



*Désirs d'authenticité*

# Natural Environment



## Tourism in Franche-Comté

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Franche-Comté, like nature itself, is endowed with a strong personality.

This is a land framed by two mountain ranges, the Vosges and the Jura, each protected by a Regional Nature Park. It is a region boasting the largest diversity of wooded area in France.

Here is a land whose myriad lakes and ponds have earned such sobriquets as Little Scotland or Little Sologne.

Elsewhere, moorland, peat bogs and streams induce an Irish melancholy, while gorges and fir trees arouse dreams of Canada.

The natural splendour of Franche-Comté – a World Apart.

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# **1** *Water*

## **THE MALSAUCY – MIRROR OF NATURE AND LEISURE ACTIVITIES**

What possible connection could there be between the silent stillness of the heron and the brash, urgent sounds of the Eurockéennes? The answer is the Malsaucy, 100 acres dotted with ponds at the gates of Belfort and at the foot of the Vosges. There are two sides to the Malsaucy: it is at once the setting for beautiful nature reflected in the smiling waters and the stage for a plethora of sporting and cultural activities.

There is the Malsaucy of water sports, sailing dinghies, canoes, windsurfing, rowing and aqua-footing, not forgetting the leisure centre with its mini-golf, mountain-bike and rambling facilities.

And then there is the Malsaucy of the Departmental Environment Centre with its feet among the mushrooms and its head in the stars, an open invitation to explore and understand the environment of the ponds and the nearby Vosges.

The Malsaucy is the crowning glory of the string of pearls making up the two hundred ponds adorning the Territoire de Belfort. In the words of the naturalist R. Hainard, it is "a world whose scattered fragments are irrigated by the blood of migrations", for the sleeping waters are a source of life for some 200 species.

The ponds which once supplied fish for days of fasting and abstinence, and produced energy to drive industry, continue to provide man with an essential component of his equilibrium: relaxation and the reality of an environment in which he may take legitimate pride.

## **UNPREDICTABLE RIVERS**

They rejoice in such names as the Furieuse or the Doubs, or again the Savoureuse and the Lanterne. Most of the names of rivers in Franche-Comté are music to the ear, like the sound of their running waters.

Unpredictable rivers which, in the chasms or pertes and resurgent springs of the Jura, vanish from view only to re-emerge miraculously further on, or in the Vosges and elsewhere, indulge in a bewildering series of leaps, bounds and cascades. The perpetual struggle between water, limestone and sandstone provides a never-ending and often grandiose spectacle. A bewildering array of landscapes are shaped by the 5000 km of rivers in Franche-Comté: from the deep gorges of the Bienne and the Loue, the inspiration for Lamartine's poems and Courbet's paintings, to the mediaeval manor-houses dominating the slow-moving Saône – so slow indeed that Caesar was moved to inquire in which direction it flowed!

If you wish to appreciate the full diversity of a Jura river you could do no better than to follow the course of the Doubs: at first a resurgence, a peat bog and a mountain stream; a lake at Saint-Point and then a vanished river lost in its pertes downstream of Pontarlier; a visible course once more, it forces a passage through the mountain before pausing to get its breath back in the meanders of Morteau and taking its ease in Chaillexon lake and the basins lined with towering cliffs of the French-Swiss border country. It is jolted back to life as it hurtles over the 27 metre waterfall of the Saut du Doubs and rushes recklessly through rugged gorges. At last it settles down and moves in stately splendour through a magnificent valley from Montbéliard to Besançon. What more could one ask for?

## **HOLY WATER**

Strength and character are the abiding characteristics of the rivers which rush down from the Jura hills and which, like the Doubs, were the first in France to supply hydro-electric energy. At an earlier date, when industry was in its infancy, the waters of the Lison powered the hammers of rural France's largest manufacturer of scythes. Today the countryside no longer echoes to the sound of the mills but memories linger on in the splendid solitude of the wild valleys.

The waters of Franche-Comté have always been known for their great purity and it comes as no surprise to learn that rivers such as the Loue, the Lison, the Ain, the Dessoubre and the Ognon are all noted for their trout. We cannot claim that all is perfect but immense progress has been made in recent years. Examples include the Doubs-Loue basin management plan and the European programme for the Dugeon valley, now a sanctuary for some of the rarest wetland nesting birds in France.

As the temple of Villars d'Heria reminds us, water was a sacred commodity in Celtic and Gallo-Roman times. In this century, we strive to respect the message of the past.

## **SAINT-POINT – AN IMPOSING LAKE**

According to the legend of the vanished village of Damvauthier, God created the lake of Saint-Point in order to punish the villagers for their inhospitable nature. It has to be said, however, that most people would consider this most remarkable of Franche-Comté lakes as a heaven-sent gift rather than a punishment! On the other hand, if God's gesture was intended as an admonition it certainly struck home for, at an altitude of 1000 metres and stretching over some 6 km in an open landscape, Saint-Point is one of the most welcoming mountain lakes that one could wish to see.

Saint-Point, the third largest natural lake in France, is eminently accessible. It is set in a rustic landscape of pastureland and villages and has been carefully developed for leisure activities: Port-Titi the fishing village built on stilts at the beginning of the century, the holiday station of Malbuisson, Les Grangettes and its water sports complex, the port and beach of Saint-Point. From the mists of early morning to the setting sun, the waters of the lake are home to sailing dinghies, surfboards, or fishing craft in quest of pike and vendace, a member of the salmon family found in the depths of mountain lakes.

In the summer months the lake wears the mantle of the Haut-Doubs Riviera while in winter it is transformed into a giant 1000-acre skating rink.

Walking along the footpath along the protected banks of the lake is an educational as well as a pleasant experience, and a splendid opportunity to explore its fund of natural resources, barely 15 km from the source of the Doubs. Environmentalists will be even more interested in its next-door-neighbour Lake Remoray and its peat bog, officially classified of "European Interest". The two lakes were originally joined together until forced apart by the alluvia of the Doubs.

## **A THOUSAND AND ONE PONDS**

With its windswept moors, countless ponds, peat bogs, torrents and streams, its sunken roads marked by stone wayside crosses and leading to lone farmsteads, there is an unmistakably Irish air about the Haute-Saône as it leads up to the foothills of the Vosges.

This is the disconcerting land of the Thousand Ponds. Still water has always aroused the imagination and there is indeed something infinitely mysterious about these ponds which, at

each turning in the road, emerge from the lush vegetation or stand out among the bare stubble fields. They are at their most attractive at break of dawn when the golden hues of autumn light up the rising mist.

The land owes as much to nature in the shape of glaciers scraping the Vosges sandstone as it does to the hand of man, responsible for draining the marshland in the Middle Ages in order to stock fish.

The charm of the Thousand Ponds lies both in their intangible atmosphere and in special character of the wetland vegetation, with such species as sphagnum and the water iris-whose flower is said to have inspired the design of the royal lily.

Time, like the wheels of the old mills, seems to stand still in this land.

## **SOURCES AND RE-SOURCES**

There is nothing timid or understated about river sources in Franche-Comté. While the “drops” of the Vosges may remain true to the image of little streams on their way to becoming mighty rivers, the same can scarcely be said of their counterparts in the Jura. Here, in the spectacular setting of vast rocky amphitheatres the mountain gives birth to what is already a lusty child – a “resurgence”.

This is the case with the sources of the Doubs at Mouthe, the Ain in the Val de Miège, the Loue at Ouhans springing from a 60 m high by 30 m wide cavern inserted in a 100 m rock face, the Lison at Nans-sous-Sainte-Anne, the Dessoubre at Consolation and the Saine emerging from a cave near Arbois, to name only the most spectacular examples. The Jura greedily absorbs but generously distributes the rainwater which falls on it in such abundance, and thus has nothing of that dry aspect so characteristic of other limestone areas.

These resurgent springs, which go under the geographical name of Vauclusian sources, are so much part and parcel of the Franche-Comté landscape that they might equally well be referred to as Jura sources. In point of fact, they are really re-sources – the point where rivers meet the light of day after their long journey under the earth, having already existed as a river or lake on the highlands.

Perhaps the most striking example of this phenomenon is the Loue, the concealed natural daughter of the Doubs. The story of how the connection between the two rivers was discovered is well worth the telling. One day in 1901 a fire broke out in the Pernod distillery in Pontarlier, world capital of absinthe. Thousands of gallons of the green liqueur escaped into the Doubs and, three days later, the apéritif was served up in the Loue!

As far as the waters of Franche-Comté are concerned, there is life after death...

## **VOUGLANS, OR THE TAMING OF THE AIN**

A wall 130 m height, 430 m wide and 54,500 cu. m of concrete: such is Vouglans dam, one of the finest examples of a high-arched dam to be found in France. This is what it takes to tame the ardour of the Ain and to create what is not only the third largest reservoir in the country (after Serre-Ponçon and Sainte-Croix) but also a 30-kilometre long “tourist” lake covering a surface of 3950 acres.

Vouglans dam came into service in 1968, giving a new lease of life to many lake-inspired legends. For here indeed a village and a charterhouse really were submerged in 600 million cu. m of water. Flooding part of the Combe d’Ain, one of the darkest valleys of the Jura, Vouglans is now an attractive stretch of water offering an array of water sports activities at Surchauffant and Bellecin.

## **LAND OF LAKES AND WATERFALLS**

Lakes, lakes, nothing but lakes... and waterfalls! It comes as no surprise to learn that this exceedingly beautiful area should be known as "Little Scotland". Nowhere else could one expect to find so many beautiful waters in such a small area: the lakes of Chalain, Chambly, Val, Ilay, Petit Maclu, Narlay, Bonlieu, Clairvaux, Abbaye, etc.. The lakes may be neighbours and in many cases related (supplying each other with water) but each has its distinct personality, by turns amethyst or emerald, lying at the foot of cliffs or mountain peaks, encircled by forests of fir trees or surrounded by pastureland.

The spectacular exploits of the Hérisson are in sharp contrast to the placid waters of the lakes. In the space of three kilometres the river drops 280 m through a series of 12 waterfalls including the overhanging 60 m "Grand Saut" and the "steps" of the Eventail waterfall where the spray can be felt over 65 metres away.

History and legend are as much part of the land as geography and hydrology. A Neolithic lake dwelling has been discovered at Chalain and a saintly hermit once lived in the middle of Lake Ilay. Narlay lays claim to a vanished village and to waters which wash clean without benefit of soap, thanks to the good offices of a fairy amorously smitten by the lake.

# 2

## *The Jura Massif*

## **THE JURA MOUNTAINS, ONE MASSIF AND TWO DEPARTMENTS**

Just as the Jura range affords splendid views over the Alps, so does the traveller, looking westward from the alpine peaks, espy the Jura as a long white spine in winter, a green barrier in summer. For the purposes of clarity we should really follow the example of our ancestors and speak of the "Jura Mountains" so as to avoid confusing physical and administrative geography. In fact, the Jura Mountains stretch over 200 km and span two departments, the Doubs in the north and the Jura in the south, forming the border with Switzerland. Could the Swiss presence go some way towards explaining why the Jura is such a tidy mountain range?

In the east, the great wall looking out on the Swiss plain and Lake Geneva opens out gradually to the west and climbs in a series of steps from plateau to plateau: hills ranged in folds and parallel coombs; summits wreathed in dark trees and slashed by deep cluses and valleys sculpted in the limestone; coombs lit up by lake-spangled pastures. The altitude rises slightly as the Jura moves south towards the Alps from which it springs. The culminating points of the range are Mont d'Or in the Doubs (1463 m) and Crêt Pela in the Jura (1495 m). This mountain area remains close to nature (there are no towns with more than 20,000 inhabitants). The climate is as clearly defined and vigorous as its relief and the vegetation reaches up to the subalpine category. There is to this day a wide variety of fauna and such majestic specimens as the chamois, lynx and capercaillie find refuge here.

If we did not know that was the Franco-Swiss border country, we could be forgiven for thinking ourselves in the taiga of Scandinavia or the vast expanses of Canada.

### **MONT D'OR – MOUNTAIN PASTURES AND FORESTS**

Etymologically, the word "Jura" may be traced back to a Latin word signifying "forest", and in former times the mountain was indeed hidden under a thick wooded mantle. The trees have since receded a little under the pressure of human occupation and pastureland now shares the land with conifers.

This dual aspect of the Jura is perhaps best illustrated in the Mont d'Or massif in the Doubs department. Mont d'Or (1463 m) is the perfect example of the final step in the Jura staircase, with gentle slopes on the French side and an abrupt cliff on the Swiss side: on one side, herds of Montbéliard heifers, on the other packs of wild chamois. Cows are an ever-present feature, with some 60 chalet farms dotting the pastureland rife with yellow gentians. Dairy farming has here gained the upper hand over the forest and one of its most famous cheeses is actually called Mont d'Or.

But just as the cheese is inserted in a strap of spruce wood and packaged in a wooden box, so cattle-farming takes place in a forest environment stretching over the chain which extends over Mont d'Or in a 30 km stretch embracing the Risol and Risoux massifs.

In short, we are in the presence of the largest middle-mountain natural forests in western Europe, offering sanctuary to such species as the capercaillie and hazel grouse which are in danger of disappearing in other areas.

The Mont d'Or massif is an exceptional and varied nature environment offering numerous facilities for cross-country and downhill skiing as well as mountain bike and walking excursions.

## **JURA PARK**

In the Haut-Jura Regional Nature Park, which has just celebrated its tenth anniversary and extended its size, 91 villages, three departments (the Ain, the Doubs and the Jura) and two regions (Franche-Comté and Rhône-Alpes), now act jointly in spheres which go far beyond purely environmental matters, though of course the protection of local architecture, rural planning and development and improvement in the quality of water are as important as ever. But now the overriding concern is to promote the economic viability of the Jura mountain area in a way which is consistent with its identity and traditions. The objective is to promote local activities: agriculture and cheese-making (Mont d'Or, Comté, Bleu de Gex and Morbier), the timber industry, crafts (watch and clock making, wooden box making, diamond cutting) and tourism.

From the Vale of Mouthe in the north to Bellegarde in the south, and from Moirans in the west to Divonne-les-Bains in the east, the Haut-Jura Regional Nature Park comprises all the different zones of the Jura mountain, and with its extended 1998 boundary, may justly lay claim to being a massif in its own right.

## **CAVES – 4000 SUBTERRANEAN SITES**

The comparison is too tempting to resist: the region's subsoil is as riddled with holes as Comté cheese! At a very conservative estimate, a count of all the cavities in Franche-Comté gives the very impressive figure of 4500 caves or chasms, or baumes or puits (wells) as they tend to be called in these parts.

Among the potholes of interest to speleologists, the Verneau cave in the Lison valley is acknowledged to be the longest network after sump in the world (28,000 m), so it is easy to see why Franche-Comté is considered as a paradise for speleologists. But the caves also enjoy a deserved reputation as tourist attractions. Numerous visitors are drawn to caves, sources and resurgent springs to discover the underground rivers at Les Planches near Arbois, Baume-les-Messieurs and Osselle; to easily accessible swallowholes such as Poudray near Besançon; to the miraculous cave-chapel of Remonot down river from Pontarlier.

The journey to the centre of the earth is, in Franche-Comté, also a way of travelling back in time, for caves such as that of Vergranne were once inhabited by the first prehistoric men known in France. They also served as refuges in times of invasion, hiding places for those resisting the French invaders of the 17th century, for recalcitrant priests during the French Revolution and for the French Resistance during the Second World War. And of course legends abound: caverns laden with treasure, fabulous animals such as the mythical vouivre (serpent), etc..

Finally, the diversity of the network of potholes in Franche-Comté explains the presence of a large number of bats representing virtually all the species to be found in France - the riches concealed underground are not always what one expects!

In short, caves are stars of the first magnitude in the geological galaxy of Franche-Comté.

## **EMERALD FOREST**

It is not always easy to grasp just how important the forest was (and still) is in Franche-Comté. Indeed, not so very long ago this “manna from heaven” placed local authorities in the enviable position of not having to levy taxes and, better still, of providing ratepayers with firewood or even household electrical goods!

In the battle between Franche-Comté and Aquitaine for the title of France’s most wooded region, the former carries the day on account of the great diversity of its forest areas, for all tree species – from the oaks of the Haute-Saône to the high-altitude spruce trees of the Haut-Jura - are to be found in different parts of the region.

The wealth of the forest, first a source of energy in the industrial era and latterly a market commodity is nowadays perhaps less immediately striking but just as important for all that, representing as it does a vital component of the environment.

## **THE LARGEST FORESTS IN FRANCE**

The forest is of very special importance to the native of Franche-Comté.

In the Haut-Doubs and the Jura, the election of the biggest and best fir tree as sapin président is an indication of the esteem in which conifers are held in this part of the world. Spruce and fir trees, stars of the Jura, cover over half the territory. If you want to get an idea of the awe-inspiring extent of this evergreen world, you must travel the 50 km of the Route des Sapins in the state-owned Fôret de la Joux, part of a 25,000-acre conifer massif and the largest fir-tree plantation in Europe; you must see with your own eyes the 200-year-old spruce trees of the King of Rome (the last firs planted by the Spaniards before the Comté became part of France in 1678); you must follow the forest roads of the Risoux and Massacre massifs and discover the taiga forest in its unspoilt natural state on the uplands where columnar spruces soar skywards. These trees have the close grain needed for survival in these harsh conditions, their wood is prized in the manufacture of stringed instruments and in days gone by was used to form the sturdy, storm-proof masts of ships.

The state-owned Fôret de Chaux, a 50,000-acre massif of broad-leaved trees such as beech and oak is a very different world. Its timber once powered foundries, glassworks and salt mines, including the famous Royal Saltworks of Arc-et-Senans in the 18th century. It is hard to believe that these industries were almost the death of what is now the second largest forest in France! In addition to forestry, great care is lavished on the protection and management of big game: there are an estimated 500 stags, 1000 wild boar and hundreds of deer.

Everything is done to make the tourist feel at home and the forest areas have of course been specially prepared for mountain bike and skiing enthusiasts, but equal emphasis is placed on preserving the environment and there are many protected areas where all noise is outlawed.

# 3

## *The Southern Vosges*

When one thinks of the mountains of Franche-Comté, one thinks of the Vosges as well as the Jura. The Vosges are in fact shared by the three regions of Franche-Comté, Alsace and Lorraine so it is very fitting, not to say symbolic, that the three should meet at the summit of the Ballon d'Alsace. As if this were not enough, the departments of Haute-Saône and Territoire de Belfort both claim a part of the Vosges. The least one can say is that the area's administrative complexity scarcely reflects its physical geography!

Which is not to say that it is an easy matter to "square the circle" of the round-topped mountains or ballons of the Vosges. No doubt much of the explanation lies in whether the slopes face north or south and hence in the river systems. Franche-Comté lays claim to the southern foothills whose waters flow towards the Mediterranean.

The culminating point of the Vosges in Franche-Comté "territory" is the Ballon d'Alsace (1250 m). Although it has been left with the smallest portion of the massif, cannot lay claim to any peaks and only a handful of ballons, the region nonetheless possesses all the ingredients which go to make up the special character of a mountain area bearing the imprint of the glacial period.

Here, sure enough, all the way from the Ballon de Servance in Haute-Saône to the Ballon d'Alsace, are the typical rounded shapes, windswept summits, peat bogs with lush vegetation hidden in their basins, alluvial valleys, dark forests of fir trees and the ever-present sight of water tumbling down the slopes.

Man, too, has imposed a certain unity on the land, and we find the same farmsteads standing forlorn in the high moors, the same upland stubble fields, the same land painfully reclaimed by the cattle breeder. And then there the valleys where industry once reigned supreme and where memories of mines, forges, sawmills and textile factories linger on. Finally, there are spa towns such as Luxeuil-les-Bains reminding us, like the Thousand Ponds of Haute-Saône and the Territoire de Belfort, that the Vosges are synonymous with water.

## **THE "BALLONS DES VOSGES" PARK: A "SITE" FOR SORE EYES!**

The "Ballon des Vosges" Regional Nature Park has succeeded in the daunting task of overcoming administrative and cultural rivalries and in bringing together the natives of Franche-Comté, Lorraine and Alsace under the single "roof" of what is France's largest park in terms of number of villages (some 200), second largest in terms of inhabitants and fourth in surface area (710,000 acres)!

As far as the environment was concerned, the Park authorities' task was first to increase its knowledge of the natural heritage so that it could then propose such necessary protective measures as forests for the capercaillie or the renovation of major "saturated" sites like the Ballon d'Alsace, victims of their own success.

In addition to the conservation of nature, rural planning involves helping farmers, particularly in the Haute-Saône valleys, to care for the environment. In practical terms, this means preserving the mountain area as a living entity: mowing and scything the countryside, pruning the hedgerows to encourage wildlife, repairing the sunken roadways, etc.. The same objectives are pursued by the Upper Rhine Valley countryside schemes and by the country planning consultancy service for the villages of Champagny, Melisey and Evette Salbert.

Measures to preserve the area's historical legacy are obviously partly taken with tourists in mind – the mining tradition lives on thanks to the heritage trail at Giromagny and Plancherles-Mines, as does hydraulic activity at Lepuix Gy and Servance – but they are also a means of ensuring that the region remains a living and meaningful reality for its inhabitants.

Lastly, the move to encourage quality in the economic sphere goes far beyond the desire to attract tourists, and embraces help to such original initiatives as the manufacture of wooden planks for protective purposes at Servance or the relaunching of crayfish breeding in Haute-Saône.

### **SUMMIT MEETING ON THE BALLON D'ALSACE**

The Ballon d'Alsace is a major national site and, at an altitude of 1250 metres, the highest point in the Franche-Comté part of the Vosges. It is also the place where three regions meet. In the words of an 18th century climber "a person who reaches the summit can place one foot in Alsace and the other in Lorraine, stretch out his arm in Franche-Comté and gaze at the far distant horizon".

The golden stubble fields of autumn and the boks to the efforts of the "Club Vosgien" which, here as elsewhere, has laid out a dense network of footpaths. These are ideal for walking round the summit, dropping down to explore the lakes and ponds below or following the old tracks once used for transporting wood. Do not be misled by the worn aspect of the summit: this is not the result of a surfeit of tourists (nowadays visitors in a hurry usually keep to a specially prepared nature trail) but of the harsh winds that blow in these parts. Meanwhile in the uplands, yesterday's farms have become today's inns.

The Ballon has long exerted a historical as well as a geographical attraction. It was frequented by the sun-worshipping Celts many years ago, long before it became a disputed frontier during the wars between France and Germany. The statue commemorates the 500 demolition experts who gave their lives in clearing the area of mines in the aftermath of the Second World War.