



Vernet-les-Bains
**The "Belle Époque"
circuit**
1½ hours: climb: 50m

Rudyard Kipling **(1865 - 1936)** and **The "Belle Époque" walk** **in Vernet-les-Bains**



The English writer Rudyard Kipling was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1907. He stayed in Vernet-les-Bains in 1910, in 1911, 1914 and 1926.

At that time, Kipling was well known in France, following the success of the French version of his classic work, *The Jungle Book*.

While he was in Vernet in 1911, Kipling met the Bishop of Perpignan, Mgr de Carsalade (see photo, above; Kipling is seated on the right). In a letter to a friend, Kipling described the Bishop as "delightful ... charming ... an authority on Catalan poems."

The Bishop was restoring the abbey of St Martin du Canigou (above Casteil), which was then in ruins. He had been inspired to do so by

the Catalan poet Jacint Verdaguer, whose famous poem, *Canigó*, was published in 1886. Verdaguer died in 1902. But perhaps the Bishop spoke to Kipling about Verdaguer's work. In any event, Kipling wrote about Canigou. In a letter to the *Club Alpin*, he praised it as "a magician among mountains".

In March 1911, Kipling also wrote a light-hearted short story entitled *Why Snow Falls at Vernet*. It makes fun of the English habit of always talking about the weather.

Today, both Kipling and Verdaguer are celebrated in Vernet. The central bridge over the River Cady is named after Kipling; and a decorated wall in the Winter Garden is dedicated to Verdaguer.

1 - This walk begins near the bridge over the River Cady, by Vernet's *Établissement thermal* (a). Walk up the valley, towards the car park. After a few metres, turn right between some buildings, then turn left to follow a track which goes up towards a large open area with picnic tables.

2 - The large building ahead is *la Laiterie* (the dairy). Pass in front of that building and climb a bank to the edge of a former lake. Go up to the right. Go left, along a footpath that climbs into the woods to a viewpoint up the valley (b). The path swings sharply to the right, terraces across fallen stones, and passes above the *Laiterie*. Where the path forks, go left. You pass a small cave and stone seats. You soon rejoin the terrace path that you were on earlier. Further along, fork left onto a path that first zig-zags up the hill, then ascends a stone staircase.

3 - From a viewpoint at the top of the staircase, the *Établissement thermal* is now directly below (c). On the opposite side of the River Cady is the Winter Garden, with its huge rocky crag (d). Near the lowest part of the garden is the memorial to the Catalan poet Jacint Verdaguer. From here, there is also a fine view across to the village. There is a maze of paths in the woods just here, but keep winding downhill.

4 - Eventually, you turn left onto a path that crosses the hillside. As you follow this path, the Casino is down below, on your right.

5 - The path emerges from the woods at a sharp bend in a tarmacked lane. Bear left and follow the lane uphill. After passing through the entrance to a private property, turn right along a grassy terrace. Bear left down some steps to a stony path.

6 - Turn right here. Go down the path. Go past a covered reservoir and emerge onto another tarmacked lane, with a campsite entrance on the right. Go straight on, down that lane (e).

7 - Just before the lane's junction with the D27 (Vernet-Sahorre) road, another lane forks off to the right. Take that lane, which soon bends to the right. You are now in the outskirts of the village, with houses and gardens on both sides.

8 - At a lane junction, go right, uphill. This is the *rue du Temple*, named after the Anglican church (f), which you soon see.

9 - Go past the church and follow the lane as it winds up into the *Belle Époque* part of Vernet. You emerge into an area of parkland (g). Cross that open space and arrive in front of the Casino, which is up on the right.

10 - From the Casino, pass in front of the Hôtel du Portugal (h). You soon reach the *Établissement thermal*, where the walk began, and now ends.

(a) Kipling and his wife came to Vernet principally for the health of Mrs Kipling. She had treatment for her rheumatism in the hot baths.

(b) Vernet, Kipling wrote, "is a lovely place". He walked on paths like this one, in the hills near the town, and he "watched the flowers come out".

(c) The ancient baths used by Mrs Kipling were destroyed - along with several other buildings - by a terrible flood in 1940. The modern buildings which stand there today were built a couple of decades later.

(d) This is perhaps the "Rock" that Kipling said "gave" him his story, *"Why Snow Falls at Vernet"*.

(e) From this lane, there is a marvellous view up to the summit of Canigou. In his letter in praise of the mountain, Kipling said it reminded him of the Himalayas. In the same letter, he wrote about "the mines and tunnels" on the flanks of the mountain. It is difficult to imagine now, but during the "Belle Époque" Vernet was a busy centre for iron ore mining. On and around the hillside you have just walked across, there were dozens of mines running deep into the ground, with overhead cables, railway lines and furnaces.

(f) Lord Roberts laid the foundation stone of the Anglican church in April 1911. It was said that the cost of the church was £1000. It was paid for by wealthy English visitors to Vernet. When the Bishop of Perpignan visited Vernet in 1911, Lord Roberts was also there. He is seated, left, in the photo above.

(g) In this area are some of the tallest and most magnificent tree specimens in Vernet's "village arboretum".

(h) The photograph in which Kipling appears, above, was perhaps taken in front of the Hôtel de Portugal, under the arch at the far end of the hotel.