

The Kipling circuit

1: Place de la République

"There is a certain little meadow by the sea, under Mount Canigou, which Spring fills with narcissi when she first sets foot in Europe." Rudyard Kipling, *"Souvenirs of France"*, 1933.

Vernet-les-Bains: in Kipling's footsteps

Rudyard Kipling, author of the much-loved "Jungle Book" and winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1907, was among the many eminent and well-to-do people who came to Vernet-les-Bains in the early part of the twentieth century to "take the waters". During his many walks in the countryside around the village, he found inspiration for a number of his stories and poems. This short walk around Vernet-les-Bains is divided into twelve stages. Follow it and you will discover, with the help of quotations from Kipling's own writings, much of what the village has inherited from the time when Kipling stayed here.

The spirit of the age

Kipling visited Vernet-les-Bains during what is referred to today as the "Belle Époque", the three decades of peace which preceded the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. During this period of economic growth and internationalism there blossomed a cosmopolitan community - intellectual and sophisticated - of which Kipling was a leading representative. It was then that Vernet-les-Bains became a Pyrenean "Garden of Eden", where wealthy visitors in search of rest and a change of scenery intermingled. These visitors came for the hot baths and they stayed in luxury hotels situated along the banks of the River Cady. They enjoyed a fashionable way of life, not unlike that of the boulevards of Paris. They took advantage of the many entertainments and other activities that Vernet-les-Bains had to offer.

A haven of peace at the foot of a sacred mountain

The dramas of nature and the course of history have fashioned the layout and urban landscape of Vernet-les-Bains. The village is made up today of three distinct sectors: the old village, overlooked by the castle; the "Belle Époque" sector around the hot baths, mostly created in the late nineteenth century; and the Avenue des Thermes (formerly the Avenue des Bains). At Vernet-les-Bains, the "Paradise of the Pyrenees", there are several hot springs, located on both banks of the River Cady. The river is the subject of the next halt on this circuit, at the pont Kipling ("Kipling's Bridge").

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2: Kipling's bridge

"Here you have sunshine, and sunshine, and more sunshine, and then the rains on the 25th August or the 1st of September, and after that sunshine again." Rudyard Kipling, extract from "Why Snow Falls at Vernet", first published in "The Merry Thought", Vernet-les-Bains, 1911.

Water - both a blessing and a curse

A blessing for the village since time immemorial, water turned into a scourge from October 16th to October 20th 1940, when torrential rain beat down ceaselessly on the region. Rivers on the slopes of Canigou became wild torrents. They scarred the mountainsides and thundered down onto the foothills, causing cataclysmic floods. This was the famous "aiguat" of 1940. Kipling, who remarked amusingly in 1911 that rain fell here only in brief periods between long intervals of sunshine, was not present in 1940 to witness this unforeseen natural disaster. The flood destroyed the Hôtel du Parc and the Baths - places both familiar to Kipling during his stays in the village.

From the Paradise of the Pyrenees to Dante's Inferno

The habitual murmur of the river which flows here became a loud, terrifying rumble. At first, people came to the bridges out of fearful curiosity. Later, they moved to higher ground for safety, as the River Cady poured out of the gorge at Casteil, rose to a height of six metres, and burst its banks. It flooded adjacent land, uprooted trees, swept away bridges and deposited more than a metre of rocks and silt in the Avenue des Thermes. Local inhabitants witnessed the river carrying on its surface apple trees, cows on their backs, sideboards, wardrobes full of clothes - and even a hotel, which floated for a few seconds before sinking into the water. On October 21st 1940, the front page of a local newspaper, "L'Indépendant", carried the headline "Vernet-les-Bains, yesterday the Paradise of the Pyrenees, today looks like Dante's Inferno."

The renaissance of a village

In the region as a whole, 50 people were killed by the flood. In Vernet-les-Bains, 52 buildings were destroyed, along with 182 hectares of apple orchards. Entire herds of livestock were also lost. In 1950, work began on the construction of a new spa centre. Major works were also undertaken to canalise the turbulent waters of the Cady between the high, wide river banks that you see here today. New bridges were also built, including the one known today as "Kipling's bridge". Gardens and open spaces were also restored and laid out, including one at the next stage of this circuit, in the Promenade Albiot.

3: Promenade Albiot

"On Tuesday, Sir Brian betook himself and his leg to the sulphur-scented pools behind his modest but, bathed for one hour, drank half a helmetful of heady Vaporarium and returned to his vineyards. On Friday, Sir Gilbert, descending from Casteil, sat for two hours in the rock-cut basin which is now the Piscina, drank a full helmet of strong Barara, and fished the left bank of the river on his homeward way." Rudyard Kipling, extract from "Why Snow Falls at Vernet", first published in "The Merry Thought", Vernet-les-Bains, 1911.

The birth of "thermalisme"

("Thermalisme" broadly means the use of natural hot springs for medical purposes. Spa centres - such as the "Établissement Thermal" at Vernet-les-Bains - capture the hot, mineralised and often sulphur-rich water and use it in a number of treatments for the relief of rheumatic, respiratory and other medical conditions. A set of prescribed treatments at the baths is called a "cure". The "curistes" who come for these treatments may not leave fully healed, but, like Kipling and his wife, they usually depart feeling a good deal better than when they arrived.)

Although it seems likely that people have taken advantage of the hot springs at Vernet-les-Bains for more than a thousand years, the first known written reference to the use of the springs dates from the twelfth century. But, at that time, the life of the village was not centred around the hot springs. The waters of the Rivers Cady and St Vincent were much more important in the daily life of the villagers. It was not until the eighteenth century, with the emergence of modern scientific ideas and notions of health care, that the medical benefits of hot spring waters were identified and promoted. In the nineteenth century, as understanding of the chemical properties of hot spring water improved, and as tourism and the "taking of the waters" became more popular, demand for "thermalisme" grew significantly in many parts of Europe.

From "Vernet-en-Conflent" to "Vernet-les-Bains"

From that time on, the village made itself more widely known. It laid emphasis on its pleasant climate (allowing for "cures" to be taken in the winter as well as the summer), improvements in transport facilities, and the several special facilities for "curistes" at its spa centres. Parks and gardens were laid out and were planted with many exotic species of trees and shrubs. These included the Winter Garden and the Casino Park. They were delightful places in which to stroll, relax and (as in Kipling's case) indulge in creative musings. Slowly but surely, what was once the remote village of Vernet-en-Conflent became the widely-celebrated Vernet-les-Bains. 1914 saw the village's official designation as a "climatic and hydrothermal resort".

The first "Village Arboretum" in France

The Kiplings stayed in Vernet for about a month each time. They enjoyed a peaceful daily routine which included strolls along paths bordered by early spring flowers and blossoms. In the parks and gardens, local species grew alongside exotic plants brought to Vernet from afar by visitors and new residents. From 1950, and following the canalisation of the River Cady, other varieties of trees were planted along the restored and reinforced river banks, as here by the Promenade Albiot. As we can see today, this further diversified and rendered even more attractive the urban landscape of Vernet-les-Bains. Then, in 1996, and after a thorough tree census, Vernet-les-Bains was designated the first Village Arboretum in France.



4: The Anglican church of St George

"*Shortly after the end of the First Crusade, there came to Vernet...two English knights - Sir Brian and Sir Gilbert*". Rudyard Kipling, extract from "Why Snow Falls at Vernet", first published in "The Merry Thought", Vernet-les-Bains, 1911.

A church for Anglicans

From 1890, the British community in Vernet-les-Bains benefitted from all the local services that the village had to offer, but the Anglicans among them did not possess their own place of worship. Instead they used the basement of the Casino, which served as an Anglican chapel. (Today the basement of the Casino is occupied by a geological museum.) In 1910 an appeal was launched to raise funds for the construction of an Anglican church. Land for the church was donated by Count Henry de Burnay, owner of the spa-hotel complex (many of his clients were British). The donors included a number of Establishment figures, including Foreign Secretary Lord Edward Grey, members of the aristocracy and colonial officers re-adapting to a European climate (notably Lord Roberts, Field Marshall during the Boer War in South Africa and, like his friend Rudyard Kipling, born in India).

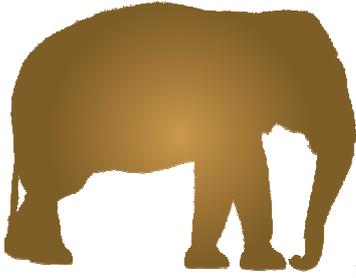
An unusual architecture

The building has elements of an Anglo-Norman style (in, for example, its overall structure) and of a neo-medieval style (in, for example, its paired windows and crenellated belfry). The edifice was designed in a way that reflects both the Anglican preference for sparseness of decoration and the architectural styles favoured by the upper classes in the early twentieth century.

Expressions of solidarity

Lord Roberts laid the foundation stone of St George's Church in 1911 (shortly after the Kiplings' departure that year). The stone, in red marble, can be seen next to the main entrance to the church. In a way, the ceremony sealed the presence of the British community in the village. This was followed, in 1912, by the launching of a project for the construction of a monument to mark the Entente Cordiale, a treaty of peace and cooperation between France and Britain. This monument, which stands today opposite the town hall, near the castle, was at the centre of a ceremony in 2004 to mark the centenary of the signing of the Entente Cordiale. That ceremony was attended by a British Foreign Office minister, Denis MacShane. Today, British residents continue to contribute to the life of the village, through involvement in the work of clubs and associations, and through a still-active Anglican community.





5: Allée Louis Codet

"Sir Brian, after the simple usage of those days, possessed himself of the ground where the Vernet hotels now stand; Sir Gilbert, the later arrival, contenting himself with the pleasant fields round Casteil." Rudyard Kipling, extract from "Why Snow Falls at Vernet", first published in "The Merry Thought", Vernet-les-Bains, 1911.

Hotels and villas

Visitors who made up the British and international communities in Vernet-les-Bains could stay in one of the grand hotels, as Rudyard Kipling did, or, if they preferred, they could rent a villa or holiday cottage. The latter could be hired for a period of weeks or months at a time. Visitors who stayed there installed themselves *en famille*, and they brought their domestic staff with them. The villas and cottages offered the same modern comforts as the luxury hotels. They were richly furnished and not a few had hot running water, lavish silverware and electric lights.

Cosmopolitan architecture

The Great Exhibition of 1878 in Paris, at which Vernet-les-Bains and its spa waters were represented, inspired the construction of these villas and cottages. Between 1880 and 1900, twelve such cottages were constructed here, modelled on the "Street of Nations" at the Paris Exhibition. Each cottage represented a country, or a region of France. For example, there was a cottage representing Alsace (this was used in 1911 by Vincent Scott O'Connor, another celebrated British writer and the author of "Travels in the Pyrenees"). Like the Great Exhibitions, these buildings reflected the optimistic, "civilising" outlook of many Europeans in the second half of the nineteenth century. This collection of buildings in Vernet-les-Bains was thus a small-scale representation of the beauty of science, the world's riches, and the harmony of its peoples. At the Paris Exhibition of 1878, Kipling's father was in charge of the Indian Section of Arts and Manufacture. Kipling, then aged 13, accompanied his father. "It was an education in itself," he wrote much later, "and set my life-long love for France."

In keeping with the times

These buildings also bore witness to changing personal relationships, which became ever-more focussed on family life. And, in accordance with the sentiments of an age which favoured the intertwining of town and country, these villas and cottages formed a kind of leafy mini-suburb encircling the Casino Park. However, villas of this period were (and are) also to be found nearer the centre of the village - such as the Chalet des Roses (in the Avenue des Thermes), built to the specifications of Charles Garnier; and the Villa Nicolau (currently the town hall). Thus comfortably lodged, the international and French visitors to this quarter could also take advantage of strolls and entertainments in, for example, the Casino Park.

6: The casino Park

"On Sundays the two would meet exactly below the great rock and exchange exactly seven words - one for each day of the week." Rudyard Kipling, extract from "Why Snow Falls at Vernet", first published in "The Merry Thought", Vernet-les-Bains, 1911.

A village popular for its leisure and recreation activities

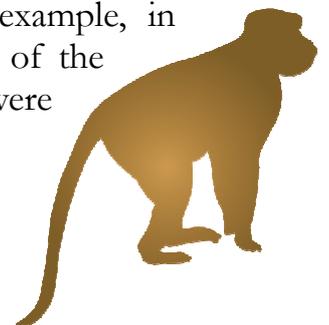
People came to Vernet-les-Bains as much for its many leisure and recreation opportunities as for its hot spring baths. By the late nineteenth century, the village's clientele had diversified and Vernet-les-Bains had become a lively tourist resort. Later, the village's entertainments committee, under the direction of the French-Catalan writer Albert Bausil, organised a wide range of activities. These included swimming competitions, golf tournaments, tennis matches (at the Laiterie, just beyond the Baths), and horse-riding events. In the Casino Park, visitors could also go boating on the lake (which was larger than it is today). Others were taken hunting.

Social and cultural activities

"Flower battles" and fancy dress balls were much frequented by visitors to Vernet-les-Bains. People also went to see plays and musicals in the Casino theatre. Daily concerts were given in bandstands in the park. The popular French singer Charles Trenet performed in the theatre and the park was later named after him. Today, the park is again the venue of colourful events, notably the late spring "Belle Époque" festival, in which participants dress up in period costume to re-create the atmosphere of Vernet's most splendid years.

The simple and the sublime - excursions beyond the village

Visitors could also take part in excursions into the country around Vernet-les-Bains - by car, on horseback, in carriages or with donkeys. The most popular outings included those to nearby St Martin du Canigou and to St Michel de Cuxa. Others, more adventurous, led to the Carança gorge, or to Cortalets, a refuge-hotel high up in the Canigou massif. This way of exploring the mountains came to be called "Pyreneism". In contrast to "Alpinism", which was seen as concerning mainly the technical and physical challenges of mountains, "Pyreneism" attached equal importance to aesthetic considerations, and to the exploration of archaeological sites. Nevertheless, exceptional physical exploits were still applauded. For example, in December 1910 the local press gave prominence to a report of an ascent of the Pic du Canigou by a group of 14 mountain walkers, most of whom were women from Britain!



7: The Casino



"It is the weather of which the English speak. Be silent, and you will hear them speaking."
Rudyard Kipling, extract from "Why Snow Falls at Vernet", first published in "The Merry Thought", Vernet-les-Bains, 1911.

"Vernet of the English"

From 1890, the winter sunshine, the peace and quiet and the beneficial hot waters attracted - and still attract - many English visitors, pioneers of tourism. In 1907, there were about 500 British people staying here at any one time. A number of travel books were produced for this clientele, notably Scott O'Connor's "Travels in the Pyrenees" (1913), which contained a substantial chapter entitled "Vernet of the English". The Kiplings thus found here an English way of life, with British doctors, a library, a English-language magazine, and Anglican religious services. The Casino was the headquarters of an English club. It had rooms for meetings, for entertainments, for games, for writing and for taking tea and coffee. It also had a reading room, where Kipling went to browse through the London newspapers.

Mrs Kipling, "curiste"

However, at the outset it was the health of Kipling's wife which brought the couple to Vernet-les-Bains. She suffered from rheumatism and she was advised to seek treatment here by a doctor in Zurich. For the Kiplings, the early part of each stay in particular was devoted to rest, to easy strolls and to sessions at the baths for Caroline Kipling. She benefitted from the treatment she was given. She also appreciated the way the whole spa-hotel complex was designed for the convenience of "curistes". In particular, there was a series of covered passages that linked various buildings, thus enabling guests to move from one part of the complex to another while staying under cover during periods of inclement weather. Between the Hôtel du Portugal and the Baths are the remains of one of these passages (today called the "Kipling Passage").

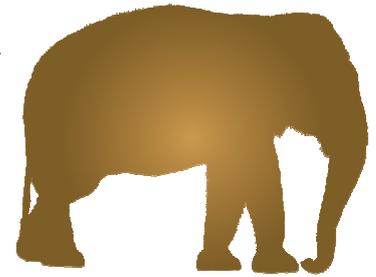
Under Canigou's charm

From the time of his first visit, Kipling was charmed by the Catalan countryside. He explored it from Cerdagne to the Côte Vermeille. In March 1911, in the company of Lord Roberts, he visited the abbey of St Martin du Canigou. The visit was facilitated by the Bishop of Perpignan, Monseigneur Carsalade du Pont, who had initiated the restoration of the abbey. Kipling wrote: "I came here in search of nothing more than a little sunshine. But I found Canigou, whom I discovered to be a magician among mountains, and I submitted myself to his power."



8: THE HÔTEL de Portugal

"On Tuesday, Sir Brian betook himself and his leg to the sulphur-scented pools behind his modest hut". Rudyard Kipling, extract from "Why Snow Falls at Vernet", first published in "The Merry Thought", Vernet-les-Bains, 1911.



The "Thermes" sector

(The "Thermes" sector of the village included not just the Baths, but also the hotels associated with the Baths, the Casino, the park and adjacent areas.)

The layout of this part of Vernet-les-Bains was based on the model of town planning initiated in Paris after 1851 by Baron Haussmann. The focal point was the Hôtel du Portugal. On its left, facing north, was the Casino. This, the entertainment centre of the quarter, was adjacent to a park that covered 70,000 square metres and that was itself bordered by several villas. This park, with its tree-lined avenues, extended eastwards to the former Baths and to hotels later destroyed in the 1940 flood. All these buildings faced the road in regular fashion, without corbelled features or other significant projections, so as to keep lines of perspective clear and thus highlight the scale and elegance of the ensemble.

Hausmannian architecture

This design of the sector, like the architecture of the villas, reflected modern values and was founded on a scrupulous harmonisation of its component parts. The Hôtel du Portugal illustrates this principle especially well. On the ground floor is a series of arcades which housed a number of boutiques. Above are three floors - elegant and balconied on the first level, rising to an attic below a mansard roof. The two wings of the hotel meet at a rotunda which harmonises the whole appearance of the building. Inside, a grand staircase in bright red marble gave access to guests' rooms and to luxurious salons (there was also a hydraulic lift). The Salon Amélie contains furniture donated by Queen Amélie of Portugal that is in a perfect state of conservation.

New aspirations

By the nineteenth century, palaces and churches were no longer the only buildings of prominence. Commercial buildings, monuments, museums and dwelling places were also constructed to impress. The new socialites who built and frequented such places had benefitted from economic prosperity and had time to spare and money to spend. During the twentieth century, more and more people could allow themselves time off from work to enjoy leisure and holidays. Ostentatious neo-Hausmannian architecture, of which Charles Garnier was the best-known proponent, reflected these developments. Thus, the Casino was designed as a quadrangular structure enclosing a magnificent theatre which can accommodate up to 600 spectators.



9: The Baths (today the “Établissement thermal”)

"Here, in a silence as profound as that of the mountains above, each devoted himself to the cure of his ailment." Rudyard Kipling, extract from "Why Snow Falls at Vernet", first published in "The Merry Thought", Vernet-les-Bains, 1911.

The hot springs of Vernet-les-Bains

A dozen or so hot springs have been located at Vernet-les-Bains, on both sides of the River Cady. The springs' heated, mineral-rich water rises from deep underground in the Canigou massif. The rate of flow and the temperature of the water that issues from the springs vary a good deal from one location to another; and some springs are more accessible than others. For these reasons, only some of the springs have been used for medical or other purposes.

Hot spring water - beneficial on several counts

These waters soothe and heal. Down the centuries, people have drunk the spring waters, bathed in them, and used them for heating. They have carefully analysed the different mineral contents of the water from each spring and they have measured the water's temperature (it varies from about 30°C to about 60°C). Each generation has discovered new, beneficial uses for the spring waters. Today, for example, some of the hot water that surges from a spring directly under the Hôtel du Portugal is channelled to a crèche (near the post office) where it used to heat the building. The same water is then carried down to a washing-place opposite the Hôtel Princess (this is one of only a small number of such washing-places in Europe to be supplied with warm spring water).

The evolution of "thermalisme" (see stage 3)

During the nineteenth century, a succession of establishments exploited the hot spring waters by using them in treatments for respiratory, rheumatic, digestive and dermatological conditions. Rich in sulphur, sodium and silica, these waters are noted for a thin, gelatinous deposit that they sometimes leave on rocks near where the spring water emerges. This deposit has been referred to as "thermal plankton" (although some might say that this term is an over-simplification for what is apparently a more complex ensemble of micro-organisms). When massaged into the skin, it has been found to help the healing of wounds. In 1914, this "plankton" deposit was used to make a beauty cream marketed under the name of "La Vernétine". It was presented as a "miracle cure for skin disorders". After the flood of 1940, Vernet-les-Bains focussed on promoting a form of "thermalisme" that both specialised in treatments for respiratory and rheumatic conditions and offered the benefits of "green tourism". Today, as well as continuing to offer medical treatments, the "Établissement Thermal" also incorporates a "well-being spa" with a jacuzzi, steam room, sauna, beauty parlour, fitness room and related services.

10: The Winter Garden

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"I had this legend from the rock which rises behind the laurestine bush and the loquat tree, in the winter garden."
Rudyard Kipling, extract from "Why Snow Falls at Vernet", first published in "The Merry Thought", Vernet-les-Bains, 1911.

The Winter Garden

In 1911, the spa-hotel complex incorporated a winter garden, located opposite the Baths on the hillside across the river. Guests reached the garden via a footbridge over the river, or by an underground passage. The garden had initially incorporated a sanatorium with a long veranda, for tuberculosis patients, plus several smaller pavilions dotted about the hillside. All were linked by winding paths. A terrace running along the front of the sanatorium offered a view across the whole valley below. The sanatorium was soon converted into a solarium and the smaller pavilions were used as refreshment kiosks and rest places. Kipling no doubt found this peaceful garden an ideal place in which to seek literary inspiration.

A literary tribute to Vernet-les-Bains

Kipling quickly became enamoured of the landscape around Vernet-les-Bains. It reminded him of "the outlines of certain hills in South Africa which are dear to me". When he arrived here in February 1911, snow lay on the ground. There were then two weeks of uninterrupted sunshine, followed, in March, by more snowfall. It was at that time that an English-language magazine produced by the English community in Vernet-les-Bains asked Kipling to write a short story for that publication. He did so and thus gave the editor, on March 16th, the manuscript of "Why Snow Falls at Vernet". Inspired by both the local climate and Kipling's compatriots, this amusing tale makes fun of the undeniable truth that English people, when conversing among themselves, speak only of the weather. The heroes of the story are two medieval English knights, whose manners and conversation are entirely comparable with well-to-do Britons of the "Belle Époque".

A prestigious visitor

Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) was the first English writer to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. By 1910, he was at the summit of his glory. His works, which drew deeply on his Anglo-Indian origins and his love of travel, held his readers in the grip of fascination. Kipling's "Puck of Pook's Hill", an elf taken from William Shakespeare's play "A Midsummer Night's Dream", his "Kim", and his "Mowgli" from the "Jungle Book" were enormously popular and well-known characters. His skills made him a master of story-telling and of children's literature. But he was also a pioneer of fantasy literature. For a long time, Kipling's defence of imperialism and his distaste for liberal causes made him a controversial figure. But for all that, and not least because of the humanism which pervades much of his work, Kipling's status as great figure of English literature is today barely disputed.

11: The Avenue des Thermes and the Avenue de Burnay

"This year Canigou has taken to himself his own place in my mind and heart...Nothing that he could do or give birth to would now surprise me, whether I met Don Quixote himself riding in from the Spanish side, or all the chivalry of ancient France watering their horses at his streams, or saw gnomes and kobolds swarming out of the mines and tunnels of his flanks." Rudyard Kipling, letter to Monsieur George Auriol of the Club Alpin Français, sent from the Hôtel du Parc, Vernet-les-Bains, 27th February 1911.

Before "thermalisme": a life based on agriculture

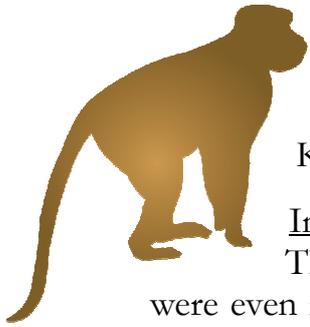
Before "thermalisme" blossomed, the economy of Vernet-les-Bains was essentially an agricultural one, like that of other villages in Conflent. Orchards covered much of the land, as did vineyards, planted on south-facing slopes. Livestock were tended over wide areas. "Orris", the igloo-shaped cabins found all over the surrounding hills which were built out of dry stone and which gave shelter to shepherds and others who looked after the animals, bear witness to the importance of cattle and sheep in the local economy. In addition, an extensive network of irrigation canals, along which water taken from nearby rivers moved under gravity, enabled villagers to produce fruit, vegetables and crops in small plots of land to help feed their families. These canals are still used today and can be seen threading their way through the village.

The mines of Canigou

But the Canigou massif possessed other sources of wealth in the form of exploitable minerals - notably iron ore. Rich in haematite and easy to work, the iron ore of Canigou formed the basis of a metallurgic industry which came to the fore in the sixteenth century with the invention of the "Catalan forge". The ancient decorated ironwork on the door of St Saturnin church, next to the castle, bears witness to this. In the nineteenth century, the processing of the iron ore mined in this region was moved to blast furnaces in central France. At the same time, several concessions for the extraction of iron ore in this area were granted. Mining continued until shortly after the Second World War and it represented a significant economic activity for Vernet-les-Bains when Kipling was here. Today the remains of that industry are to be found in several places in the hills and valleys around Vernet-les-Bains, and in the village itself. In particular, some of the "mines and tunnels" noted by Kipling are still visible, as are ventilation shafts, first-stage furnaces and disused railway lines.

The multiplier effect of "thermalisme"

The above-mentioned aspects of the economy of Vernet-les-Bains must have fascinated many people who came to the village for a holiday or a "cure". But "thermalisme" was itself an important source of employment, creating jobs in the hotels, the baths and in the many associated services sought by visitors and "curistes". In addition, "thermalisme" generated work in related areas that provided supplementary income to families whose main revenue (sometimes meagre) was from mining and farming. For example, there was a laundry adjacent to the washing-place (at that time located in the Avenue de Sahorre) where 16 women had permanent employment doing washing and ironing. And, in order to meet the demand for ice from "curistes", hardy ice-carriers climbed to the upper slopes of Canigou, cut huge slabs of ice and brought them down to the village on their backs. (The ice was stored in a "chalet-glacier".) Today, the celebrated Canigou mountain marathon (held on the first Sunday in August) pays tribute to those ice-carriers of yesteryear.



12: Place de la République (south-east corner)

" *What do you find to do in the country?* ' *Everything except time to do it.*' " Rudyard Kipling, "Something of Myself", 1935

In the heart of the village

The Avenue des Thermes (formerly the Avenue des Bains) and the town square were even more at the heart of the village in Kipling's time than they are today. The post office, the town hall and the school were all located here - along with, of course, the fountain and its effigy of Marianne (whom Scott O'Connor - see stage 7 - referred to as "Madame la République"). Then as now, the tourist of 1910 found in the avenue and around the square a range of shops and services. In some cases the fame of these establishments spread to the far corners of the British Empire (or so the cake shop, proud of its home-made jams, may have liked to think). But, in addition to these treasures, Kipling would also have discovered other local specialities, in the form of the many myths, legends and traditions associated with the Catalan culture.

Canigou and the Catalan culture

For Kipling, Canigou was a "magician among mountains". He imagined "gnomes and kobolds swarming out of the mines and tunnels of his flanks". Kipling's literary world was infused with magic. He could not but be captivated by myths and legends associated with Canigou, populated as they are by fairies, elves, goblins and the like. In 1910, Kipling published "Rewards and Fairies", in which we once again meet Puck, "the last survivor in England of those whom mortals call Fairies". By coincidence, the work of the revered Catalan poet Jacint Verdaguer (1845-1902), author of the epic poem "Canigó", and of "Lo follet" ("the goblin"), also contains abundant references to such mythical creatures. (There is a memorial to Verdaguer in the winter garden. His work played an important role in the renaissance of the Catalan language and it helped to inspire the restoration of the abbey of St Martin du Canigou.) Verdaguer referred to Canigou as the "fairies' Mount Olympus". Canigou, a mountain seen as offering protection, sustenance and inspiration, is a symbol of Catalan identity and of what distinguishes Catalan culture from its French and Spanish counterparts.

The village's origins

Down the centuries, Vernet-les-Bains and the surrounding countryside have had various rulers, coming from both sides of the Pyrenees mountains. First recorded in the ninth century, Vernet became, around the year 1000, part of a territory controlled by the newly-founded abbey of St Martin du Canigou. Later, at the beginning of the twelfth century, the abbey handed over control of the village to a feudal lord. Following the tendency of that period, the village then took the form of a hill settlement, coiled around the hilltop castle and its protective enclosure. The "old village" that we see today, with its maze of narrow, flower-decked streets, is a legacy of that time. Situated alongside the Place de la République, the "Maison du Patrimoine" houses, on its upper floor, a highly original exhibition about the history of Vernet-les-Bains. The building also accommodates temporary exhibitions on the history of the area. You will also find here the local tourist office, which has information about guided walks and other excursions in and around Vernet-les-Bains.

