

## French Signposts and how not to get lost in France

Before you head for the ferry, its worth stressing that road signs in France DO NOT follow the same hierarchy as they do in the UK. So if your destination in France is pretty much anywhere (but PARIS) then you really need to understand how they decide what destinations will appear on road signs. Then you can jot down the place-names which you need to watch out for. Simple.



The French use a simple scheme for road signs which has been around for years. However, most foreigners find it odd or quite dreadful, basically because they don't know how the scheme works. So this note aims to make the scheme a little bit clearer and perhaps make your next trip less stressful. The first thing to realise is that the signposting in England (*or other countries for that matter*) is no great shakes. For instance anyone riding, day after day, up the old A5, may wonder why, on leaving London, the first place signposted was Hinkley with no mention of Towcester, Northampton, Daventry or even Birmingham???



Our Irish friends are just as odd.

and let's not forget about our US cousins:

### It all starts with a history lesson.

French road signs, their style, location and upkeep used to be the sole preserve of those excellent people at Michelin (who make car tyres AND maps of France), and only relatively recently has this role passed to state, regional & local authorities. This explains two things:

1 - Lacking funds or materials for proper metal poles or proper signs, originally the Michelin Man took the minimum cost route and simply painted road signs onto the side of houses. This habit of putting signs on any convenient wall continues in many French towns. This explains why French signs are located right at the junction itself (not before the junction as we are used to in the UK). So if you approach too fast, you may not spot the signs until too late.

2 - As Michelin used to hold the National sign writing franchise and monopoly, they chose colours and codes for the signs that suited them best. Hence they match the colours used on their own Michelin brand maps. Those original colour and style choices continue, even after the work passed to state/local bodies, and as we will see, they also preserve other useful information purposes.



Here is an example that shows both of these points:

In the picture you can see the old sign lurking at the back mounted directly on a wall, this points the driver right down the major N12 (**National, red**) road and in front the more modern metal sign, again pointing the driver to the right, along the lesser D712 (**Departmental, yellow**) road.

However the signs in the picture also carry a lot of other information which may not be immediately obvious to Foreigners, as we shall see...

### Time for a primer on French Road Classifications

The French have four road classifications, rather similar to those in the UK.

**Autoroutes (A+number)** - designate the "autoroutes", or motorways. Major routes usually have a single or double digit number, whilst 3 digit Autoroutes usually connect two Autoroutes or apply to by-passes or urban motorways. These are the equivalent of the UK's M1, M5 etc. Where applicable they now carry the European International E Route coding as well.

**Routes Nationales (N+number)** - These are government maintained highways. However many are being downgraded into Routes Departementales, especially ones that are doubled by a motorway. (This is basically to shift who pays the maintenance bills). These are roughly the equivalent of the UK's A roads, like the A1, A6 etc.

**Routes Departementales (D+number)** - These highways are maintained by the relevant departement authority, (an administrative division of France). Their quality depends on how rich the departement is, hence road standards may change dramatically as you cross Departmental boundaries. These are the equivalent of the UK's B roads, I guess you get the picture.

**Routes Communales/Vicinales (C+number, V+number)** - These are the lowest category of road, and are maintained by the local municipalities. These are mainly local roads - the equivalent of our unclassified roads and may be unsealed; think of anything from a small country lane, a factory access road, to a rough farm track. Again the level of maintenance really depends on how wealthy the local commune is.

Like the UK, road numbers are rarely posted for this class of road. If you are lucky in built up areas, a road name may occasionally be displayed. You may also spot what looks like small blue house number plaques on buildings. However beware these are not sequential and there will often be gaps, hence you will rarely find number 22 next door to number 23! Why? I hear you ask. Well these plaques are put up by France Telecom and actually show houses with a telephone connection and the number on the plaque is how many meters along the road the connection is from the end of the road nearest to the town centre. – Confusing or what!



Now those of you that have been paying attention will recall that there is an historic link between the roads, the signs and Mr **Bibendum**, aka The Michelin man.

That link is the “colours for roads in France” (OK with one exception.....the motorways).

**Why the motorways?** I hear you ask. Well when Monsieur Michelin started making signs and maps there were no motorways. Unfortunately the colour blue (normally used for motorways) had already been used by Michelin on their maps for rivers and the sea. So, rather than repaint God’s handiwork, and totally redraw all their maps, they settled on **red / yellow / red** for toll motorways and **red / white / red** for toll free motorways. All the rest of the roads had been around for years, so they were fine. So we ended up with:

Routes Nationales (**N**+number) are shown red on the map and the road sign numbers are also red.

Routes Departementales (**D**+number) are yellow on the maps and yellow on the road sign numbers. (NB The French have a habit of reclassifying their red N roads as D roads but leaving them marked in red on the maps but that’s French and you’ll have to live with that).

Routes Communales/Vicinales (**C**+number, **V**+number) are white roads on the map and white on the road sign numbers.

Now before we move on, a couple more things about those dreaded motorways.

First - just to be different the Swiss decided to adopt a sign system which is the opposite of almost everyone else on the planet – so motorway signs are Green, whilst local roads use Blue signs.

Secondly - just like the UK, signs on French motorways tend to be Blue BUT by default, most French road signs are on white backgrounds, with ONLY the colour of the road number to tell you if it’s an N or D road, along with the letter prefix.

This creates interesting problems on French motorway direction signs – what colour to use? On the motorway itself, the signs are only **blue**, likewise if the motorway itself is staying as a motorway or dividing onto another motorway. However where an exit road is not to another motorway, then signs are **white**. Also the motorway’s own road number prefixes are always **red** (like the N roads) as, obviously, it is only a vamped up A road.

Here is an example: In this picture you can see:



1. The motorway continues to Pont Audemer and Caen, so it's a **blue** sign, with its obligatory **red** Autoroute number, coupled to the **green**, EuroRoute E designation.
2. There is a junction in 1200 m (meters), taking us off to Caen and Le Mans on non-motorway roads, so the sign is **white**.
3. The same white sign also tells us something else. Caen, Allencon and Le Mans are colored **green**.

This means that, when looking at the Michelin map, those three towns should be easy to spot as they will have a green box around their name. This little known fact is very useful when plotting routes from a map, as it gives you a clue as to which towns will definitely be signposted from some distance away. The lesser town of Bourghtheroulde is simply black on the usual white background, probably indicating it's quite small.

4. To the far right of the picture is the sign telling motorists the peage (tolled section) starts in 1,500 metres (about a mile). Up until then the motorway had been free, meaning that it would be toll free if you left at the next junction just 1,200 meters ahead and continued to Caen on the other road.

NB You could see this on a Michelin map, as the motorway marking would change colour, with a black line across it, showing the position of the toll booths.

One thing which you WONT find in France is the sort of typical compass directions seen widely in the UK for instance approaching a junction in the UK you might see signs showing A1(M) The North and further on a sign for A1(M) London & The South. Hence its vital to know what "Named" destinations lie further along your intended route to avoid the risk of joining the right motorway but heading in the wrong direction!

### Local roads & signs

Now, most of us who are keen motorcyclists are only too keen to leave the motorways and major routes behind and head onto the twisties. Here is where the fun really starts. The chances are you will find yourself on N or D roads, looking for (or at) signs like this:



**Do not panic.** You are at a T-junction.

The road left and right is the D115. It's a "Departement" road, colored **yellow** on your map.

To the left is the road to the center of Arles and three other places, Amelie les Bains, Ceret and Perpignan.

To the right, Le Tech, Prats de Mollo (*Never miss the chance to laugh at funny foreign names, no matter how lost you are. Remember the French will laugh at our Pratts Bottom, in Kent*).

The above signs tell us one more thing, too. The towns of Ceret / Perpignan and St Laurent are depicted on separate signs. Why? You might ask. Well as a rule of thumb this means that, whilst they definitely need you to turn left or right respectively, the roads shown on separate signs will subsequently branch off. In effect you are getting an advance warning to look out for another junction somewhere on the road to Arles / Amelie and Le Tech / Prats de Molo.

So far so good.

Now a bit more about **D roads**, as these can cause great confusion to tourists.

As you now know, the local Departements own the small local roads. This ownership is jealously guarded, "My

bat, my ball, my wicket" if they played cricket. This jealous guardianship extends to the roads' numbers, too.

Somewhat inconveniently, the road can often leave one Département and continue into another. Rather like England, the road surface might well change, right on the county line. Now here's the tricky bit....so might the number!

So jealous are the Départements of 'their' number, that they will actively avoid using their neighbour's. This is where the innocent tourist with only a large scale map, starts to go very very wrong. He's been attentively looking at the map, and is certain that the road he wants is the D1, but these Frog fools have suddenly turned it into the D5 without telling him.

The answer is simple: Get a smaller scale map and look at it properly. Meantime, just look at the place names, if you want to head for Prats de Mollo, do you really care that the road number is now the D115 and not the D1, you will still get there.

### Route planning and town centre signs

Now, this conveniently brings us onto planning a route and the oft heard complaint that France doesn't signpost anything. This latter protestation is so far from the truth it's ridiculous.

The French love signposts and they love their Michelin. Indeed signposts spring up all over the place, pointing us to roads so small a snail would be embarrassed. What the French sometimes do not do is signpost where you might expect them too. Hence the value of having a small scale map.

I have explained that the French are very jealous of their departments. This jealousy extends beyond the simple renumbering of minor roads. It continues into the apparent complete denial that some nearby major towns even exist. The reason? Quite simple as usual. You might consider town 'X' to be a big place and worth signposting, from miles away. Indeed you may be right, except were in France and it's in another Département, so it means little or nothing to those that order and install the signs. Nobody wants to go there...why should anyone possibly want to leave this nice Département and go *there*, of all places? It's all very French but a part of the charm.

Get yourself a smaller scale map and then follow signs for smaller places along your route in the same Département, as these will all be there and well signed. Remember also that on Michelin maps they put a nice green box around the towns that will definitely be signposted.

Eventually, despite being bedevilled with changing road numbers and non-existent towns, you will come to a large place. Here, many foreigners are tempted to give up and hide forever in a ditch. The signs? They have all gone, I'm lost in France, as the dreadful song goes. Again, do not worry, people do leave....eventually. Here is a typical French town sign, but you will find many similar signs out in the country:



You can escape, but you need to apply some logic to choose the right direction to take.

Let's say that you do not want to go to Nimes, Arles or Aix en Provence, jolly nice as they are. These are **green** places and what do we know about places that are green? They are on the Michelin map with green squares around them.

Nor do you fancy the lesser road to Bagnols on the river Ceze, the Central Hospital or a visit to the Whores of Gabarit (*actually - Hors Gabarit is a mandatory route for oversized vehicles*).

You want to go somewhere else. The French know this and conveniently put up a sign, **Autres Directions** ...sometimes **Toutes Directions**....



In short, that simple sign is your Saviour, hallelujah.

It means, "Other directions / other places" and "All directions" – a pound to a penny says, the place you want will eventually be signposted off the Autres Directions road. So simply follow it.

However, as you are probably coming out of a town, you may need handy the name of the first couple of smaller places between your ultimate destination and where you are now. Perhaps even more grounds to either buy that smaller scale Michelin map or at least to ensure you use a French route planner like [www.viamichelin.fr](http://www.viamichelin.fr) to provide you with detailed turn by turn routing information...

Finally I hope we are really getting somewhere.

We've done the roads, the eccentric colours, the maps, the signs and their varied meanings, why places may not be where we expect them to be (*or even exist*) and what to head for when the wheels come off in a hot city with the sun baking down, on a Sunday, when all the shops are shut.

### Right - What's left?

Just the easiest sign of them all. The **Bis** sign, your passport to easy rural travel from city to city.

Those nice people at Michelin really want everyone to get out and ride motorcycles; it wears out the rubber, you see. They know that it's quick but dull, driving down a motorway. So they created 'Tourist routes' which wobble along generally quiet and scenic alternative routes and will give your tyres a real battering.



Better still these routes are all shown on the excellent Michelin 726 map. As such they fit somewhere between motorways and small D road meandering, and are rarely chocked with large trucks.

As you can see above they have a special sign all of their own, and most of them are excellently signposted on their entire route.

That simple sign, along with its brothers and sisters, will take you effortlessly across France, top to bottom, hence for French bikers Michelin map 726 is the bible!

### Using maps/routes with confidence.

Some tips, particularly if you now have a gaggle of mates closely following you, and you realise you are probably lost.

1. They will be lost, too. So why worry?
2. Just look out for a sign to a place that is on (*or near enough to your intended route*) and take it. It doesn't matter that you wanted to ride down the D54, surely the N27 will do if it gets to the same place. Do not be proud. You can always say, "Bloody French signs, who needs 'em?"
3. Trust your map, the Earth doesn't change that much.
4. Don't worry about the inevitable Deviation or Route Barree signs...They will take you down roads that you and your friends would have missed, and add to the sense of accomplishment when you eventually arrive
5. Finally, riding a bike anywhere, is still better than being at work.

### Tail Piece



OK from time to time they so get it wrong....

(Both signs say *All Directions*, and in between someone has added "*Sort it out yourself*").

If you are still with me - I am impressed. I hope you enjoyed this and perhaps learned something of use.