

Once upon a Barge

Rolf Brauch ~ April 2000



Our adventure began on Friday night, March 31st, as we left Toronto on an overnight flight to Paris via London, England. We met our fellow travellers at the Gare de Lyon in Paris, for a TGV-train ride to Dijon (home of the famous mustard).

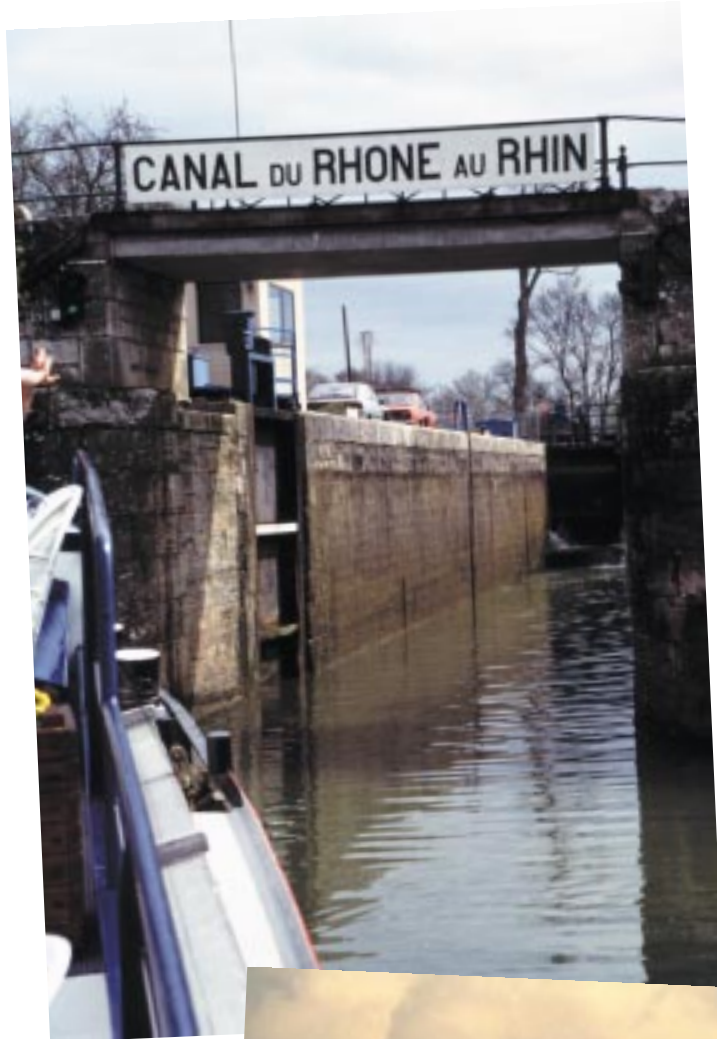
In Dijon we were met by our tour guide and bus driver for a short ride to the town of Verdun where the Caprice was moored.

After a wonderful Sunday morning breakfast onboard the Caprice, we started our journey along the Soane and Doubs rivers.



Swan taking flight as the Caprice approaches.





Entering the Rhone and Rhine canal which connects the Soane and Doubs rivers.

The Caprice barely fit into the many locks we navigated over the course of the week, with just inches to spare on either side. It was almost like threading a needle, and required a lot of skill on part of the pilot, especially when the wind or current was strong.

For this particular lock, which was on a 90° angle to the Soane river, it took four attempts to line up the Caprice the right way to fit her bow into the lock.

Coming out of the lock onto the Doubs river.





It took several days before we figured out that those curious clumps in the trees, that looked a lot like huge bird nests, were actually Mistletoe.



Chugging along the Rhine-Rhone Canal





Being very early spring, the weather was cool and damp, not exactly ideal for sitting on deck.

Soooo, some of us hiked...

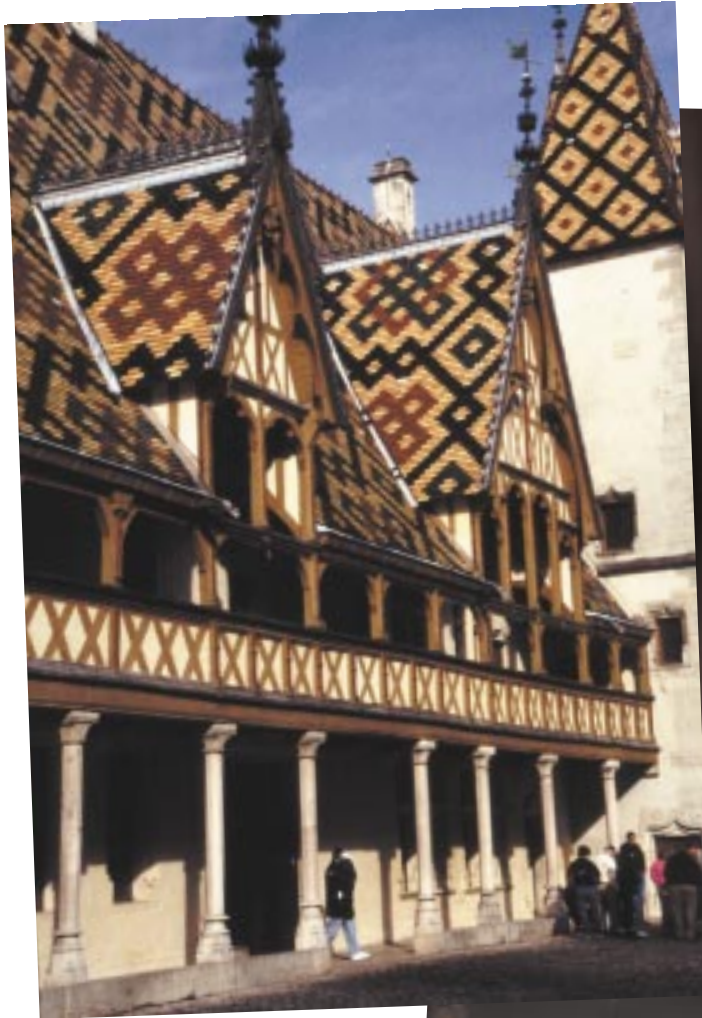
...while others biked.





The clearance under some bridges often was as low as it was narrow. This one actually had tons of head room — under some others, we had to duck.





An interesting side-trip was a visit to the Hotel-Dieu in Beaune, a hospital built in 1443 by the Duke of Burgundy. Also referred to as a palace for the poor, the roofs are covered in glazed multicoloured tiles which create extraordinary geometrical patterns.

Dr. Kirk making rounds.

Our fellow travellers assembled for a group shot in the hospital courtyard.





Dole, former capital city of ancient Comte, has many charming attractions, including this cathedral as seen from our mooring spot on the Doubs river.

Dole also happens to be the birthplace of Louis Pasteur. The home where Pasteur was borne and lived is now a museum.

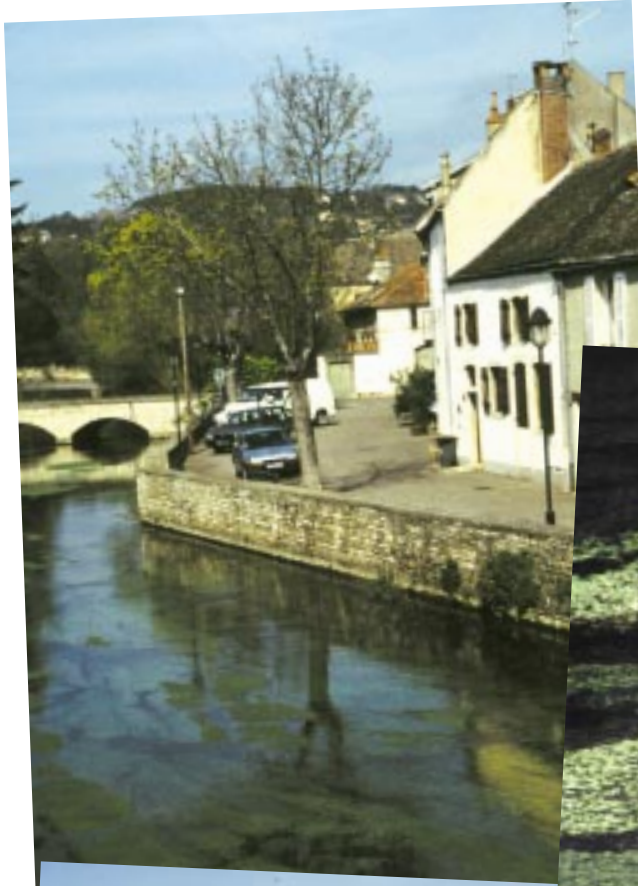
A brief rainshower brought us a beautiful rainbow. In fact it turned into a rare double rainbow — of course I had to run out of film just as the double rainbow appeared.



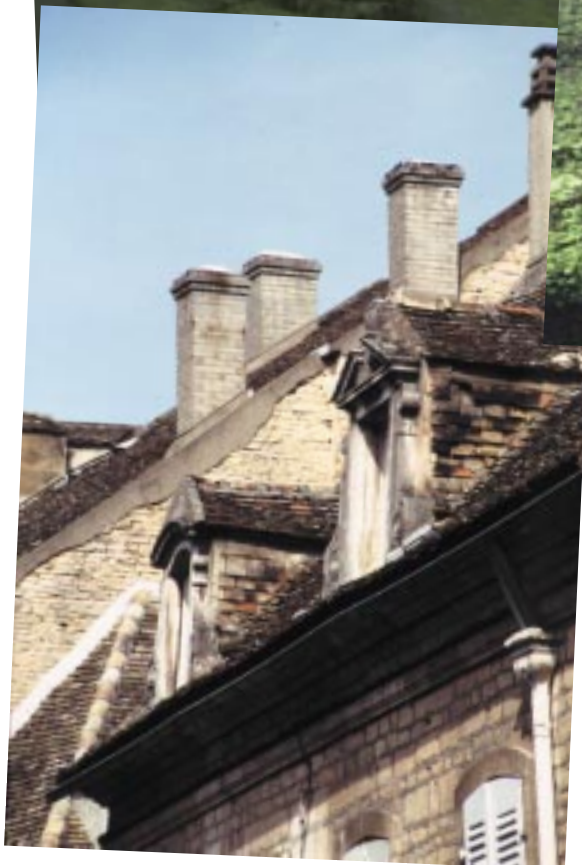


Notre Dame Basilica — home of a beautiful pipe organ built by Riepp in 1754, and many wonderful stained glass windows.





While everyone else went on a wine tasting jaunt, we opted to poke around town a bit and came across a little river with these wonderful plants growing in it — the plants were actually underwater.



...just love the interesting roof lines on old buildings.





Our ever friendly deckhand - getting ready to tie up the Caprice in a lock.

Another interesting side trip was a visit to the Royal "Saltworks" at Arc et Senans. The facility consists of a walled compound with a collection of interesting buildings created by a manic architect.

The salt was not mined in the traditional way as in Salzburg, Austria, for example, but rather recovered by condensing very salty water by heating the water in wood-fired ovens. To do this the water was delivered some 30 kilometers through wooden pipes in order to be closer to a forest.





Coming through — a tunnel carved out of a limestone hill provided an interesting passage. The tunnel was just wide enough for the barge and a narrow walkway on the left side.

At this end of the tunnel, the canal continued left at a 90° angle. To permit the barge to turn, a small basin had been created. It took close to a half hour to turn the barge.

Stairs enabled those of us who walked to cross over to the other side of the canal.





Turning the Caprice around after coming through the tunnel.

"Hey guys, it's got to go that way a wee bit more"





Another interesting sidetrip was a visit to the Grotte D'Osselle, about 20 km southwest of Besançon.

These caves were carved out of limestone by an underground river many thousands of years ago.

The caves show signs of prehistoric use - with evidence of campfires and animal bone fragments found by explorers.



If you're over six feet tall or a little claustrophobic, you may want to think twice about touring the caves.

In a couple of places you have to navigate through very tight passages with extremely low ceilings — you're bent over to the point where your hands almost touch the ground — it's too wet for crawling on your hands and knees — and it's easy to bang your head into the rock. Wearing a hat or baseball cap is highly recommended.





My photographs don't do the caves justice. Light was provided by a few strategically placed spotlights. Without my tripod, I was forced to shoot freehand, and under these dim light conditions, shooting at the slow speed needed to get half decent exposures, it's difficult not to induce camera shake.





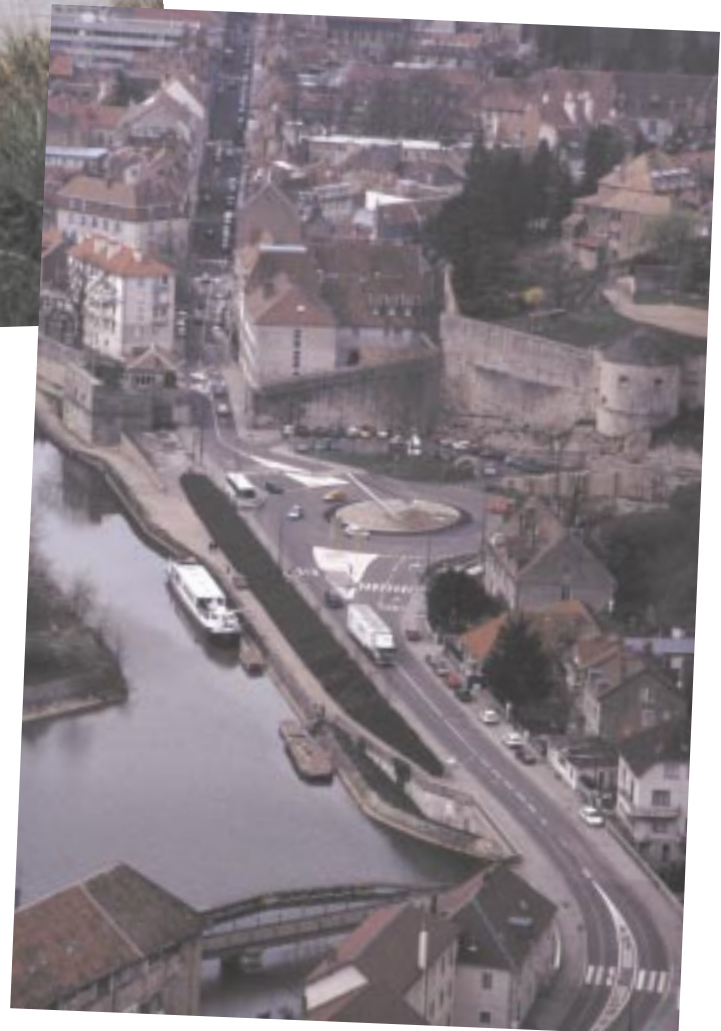
The nearer we came to the end of our trip, the higher the hills became. Upon exploring the surrounding countryside later we discovered that the area is a large limestone plateau. Riven by the Doubs and many small tributaries, this created many narrow canyons and steep gorges with delightfully winding and narrow roads up and down each side. Oh, how I would love to tour this place in an open sports car.

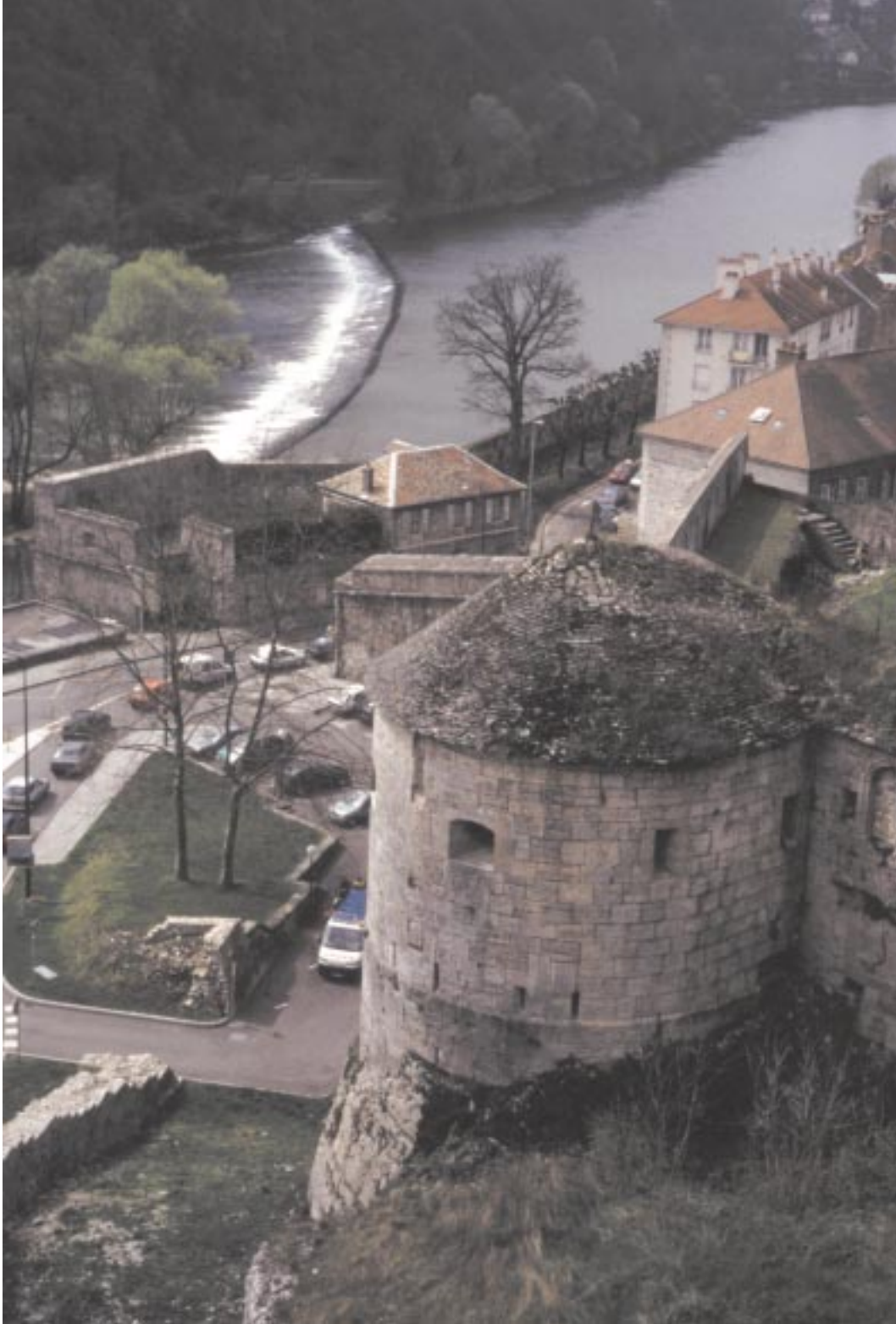
Being in the off-season, we had no problems finding places to stay, although this area does get very busy in Summer.

Our anchorage on the Doubs river in Besançon, capital of Franche-Comté, also known as "France's green beauty queen".

2.5 hours from Paris by TGV train, Besançon is a "must-see" city. The compact downtown core is surrounded by a 340° loop in the Doubs river.

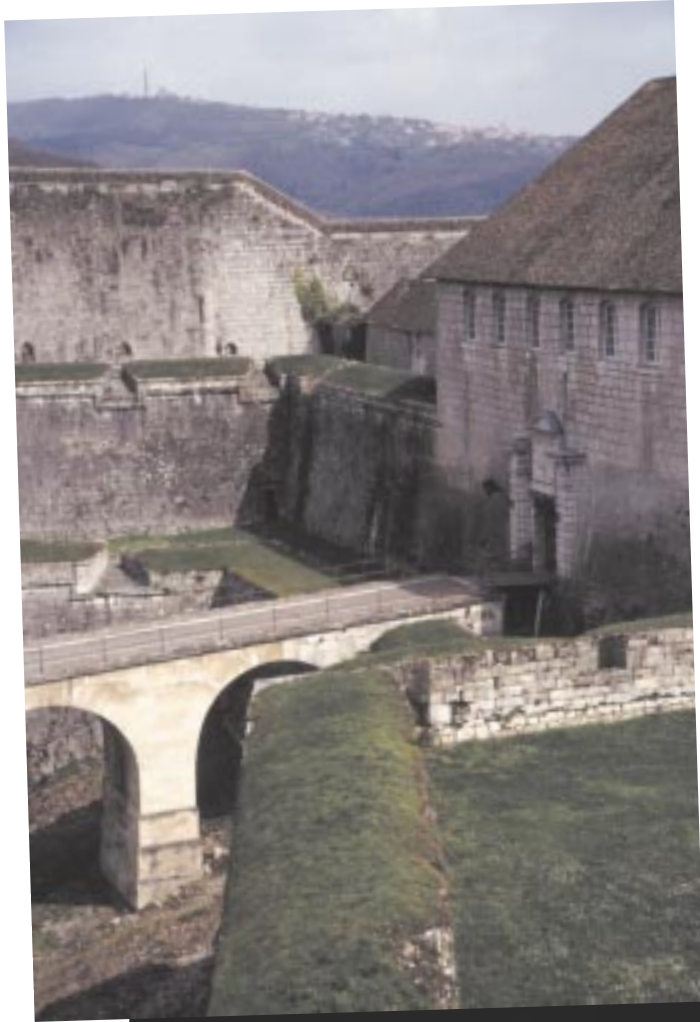
Besançon has an abundance of old buildings and churches, smart shops, restaurants and hotels. It was a fitting destination of our barge trip.





Part of the outer fortification of "la Citadel"





The Citadel overlooking Besançon, built during the reign of Louis XIV, today serves as a museum and mini-zoo.

The Citadel at night taken from the Caprice at anchor on the Doubs river.





After saying our goodbyes to our fellow travellers in Besançon (who returned to Paris), four of us rented a car to tour the area and get a flavour of the countryside.

We were looking for a four-door sedan, but all they had was (in the words of the rental-agent) "a curious little car" (a Renault-Kangoo diesel). While not speedy (on a short stretch of the motorway it eventually did get to 60 Mph), it was roomy, easy on fuel and the transmission was geared just right for the mountains.

While driving over a 4,100 foot pass of the Vosges mountains north of Besançon, we happened on a group of hang-gliders and para-sailers.

Although it was a sunny day, it was cold and lots of snow was still lying on the north slopes.





While looking for accommodations we drove by a little farm with deer, llamas, goats and donkeys — like the one that Irma befriended with a little gift of grass.

...and here's the old goat himself, also trying to make friends with the donkey.





Poking around countless little valleys we came across a charming small town where this wonderful Chateau dominating the town centre.

Set against a background of mountains shrouded in ground fog, it was easy to imagine how the people lived here in the days of knights in shining armor.

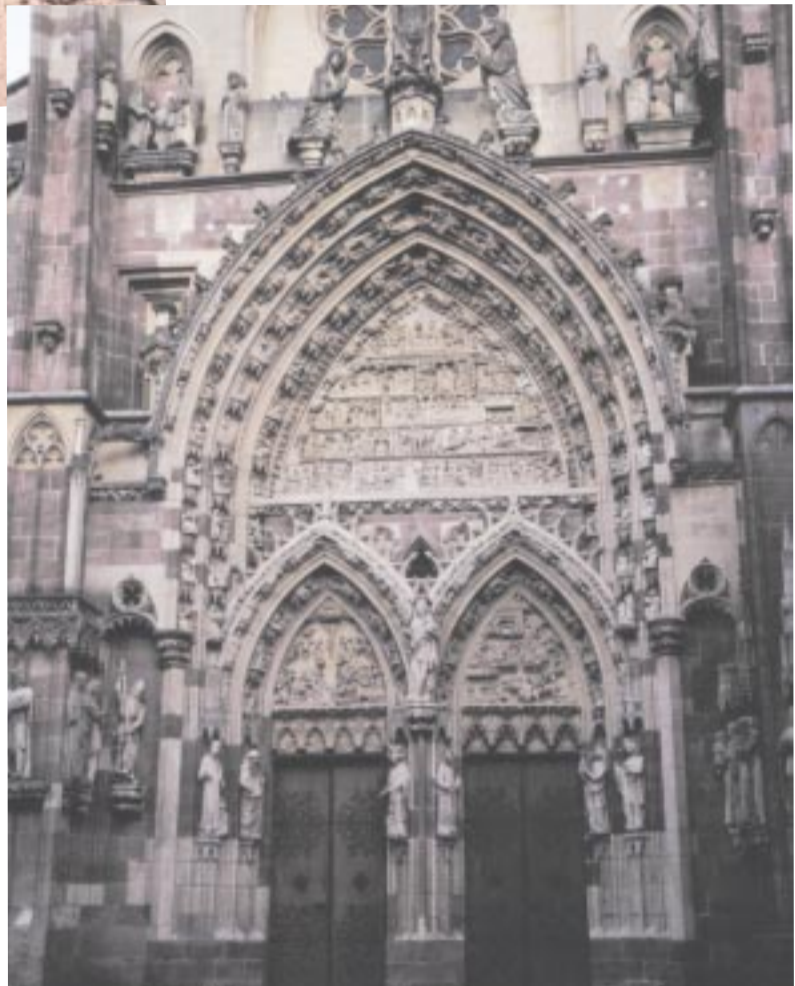


...please don't ask me the name of the town — I lost my notes (but I do remember it was only a short distance southeast of Besançon).





On our stop Sunday night in a small village, I couldn't resist taking this shot — the view from our hotel window to the 'house' next door. The place was literally only 10 feet from our window.



The main entrance of the cathedral in Thann, northeast of Besançon, not far from Strasbourg. Sorry I don't have any shots of the whole cathedral (it was impressive), but it was very late in the day and getting too dark.



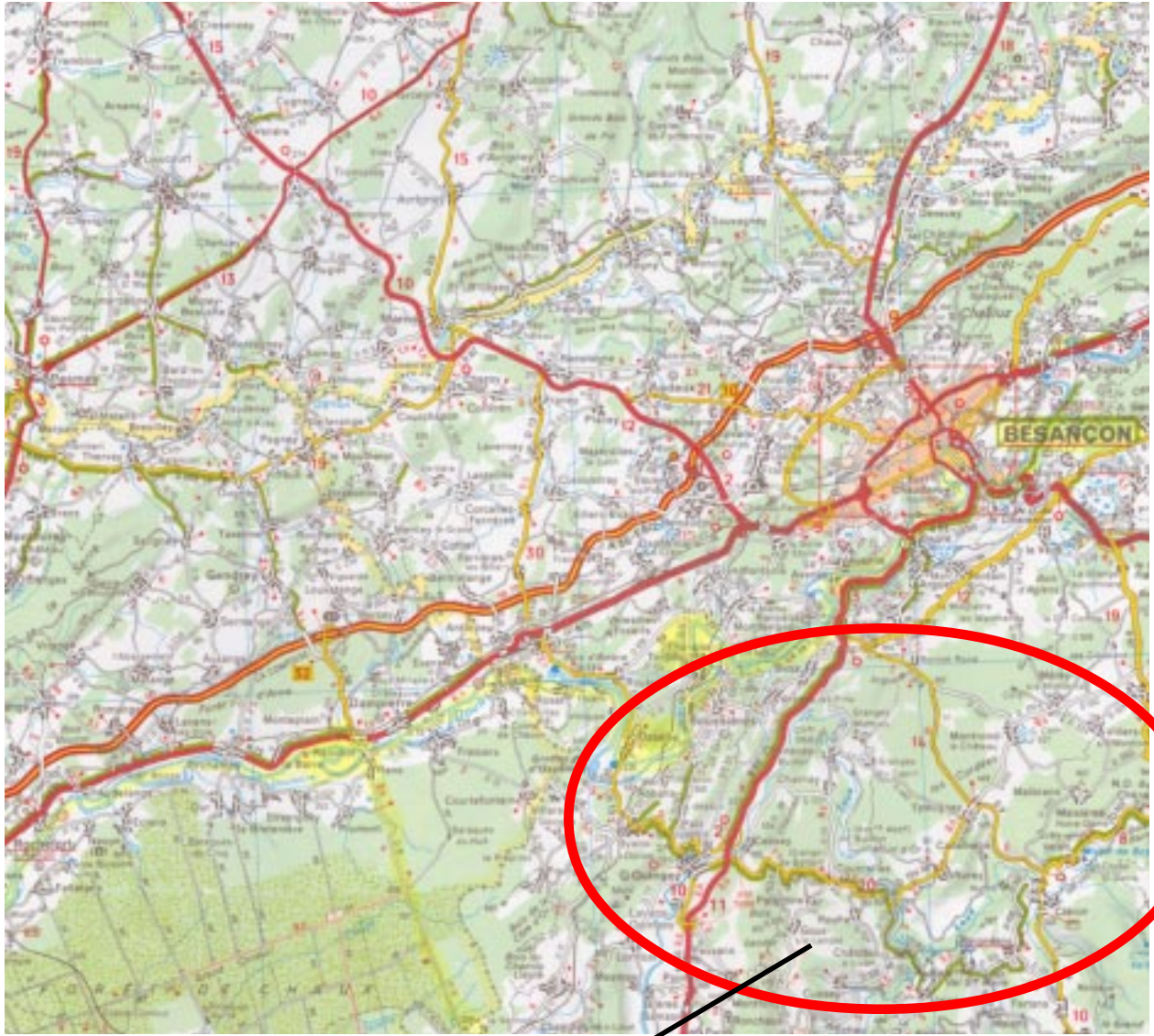


All over the countryside one finds interesting buildings such as these outbuilding of an old church...



... and the remains of an old mansion, now almost completely overgrown with ivy.





This is the area we found so beautiful and promised to visit again for a more thorough and leisurely exploration.

The Swiss border is only an hour's drive south. Crossing the mountain range into Switzerland was very interesting with great narrow, twisting and turning roads, but after we dropped down into the valley, however the drive along the north shore of Lac de Neuchatel was a bit disappointing due to heavy highway construction, so we quickly headed north again into France.

*For more photographs and travelogues visit my place:
<http://www.brauch.com/Rolf/Welcome.html>*

