

GUIDE

Travel the Rhône River...

*...in the wake of stone workers
and the bargemen of old*



The trail of the Rhône in the Dauphiné region..

...a region with multiple facets to explore.

Found in the Department of North Isère this trail of the Rhône River in the Dauphiné region is built up of diverse landscape, hills, plateaus, plains and valleys. The heart of the territory is characterised by a limestone plateau containing a tapestry of meadows, forests, crops and dry grassland. On the East you can find rocky cliffs which have a less rocky topography composed mainly of valleys.

This region is also closely intertwined with Rhône River, a former border between the Dauphiné and the Savoy; Enemies in the middle ages, the river now marks the border between the Ain and the Isère departments. The Natural environment developed through time thanks to the changes of the River (Islands, marshes...) producing a remarkable biodiversity.

These diverse and varied geological aspects make up one of the richest natural resources of the region. The ancient stone quarries of the Montalieu and Villebois contain a limestone, called "The stone of Villebois". For over 200 years, people have industrialized this natural resource. The Rhône River is the other major factor of importance in the story of this stone. Today, this industry is producing massive and decorative stone for local and international sites.

Reflections across the Rhône River

As you begin your trail in the Montalieu and Villebois region, you will be sure to discover stories of the lives of people who were brought together by one common factor – they were settlers along the banks of the river Rhône.

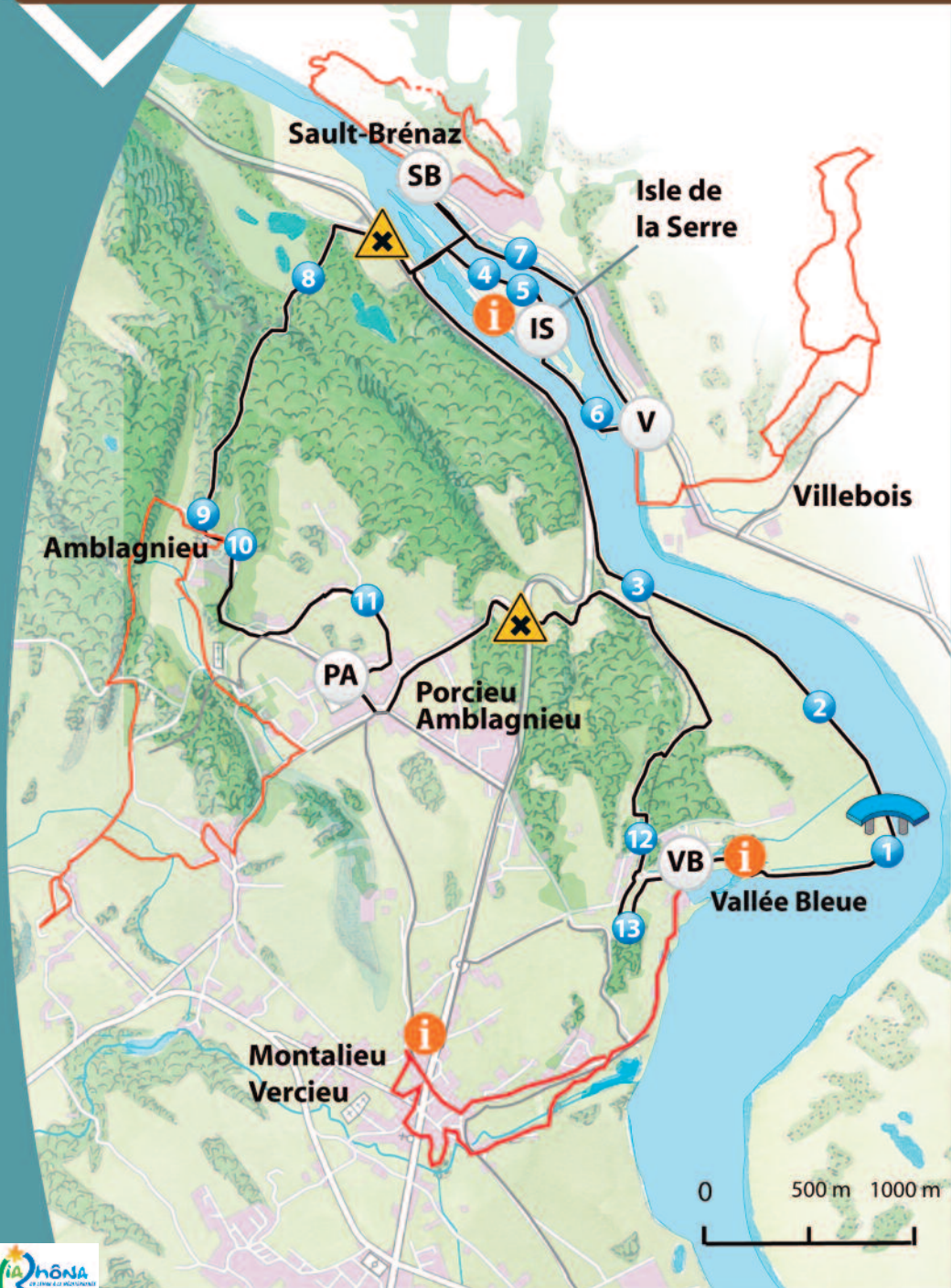
Some people still see the Rhône simply as a boundary to be crossed, requiring boats and bridges; others, however, look further along the length and breadth of its banks and bring together people, animals, products, ideas and concepts. It was all legal, of course – in the eighteenth century, history tells us of only one local smuggler – called Mandrin – and, after all, weren't these smugglers just trying to improve their daily lives?

Some people travelled downstream, while others navigated further upstream, battling against the river current, following the Rhône's amazing journey from one to bank to another. Others, once smugglers, became merchants operating to destinations along the toughest routes, such as Seyssel, le Bourget-du-Lac and Avignon. Many also migrated downstream. In the Middle Ages for example, more than half the population of Avignon originated from the upper region of the Rhône River.

As the saying goes: "The grass is always greener on the other side", so why not take a trip to the other bank and see what more the reflections across the Rhône River can reveal...

Dominique Tritenne
President of the Organisation "Amis du Pays de la Pierre"
(Friends of the Stone region)

Travel the Rhône River in the wake of stone worker








Source cartographique : Planisphère



This trail uses part of the ViaRhôna cycle path. More Information can be found at the local Tourist Office

s and the bargemen of old

Legend

- | | |
|--|---|
|  Entry gate |  Stops with engraved logos |
|  The trail path |  Secondary trails |
|  Landscape chart |  Information points |
|  Road Crossing | |

Technical specifications

Length: 16.2 km. Altitude difference: 180 m. Journey time: 4 h
Departure: from any of the 5 "Entry Points", you choose.

To get started...



This booklet was designed to help you all the way through your journey. 13 stone trail markers are numbered and engraved with this pictogram / sign. They refer to the information in this booklet.

5 signs called "Entry Points" can be found at different points along the route and they are there to welcome and guide you as you get started on your trail. They each correspond to a section in the booklet.

Please use these markers to get started at the right number!

At the "Entry Points", additional routes are also proposed to discover different villages...

The La Vallée Bleue (Leisure centre) and the l'Espace Eau Vive (Water rapids centre) at l'Isle de la Serre supply toilets and drinking water.

Precautions

Make sure you have adequate footwear, enough water, a sunhat, an anorak in case of rain and if you wish some binoculars.

Swimming is prohibited in this part of the river. It is dangerous to venture into the Rhône River, or on the Islands or gravel banks, the water levels can climb sharply at any time due to hydroelectric plants and dams.

Here and everywhere else, please respect nature.



No fires



No picking of wild flowers.



Dogs must be kept under leash



No motor vehicles



Grazing herds

As you travel along the river, you might be lucky enough to encounter some sheep. A common agreement between the C.N.R. (National Rhône River Network) was drawn up to allow local farmers to graze their herds there to help maintain the River's banks.

Stop 1

The construction-port



Along the current dam, a port allows boats to ship stones from the quarries of Montalieu. Quite a number of these ports can be found along the length of the river.

Map of the Rhône from 1860

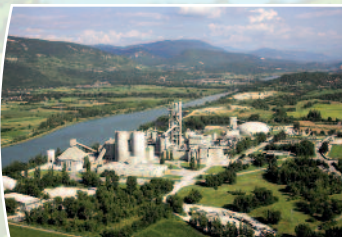
Between the two banks

Ferries used to operate with a cable linking the two banks of the river, like a floating bridge. This mode of transport was very popular with the inhabitants.



Cable ferries

The Cement plant



Situated on the edge of Rhône River, the cement plant belonging to the Vicat group is the corner stone of the industrial tradition, which started in 1817 with Louis Vicat, who invented artificial cement.

The Vicat cement plant

Next step:

To reach the next station, continue travelling along the Rhône River next to the lock. To help you follow the guidebook trail, a landscape location chart table is at your disposal.



La Vallée Bleue (Leisure centre)

Leisure centre

Inspired by the C.N.R's development project, the town authorities of Montalieu-Vercieu were able to bring the current leisure centre into being after five years of building works.

The centre opened in 1987 and today the La Vallée Bleue (Leisure centre) is the base for numerous activities that can be carried out along the banks of the river.



The Rhône River, gradually tamed by man.

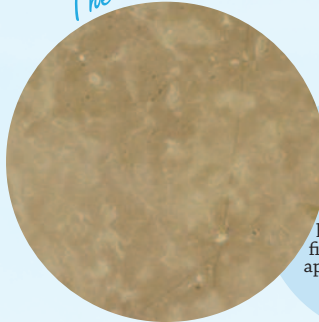
Over the centuries, men have forged links with the Rhône River. In its natural state, the river was wild and uncontrollable, but over the centuries the power of the river has been harnessed and controlled by human development. Today, men and the river have learned to live together and offer us a large range of things to do and see.

Aerial photography, Port Bigarra, now "La Vallée Blue", 1980)
Port Bigarra, actuelle Vallée Bleue, 1980



Many of these developments along the river Rhône took place a long time ago, but the most visible ones date from the mid-1980s. The dams we now travel along, were shaped and moulded during the work undertaken by the Compagnie Nationale du Rhône (National Rhône River Network). In the bed of the Rhône River, all the small islands were levelled, except for 'Brotteaux' and 'Paternoux', which were kept to preserve the natural flora. The developments were also intended to build an artificial water dam to provide water for the hydro-electric plant of Porcieu-Amblagnieu. These facilities were created using a foundational development plan that could be reproduced throughout the different reaches of the Rhône River, in keeping with the bigger picture.

The "choin"



Softened yellow paint from Villebois

The etymology of the word "choin" remains unknown. It's a local term and it refers to choice stones, described as being as hard as "dog"... The first mention of this appears in 1192 spelt as "chaon"...

Stop 2



A Map of different glaciations in Europe

A choice stone

Hard, compact and massive, Villebois stone is renowned for its qualities. Its industrial exploitation and exportation back to the early 18th century.

Glaciations and alluvium

During the last period of glaciation, ending around 15,000 BC, a glacier covered the entire region. This process wore away at the different reliefs, expanded the valleys and brought the Rhone River into being. These two phenomena left alluvium: sand, clay, silt and gravel.



An example of a completed work, this stairway can be found in the Villebois Townhall.

Hillsides ?

The escarpments of the Bugey region were eroded by running water and frost, causing the formation of scree.

These slopes are especially suited to vineyards.



The hillsides of the Bugey region

« The ladies of Villebois »

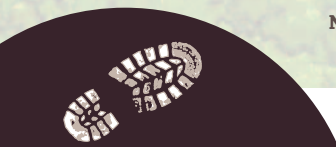


Erosion ended up by forming some remarkable shapes – these relief features are also called fairies, chimneys or bridesmaids.

Les demoiselles de Villebois

Next step:

Continue until you reach Stop 3 located at the end of the lock.



Once upon a time, some 165 million years ago

A warm shallow sea covered our region. A limestone rock was formed by the process of sedimentation. Several million years later, the sea beds rose up to form the Alps and the mountainous region of Bugey and Crémieu.

Aerial photo

Studio campaign/Duplan



This hard and compacted rock was produced from the sedimentation of marine organisms found in tropical seas. The Alps begin to form some 60 million years ago. Under huge pressure, the sea beds were lifted up before folding back down again. The Rhône River followed its course along a rift between the two plates and the tributaries began to dig into the different landforms. Vegetation adapted to the different calcareous soil, also began to settle there. Erosion, mainly caused by running water, began to form faults, caves and water resurgences. This typical formation of limestone plates is known as Karst topography.



The Railway Bridge, old postcard

In 1940, the railway bridge between Montalieu and Villebois was destroyed by the French army to slow the advance of the German army, which brought about the end of the liaison between Ambérieu and Montalieu (PLM).



The tourist railway network of the Haut Rhône

From stone quarries to platforms



Moving the blocks of stone proved to be very difficult. Using jacks and winches, the stone slabs were lifted up before transportation; depending on their size and the difficulty of the journey, trolleys called drays, swifts or toads were used.

"Le fardier", An Old Postcard

A walk by the river
Enjoy a trip on an authentic steam train that runs along a 4 km line, which was restored in 1988/89. You will be able to walk along the Rhône River and the feed canal right up to the Sault-Brénaz Bridge, using this historic means of locomotion. In the station warehouse, you will also be able to admire a steam locomotive built in 1917 by Orenstein and Koppel, which has been classified as a historical monument since 1987.

From railroads to roads

Just as the railroads had replaced inland waterway transport, the lorry replaced steam locomotives to become the main means of transporting local stone. Alternatives to road transportation are also being examined...



A lorry belong to the Vagnon Company

The port at the bottom of the road known as "La Dangereuse"



At the bottom of the road, stone from the quarries of Porcieu were loaded on to barges at the port of Briord (Isère).

A Construction site and the Port of Briord (In Isere), old postcard

Next step:

Keep travelling along the path that runs alongside the Rhône River. When you arrive at the hydroelectric power plant, continue along through to the crossroads on the right. Cross the bridge overlooking the lock and turn right towards the Espace Eau Vive (Rapids water centre). Stop 4 can be found on your left, just before the premises of the CNR.



e transportation of stone, from railroads to roads.

Since their very beginnings, the growth of quarries has depended on their ability to export production. The stone quarries of Montalieu and Villebois were greatly impacted by the arrival of railroads and they became an important rail hub for the region.

The Transportation of stone, old photograph



The inhabitants of the region often used to hear sounds of trains arriving at the station. The construction of the railway linking Montalieu to the national network brought about the end, in the short term, of waterway transport. To meet the increasing demands of stone workers, Montalieu-Vercieu was connected as early as 1875 from Ambérieu-en-Bugey to the Lyon-Geneva line, operated by the railroad Company "Paris-Lyon-Méditerranée (PLM)". A second line was opened in 1881 by the "Société du Chemin de Fer de l'Est Lyonnais (CFEL)" railway company, linking the east of Lyon to the railway network. On this network, two stations were constructed at Montalieu. In 1884, a portion of 3km connecting Montalieu to Amblagnieu, was opened to connect the stone quarries to the main line.

Stop 4



An Excerpt May 8th, 1840 from "le Censeur"

In 1837, "l'Abeille" (The Bee), a steam boat came up the river for the first time in this section of the river. In the summer of 1860, a daily service was established Lyon and Aix-les-Bains.

The boatmen



A scene depicting the hauling of goods in the Gallo-Roman era Musée Calvet, Avignon

Even as early as the 1st century AD, the quarries of Fays and Seyssel were fed by the water construction sites of the cities of Vienna and Lyon. This trade was organized and managed by the corporation of Boatmen, encompassing ship-owners, boatmen and rich merchants.

The Gallo-Roman theatre

The Colombier site, which opens directly on to the river, overlooking the breaks, suggests that it was built under the auspices of this powerful corporation.



The Colombier site

A flourishing activity



A "Rigue" being loaded (old photograph)

In the 19th century, the Mariners navigated large barges with flat bottoms known as "Les rigues". They could measure more than 30m long and carry more than 230 tons of goods!

Next step:

Continue along the path that follows the tow path found the near trail marker 4. Continue along the riverbank until you get to the Watermill ruins. If the path is flooded, be careful to stay on the road and head towards the Espace Eau Vive (Rapids water centre). Before the first building, go to the river bank to find trail marker 5.



The Chautagne lock

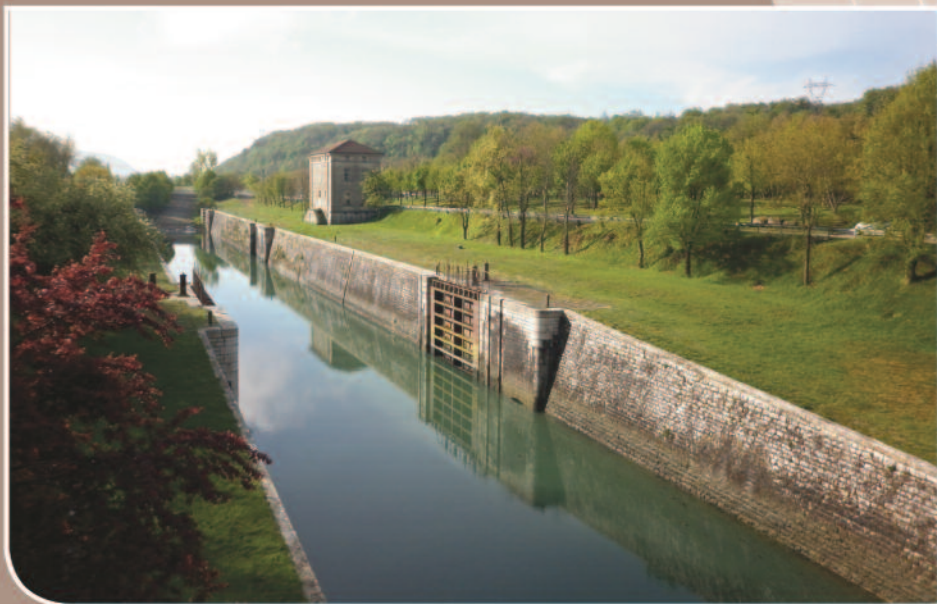
The current navigation on the upper Rhone river

Since 2010, the locks of Belley and Chautagne opened up an additional 57km of a navigable route between Brégnier-Cordon and Seyssel. Now, thanks to the Savières's canal, pleasure crafts are able to reach the lake of Bourget. The partial restoration of the upper region of the Rhône River is part of the touristic and economic development of the Valley.

Stories of the boatmen and bargemen of old

Since antiquity, goods have been transported to and from the Mediterranean and other major urban centres. As you travel around the l'Isle de la Serre area, you will discover traces of all this history, which bear witness to the vitality of this transportation route.

The "L'Isle de la Serre" lock



Over the centuries, humans thought how to develop and facilitate navigation along these routes. In the best weather conditions, from Seyssel to Lyon, the descent would last 2 to 3 days, but going back up required 15 to 17 days. Only boats loaded with high value goods would go up the river. The majority of these boats were scrapped and became firewood. The loading and unloading of goods was facilitated by the construction of docks. Between 1841 and 1890, different projects were undertaken to facilitate navigability. The waterway diversion and the Sault-Brénaz lock date from these constructions, which came to an end with the arrival of railways.

The origins...



There are two hypotheses concerning the origin of the name of the river: "Rhodanus" comes from Celtic word Rhodan meaning 'to move quickly' and secondly, a colony from Rhodes, which can be found at the river's mouth, may have inspired its name.

The Rhône River, bronze sculpture, Bellecour square, Lyon

Stop 5



The turbines of the factory at the site of the Serre Water Mill, Feugier-Sappey

The forest along the river



Willow, alder and ash make up the woodlands found along the river banks. They have had a major role in the preservation of banks and also in protecting against pollution from water runoffs.

Riverside vegetation

A living environment

Willow trees are the delight of beavers that love the tender wood and build their lodges within the branches.



Tree trunks that have been gnawed by a beaver

Japanese knotweed



Originating from Asia as an ornamental plant in the 19th century, this invasive species has colonized the banks of the Rhône River. This plant destroys the natural environment and deprives wildlife of its traditional habitat.

Knotweed on the banks of the Rhône River

The mill

It was rare to find mills along the Rhône River. The primary use of the Rhône River was for navigational means; a towpath enabled barges to ascend the river. Here for example you can still find traces of the Serre Water Mill, which dates from 1537. It has undergone major changes, including the installation of the hydraulic turbines for the marble masonry factory of Feugier-Sappey in the 19th century.

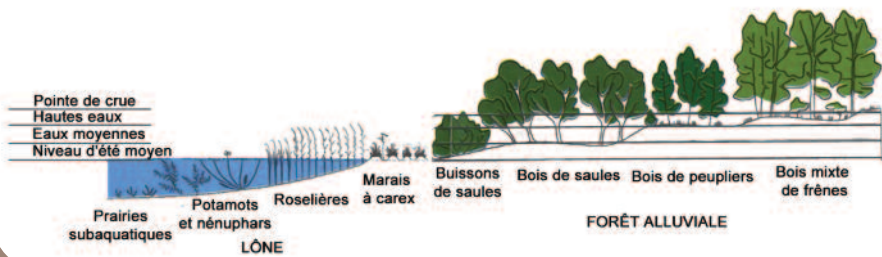
Next step:

Cross the Espace Eau Vive (Rapid Water Park) towards the dam, to reach the other side of the small island. Trail marker 6 is located just before the dam.



A natural free-flowing river...?

812 km long, the river flows right down from its source in the Saint Gothard massif in Switzerland, into the Mediterranean Sea. The CNR development plan in 1980 reduced flooding, but they have not managed to permanently stop it...



The length of the Rhône makes it the second largest river in France, but with 1700m³ water being pumped out of its mouth it has the largest average output, although the output is very variable, (average 450m³/s). It is, of course, directly influenced by rainfall and by melting snow in the Alps. The river output ranges from 200m³/s during low output periods to 1500m³/s during high waters. The width of its bed, limited by the presence of the two rock formations, causes the speed of the river to increase during floods. These large variations in speed and this force of nature have always been dreaded by bargemen.

Stop 6

The Ain / Rhône junction



This confluence of rivers is one of the last natural active deltas found in Europe and it is a classified site. It is of major interest both from an ecological point of view and also due to its landscape, which is not very compatible with major development.

The Ain / Rhône junction

The Water Reservoir



The Villebois Dam

On this section, the flow of the river is very flat. With a reserve of 28 kilometres, the maximum drop height is only 9.7m.

Water levels

The hydroelectric systems in place do not regulate the water levels of the river in any way. The water height marks engraved on the Sault-Brénaz bridge show this distinctly.



Water level marks engraved onto the wall of the bridge at Sault-Brénaz

Management of water levels



To limit the impact of the flooding, floodplains were created, such as those of Brangues, Le Bouchage and St Benoit.

The February 1990 floods at Sault-Brénaz

Next step:

Once you have crossed the dam, follow the direction of the flowing River towards Sault-Brénaz. Now follow the ViaRhôna (Cycle path). Trail marker 7 can be found just before the bridge.



Rafting at the (Espace Eau Vive) Water Leisure centre

Espace Eau Vive - A leisure centre with exhilarating rapids

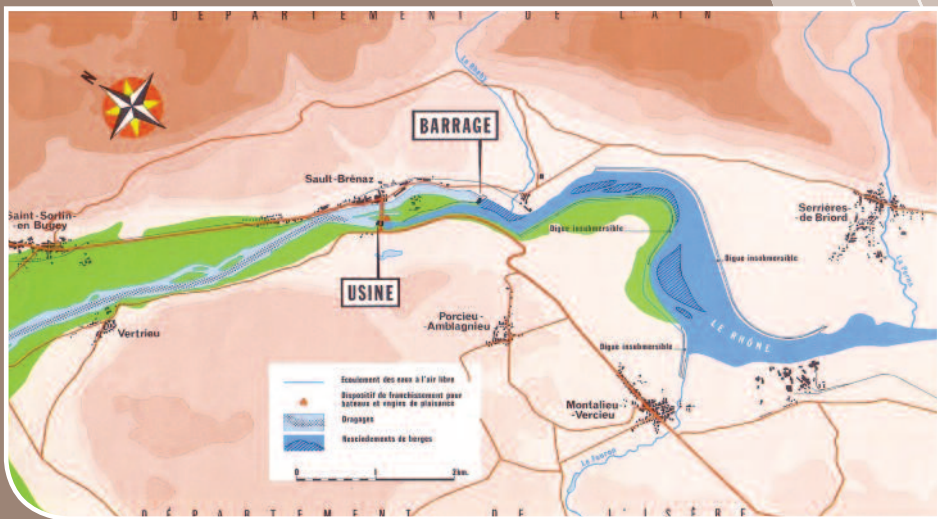
Located within the town of Porcieu-Amblagnieu, the artificial river at the l'Isle de le Serre was established during the construction of the hydroelectric factory. The site offers a 600 metre long ride where there are successive waves, rolling waves and other water obstacles to be encountered: kayak, rafting, hydro speed... the constant water flow ensures that you can always have fun, while those who prefer to watch can enjoy looking on.



Developments at Sault-Brénaz

The Sault-Brénaz development plan in the upper region of the Rhône River is the most recently constructed facility undertaken by the Compagnie Nationale du Rhône (C.N.R), whose mission is the production of electricity, river navigation and protection against flooding.

Developments at Sault-Brénaz, Compagnie Nationale du Rhône



Water falling on to a turbine produces electricity; the more significant the height is the more energy that is produced. Hydroelectric installation was designed to optimize this concept as much as possible. Upstream, a dam creates a water reserve and raises the water level. A canal located downstream feeds fresh water into the factory. The factory produces 245 gigawatts per annum: the smallest production from the upper region of the Rhône River. With nearly 15 billion kWh on average per annum, the CNR provides a quarter of national hydroelectricity.

Today, the Sault-Brénaz plant is not suitable for marine navigation. A by-pass canal and a lock would have been needed for this purpose. One built in the middle of the 19th century can be found at Sault, but it is no longer connected to the river.



In antiquity, the various groups of navigators were placed under the protection of divinities. Opposite the rapids of Pérolier, the church shelters a statue of Saint Nicolas, the patron saint of sailors.

The Pérolière sault and the church at Sault Brenaz

Stop 7



The Kingdom of France up until the Middle Ages

Close to the port...



The construction site Chante Merle at Sault-Brenaz, Old Postcard

The construction site Chante Merle, found at Sault-Brenaz, was one of the most important building "Rigue" (flat bottom barges) construction sites. It was also a traveller's refuge with Inns and stabling for horses and warehouses.

The border between Riaume and Empi

During the Middle Ages, on both sides of the Rhone, the separation line between the Dauphiné and the Savoie never stops changing places. From the middle of the XIVth century, it marked the border between the owners of Dauphin, the Kingdom of France, the territory of the Dukes of Savoy and the Holy Roman German Empire. The sailors used the terms "Riaume" (right bank) and "Empi" (left bank) to indicate the different banks of the river. The conflicts carried until 1601, when Bresse and the Bugey became part of France. The Castles and fortified towns in the region bear testimony to this heritage passed.

Sailing village

As you travel through the small streets at Sault-Brenaz, take note of some of the street names. Like their coat of arms, the names evoke the historical activities of the village: sailing and stone quarries works.



Street sign, Sault-Brenaz

A favourable crossing point...



Repairs of the sabotaged bridge in 1940, old postcard

At least three bridges were built before the current structure, which was finished in 1826. The two pillars were built on the foundations of a Roman bridge! The third arch was destroyed in 1940 to slow down the progression of the German army.

Next step:

After discovering the Sault-Brenaz village, cross the Rhone again until you reach the road (D1075). Then cross the road in the direction of the quarry. Please be careful and use the designated crossing areas. At the end of the road leading to quarry, take the path on your left to find trail marker 8.

Sault-Brenaz, The Bargeman's village

The river has been a true transportation corridor since antiquity. However, you do have to adjust your navigation to water speeds; 6km is an average speed and it is of course impossible to navigate during floods or low waters! There are many obstacles that also have to be overcome...

"Analyse du site, mise en scène théâtrale des mouvements de la nature."
Julien-Joseph Brégeon, 1808 (Analysis of the site, nature's own film...)



The village of Sault-Brénaz derives its name from the three rapids located just a few hundred metres away: le Petit Sault, Le Grand Sault and the Sault de la Pérolrière which is found opposite the church. The negotiation of these rapids was dreaded by bargemen. At the “décize” (descent), the flat bottom barges “Rigues” had to be kept in line in order to slip to allow the limestone slabs to be loaded using the water current. For the upward journey, it used to take one whole day to tow a boat by animal power. Then, winches, using water power, were set up by the Grand Sault. From 1841 to 1868, many developments were set up to facilitate the passage of these obstacles: dams were built in to raise the water level and Grand Sault was partly levelled.



The Rhône River, just like the rapids and the flooded quarries, was a reputed bathing location. A sandbank, formed following the silting of the canal exit, made it ideal for people wanting to bathe.

Swimming at the lock, old postcard

Quarries from the plateau (Larger Cremieu Region) to the port



On the road to "La Combe"

Large carriages, called les fardiers (hauling carriages), were loaded with blocks and then brought to the port. To enable these convoys to descend from the top of the hillside plain, the roads had to be adapted: the natural gradient was adjusted and the curbs in the roads reduced.

The bargemen of old

To deal with quarry waste, bargemen stacked up large heaps of stones called "Marinières". Little by little they were covered in vegetation and are now characteristic landmarks of the Quarry region.



The "Marinières"

The underwood



The path continues on to the Amblagnieu hillside. The vegetation changes from an alluvial forest enjoying the humidity, to an underwood made up of oaks and boxwood.

Boxwood

Stop 8



Representation of the Peugeot-Sapppy factory

The tram

In 1911, the AIN region Tram Company (TA) opened a line from Sault to Brégnier-Cordon. In 1921, this line was extended to cross the bridge at Sault and join the line La Balme-les-Grottes / Lyon. This line was maintained by the Company Omnibus et Tramways de Lyon (OTL). The service also provided transport for the Morel Quarry as well as the Feugier-Sapppy factory, which specializes in the sawing and the cutting of hard stone. These tramways disappeared between 1935 and 1940.

Next step:

Follow the path which crosses la combe in the direction of the hamlet of Amblagnieu. Trail marker 9 is almost at the foot of the village.

The Morel Quarry

Up until now, only the Villebois "choin" (limestone rock) has been only been mentioned, yet the natural territorial and geological resources to be found in the region are huge.

In this quarry, stone is extracted from Crémieu.

The Morel Quarry, aerial photo



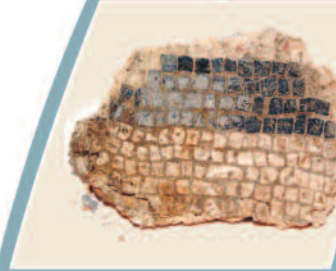
The geological layer where "choin" can be found is Bathonian, which formed approximately 165 million years ago. At this quarry, an even older Bajocian layer over 170 million years old can be found. This stone, less compact, is rich in iron oxides, which give it its distinctive ochre colour. It is not possible to produce building blocks of this size, so this material was mainly used to produce breeze blocks and slates. Nowadays, this stone is crushed to produce sands and gravels of different granulation. They are used on their own or incorporated into cement to make decorative concrete, or turned into lime for coating or seals.

Stop 9



Roman provinces in Gaule

The ancient city of Vienna reconquered the Gaulois Allobroges region. During the Gallo-Roman period, villas and huge agricultural fields could be found in the region.



A mosaic fragment, "Musée-Maison du patrimoine" at Hières-on-Amby

The railway



Porcieu, A building site and the Fontaine Blanche station, An Old Postcard

From 1881, the Railroad of East Lyon developed a new line destined exclusively for industrial use. 3km long, this line was a route exclusively used by the stone quarries found at Derriaz. The line stopped at Amblagnieu.

The Gallo-Roman villa

The topography and soil quality found in the valley brought about the right conditions for a large Gallo-Roman villa settlement. These mosaics found here and the materials used, show that sumptuous dwellings could be found. The access road to the Rhône River allowed for trade with the towns such as Lyon and Vienna.

Stations

Consisting of several platforms rented out to quarries, the Amblagnieu station was located right in the middle of these quarries. The line was extended by 1.5km to serve the area "Sous-Amblagnieu".



Expedition Platforms, Amblagnieu Station, Old Postcard

The "pierres plantées"



These stones were buried with up to a third of their height, and they were used to mark out the boundaries of plots of land. These stones were extracted from thin layer strata and were not suitable for other uses.

A "pierres plantées" fence at Amblagnieu

Next step:

Take the road which leads to the Amblagnieu village square. The route takes you by some buildings perched on the rocks! Keep travelling along this path where you will find trail marker 10. The Church is located behind the village square.

Men at Amblagnieu “Combe” (Natural hollow in the landscape)

Right from the time of the building of Gallo-Roman dwellings down to the exportation of stone towards the Rhone River by rail, this place has always been used by men. This natural hollow is particularly suited to agriculture, having such easy access to transport and water.

The Amblagnieu Forteress built on the rock



Formed by the passage of glaciers during the ice ages, the valley is in a fertile oasis of rock landscapes, although also very arid. The flat bottom of this small valley coated with alluvia and the two natural springs, made this area very well suited to Gallo-Roman agriculture. During the medieval period, a parish was set up here around its priory. In spite of the development around this stone quarry industry in the 19th century, this valley has held on to its agricultural vocation. From this place, a road, then a railway, made it possible to bring stone to the port and then transport it directly to the different construction sites.



In the Middle Ages at Amblagnieu, a Priory could be found, which was part of the Ambronay Abbey. Today the church is the last remaining vestige.

The Church at Amblagnieu and its surroundings



Quarries found at the foot of the church at Amblagnieu

Anonymous portraits



Church of Amblagnieu, corbels

The pointed edges of the chancel rest on two corbels decorated with sculptures. These stones represent two portraits, which are not mentioned in known text. Perhaps they represent the donors who contributed to the works?

From one use to another

Having lost its religious function, the church was used by the local inhabitants for domestic requirements. Certain stones of the gate side walls had stitched openings so that carriages were able to enter the nave.



The church gates

The cemetery



The church of Amblagnieu old postcard

A few tombstones testify to the presence of an old cemetery around the church. From antiquity to the Middle Ages, it was common to practise burials in the middle of sacred areas within the churches enclosures.

The Church
The first mention of the church goes right back to 1225. It is of Roman inspiration and it stands out owing to its square bell-tower with its twin and triple windows openings. A mural painting, recently restored, embellishes the Southern chapel. It was deconsecrated in 1867, when the church of Porcieu was completed. Abandoned to ruin, it was repurchased and then restored in 2008 by the community; it has become a cultural point of interest, in the care of the organisation "Les Amis du Patrimoine" (Friends of heritage).

Next step:

Depart from Amblagnieu and start travelling towards Porcieu. Don't turn right on the road towards the cemetery to take the road on the left which leads to Turnoud. Continue along the road which ascends to the Castle. Trail marker 11 can be found at the end of this street.



Traditional architecture, Story of raw material and its interaction with people

The history of Amblagnieu goes back a long way. It was, however, during the 19th century that stone extraction and cutting brought about the expansion of the tiny village of Porcieu at the expense of its historical heritage. The building style that can be found in the quarry region bears witness to these people of old and their history.

An example of traditional architecture found in the Amblagnieu town square



Stone workers' houses were modest and narrow with two-sided roofs. The principal building material was, of course, stone. Everywhere, you can find "choin" (hard stone from the region), around the wall angles and in all the openings. The walls were built with slab stones, not very bulky and roughly square. To build them, two wall facings were filled with gravel or clay. The walls also covered with lime, according to the means of the families. The houses of quarry owners were built out of fine-grained stone and were larger and more imposing; their roofs had four sides and also had more harmonious, symmetrically styled facades.

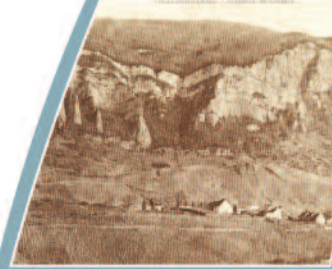
Stop 11

Le «biard» ou «bia»



A "Bigue" and vine plant

The variety of grapes that was mainly grown in the region was: the "biard" or "bia". Common to the region, it produced a Claret wine weak in alcohol. An extremely prolific variety, it did not have to be grafted.



The slopes of Bugey at Villebois, old postcard

Le Woodlands and Heath



The landscape of the plateau

These woodland and heath areas were shaped mainly through subsistence farming. Livestock and multiple crops were grown on small plots of land surrounded by hedges.

The vine
Archaeological excavations in the area show that vines were grown here as early as the 14th century. Wine was widely drunk by quarry workers: 4 to 6 litres per day... Multiply this figure by the number of workers and you'll get the amount of wine needed daily on site! Well into the 1950s, the cultivation of the vine was widespread, covering the hillsides of the Bugey region and many other plots of land in the region.

De grosses têtes! (Big heads)

These bushy trees (the unusual shape of the heads of the trees is created when the young trunks and main branches are cut back to promote a more bushy growth of foliage) are mainly produced by trees that are not found in the forests. They were regularly cut back and the shoots were used again. They were positioned as boundary markers.



"Les arbres têtards" (The tadpole trees)

Turnoud Castle



Of neo-Renaissance style, the Turnoud castle was built in the 19th century, near the site of the ancient castle built of wood and clay, dating from before the year 1000.

The Turnoud Castle, old postcard

Next step:

Depart from Tournoud and start heading towards Porcieu. Cross the village. Pass the Church and then the Town Hall. Leave Porcieu through the street called Sauge et Var. Then turn left down Champin Street until you reach road that crosses the D1075. Be very careful. Take the path that passes in front the climbing wall and leads to "La Vallée Bleue" (Leisure centre) by following the railway line.

Man, the true landscape architect

Throughout time man has moulded and shaped the landscape in which he lives. In Villebois, the expanding industry of stone extraction attracted hundreds of families. In this period, villages and transport systems developed. Nevertheless, agriculture still remained a necessary subsistence economy.

Hay making at Montalieu-Vercieu, An Old Photograph



As from 1852, the work of stonemasons was paid per unit from an agreement that was reached between bosses and workers. Essential to wage agreement, the application of « rates » granted stonemasons more work flexibility. As well as their day job, stone masons also undertook agricultural work, but only in limited quantities for family consumption. Work at the quarry and in the factories was also controlled by weather conditions. This price scheme continued until the 70s, before gradually being phased out.



In the "Beau Rivage" district each year regardless of the weather, numerous festivities are organised along the Rhône River. All of Montalieu used to come to the event and also people from the department of Ain; notably from Villebois, they came by cable ferry. To alert the operator of their arrival they used to shout out: «Batio! (Boat !) Batio! (Boat!)»

Old Postcard, the banks of the Rhône River at Montalieu

Stop 12

A trip down memory Lane



old postcard, the PLM station at Montalieu, 1918

In the heart of the quarry region of Montalieu, stations were very busy. Initially, trains whistled, and those of the PLM more loudly than those from the east... Passenger transport was stopped however around 1947.

Cafes in Montalieu

At the beginning of the 20th century around 20 cafés were present in Montalieu! Near the train station at Beau-Rivage, the cafes welcomed the stone workers after their day's work, as long as they didn't forget to settle their accounts on pay day!

Café restaurant Muret, 1904



Training



Centre de Formation des Apprentis (Apprentice Training Centre)

Towards the end of the 19th century, the need for skilled workers grew and so work training was structured to cope with the demand. The first college was set up in Villebois. From 1946, Montalieu became an apprenticeship training centre; nowadays people are trained at the Centre de Formation des Apprentis (CFA).

Next step:

Go down to the roundabout next to the locomotive, go up to the CFA then cross over to reach the old forge and the Galoches Quarry, located on the left side of the road.



Maison de la Pierre au Ciment, Didier Jungers

Maison de la Pierre au Ciment (Stone and Ciment Museum)

Since 2000, "la Maison de la Pierre au Ciment" and the "la Maison de Pays" have been open to the public. These educational areas house a permanent exhibition that highlight the history of the stone quarry region: Geology, the history of stone craftsmanship, encompassing traditional architecture, social history and the history of the cement production.



In the heart of the Quarry region, where the stone workers of old once lived...

From the 18th century, the number of quarries extracting stone grew and grew, until a peak was reached in the 19th century.

The importance of building work in Lyon created an ever increasing demand for labour.

Photograph, The Quarries



In 1848, 1,400 people were employed just for extracting stone! In just a few years, workers came to the region in ever increasing numbers and the government designated the quarry region as a 'troublesome area'. Many local by-laws were drawn up during this period to curb the troubles caused by the rapid growth of the region. The regional Isère government requested the creation of a local police force in 1853. At the same time, carriers and stone masons had a pioneering role in the implementation of social measures. After 50 years of struggle, the Union of the stonemasons and quarry workers was created officially in 1884, after a vote authorizing unions.

Stop 13

La carrière des Galoches



Les galoches (clogs)

The "galoches" (clogs) were shoes worn by the stonemasons. Wood and leather soles were reinforced with nails! From a distance, one could hear the footsteps of the workers on their way to the quarry.. The name is still used today!

A book waiting to be discovered...



The Chanoz Quarry at Parmilieu

In a quarry, it is possible sometimes to observe the traces left by the tools used over the years and piece together the different methods of stone extraction: the pick, then the crowbar, gunpowder and finally today the use of explosives to break up the rocks.



La carrière des Galoches

The stonemason's tools

The tools were also known as « garniture » (trimmings). All of the tools had the owner's initials engraved on them. The toolbox includes an axe head, chisel, a sledge hammer, pins, scissors, and granulating, etc., and a few tools for measuring and tracing: a compass and a square...



The stonemason tools

The restoration of plant biodiversity

The Quarry at Galoches hasn't been in production since the 1950s. Gradually, various plant formations, from lichens on trees through to grass, spread out over the whole area and covered up this terrible scar on the landscape. The bottom of the quarry filled up to create a natural swimming pool that was appreciated by those living in Montalieu for a number of years.

Blacksmiths and tool makers



The forge

They were, of course professions that were essential for the work of the quarrymen and stonemasons. When the tools are worn out or broken, they brought them for repair to the blacksmith. Dated from 19th century, the forge found in front of the CFA is built on stone slabs.

Next step:

Leave the Galoches quarry to go back to the leisure centre "La Vallée Bleue" and its car park. For those wishing to regain the 1st trail marker, carry on down past the port and follow along the lock.



In the quarry, an age-old know-how...

In the middle of the 20th century, stone work was mechanised, which facilitated the work, of course. However, the day to day work in the quarries didn't change in the same way. To this day, a large number different types of cut stone can still be found in the quarries.

The Quarry "La carrière des Brosses » at Parmilieu



Several different processes are followed consecutively to produce cut stone. The quarry worker is in charge of extracting the blocks of stone. The stone is then cut into "slices". The slicer then cuts the slabs into the right dimensions to comply with the ordered finished product. The stonemason's work is prepared in this way.

Today, this operation is entirely automatic and carried out by sawing machines. Finally, the stone mason, following the draughtsman's plans, transfers all the patterns and details on to the slabs and puts them all together.

A regional development project...

The tourist office of the Rhône in Dauphiné (SYMBORD) has been working for many years to develop and preserve local heritage.

The Rhône Alpes region through a development project (CDRA) brought into being this tourist trail which tells the tale of stone workers, the Rhône River and the bargemen of old. The SYMBORD is composed of 44 communes, two larger groups of communes: The Crémieu region and the Pays des Couleurs.

This local heritage is very rich due to the number of its remarkable diverse aspects. An inventory was undertaken in 2010 and 2011 to collect information about local assets. Around 30 sites have now been restored by this venture. Different tourist development projects have been undertaken to allow you to discover the territory, its history and its landscapes.

It is in this context that the project “A trip along the Rhône River in the wake of stone workers and the bargemen of old” was brought into being. If you want to discover more about the region, a number of other tourist routes exist. Please feel free to contact the tourist office for any further information.

This project, backed by the SYMBORD, was brought into being by the Maison du Patrimoine (Heritage house) at Hières-sur-Amby and la Maison de la Pierre au Ciment (Cement Museum) at Montalieu-Vercieu.

Contact :
SYMBORD : www.symbord.fr

We particularly would like to thank the all the different partners involved in the project, communes and larger groups of communes, all of the members of the WorkGroup and all others who have participated actively in the realisation of this project.



Associations :

- Association des Amis du Pays de la Pierre (Montalieu-Vercieu)
- Association des Amis du Patrimoine de Porcieu-Amblagnieu
- Association Villeboisienne d'Etudes (Villebois)
- Sault-Brénaz, Histoire et Mémoire en images (Facebook page)

Crédits photos

Morel Quarry,

The tourist railway network of the Haut Rhône

The Vicat cement plant

Compagnie Nationale du Rhône (National Rhône River Network),

Didier Jungers,

Maison de la Pierre au Ciment (Stone and Ciment Museum)

Musée-Maison du Patrimoine, (Heritage House Museum,)

Espace Eau Vive,

The Tourist Office of Montalieu-Vercieu and the Vallée Bleue,

Studio campaign/Duplan

And the financial support of the Rhône-Alpes Region and the Conseil Général de l'Isère.



To learn more...

Tourist information

Montalieu-Vercieu Vallée Bleue tourist office

04 74 88 49 23 www.tourisme-montalieuvercieu.fr

Tourist Office at Morestel

04 74 80 19 59 www.morestel.com

Tourist Office at Crémieu

04 74 90 45 13 www.tourisme-cremieu.fr

Tourist Office at Avenières/Veyrins-Thuellin

04 74 33 66 22 www.otlesavenieres.fr

Tourist Office at Bugey du Rhône aux Montagnes (Lhuis)

04 74 39 80 92 www.tourismelhuis.fr

Heritage Museum (Musée-Maison du Patrimoine) (Hières-sur-Amby)

04 74 95 19 10 www.musee-larina-hieres.fr

Maison de la Pierre au Ciment (Ciment Museum) (Montalieu-Vercieu)

04 37 06 10 71 www.maisondelapierreaciment.fr

Espace Eau Vive de l'Isle de la Serre (Rapids Water Park) (Porcieu-Amblagnieu)

04 74 36 67 61 www.espaceeavive.fr

Secondary tourist routes

Each village you go through offers additional tourist routes.

- At Villebois, the Manyos circuit: from the monolith square, the trail passes through the hamlet of Bouis and the Octave plateau enabling you to discover the local stone architecture and other remarkable buildings.
- A Sault-Brénaz, the Cengiz circuit: from the church Our Lady of the Annunciation, climb up to discover the Colombier Gallo-Roman theatre which offers breath-taking views of the Rhône Valley and the Chapel Saint-Christophe. The return journey is along the tow path.
- At Porcieu-Amblagnieu, “la boucle des lavoirs”: from the hamlet of Amblagnieu, the trail winds through heart of the landscape of the plateau of the Isle Crémieu to discover the many buildings used for laundry in the past and many other interesting aspects that can be found in the small villages.
- At Montalieu-Vercieu, the sculpture circuit: from the La Vallée Bleue or from Montalieu, follow the stone carvings to discover the cultural / heritage secrets of Montalieu.

Enjoy a trip along the Rhône River
in the wake of stone workers and the bargemen

This beautiful hike whether walking or cycling through the landscape of Crémieu / Bugey region, is a golden opportunity to discover the long history of the Rhône River and of the stone found in the region.

The Montalieu and Villebois region is renowned for its traditional stone. This stone, can, of course, be found in other towns and villages in the region and even further afield in other European cities...

You will be able to follow in the footsteps of the inhabitants of the past and rediscover their traditional way of life.

