

The Massif Central

HIGHLIGHTS

- The last turn before the summit of **Puy Mary** (p233)
- Puffing through the pedal motions of the Tour de France route up the **Puy-de-Dôme** (p232)
- Sleeping in a **mountain buron** (shepherds hut; p234)

TERRAIN

Rolling hills dotted with volcanic *puy*s in the north and divided by older, jagged mountain ranges in the south.

Telephone Code – 04

www.auvergne-tourisme.info

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 mountains, trickling streams join forces to form three of France's greatest rivers: the Dordogne, the Allier and the Loire.

The Massif Central covers roughly the area of the Auvergne region, comprising the *départements* of Allier, Puy-de-Dôme, Cantal and Haute-Loire. Deeply traditional and still dominated by the old industries of agriculture and cattle farming, the Massif Central is home to the largest area of protected landscape in 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 rude and raw. The parks' rugged expanses make the region ideal for combining a cycling trip with other outdoor activities – mountain biking, hang-gliding and *parapent* (para-gliding) flights, rock climbing and strenuous walks are all possible.

The area's popularity with outdoor adventurers means it is spotted with *gîtes d'étape*, hostels for walkers, cyclists or equestrians. These often occupy rustic stone buildings in stunning, quiet locations.



ENVIRONMENT

The Massif Central and the surrounding Auvergne region play host to the largest area of protected land in France: the Parc Naturel Régional des Volcans d'Auvergne and its neighbour, the Parc Naturel Régional du Livradois-Forez. Except in the few small cities and the regional capital, Clermont-Ferrand, life is unsurprisingly primarily rural and deeply traditional, still dominated by agriculture and cattle farming. The rich volcanic soil supports maize, tobacco and vineyards. At higher elevations, cows and sheep produce some of the country's most popular (and affordable) cheeses (see boxed text, p234).

With so much natural splendour to offer, the Massif Central is a paradise for those who like their landscapes rude and raw. It's an adrenalin addict's mecca: thirteen Grande Randonnée (GR) tracks wind through the region, ready to challenge those who think they've seen it all, along with hundreds of easier, shorter footpaths, many of which are suitable for mountain bikes.

CLIMATE

Unlike the rest of France, the Massif Central receives most of its precipitation in summer, usually as afternoon storms. At these times, routes in the mountains can cloud over and cold rain can catch unprepared cyclists off guard. The mountains usually escape the heat extremes of lower places such as Clermont-Ferrand, where summer temperatures can reach the high 30s. Winds tend from the north during May to August, and from the south the rest of the year, although the mountain ranges create their own unpredictable currents.

For *météo* (weather information) in the *département* of Puy-de-Dôme, dial ☎ 08 92 68 02 63; for Cantal, call ☎ 08 92 68 02 15.

PLANNING

Bike Hire

Although we've listed only one bike shop in Clermont-Ferrand, there are quite a few. You should be able to find a hire bike that meets your needs. In general, a deposit is required (cash, signed travellers cheques or a credit card), usually €50 to €350. See the Supplies & Equipment sections of each town.

Maps

The region is fully covered by Michelin 1:200,000 regional map No 522 *Auvergne, Limousin*. For a closer look, you will need Michelin 1:175,000 local maps No 326 *Allier, Puy-de-Dôme* and No 330 *Cantal, Lozère*.

The Fédération Française de Cyclo-tourisme (p425) details pedal-worthy itineraries in its IGN-produced CycloGuides series including one for each of the four *départements*: Allier (24 circuits), Haute-Loire (24 circuits), Cantal (25 circuits) and Puy-de-Dôme (12 circuits).

The maps of the area produced by Chamina (see Information Sources) are prized by hikers and mountain bikers.

Cycling Events

Randonnée de la St-Jean (departs from Dore-L'Église; June) The Association Cycliste du Livradois welcomes cyclists to the Haute-Loire for rides of 80km to 100km.

Circuit des Estives en Cézaillier (departs from Allanche; July)

Road routes from 40km to 100km, as well as mountain bike circuits of 25km to 40km take in the central Cézaillier highlands between Cantal and Puy de Dôme. Hosted by the Vélo Club de Cézaillier (pagesperso-orange.fr/veloclub.cezaillier, in French).

Information Sources

Auvergne Terre Cyclo (www.auvergne-velo.fr) A website covering all aspects of cycling in Auvergne.

Chamina (☎ 04 73 92 81 44; www.chamina.com, in French; 35 rue du Pré la Reine, Clermont-Ferrand) Produces MTB topoguides and helps with trip planning throughout the region (and elsewhere).

Fédération Française de Cyclisme (FFC; www.ffc.fr, in French) Runs, nine Auvergne **VTT sites** including one at Chamina in Clermont-Ferrand.



WARNING

Many *cols* in the area are closed by snow from October until late May or even early June. Days 2 and 3 of the Volcans d'Auvergne ride cross such *cols*; outside June, July and August always check road closures with tourist offices.