

Boscodon Abbey

Set against the handsome mountain backdrop of the Hautes-Alpes at an altitude of 1150m, Boscodon Abbey is an outstanding 12th century monument. It was once the largest abbey in the region and the main centre for the Chalaisian monastic order



(similar to the Cistercians), which spread through the Dauphiné and Provence in the Middle Ages. Summoned by the nobleman Guillaume de Montmirail, to whom the lands around Boscodon belonged, the monks arrived from Chalais in 1142.

From the second half of the 14th century onwards, after a series of wars and frequent raids the monastery buildings and the cloister were almost entirely destroyed, though the the abbey church was spared. Reconstruction, restoration and enlargement of the monks' living quarters led to large-scale building works that continued until the end of the 17 century. After the revolution of 1789 Boscodon became the property of the nation and was turned into a small peasant village consisting of 20 families and a school. Little by little, from 1972 onwards, the abbey and its grounds were bought up by the Association des Amis de l'Abbaye (Association of Friends of the Abbey) and was granted historic monument status in 1974. It is now the permanent home for a community of monks and nuns from various religious orders who manage the site and welcome members of the public to share in their daily life, prayers and work.



Lac de Serre-Ponçon will dominate your view for at least a day. Fed by the Durance and Ubaye rivers, it is the largest artificial lake in Europe. A blue jewel of water sitting beneath the mountains of the Hautes Alpes and the northern edge of the Alpes de Haute Provence. Lac de Serre-Ponçon was formed by the Barrage de Serre-Ponçon built in 1955 across the Durance just below where the Ubaye joined from the southeast. The village of Savines-le-Lac, located on the southern shore beside the bridge, is a reconstruction of the old village of Savines that now lies flooded beneath the lake. The little Chapelle Saint-Michel, that once stood on the top of a hill, is now a picturesque little island in the lake.

L'Argentière-la-Bessée lies on the River Durance and on the edge of the Ecrins National Park. The village has an old silver mine (origin of name of L'Argentière), which is now opened to tourists.

Briançon

The highest town in Europe (1,320m), Briançon has been an important stronghold since pre-Roman times, guarding the road to the Col de Montgenèvre, one of the oldest passes



into Italy. Sitting at the junction of four strategic valleys (Durance, Guisane, Cerveyrette and Clarée) Briançon is one of the most fortified areas of France. In 1690, Savoy joined a coalition against Louis XIV, bringing a threat of invasion. In 1713, the Utrecht treaty ceded eastern Dauphiné to the Piemont, making Briançon a

frontier town. In the 18th century, the town was fortified with ramparts and gates (still splendidly intact), designed by Louis XIV's military architect, Vauban (see Vauban's fortifications). The remains of the forts can still be seen in the mountains to the east within 5km of Vauban fortress, including the forts of Anjou, Randouillet, Trois Têtes, Dauphin, Infernet, Gondran, Croix de Bretagne and Selettes. Today, the Old Town is pedestrianised and entered via Porte de Pignerol.

Look out for:

Eglise de Notre Dame (1718), also built by Vauban with an eye to defence.

Le Pont d'Asfeld - built in 1734, this bridge spans the Durance in a single arch 40m across and 56m high.

Vauban's Fortifications

Construction of Briançon's defensive walls and the Fort du Château started in earnest in 1693. Due to the terrain, Vauban abandoned his usual design and created a layered defence system around the town, with the Fort du Château at its highest point. The latter's defences were helped by the terrain in that the walls and cliffs were sufficient to prevent an assault. Initially Vauban had no plans for protecting the neighbouring heights, but when he returned in 1700 he made plans for a fort, Fort des Têtes (larger

than the citadel in Briançon, and named after the Three Headed Plateau on which it was constructed) on the other side of the river to Briançon, along with a single span bridge over the gorge to link this fort with the town. What is today known as the Pont d'Asfeld (named after Vauban's successor, the Marquis d'Asfeld), was constructed 28 years later. With an arch of 40m and height of 56m it is an impressive engineering feat given the terrain and materials available at that time.

Montgenèvre is a ski resort on the Franco-Italian border at the top of the Col de Montgenèvre, but little else. In summer, its only redeeming feature is in the surrounding countryside – woods, dramatic inclines and the nearby source of the River Durance.

The **Col de Montgenèvre** (Italian: Passo del Monginevro; elevation 1854m) is the



mountain pass that links Briançon in the upper Durance valley with the Susa Valley and its communes of Cesana Torinese and Susa in the province of Turin. It appears to have been first known to the Romans when Pompey used it on his campaign to Spain in 77BC, and subsequently used by Julius Caesar when travelling to Gaul. Later it was made into a reliable road by Napoleon, a contribution that is commemorated with an obelisk in the village itself. A variety of

sources also claim that Hannibal passed nearby on his retreat from the far more powerful Roman armies. In an attempt to evade them, Hannibal took the unprecedented decision to turn inland and march over the Alps. It is thought that he probably crossed over the valley of the Drome and south of the Col de Montgenèvre or near the Col de Mont Cenis. This had never been done before – indeed many thought it impossible – and has long been praised as a brilliant tactical decision.

After Montgenèvre you will cross the border into **Italy**, a country that offers a remarkable kaleidoscope of regions, landscapes and cultures. Extending over 1,000km it stretches from far northern reaches that take in the Alps and the industrialised Po plain, all the way down to sun-soaked Mediterranean shores and islands of the south. The term Italia is thought to have originated from the ancient tribe name Itali, though another, more common explanation is that the term was borrowed from the Greek word *Viteliú*, meaning "land of young cattle". The bull was a symbol of the southern Italian tribes and was often depicted goring the Roman wolf as a defiant symbol of free Italy during the Samnite Wars. Italy shares its northern, Alpine boundary with France, Switzerland, Austria and Slovenia. The independent states of San Marino and the Vatican City are enclaves within the Italian Peninsula, and Campione d'Italia is an Italian exclave in Switzerland. Italy's capital, Rome, was for centuries the political centre of Western civilisation and the capital of the Roman Empire. After its decline, Italy endured numerous invasions from Germanic tribes such

as the Lombards and Ostrogoths, to the Normans and later, the Byzantines, among others. Italy is probably most strongly associated with art, culture and more specifically, the Renaissance, so called because it was a *rebirth* of many classical ideas that had long been buried in the chapters of classical Antiquity. One could argue that the fuel for this rebirth was the rediscovery of ancient texts that had been almost 'forgotten' by Western civilization, but were preserved in monastic or private libraries. Renaissance scholars scoured the libraries in search of works by classical authors such as Plato, Cicero and Vitruvius - works that were diffused into the Christian world, providing new intellectual material for European scholars. The Black Death pandemic in 1348 left its mark on Italy by killing one third of the population, but ultimately the recovery actually led to a resurgence of cities, trade and economy which greatly stimulated the successive phase of the Humanism and Renaissance (15th-16th centuries) when Italy again returned to be the centre of Western civilization, strongly influencing the other European countries with Courts like Este in Ferrara and De Medici in Florence. Through much of its post-Roman history, Italy was fragmented into numerous kingdoms and city-states, but was unified in 1861, following a tumultuous period in history known as the "Risorgimento". In the late 19th century Italy gained a colonial empire, which extended its rule to Libya, Eritrea, Italian Somaliland, Ethiopia, Albania, Rhodes, the Dodecanese and a concession in Tianjin, China. Today, modern Italy is a democratic republic, founding member of what is now the European Union and ranked as the world's eighteenth most-developed country.

Piedmont

The via Francigena will take you through Piedmont to Vercelli, after which it proceeds on into the region of Lombardy. The Piedmont region is surrounded by some of the highest mountains in Europe, such as the Gran Paradiso and



Monte Rosa, and crossed by the largest river in Italy,



the Po. Most of the population live in the plain, especially in the wide metropolitan area of Turin, Novara and Vercelli where a great many mechanical and car industries are located. Thanks to the abundance of water, agriculture is very important, the main products being rice, wine, maize, potatoes and the precious white truffle. Piedmont's most ancient inhabitants were the Celts and Liguri, who were succeeded by the Romans. The barbarian invasions of the 5th century completely destroyed the region and it was only under the Lombards that civilized life was re-established. After the Frankish invasion of the late 8th century AD the feudal system was introduced and many monasteries established. Then in the 11th century, as in the rest of Italy, the rise of free Communes began, a number of which often fought against the powerful Marquises of Monferrato. In the latter half of the 13th century the Communes sided with Charles of Anjou, and the Angevin rule lasted throughout the following century. During the Renaissance the mighty Visconti family ruled over Alba, Alessandria, Asti, Bra, Novara, Tortona and Vercelli, while the Savoy family from Southern France started to spread in the region. In 1559, after a war between France and Spain, the Cateau-Cambrésis Treaty gave part of Piemonte to the Savoy Duke Emanuele Filiberto and to the Marquis of Monferrato, leaving France the cities of