

Pure & simple

Good food and wine, outdoor pursuits and quaint vineyard villages make it easy to feel drawn to Saône-et-Loire, as *Paola Westbeek* discovers

As you drive through the south of Burgundy, Saône-et-Loire's varied landscape unfolds with vast panoramas of rugged mountains, dense woods, lush pastures and undulating vineyards that seamlessly intermingle with pleasant waterways. The department is divided into five natural regions offering plenty of breathing space to both relax and invigorate. You can whizz through more than 800 kilometres of marked mountain bike trails one day and discover the countryside on a gentle cruise through the Canal du Centre the next. Culture also abounds in this fascinating part of France with towns that are steeped in history and architectural heritage. But that's not all. Amid this abundant splendour, some of the country's most famous gastronomic delights can be savoured with modestly priced wines ranging from elegant whites to rustic reds. This is the France many dream of, visit and never want to leave.

THE GREAT OUTDOORS

In the north-west corner of Saône-et-Loire, the Parc Naturel Régional du Morvan is a green oasis of forests, farmlands and lakes that beckons outdoor enthusiasts to explore nature in myriad ways. Established in 1970, the nature reserve is not only the perfect place to hike, horseback ride, mountain bike, kayak and canoe, but it is also home to lots of towns and villages where time has stood still.

"Many Dutch and English people have purchased property in the Morvan as the prices are extremely affordable," says Benjamin Haas, an estate agent at

Saône-et-Loire



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France4u. His company has been helping expats find the perfect home in the department for the past 17 years. “If you venture into the Morvan because you like nature, and don’t mind being a little further away from bakeries and shops, you can find a house with a garden and views for approximately €100,000, or even less for a second home in a more isolated area,” he adds.

Autun, founded in the first century BC by Roman Emperor Augustus, is the beating heart of Morvan. The provincial town’s amphitheatre (once the largest in the Roman world) and its two ancient gateways (the Porte d’Arroux and the Porte St-André, dating back to the first and fourth century respectively) still attest to its Gallo-Roman roots. There, you can visit the 12th-century Cathédrale St-Lazare, famous for its magnificent sculptures and tympanum, or Musée Rolin where you can admire a variety of artefacts, sculptures and beautifully preserved mosaics. And when lunchtime rolls around, there’s no better place to enjoy *cocotte d’escargots* (snails in garlic cream sauce) and a carafe of wine than at Brasserie du Commerce, located on the corner of Rue de Champ de Mars.

VILLAGE LIFE

It is late Thursday morning in mid-August and at the Grande Rue in Buxy market stalls display dewy courgettes, smooth-skinned tomatoes and strawberries that lure you with their scent. One stall is stacked with dense loaves of freshly baked gingerbread (*pain d’épices*, a regional speciality) and others offer charcuterie, cheeses, honey and flowers. A typical French market scene, you would think, until you notice there’s something missing: crowds. Though it’s tourist season, it is mostly locals who are filling their baskets or gathering for *kirs* at the café on the

corner of Place de la Tour Rouge, named after the tower on the opposite side of the street (its roof is crowned with red tiles dating to the 15th century and the tower itself was once part of the village’s 12th-century fortifications). In light of this, if there’s one piece of advice Benjamin gives clients who are looking to settle down in this part of France, it’s to learn the language. “This is not a tourism area where foreigners are a source of income such as Dordogne or the Côte d’Azur,” he explains. “If you have a basic knowledge of French, neighbours will open up to you and welcome you with open arms.”

Buxy is just one of the many peaceful wine villages in Côte Chalonnaise, a viticultural region named after Chalon-sur-Saône, the department’s largest city. Though in Burgundy the limelight shines brightest on the prestigious Côte-d’Or to the north (often referred to as ‘Golden Slope’), this region produces similar wines that are significantly more affordable. Just as in Côte-d’Or, the main grape varieties are pinot noir (for reds) and chardonnay (for whites). Driving through the Route des Grands Vins with its sweeping vistas of neatly planted vines will lead you to the five *appellations*, from north to south: Bouzeron, Rully, Mercurey, Givry and Montagny.

A more relaxed way to discover the department, however, is by following the Voies Vertes’ 74 kilometres of smooth cycling paths which stretch from Chalon-sur-Saône in the north to Charnay-lès-Mâcon in the south. The concept of a car-free recreational path originated in Saône-et-Loire in 1997 and since then has gained popularity throughout the country. Don’t forget to stop and admire the majestic 12th-century Château de Rully and the Hôtel de Ville in Givry, one of France’s most beautiful town halls dating to the second half of the 18th century.



The market at Buxy



Above: A spherical fountain takes pride of place in St-Vincent square in Chalon-sur-Saône



Cathédrale St-Vincent in Chalon-sur-Saône

Below: Musée Nicéphore Niépce celebrates Chalon’s most famous citizen – Joseph Nicéphore Niépce - who is credited with the invention of photography in 1827



MAKE A TRADITIONAL BURGUNDY DISH
Turn to page 62 for a recipe for Escargots à la Bourguignonne



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

To the far east, the wide plains of the Bresse area are intersected by rivers and streams. Half-timbered houses and old watermills dot the countryside as the ‘Gauloise de Bresse’ roam freely in search of tasty insects and worms. Though the noble fowl was granted AOC (*appellation d’origine contrôlée*) certification in 1957, it has tempted gourmets since Roman times. Among them, Henri IV who was so impressed with their flavour that he promised everyone ‘*poule au pot*’ every Sunday, and Brillat-Savarin who referred to them as “*la reine des volailles et volaille des rois*” (the queen of poultry and the poultry of kings) in his famous book, *Physiologie du goût* (1825). In fact, Bresse poultry is regarded by the French as the fourth gastronomic world wonder.

On Monday mornings, Louhans, the capital of Bresse poultry, boasts one of the region’s must-see markets dating to the 13th century. Part of the market is held along the 400-metre Grande Rue, which counts 157 medieval arches and is the longest arcaded street in France, but the most impressive part is the poultry market on Champ de Foire. Here, you will not only find Bresse poultry, but also livestock such as ducks, geese, rabbits and goats.

ART DE VIVRE

Continuing to the south-west, the Mâconnais-Clunais awaits with gentle hills, dramatic cliffs and yet another exciting wine district. Those who love buttery chardonnays have certainly come to the right place as the grape accounts for 80% of the production in this region. Pouilly-Fuissé is the most renowned *appellation* and produces fruity whites with hints of toast, oak and honey. But it wasn’t just the wines that attracted London couple Nick and Rebecca Harman to start a new life here. They moved to Saône-et-Loire in August 2004, knowing they would earn their living in hospitality. “We love the area’s diversity,” says Rebecca. “We have hills and vines, rivers and beautiful countryside. There are numerous châteaux and abbeys dating from the 10th to the 18th century.” One of those abbeys is the Benedictine Abbaye de Cluny, a remarkable example of Romanesque architecture which was founded in 910 and became Europe’s largest monastic empire by the end of the 11th century. Though most of the abbey was torn down during the French Revolution, what is still left gives a good impression of how it looked in its heyday.

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WHERE TO LIVE

Saône-et-Loire



Above: Cruising the Canal du Centre

Right: Tournus on the banks of the Saône

Below: Making a splash in the Morvan



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REASONS TO LIVE IN SAÔNE-ET-LOIRE

The department is not an obvious choice among British expats so you can enjoy getting to know your French *voisins* rather than fellow Brits.

With good TGV links and Lyon airport close by, you're never really too far from anywhere in Saône-et-Loire; perfect for exploring the rest of France or going back to the UK.

Burgundy is world renowned for its food and drink so expect to wine and dine like a king and queen. The produce is mostly all local, so it's not too expensive.

Whether you want to explore the mountains, woods, vineyards or rolling green hills, you won't be short of choice when it comes to outdoor adventuring in Saône-et-Loire.

For charming country homes, Saône-et-Loire is hard to beat and with an average house price of €123,000, they are very affordable, too.

Just a little less than a year after arriving in Saône-et-Loire, the Harmans purchased their hotel in Chardonnay, the very town that gave the Mâconnais wine district's reigning grape its name. "Le Chardon was a blank canvas and needed total renovation," says Rebecca, "but the price was right, it had a full liquor licence and we could structure the building to our needs rather than compromising on an existing property." Today, the successful hotel offers four tastefully styled rooms (each one named after a wine grape) and a restaurant serving regional specialities such as *coq au vin* and *boeuf bourguignon*.

SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE

And for the ultimate *boeuf bourguignon*, there's no beef quite like Charolais beef. The handsomely robust white cattle graze lazily on the fertile prairies of the

Charolais-Brionnais region to the south-west, also home to goats that produce some of the country's finest cheese. With its smooth paste and mildly acidic taste, the barrel-shaped Charolais cheese pairs exceptionally well with a chilled glass of Montagny.

Perhaps the best way to experience the region's bucolic landscape is while sailing through the placid waters of the Canal du Centre. Built between 1783 and 1793 by engineer Émiland Gauthey, the 112-kilometre canal unites the Saône and Loire rivers and extends from Digoin to the historic city of Chalon-sur-Saône. There, you can walk through the old shopping streets or have a drink at the foot of the cathedral on Place St-Vincent. One of the most notable citizens of Chalon-sur-Saône was undoubtedly Joseph Nicéphore Niépce who can be credited with the invention of photography in 1827. Maison Nicéphore

Niépce, the house where he took his first photograph, has been open to the public as a museum since 2002.

Whether its culture, excellent food or the quiet respite of the French countryside, Saône-et-Loire offers something for everyone. And its central location is certainly an added bonus. "It is literally in the middle of western Europe," says Benjamin Haas. "Fast TGV lines and great motorways make it easy to reach from any mayor city. Many people we meet here have driven through, but only when they stop, can they fully appreciate its richness."

TURN OVER

For an expat's story of opening a *chambres d'hôtes* near Cluny