

# Middle Ground: the Often Overlooked Towns in Central France

*Published on 25 March 2025 by Christina Mackenzie*

» *Published in Travel Stories*



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Where in France can you find a majestic wild river, the nation's largest collections of musical instruments and stage costumes, medieval and Belle Époque towns, orchards and vineyards, rolling green countryside criss-crossed by hedges and punctuated by majestic oak-trees, lovingly restored villages unspoilt by modern housing developments, a UNESCO World Heritage site and, despite all this, no crowds?

The answer is: the Allier department (named for the river) bang in the country's geographical centre. Despite the location, this region is largely overlooked by visitors who prefer to rush headlong down the more easterly A6 motorway to the French Riviera. Next time opt to drive leisurely down the mythical N7 the former main route south, which, now that's it's been widened to 2x2 lanes, is a toll-free and perfectly viable alternative to the motorway and enables you to visit some lovely towns and villages en route.



Montluçon centre of town



The three main towns in Allier are set at the points of a westwards facing isosceles triangle. Montluçon at the western point has an industrial past, Moulins at the northern point is medieval and Vichy at the southern point is a Belle Époque spa. Moulins and Vichy are only 48 km apart while Montluçon lies about an hour's drive from both Moulins and Vichy.

# Montluçon

I started my adventure in Montluçon, which has sat in a shallow meander of the department's quieter river, the Cher, since Roman times. Louis II, Duke of Bourbon, fortified the town in the Middle Ages, building four city gates, and restoring the church of Notre Dame and the castle (closed to the public). Today, the city walls have all but disappeared, their location marked by the horseshoe-shaped Boulevard de Courtais.



Historic centre

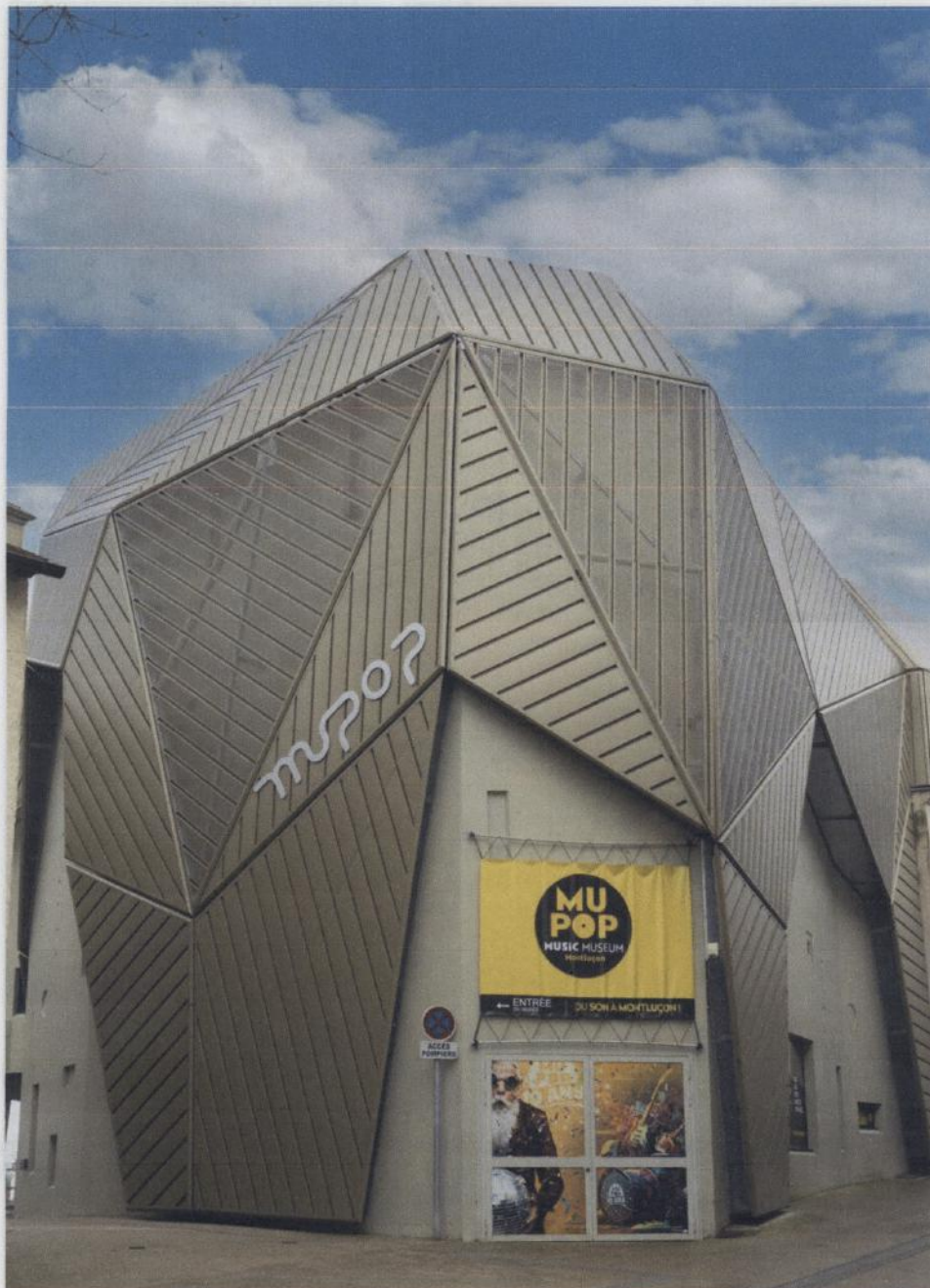


Château des Ducs de Bourbon



From its perch, the Château des Ducs de Bourbon overlooks pedestrianised cobbled streets lined with slightly dilapidated half-timbered and stone houses. But, even in inclement weather, the warm yellow stones of Notre-Dame de Montluçon church brighten the eponymous square.

[ENLARGE](#)



Next to it is a building "you either love or hate," according to my guide.

Designed by Philippe Tixier this is the surprising MuPop Music Museum, inaugurated on 21 June 2013. It inhabits an 18th century mansion and an old shop which Tixier has coiffed with a bronze tea-cosy.

This museum, imaginatively curated by Pascal Payeur, is home to France's largest collection of musical instruments from the 18th century and on. And, as long as you've not forgotten the audio-guide – which is really mandatory (and available in English) – you can also listen to many of these instruments.

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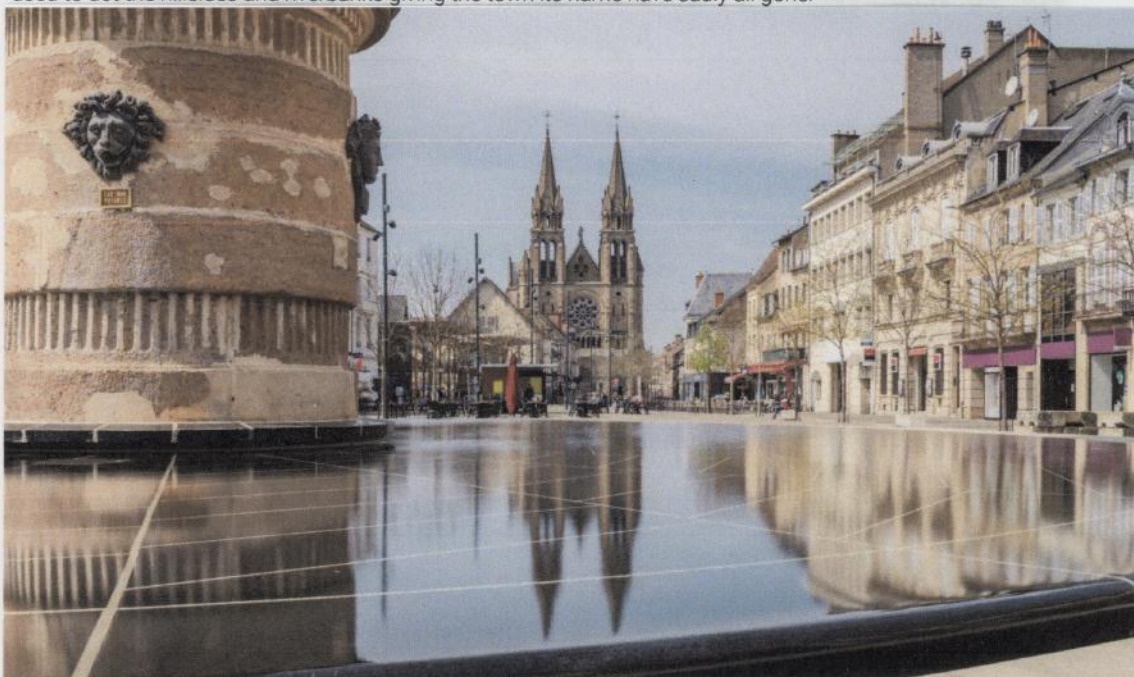




# Moulins

From Montluçon, I drove along the D94 to Moulins through some lovely landscape of small fields fringed by hedges and studded with majestic oaks.

Moulins lies on the east bank of the Allier River, the principal tributary of the Loire. One of Europe's few remaining wild rivers, its unconstrained bed allows it to meander where it pleases. The many windmills, watermills and boat mills that used to dot the hillsides and riverbanks giving the town its name have sadly all gone.



Downtown Moulins

Walking across the Régemortes bridge to the west bank I found the Maison de la Rivière Allier which is a fount of information, maps and coffee! Nearby there's a beach and swimming area, a playground, toilets, and a camping ground for up to 90 campervans. This is also the start of the 5km-long Sentier des Castors pedestrian route with its 20 audio information points about flora and fauna along the way. Cyclists might prefer the Via Allier, a 455km cycling route that links Nevers to Langogne. You could pedal along the 9km-traffic-free route that runs along the riverbank from Chavennes



to Bressolles with Moulins at the midway point.

[ENLARGE](#)



Close by is the rather severe looking Quartier Villars, a late 18th century dragoons and cavalry barracks destined for demolition until its monumental staircase rescued it. Pushing the doors into what is now the National Centre for Costume and Theatrical Design (Centre national du costume et de la scène or CNCS), I was transported into the colourful and joyous world of the Paris Opera, the Comédie française, the Bibliothèque nationale and other major French theatres because since 2006 this is where their best costumes are conserved and exhibited. There are two temporary exhibitions a year and two permanent exhibitions, one dedicated to dancer Rudolf Nureyev and the other features, amongst other things, the remarkable headless Marie-Antoinette costume seen in the 2024 Paris Olympics opening ceremony.

Director Delphine Pinasa told me the costumes, prints and photographs are very fragile so those exhibited in the permanent exhibition are changed twice a year. With over 10,000 costumes in storage, she has a wide wardrobe to choose from!

In 2023 the CNCS inaugurated a large space where visitors can learn how scenery and props are designed and made, even trying a bit of hands-on painting themselves. A "back-stage" has been built here so they can also discover what the lighting technicians, the sound-operators and stagehands do.







Deputy District Forest Officer told me the common, plants and photographs are very little or have existed in the mountainous region and have been used for 10000 years as a source of food. She has a wide knowledge of the region and has been working in the forest for 10 years. She has a wide knowledge of the region and has been working in the forest for 10 years.





Before heading back to the Allier's east bank and Moulins' historic city centre I enjoyed the view of its four 19th century spires. Depending on my viewpoint, the four neo-Gothic spires appeared either to belong to one building or were revealed as quite separate, the two 82-metre-high spires of Notre-Dame-de-l'Annonciation cathedral behind and to the right of the two 74-metre-high spires of the Sacré-Coeur church.

Just behind this church lies the Place d'Allier, the triangular-shaped main city square and the Saincy "fountain" whose "water" is actually a shiny, black granite plaque. Next to the fountain I followed in the footsteps of Gabrielle Chanel, aka Coco Chanel (who used to live in Moulins helping her seamstress sister) and paused for refreshments in the Grand Café: it's been here since 1899 and its décor, a sort of baroque Art Nouveau, has remained intact.

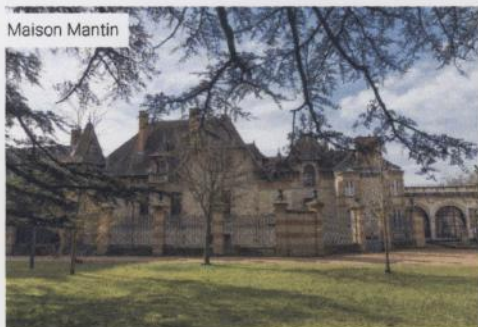
Chimes from the Jacquemart Tower's 4-tonne bell punctuated my two-hour guided tour of the city every 15 minutes: Jacqueline and Jacquelin, the automaton "children" strike the 15, 30 and 45 minutes past the hour while the "parents" Jacquemart and Jacquette, strike the hours... 24/7!

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Just next to the 15th century collegiate chapel, today enlarged into a neo-Gothic cathedral, lies the Maison Mantin built for Louis Mantin in 1893 who bequeathed it to Moulins on condition it be kept intact and open so visitors can see how a 19th century bourgeois lived. I was most entertained by the bathroom with its huge metallic tub and shower with taps galore!

Maison Mantin



Maison Mantin



Maison Mantin



# Vichy

Talking of baths, my next stop was Vichy, one of the 11 Great Spas of Europe which, in July 2021 were jointly awarded a UNESCO World Heritage label. Like the 10 others, Vichy was – and still is to a certain degree – a place where people come seeking curative and therapeutic effects from its waters.



One of the thermal baths in Vichy

Vichy developed largely thanks to Emperor Napoleon III (1808-1873) who came five times to treat his renal colic. The train station, street lay-out, casino, were all built on his orders. There are some interesting, eclectic Anglo-Norman, Swiss, colonial, Flemish Renaissance, Art Nouveau and Gothic revival villas near the river built for wealthy 19th century members of this retinue. Today they are privately owned, and many are classified as Historic Monuments.



In the 1930s, almost 130,000 people a year came to Vichy for a cure. Today, the number has shrunk to about 7,000 because a cure must be prescribed by a doctor, lasts a minimum 21 days and costs between €1,500 to €1,800 excluding accommodation, food and travel. But drinking water from five of the nine sources is free and you can help yourself to four at the Hall of Sources. I tried them: Chomel, Grande Grille, Hôpital and Lucas – one decidedly sulphury, one really salty ("not salt, bicarbonate of sodium" my guide corrected me), and the others.... mmeh! Water from the Celestins source (950m south of the Hall of Sources) is the one that's most neutral and sold the world over.

ENLARGE



I would never have entered the austere, reinforced concrete Notre Dame des Malades church (aka Saint Blaise) built between 1925 and 1956, without my guide. What a mistake that would have been! Inside, it's an explosion of colours from the slender lapis-lazuli columns to the strong red, blues and greens of the stained-glass windows via the shimmering gold of the mosaics, all the work of the Franco-Spanish Mauméjean family.

The Vichy Opera House opened in March 1903 and is the only one in Europe with a yellow, ivory and white colour scheme.



Opéra de Vichy



In the 1930s, almost 130,000 people a year came to Vichy for a cure. Today, the number has shrunk to about 7,000. Because a cure must be prescribed by a doctor, just a minimum 21 days and costs between €7,500 to €12,500 excluding accommodation, food and transport. But drinking water from five of the nine sources is free and you can help yourself to hot mineral water from the Caldesa source at the Hall of Sources. I had my Clément, Grand Lait, Héloïse and Lucien - one decidedly sulphury and fairly salty. (I can't recall the names of the other two, but they're not the same as the ones I mentioned in my book.)



I would never have entered the austere, reinforced concrete Notre-Dame-de-Miséricorde Church (aka Saint-Bless) built between 1925 and 1927, without my guide. With a mosaic that would have been inside the original colour from the slender, light-brown columns to the strong red tiles and gleaming stained glass windows, the exterior was gold. In the 1930s, it was the only church in France to be built in reinforced concrete.





For a rural chapel I headed to Chantoux 30 km west of Vichy, and the only village in the Allier department to bear the  
 "Most beautiful villages in France" (Plus beaux villages de France) label. Its remarkable not only thanks to its medieval  
 stone buildings, glassy village square and cobbled but because 25% of its 300 inhabitants are artists whose shops and  
 studios one can visit.

Here's a look and see "Our Most Treasured" workshop



Notre Dame des Malades aka St Blaise

## Smaller villages



For a rural change I headed to Charroux, 30 km west of Vichy, and the only village in the Allier department to bear the "Most Beautiful Villages in France" (Plus Beaux Villages de France) label. It's remarkable not only thanks to its medieval stone buildings, grassy village square and city gates but because 25 of its 360 inhabitants are artisans whose shops and ateliers one can visit.



Nathalie Floch and her "Des Mots d'Emaux" workshop

I visited four "Des Mots d'Emaux" Nathalie Floch's shop and atelier where she enamels on lava; "Safran de Charroux" owned by Pascale Chassaing and Bruno Chandioux where I learned all about growing, harvesting and using saffron; "Terres de Couleurs" where I watched ceramicist Nathalie Nyault turn a salad bowl on her potter's wheel in under five minutes; and "Moutarde de Charroux" where Olivier and Annabelle Maenner sell the mustard that they make in St-Bonnet-de-Tizon, 3km away.



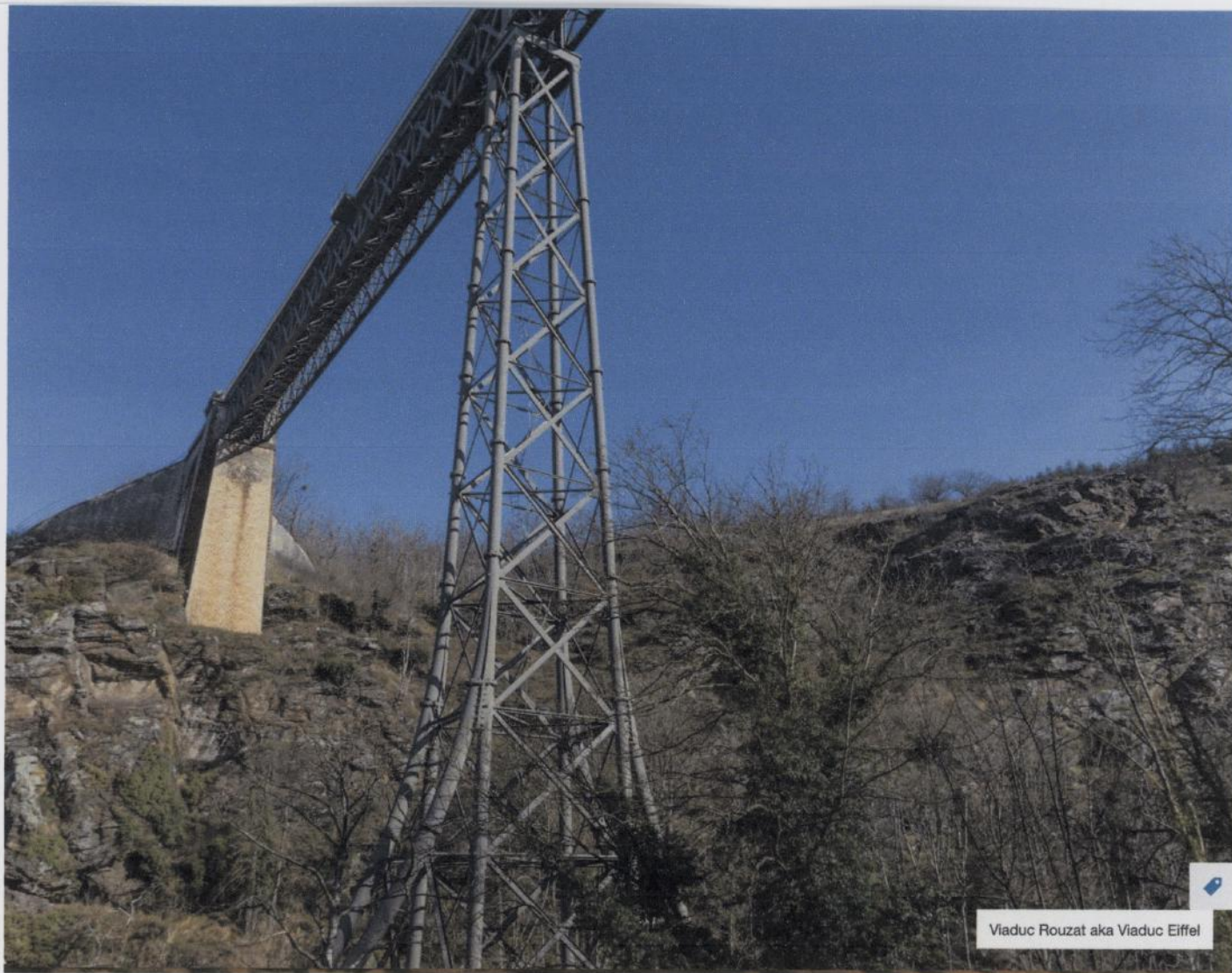


En route to Charroux via the D37 I drove under the Rouzat railway viaduct built by Eiffel (yes, he of the tower) but designed by Wilhelm Nördling which soars 59m above the river Sioule. When you look at the vertiginous spiralling ladder (no longer used) up the middle of the central pillar with no security it's hard to believe there were no recorded deaths during the construction of the viaduct.

The Allier's southern border with the Puy de Dôme department is in the middle of this river which has carved gorges through the northernmost foothills of the Massif Central range. These Gorges de la Sioule are a perfect kayaking alternative to the overcrowded Gorges du Tarn or Gorges du Verdon. Visitors rent boats at Ébreuil, are driven to Menat in the Puy de Dôme from where it's a two- or three-hour paddle with the current back to Ébreuil. "Perfectly doable by children as long as they can swim" my guide assured me.







Viaduc Rouzat aka Viaduc Eiffel

On my way home I paused just south of Moulins in the vineyard heart of the Allier where 19 villages produce the AOC Saint-Pourçain appellation made only with the region's historic Tressallier grapes. In the unspoilt, picturesque village of Cesset I met Jean Teissèdre who, with his sister Sophie and her husband, in 2011 took responsibility for the family vineyard, turning it organic and creating the Domaine des Berioles. They also offer wine tourism circuits. On Friday evenings there are concerts and apéritifs at the Domaine, summer weekends there's a wine bar, there are treasure hunts in the vineyard for children and on the 27th July 2025, they'll organise a wine and food pairing dinner to music provided by an orchestra.



You can travel to Montluçon, Moulins and Vichy from Paris by train. The journey takes between 2.5 and 3.5 hours and costs between €45-€60 one way. You can also travel between the towns by train or bus.