

Green

Wake up and smell the fromage

An eco gîte amid the forests of the Jura mountains makes a great base for walking - and sampling the fine local cheeses, says Jo Caird

Having arrived at the gîte on an unseasonably grim evening of rain and fog that hid our surroundings entirely, we were thrilled the next morning to find ourselves atop a meadow covered plateau completely at odds with the tortuous mountain roads we'd driven to reach it.

Les P'tits Belets, in the hamlet of Lajoux in the Haut-Jura regional natural park in Franche-Comté, eastern France, is one of around 300 WWF-certified "panda gîtes". To qualify for the "panda" mark, holiday cottages must be run according to principles of sustainability and respect for the local environment, be located in an area of superb environmental diversity, and provide tools and literature to help visitors make the most of their surroundings. They must also meet all



Big cheese ... wheel of Comté in the Jura

must be run according to principles of sustainability and respect for the local environment, be located in an area of superb environmental diversity, and provide tools and literature to help visitors make the most of their surroundings. They must also meet all the requirements of the level two Gîtes de France rating, which guarantees all the basic holiday living essentials.

Michel and Héléne Berrod added a holiday flat to their 18th-century farmhouse by raising the original roof and constructing another storey out of sustainable materials. Their home's ancient beams have been ingeniously used in the flat's supporting walls, providing a nice contrast to the exposed chipboard that much of the rest of the apartment is made from.

On the gîte's doorstep are 2,600km of signposted walks, mountain bike and horse-riding trails, including the 400km Grande Traversée du Jura, which runs through the park from north to south. Much of the rambling is in dense spruce forest, which provides excellent shelter from the elements and plenty of atmospheric moments, if rather fewer spectacular views than one might wish for - though there are breathtaking views of the Alps from Crêt Pela, the area's highest point.

We planned our walking routes with waterfalls, lakes and echo spots in mind, taking in the verdant surroundings of La Cascade de la Queue de Cheval (Horse's Tail Waterfall), off the road to St-Claude; the wetlands at Lac des Rousses; and the extraordinary, massive natural echo chamber outside the village of Leschères. For less strenuous walking, a number of the routes take you through rolling pasture where the gentle tinkle of cowbells is never far away. You'd be pushed to find a lovelier

soundtrack to an afternoon.

Getting back to the gîte each evening, we found it impossible to resist the lure of the sauna. The central heating and hot water at Les P'tits Belets are both run entirely off the solar thermal panels behind the house, so this small concession to luxury doesn't contradict the house's eco credentials, meaning we could rest our weary muscles guilt-free.

The Haut-Jura is not just a place of exercise and fresh air, however, it's also, thanks to a thriving traditional cheese-making industry, the ideal destination for gluttons. A 10-minute drive across the plateau from Lajoux is Les Moussières, home to the Fromagerie du Haut-Jura, a family-run cheese co-operative. We arrived at the viewing gallery at 8am, in time to see the cheese-makers up to their elbows in curds as they prepared that day's batches of Comté, Morbier and Bleu de Gex, the region's three best-known



Lac de Lamoura in the Haut-Jura

cheeses. As we watched them stir the newly formed curds, drain the whey from the enormous vats and pack the curds into moulds for ageing, we were told about the history of cheese-making in the Haut-Jura, a story that goes back nine centuries.

The region's medieval serfs realised that by setting up as co-operatives and pooling their milk, they could make enough cheese to see them through the months when snow made grazing impossible. The region's co-operatives now make cheese all year round but the methods they use are the same as they've always been.

On our final day, we visited Fort des Rousses, a gigantic Napoleonic stronghold that served as a military base until 1998 when Les Fromageries Arnaud converted the place into a storage facility for ageing upwards of 55,000 Comté cheeses. Comté, a hard cheese with a delicious nutty flavour, does not smell particularly strongly, but as we walked through corridors stacked floor-to-ceiling with the giant rounds, the pong was overpowering.

We'd been feasting all week - a particularly memorable evening was spent eating traditional, cheese-heavy Jurassienne dishes at L'Anversis (lanversis.pagesperso-orange.fr), a quirky and stylish restaurant outside the village of Lamoura - so the tasting session in the fort's old gunpowder storage vault may not have been strictly necessary, but the introduction to the most aged Comté, the two-year-

In the pastures, the tinkle of cowbells is never far away

old, was a real treat.

That night, our hosts at Les P'tits Belets invited us down to their warm, bohemian-style kitchen to share a fondue. In another time and place, this would have felt like an indulgence too far, but after a week of rambling around the quietly lovely Haut-Jura countryside, a meal composed entirely of cheese, wine and bread felt like an entirely reasonable nutritional option. Oh, the joys of mountain life.

● *A week's self-catering at Les P'tits Belets (+33 3 8441 2443, lesptitsbelets.com), which sleeps four, is from €400. Returns from London St Pancras to La Cure start at £124 (0844 848 4064, raileurope.co.uk). Easyjet flies from 13 UK cities to Geneva from £48 return (easyjet.com), and Auto Europe (autoeurope.co.uk) has a week's car hire from £199. Lajoux is an hour's drive from Geneva. The Fromagerie du Haut-Jura (+33 3 8441 6096, fromagerie-haut-jura.fr) and the Fort des Rousses (+33 3 8460 0255, fort-des-rousses.com) offer tastings - call to arrange. Le Gabelou hotel in Mijoux (+33 4 5041 3250, gabelouhotel.com) hires electric bikes from €13 per half day or €50 for three days*