

# Closer to nature

Waterfalls in Doubs

Jura is one of the most unspoilt areas of France, perfect for those wishing to embrace a peaceful and traditional French lifestyle of days gone by, as *Paola Westbeek* discovers



Boasting a scenically diverse and impressive landscape with charming rural villages unscathed by the hands of time, the Jura mountains are located at the border with Switzerland and stretch out over approximately 250km in Bourgogne-Franche-Comté and Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes.

They unfold in Doubs, the greenest department of France, named after the 453km river that flows through it, and extend into Ain where they reach their summit at 1,720m in Crêt de la Neige. In this land of traditions, one can indulge all the senses - from breathing in crisp mountain air in one of the most unspoilt parts of the country to discovering the many artisanal products that are part of its unique heritage.

### SPECTACULAR SCENERY

A visit to the Jura mountains is guaranteed to leave a lasting impression. If it isn't the ethereal beauty of the early morning

veil of mist crowning the area's peaks or the panoramically winding roads that give way to sprawling views of hilly green pastures with lazily grazing cattle in summer, it's the idyllic winters with towering snow-covered spruce trees, cosy wooden chalets and 3,000km of slopes.

A vast 43% of the region consists of forests that date back more than 7,000 years and are inhabited by boar, deer and lynx. In fact, the name 'Jura' is a Gaulish word meaning 'forest land'.

The landscape is also characterised by lakes, rivers and waterfalls that invite one to sail, swim, fish or simply admire. This is one of the least explored areas of the country, which means it hasn't been tainted by mass tourism and still offers the same traditional lifestyle of days gone by.

It was that authentic French way of life that attracted Barry Whittingham, writer of the *Call of France* trilogy and retired English teacher to the Jura department more than 45 years ago.

After a teaching exchange programme

in Haute-Saône in 1972, Barry went on to teach in Besançon, a vibrant city located on the edge of the Jura mountains and the capital of Doubs. It is the birthplace of Victor Hugo (1802) and known for its UNESCO citadel designed by military architect Vauban.

According to Barry, who now resides in the town of St-Claude nestled in the Haut-Jura, in comparison to places such as the south-west, there aren't many expats who have made the Jura mountains their home, but he doesn't really miss the contact with English speakers.

Living there enables him to 'embrace to the full', the kind of life he was looking for when he first decided to settle in the country. When asked what he enjoys most about life there, he replies: "The spectacular mountain scenery, the closeness to nature and the peaceful, small-town environment where traffic jams are unheard of and where everybody knows everybody." This is definitely France at its most pure.

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### KEEPING OLD TRADITIONS ALIVE

Craftsmanship abounds in the Jura mountains with everything from bell founders to gem cutters and pipemakers who have managed to preserve their ancestral traditions.

Watch and clockmaking was brought over by Swiss Protestants during the second half of the 16th century and took off in the 17th century as a way for local farmers to keep active during the long and harsh winter months.

In Morteau (known to produce one of the region's most famous smoked sausages), you'll find the *Musée de l'horlogerie*, established in 1985. Housed in Château Pertusier, a bourgeois home built in 1576 by one of the oldest families in the area, the museum tells the story of clockmaking in the Jura mountains.

Another craft that has been proudly maintained is that of bell-making. The Obertino bell foundry has been manufacturing bells since 1834 and is one of the last to remain in France today. Many of the bells gracing the necks of the russet-and-white Montbéliarde cows seen

dotting the hillsides were produced there - and you can still witness this awe-inspiring process as you peer through the window of Obertino's workshop in the little town of Labergement-Ste-Marie.

St-Claude not only boasts more than a century of stone-cutting expertise, but it was there that pipe-making factories appeared in the late 19th century. By 1925, there were approximately 6,000 pipemakers, and although the town only counts half a dozen today, it is still considered the pipe-making capital of the world. At the *Musée de la Pipe et du Diamant*, you can learn more about these important crafts while admiring an impressive collection.

Some 30km to the north-east of St-Claude is the town of Morez where in 1796 nail manufacturer Pierre-Hyacinthe Cazeaux had the clever idea to bend a nail into the first pair of eyeglasses. By 1820, more spectacle manufacturers had settled in town. Today roughly 10 million frames are produced there annually. You can spend an afternoon immersed in the history of this important invention at the *Musée de la Lunette* which houses one of the most extensive collections of eyewear and optical instruments.

### WINES WORTH DISCOVERING

It isn't just the many time-honoured skills that are intertwined with the culture of 'montagnons', as the people of the Jura mountains are called, but also a hearty appetite for robust fare paired with distinctive wines and served with a generous helping of hospitality. The French concept of 'produits du terroir' is exceptionally well-represented in specialities such as pork charcuterie which is dried and smoked in large, pyramid-shaped chimneys called *tuyés* and robust cheeses such as Mont d'Or, Morbier, Bleu de Gex and, of course, Comté. Made from raw milk from Montbéliarde cows, Comté has a mildly peppery flavour and an earthy, somewhat nutty aroma. It received AOC status in 1958 and is the most popular cheese in the country.

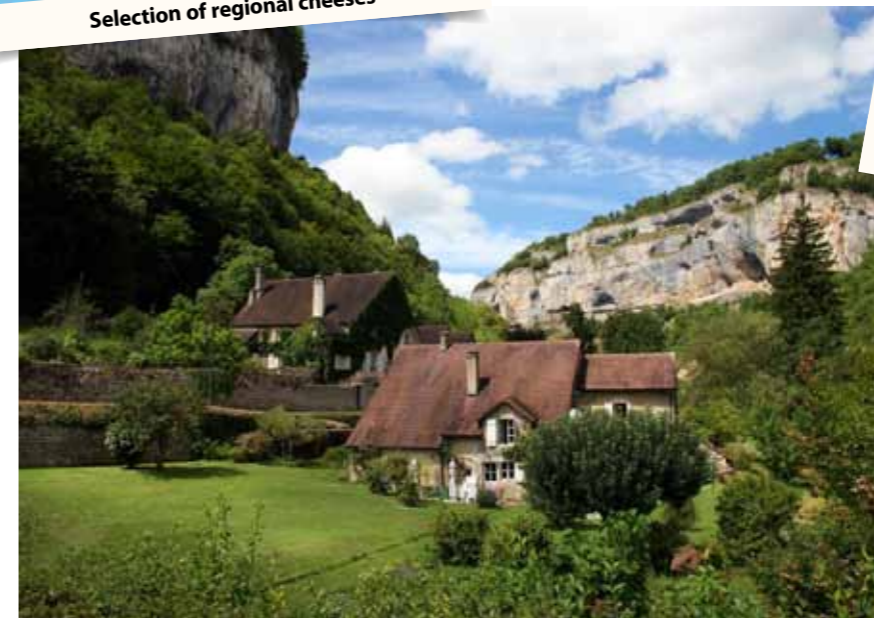
In order to fully appreciate the cheese, a visit to Fort St-Antoine - a military fort built between 1879 and 1882 and now home to the prestigious ageing cellar of *affineur* Marcel Petite - is highly



Selection of regional cheeses



A regional salad with cheese and charcuterie



Lons-le-Saunier



Local charcuterie

recommended. Approximately 100,000 wheels (each weighing a whopping 35 kilos) slowly mature to perfection at low temperatures for an average of 14 months.

Comté is served on cheese boards and added to many dishes, much like the regional wine it pairs best with - the amber-coloured *vin jaune*. Similar to sherry, this aromatic wine has hints of hazelnut and dried fruit. It is made from savagnin grapes (which only grow in Jura) and aged in oak barrels for a period of six years. A must-try dish made with the wine is the delectably creamy *poulet au vin jaune et aux morilles* (chicken with *vin jaune* and morels).

Though Jura is France's smallest (and a rather unknown) wine district, its seven *appellations* are certainly worth discovering. Approximately 140 *vignerons* produce red, white, rosé, sparkling and sweet wines made from chardonnay and savagnin grapes for white, and pouslard, trousseau and pinot noir for red.

A vineyard adventure is always off to a good start in the region's wine capital, the medieval town of Arbois, where you can sample the wines at restaurants, wine shops and the local wine museum (*Musée de la Vigne et du Vin du Jura*). After that, head out on the 80km wine route and feast your eyes on some of the most idyllic panoramas or stop and explore pretty villages such as Poligny (the capital of Comté cheese) and Château-Chalon, where you can visit the 12th-century Eglise St-Pierre.

If you continue further south towards Ain, the vineyards of Cerdon produce refreshing sparkling wines that are delicious as an *apéritif*. Especially memorable are those of Lingot-Martin in Poncin, an association of four growers with



Pipes at the Musée de la Pipe et du Diamant



Master piper Sebastien Beau

vineyards spread out over 40 hectares in the Bugey-Cerdon *appellation*.

And for those looking for an enjoyable way to burn off all the region's gourmet delights, the *Grandes Traversées du Jura* is a network of trails that connects the mountains from north to south and is perfect for hiking, cycling, horse riding, snowshoeing and skiing. It starts in the north of Doubs in Pays de Montbéliard and extends to Bugey in the department of Ain.

### TURN BACK THE CLOCK

It was the scenery and tranquillity that brought Dinand and Miriam Westerveld and their two young children to Villerserine, a sleepy village located in the middle of the Revermont hills. Originally from the town of Nieuwkoop in the Netherlands, they had been visiting the area on family holidays before deciding to make it their permanent home in 2005.

Four years later, they transformed part of their 300-year-old farmhouse into luxury accommodation Les Tulipes.

Miriam says: "Jura is sparsely populated



### PROPERTY PRICES

#### JURA

€130,000

Average house price

€1,240/m<sup>2</sup>

Average apartment price


Source: Notaires de France

and living here feels like turning back the clock 50 years.

"Life revolves around having the basic necessities and is one of simplicity. Little things such as enjoying a picnic with the neighbours under our oak tree are important to us."

Though the locals are friendly, making an effort to integrate and learn the language is essential.

"Very few of them speak or are willing to speak more than the odd word of English, so a non-French speaking expat would have difficulty being accepted," says Barry Whittingham. "Generally, people from the Jura mountains are not renowned for their extroverted, demonstrative nature and you have to reach out to them. Once they have given you their friendship, however, it's real and durable," he adds.

If you're looking to live in a place that offers space, serenity and a rustic charm firmly shaped by cherished traditions, then the Jura mountains is an area definitely worth considering. 

[montagnes-du-jura.fr/en](http://montagnes-du-jura.fr/en)

