

Vernet-les-Bains and its history: a stroll around the Old Village

1 Starting at the tourist office, cross the **place de la République**, and head towards the café on the right. Climb the **rue du Canigou**, then turn left into the **rue du Fenouille**. Turn right up the stone stairway which leads to a garden called the **Jardin Nicolau**. This is one of the open spaces in Vernet which forms part of the *Village Arboretum*. Vernet-les-Bains is the first village in France to be designated a *Village Arboretum*. It has a remarkably diverse range of species of trees and shrubs, found throughout the village. Booklets, guided walks and self-guided trails, available at the tourist office, offer an introduction to the *Village Arboretum*.

2 At the top of the garden, with the town hall (*mairie*) on your left, you see the **Entente Cordiale monument** on the right. This monument testifies to the presence of a well-to-do English community in Vernet from around the end of the nineteenth century. A unique monument, it was built to commemorate an historic agreement between France and Great Britain that was signed in 1904. The monument was the work of the celebrated local sculptor, Gustave Violet, and it was inaugurated in 1920. At the top of the monument, the two white marble figures, one holding a sword and the other a trident, represent France and Britain respectively.

3 Turn left now and pass in front of the town hall. You will see ahead of you the tower of the **castle**. Originally constructed in the eleventh century on the site of a former tower, the castle was under the authority of the monastery of Saint Martin du Canigou. That monastery was founded by Guifred II, Count of Cerdagne and Conflent, around the year 1000AD. From the twelfth century, part of the village, previously located entirely alongside the river Cady, was re-formed on the hill around the castle. From that time, records refer to a *castrum verneto*, which is confirmation of the existence of a fortified, enclosed settlement. Traces of the former wall can be seen in the rue Notre Dame del Puig. In 1654, when Vernet was in Catalunya (Spain), the castle was largely destroyed by occupying French troops. In 1659, Vernet, along with Conflent, Roussillon and a part of Cerdagne, was transferred from Spain to France. In 1896, Clément de Lacroix, a descendant of Pierre de Barrera, the owner of the baths in Vernet from 1788, embarked upon the restoration of the monument, using material from the ruins of the original structure. Most of the stone blocks were not re-worked before being put into place. Only corner blocks were cut and shaped, like those of the church. A lane still encircles the castle and church, separating them from the rest of the settlement. The

castle was sold in 1970 and is a private residence, not open to the public.

4 Now follow the **rue du Château**. You are facing down the valley. Some way down, on the left bank of the river Cady, is the **Château Saint Clément**, a building which once belonged to the Monfreid family. George-Daniel de Monfreid (1856-1929), a painter and sculptor and a friend of Gauguin, lived there. His work includes the Calvaire in Vernet's Chapelle Notre Dame du Paradis. His son Henri is famous in France as the author of "L'Aventure Maritime". In the 1960s, the artist's daughter still lived on the St Clément estate. Musicians were made welcome there, and they came every year to play in the company of the master-cellist Pablo Casals.

To the left of the Château Saint Clément you can also see **former furnaces for burning iron ore**. Mining was a major industry in Vernet in the nineteenth century. It was carried out in three zones. The first zone extended from the lower part of Vernet up towards the col de Sahorre; the second ran from the old village alongside the St Vincent river; and the third was located on the eastern slopes of the Pic de la Pena. Mining-related activity in the village was forbidden from 1893 because of the smell generated by the desulphurisation of the iron ore.

5 Now turn to the left and climb the lane which leads to the church.

You stand before the **church of St Saturnin**.

This place of worship, which dates from the 12th century and which may originally have been the castle chapel, became the parish church at the beginning of the eighteenth century. This followed a flood which destroyed an earlier church down in the valley. It was at that time that the remains of Saint Saturnin, patron of the original church, were placed in the choir of the chapel. The church possesses a number of classified treasures, including a pre-Romanesque marble column.

Looking up the Cady valley (with your back to the church), you can see the tower of the **abbey of Saint Martin du Canigou** perched on the mountainside.

6 Return to the **rue du Château** and go down the **rue du Cap del Roc** and the **rue Carnot**. Here, you follow a lane that passes beneath a **half-timbered house**. The passage here was formerly closed and served as an enclosure for livestock. In a right-angle of a wall which overlooks the small gardens, you can see an old pig trough, which was carved out of Canigou granite.

7 You arrive at the **Place Sauveur Battle**. This square is dedicated to a founder member of a Second World War

Resistance group known as the "Maquis Henri Barbusse". He was captured by the Germans at the chalet des Cortalets and died after being tortured in the days which followed.

From here there are two options:

8 The first option is to take the **rue Amédée Paris** and then go down the steps of the **rue des 60 degrés**. The latter is named after its steep slope. Its broad steps facilitated the passage of livestock.

8a The second option is to go down the **rue des Jardins**. You will note that small canals run alongside the lane. In operation since the Middle Ages, these formerly brought water to the houses. They still serve as a system of irrigation. Also still in operation is a system for regulating the times at which gates in the canals should be opened and closed, with the aim of ensuring that all parts of the village and its gardens receive shares of the water.

9 After passing the **placette Gambetta**, follow the **rue de la Riberette** and go through an archway built with red marble. This rock was quarried near Villefranche de Conflent. The fortifications of that village, reconstructed by Vauban in the seventeenth century, have been listed by UNESCO as part of a World Heritage Site.

10 Follow, on the left, the **rue des Lavandières**. On your right is the washplace - one of only a small number in Europe that are still fed by natural hot spring water. It was built at this location after the "Aiguat", a terrible flood in 1940 which destroyed the former washplace and a substantial part of the "Belle Epoque" section of Vernet. Most of the hot springs rise close to the Casino Park and the current spa centre. The water of the hottest spring has a temperature of 66°C.

Turn left into the **rue du Cady** and climb to the **place de la République**. This is the commercial centre of the village and it is where many of Vernet's entertainments and festivals are held.

You may also wish to explore the other side of the Cady river and to visit the **Parc du Casino** and the **Spa quarter** of Vernet, created mainly during the "Belle Epoque" period over a century ago. There you will discover many of the different species of trees which have been identified in Vernet-les-Bains. In addition, the "Kipling Circuit", with illustrated information panels, threads its way through this part of the village.

2021 (based on a tourist office leaflet of 2011)

Circuit du Vieux Village

1 Yellow building with a balcony

2 Monument with statues

3 Tower of the Château

4 Alleyway with stone walls

5 Church building

6 Street view

7 Street view

8 Street view

8 bis Street view

9 Flower box on a wall

10 Stone block with 'LAVOIR' inscription

Streets shown: Avenue des Thermes, Rue du Confort, Rue de la Chapelle, Rue de la République, Rue du Camigou, Rue Pasteur, Rue Mercader, Rue du Château, Rue du Cap, Rue Arago, Rue Amédée Paris, Rue Ribierette, Rue des Jardins, Rue des 60 Degrés, Rue Camot, Rue du Soleil, Rue Beau Soleil, Rue Ribierette - le porche, Rue des Bains, Rue du Colonel Nol, Rue de Lalande, Rue du Cady, Rue des Lavandières, Rue de la Chapelle, Place de la République, Place Mal Foch, Place Gambetta, Place Sauveur Battle, Place de l'entente Cordiale, Résidence du Château, Rés. des Lavandières, Salle de la Copérative, Sécurité Sociale P.J.J., R.P. Curie, Pont Rudyard Kipping, Vers Quartier Belle Epoque.