Massif Central

**Why Go?**

In one of the wildest, emptiest and least-known corners of France, the Massif Central, you can feel nature’s heavy machinery at work. Below ground, hot volcanic springs bubble up to supply Vichy and Volvic with their famous mineral waters, while high in the mountains trickling streams join forces to form three of France’s mightiest rivers: the Dor-dogne, the Allier and the Loire.

The Massif Central and surrounding Auvergne region remains deeply traditional. Reliant on agriculture and cattle farming, it shelters the country’s largest area of protected landscape with two huge regional parks: the Parc Naturel Régional des Volcans d’Auvergne and its neighbour, the Parc Naturel Régional Livradois-Forez. On-tap outdoor activities include heady hiking trails, plunging ski slopes, paragliding off shapely volcanic summits, and setting off on an age-old pilgrimage – sustained by some of the halest, heartiest food in France.

**Best Places to Eat**

- Emmanuel Hodencq (p535)
- François Gagnaire (p552)
- Les Caudalies (p539)
- La Parenthèse (p552)
- Le Sisisi (p536)

**Best Places to Stay**

- Le Chastel Montaigu (p545)
- Hôtel Saluces (p547)
- Hôtel Notre Dame (p542)
- Auberge de Jeunesse Le Grand Volcan (p543)
- Le Moulin Ferme-Auberge (p554)

**When to Go**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Temp</th>
<th>Rainfall</th>
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<td>May &amp; Jun</td>
<td>Experience the region’s hiking trails in their full springtime splendour.</td>
<td>Dec–March Max out on winter sports near Le Mont-Dore or catch Clermont-Ferrand’s short film festival.</td>
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Clermont-Ferrand

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Scale the panoramic summit of Puy de Dôme (p 541) on the new cog railway
Swoon over the pastoral greenery and rugged volcanic scenery around Salers (p 546)
Marvel at the Michelin brothers’ influence on travel at the Michelin museum (p 533) in Clermont-Ferrand
Schuss down the slopes, or ride the century-old funicular in Le Mont-Dore (p 542)
Watch artisans at work and tour the world-class knife collection at Musée de la Coutellerie (p 547) in Thiers
Meet the cows who make one of France’s most famous cheeses at St-Nectaire (p 545)
Climb the tortuous staircase to the mystical cave-chapel of St-Michel d’Aiguilhe (p 548), perched atop a pinnacle in Le Puy-en-Velay
Soak up the mineral-rich spa waters in belle époque Vichy (p 537)