm Mon-Sat, 3-7pm Sun Sep-Jun) Internet access.

Laundrette (24 rue Portail d'Avignon; ☎ 8am-7.30pm)

Main Post Office (8 av de la Dentelle)

Tourist Office (☎ 04 71 09 38 41; www.ot-lepuy-envelay.fr; 2 place du Clauzel; ☎ 8.30am-7.30pm Jul & Aug, 8.30am-noon & 1.30-6.15pm Easter-Jun & Sep, 8.30am-noon & 1.30-6.15pm Mon-Sat, 10am-noon Sun Oct-Easter) Has several walking-tour leaflets and sells the four-site pass (see boxed text, opposite).

Sights & Activities

Le Puy has been a focal point for pilgrims for over a millennium, especially for penitents following the Via Podensis from Santiago de Compostela (see boxed text, below): the town was the last stop on their arduous 736km trek. The 11th-century **Cathédrale Notre Dame** must

have made a dramatic finale, with its multi-storeyed facade, soaring pillars, Romanesque archways and Byzantine domes, reached after a steep cobbled climb up rue des Tables. The frescoed portal is framed by porphyry columns shipped in from Egypt: inside, you'll find a statue of St Jacques, patron saint of Compostela pilgrims, and an eerie Vierge Noire (Black Madonna), one of the most famous in the Auvergne. The 12th-century **doister** (adult/18-25yr/under 18yr €5/3.50/free; ☎ 9am-6.30pm Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-6.30pm mid-May-Jun & Sep, to 5pm Oct-mid-May) indicates the cathedral's Moorish influences, with its multicoloured bricks and columns.

The cobbled streets around the cathedral are lined with medieval and Renaissance houses: keep your eyes peeled for sacred statues and saintly figurines tucked into niches in many of the houses. Rue Chaussade, rue du Collège, rue Porte Aiguère and rue Pannessac are all worth exploring.

North along rue du Cloître is the 757m pillar of **Rocher Corneille** (adult/child €3/1.50; ☎ 9am-6pm or 7pm mid-Mar-Sep, 10am-5pm Oct-mid-Nov & Feb-mid-Mar), topped by Le Puy's answer to the Statue of Liberty: the 16m-high rust-red figure of **Notre Dame de France** (aka the Virgin Mary),

THE VIA PODENSIS

Ever since the 9th century, when a hermit named Pelayo stumbled across the tomb of the apostle James (brother of John the Evangelist), the Spanish town of Santiago de Compostela has been one of the holiest sites in Christendom and an irresistible magnet for perambulating pilgrims from across Europe.

The pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela is traditionally known as the Camiño de Santiago (Way of St James in English). There are many different routes from London, Germany and Italy, as well as four that cross the French mainland. But the oldest (and most popular) French route is the 736km **Via Podensis** from Le Puy-en-Velay via Figeac (p645), Cahors (p639), Moissac and Rocamadour (p647). Established in AD 951 by Le Puy's first bishop, Godescalc, it became one of the most popular pilgrimage routes during the 12th and 13th centuries, and still attracts thousands of people every year.

Early pilgrims were inspired to undertake the arduous journey in exchange for fewer years in purgatory, but for modern-day pilgrims the reward is more tangible – walkers or horse-riders who complete the final 100km to Santiago (cyclists the final 200km) qualify for a unique Compostela Certificate, issued on arrival at the cathedral.

The modern-day **GR36** roughly follows the Via Podensis route, IGN publishes a good all-round *carte touristique* (tourist map), *Les Chemins vers St-Jacques de Compostelle* (No 922; €5), but you'll need good topographic maps if you're going off road. There are plenty of organisations to help you plan your adventure: contact the **Association de Coopération Interrégionale: Les Chemins de Saint-Jacques de Compostelle** (☎ 05 62 27 00 05; www.chemins-compostelle.com; 4 rue Clémence Isaure, Toulouse), the tourist office in Le Puy (above), or check out the useful online guides at www.webcompostella.com and www.csj.org.uk.

fashioned from cannons captured during the Crimean War. Inside the statue, a creaky spiral staircase winds its way to the top, with tiny portholes affording vertiginous views over the town's rooftops.

Further north is the **Chapelle St-Michel d'Aiguilhe** (adult/child €2.75/2.25; ☎ 9am-6.45pm Jul & Aug, 9am-6.30pm May, Jun & Sep, 9.30am-noon & 2-5.30pm mid-Mar-Apr & Oct-mid-Nov, 2-5pm Feb-mid-Mar & Christmas holidays), Le Puy's oldest chapel, perched atop another 85m-high volcanic plug reached via a 268-step staircase. Stepping inside feels like a lost scene from *Indiana Jones* – the chapel follows the natural contours of the rock, and the simple architecture, strange carvings and 12th-century frescos create an otherworldly atmosphere. Established by Bishop Godescalc in the 10th century, the chapel was rebuilt in the 12th, 14th and 19th centuries.

At the southern end of the Jardin Henri Vinay is **Musée Crozatier** (☎ 04 71 06 62 40; adult/child €3.20/free; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-6pm Wed-Mon Feb-Nov), founded by Puy-born sculptor Charles Crozatier (1795–1855). Its hotchpotch of artefacts range from dinosaur bones and Dutch paintings to Le Puy lace and the first 'praxinoscope', an image-projecting machine that predated modern-day cinema.

Le Puy's great lace industry has fallen on hard times: in its heyday, there were over 5000 lace workshops in the Haute-Loire, but only a handful now remain. You can learn more (and even take a crash course) at the **Centre d'Enseignement de la Dentelle au Fuseau** (☎ 04 71 02 01 68; www.ladentelledupuy.com; 38-40 rue Raphaël; adult/under 10yr €3.50/free; ☎ 8.30-11.30am & 1.30-5pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-4.30pm Sat).

Along with its lentils and lace, Le Puy is famous for its very own fiery-green liqueur, Verveine, invented in 1859. **La Distillerie de la Verveine du Velay** (☎ 04 71 03 04 11; www.verveine.com; 45min tour adult/student/child €5.80/4.20/2; ☎ 10am-12.30pm & 1.30-6.30pm Jul & Aug, 10am-noon & 1.30-6.30pm Tue-Sat Mar-Jun & Sep-Dec, 1.30-4.30pm Tue-Sat Jan & Feb) is 6km east along the N88 in St-Germain Laprade.

Festivals & Events

Le Puy's annual four-day street party, the **Fête du Roi de l'Oiseau** (www.roideloiseau.com) takes place in mid-September. The tradition dates back to 1524, when the title of King (*Roi*) was bestowed on the first archer to shoot down a straw *oiseau* (bird) in return for

PILGRIM'S PASS

Le Puy's four major sites (the cathedral, the Rocher Corneille, the Chapelle St-Michel d'Aiguilhe and the Musée Crozatier) can be visited on a joint **museum pass** (€8). You can buy it at any of the sites or from the tourist office.

a year's exemption from taxes, but these days it's just an excuse for an annual bash full of music, cinema, street theatre and outlandish costumes.

Altogether less raucous are Le Puy's **Latin Music Festival**, held in mid-July, and the weeklong folk festival, **Interfolk**, at the end of July.

Sleeping

Auberge de Jeunesse (☎ 04 71 05 52 40; auberge.jeunesse@mairie-le-puy-en-velay.fr; 9 rue Jules Vallès; dm €10.50; ☎ daily Easter-Nov, Mon-Fri Nov-Easter) Inside a former convent, this HI hostel is typically well run, with a choice of four-bed rooms or boarding-school 20-bed dorms, but the titchy kitchen feels cramped when it's busy with summer hikers.

Camping Bouthezard (Camping Le Puy-en-Velay; ☎ 04 71 09 55 09; chemin de Bouthezard; sites €12; ☎ Easter-Sep) Le Puy's campsite enjoys an attractive berth beside the River Borne. Bus 6 delivers you outside.

Dyke Hôtel (☎ 04 71 09 05 30; dykehotel@wanadoo.fr; 37 bd Maréchal Foyolle; s €36, d €40-48) Despite the curious choice of name (which refers to a volcanic pillar, in case you're wondering), this small hotel is efficient if unexciting. Downstairs there's a café-bar; upstairs there are clean, modernish rooms of varying dimensions, all with bathrooms and some with balconies onto the (very) busy road.

Hôtel St-Jacques (☎ 04 71 07 20 40; www.hotel-saint-jacques.com; 7 place Cadelade; s €40-50, d €55-65; ☎ Feb-Dec; ☎) It's showing its age, but this intimate little hotel is a good budget base. Spread over four floors, the pick of the rooms have wood floors, dinky bathrooms and views of the square, with a patio café for summer brekkie. Wi-fi's free.

Hôtel Bristol (☎ 04 71 09 13 38; www.hotel-bristol-lepuy.com; 7-9 av Maréchal Foch; s €48-58, d €58-70; ☎) Typically solid Logis de France, with 40 businessy rooms around a small

garden-cum-car-park, plus a smart restaurant filled with brass fixtures and leather armchairs. The ones in the rear annexe are roomier and smarter; ask for the top floor for rooftop views. Wi-fi and parking on site.

Hôtel L'Ermitage (☎ 04 71 07 05 05; <http://hotel-ermitage.perso.cegetel.net>; 75 av de l'Ermitage; d €50-75; ☒ (P)) Modern, corporate-style hotel 3km from the centre, with a selection of boxy rooms that are on the bland side (laminated floors, generic furnishings, small TVs), but with the bonus of views of the hotel garden or across the valley and town.

Hôtel Le Régina (☎ 04 71 09 14 71; www.hotelrest-regina.com; 34 bd Maréchal Fayolle; s €53, d €60-110; ☒ ☒) Topped by a neon-lit art-deco turret, the Régina's rooms range from old and shabby to modern and swish, with a considerable difference in quality depending on price. The off-street rooms are much quieter, but the *appartements* are the plushiest, with stripped wood, contemporary furnishings and separate office suites. There's wi-fi (free), parking (€6.50) and a refined restaurant complete with grand piano (mains €17 to €24).

Eating

Le Bistrot (☎ 04 71 02 27 08; 7 place de la Halle; mains €9.50-15; ☒ Tue-Sat) Brasserie staples are served with a Gallic shrug at this occasionally sham-bolic bistro-bar. Steaks, casseroles and lentil stews are chalked up daily, and you can choose from lots of world beers while you tuck in at the patio tables.

Entre les Artistes (☎ 04 71 09 71 78; 29 rue Pannessac; mains €10-20; ☒ lunch Tue-Sat, dinner Thu-Sun) Frilly and irresistibly feminine, this cosy place is decorated with quirky style and lashings of local lace. Good, solid local dishes served up in simple style – nothing too fancy, but dead filling.

Le Croco (☎ 04 71 02 40 13; 5 rue Chaussade; mains €12.50-14.10; ☒ Tue-Sat) The cute Croco specialises in huge salads and veggie platters featuring Auvergnat ingredients (including Bleu d'Auvergne, Cantal and *chèvre chaud*).

Lapierre (☎ 04 71 09 08 44; 6 rue des Capucins; menus €18-28, mains around €15; ☒ Mon-Sat) A much-recommended Auvergnat restaurant run by a talented female chef, Estelle Lapierre. The atmosphere's posh and prissy, with lacy lampshades, fresh plants and razor-sharp napkins dotted around and top-notch traditional food – expect hearty meat, fish and cheese dishes, and handmade desserts featuring a *souçon* of Verveine.

our pick Comme à la Maison (☎ 04 71 02 94 73; rue Séguret; menus €22-39; ☒ lunch Tue-Fri & Sun, dinner Tue-Sat) This little restaurant is easy to miss, but if you manage to find it, you'll be rewarded with Le Puy's most adventurous food, created by up-and-coming chef Guillaume Fourcade. Inventive dishes such as fennel-and-mackerel tart or foie gras with dried fruit are served in a funky dining room blending old architecture with bold colours. Excellent and bang up to date.

SELF-CATERING

Le Puy's weekly market takes over place du Plot and nearby streets every Saturday morning, or there's a **covered market** just off rue Grenouillit. **Fromagerie Coulaud** (24 rue Grenouillit; ☒ Tue-Sat) sells a good selection of local cheeses.

Drinking

Le Puy has plenty of places for a quiet café or a late-night Kronenbourg. One of the best is **La Distillerie** (29 place du Breuil; ☒ till 1am or 2am Mon-Sat), a traditional boozer filled with upturned beer barrels and a decommissioned still.

Le Bistrot (place de la Halle; ☒ Tue-Sat) packs in a loyal local crowd for its extensive beer selection, as does the **King's Head** (place du Marché Couvert; ☒ till 1am Tue-Sat), an English-style pub run by a friendly Anglo-Saxon owner.

Shopping

The two souvenirs to pick up in Le Puy are (obviously) lace and lentils. Several shops sell handmade lace, including **Les Portraits du Velay** (☎ 04 71 06 00 94; www.dentelledupuy.com, in French; 10 rue Raphaël), while you can pick up authentic AOC lentils at the local market or the **Boutique de la Lentille Verte du Puy** (☎ 04 71 02 60 44; 23 rue des Tables; ☒ Jul & Aug).

Getting There & Away

Le Puy's bus connections are pretty limited and practically nonexistent during school holidays, so you're far better off catching the train. Connections to the **train station** (av Charles Dupuy) include Lyon (€19.90, 2½ hours, three to five daily) via St-Étienne and Clermont-Ferrand (€20.10, two hours, four to six direct).

Getting Around

All five lines of the local TUDIP buses (single ticket/10-trip carnet €1.10/7.50) stop at place Michelet.

For a taxi call ☎ 04 71 05 42 43.

AROUND LE PUY-EN-VELAY

Fortresse de Polignac

Five kilometres northwest from Le Puy is the château of **Polignac** (☎ 04 71 04 06 04; adult/6-18yr €5/3; ☞ 9am-7pm Jun-mid-Sep, 10am-12.30pm & 1.30-6.30pm Tue-Sun Apr, May & mid-Sep-mid-Nov), built in the 11th century by the powerful Polignac family, who once controlled access to the city from the north. Perched atop another volcanic dome, the castle is ringed by a practically continuous wall dotted with lookout towers and a 32m-high rectangular keep at the castle's highest point.

Gorges de l'Allier

About 30km west of Le Puy, the salmon-filled Allier River – paralleled by the scenic Clermont-Ferrand-Nîmes rail line – weaves between rocky, scrub-covered hills and steep cliffs. Above the river's east bank, the narrow D301 gives fine views as it passes through wild countryside and remote, mud-puddle hamlets.

The wide-open landscape is the main attraction, but there are interesting detours, including a Romanesque church in **Prades**, and the 15th-century **Collégiale St-Gal** (☎ 04 71 77 05 41; ☞ 8.30am-7pm) and **Jacquemard folk museum** (☎ 04 71 77 05 51; ☞ 2-7pm Jul & Aug, 3-7pm early Sep), both in Langeac.

The gorges are hugely popular with outdoor enthusiasts. Walking trails criss-cross the valley walls, and if you're after more thrills and spills, several companies offer canyoning, adventure sports and white-water rafting – try **Tonic Rafting** (☎ 04 71 57 23 90; www.raft-canyon.fr, in French; €55-110; ☞ Apr-Sep) or **Rivière Nature** (☎ 04 71 57 22 54; St-Privat-d'Allier; per day €75; ☞ Apr-Sep).

For a lazier way of exploring the valley, hop aboard the scenic **Train des Gorges de l'Allier** (☎ 04 71 77 70 17; www.trainstouristiques-ter.com; tickets €13-28; ☞ Mon-Fri Jul & Aug), which trundles between Langeac and Langogne via Prades and Monistrol d'Allier.

There are plenty of campsites in the valley, including the riverside **Camping les Gorges de**

l'Allier (☎ 04 71 77 05 01; www.campinglangeac.com; sites €12.50) in Langeac and **Camping Le Vivier** (☎ 04 71 57 24 14; mairie.monistrolallier@wanadoo.fr; sites from €10; ☞ Apr-Sep) in Monistrol d'Allier.

If you're after something more comfortable, the rustic **Auberge de l'Île d'Amour** (☎ 04 71 77 00 11; 17 av de Gévaudan, Langeac; menus €20-35, d €50-60) in Langeac makes a homely base, with small, snug rooms and free-standing chalets as well as a solid *table de terroir* (country table) restaurant.

Alternatively, you can sleep in charmingly renovated stone cottages at **Le Moulin Ferme-Auberge** (☎ 04 71 74 03 09; www.gite-aubergedumoulin.com; St-Arcons-d'Allier; d €55, with half board €95; (P)), with dinner served at a big communal table in the 15th-century windmill.

La Montagne Protestante

Around 40km east of Le Puy is the highland area known as La Montagne Protestante, so called because of the stout Protestant principles (and occasionally odd customs) of the local population. It's a sparsely populated area, carpeted in rich pastureland and thick fir forest; the area's most distinctive landmarks are the peaks of Mont Meygal (1436m) and Mont Mézenc (1753m), whose summit is accessible via the GR73 and GR7 hiking trails. On a clear day, you can take in panoramic views across southeastern France, from Mont Blanc, 200km to the northeast, to Mont Ventoux, 140km to the southeast.

Villages are few and far between, but one particular place is worth a visit – the trim village of **Le Chambon-sur-Lignon**, 45km east of Le Puy-en-Velay, which played a courageous role in WWII. Chambon and the surrounding hamlets sheltered over 3000 refugees, including hundreds of Jewish children, from deportation by the Nazis, and every July and August there's an exhibition on the town's WWII history. The **tourist office** (☎ 04 71 59 71 56; http://ot-lechambonsurlignon.fr; rue des Quatre Saisons; ☞ 9am-noon & 2-6.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-noon Sun Jun-Sep, 9am-noon & 3-6pm Mon-Sat Oct-May) has details.

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