

Unique village is living arboretum

Jane Hanks on how Vernet-les-Bains' location permits many specimens to flourish... and how it earned a unique label

The first and only Village d'Arboretum in France is a unique collection of remarkable trees to be seen not in a majestic park, but by walking through the small thermal spa town of Vernet-les-Bains in the Pyrénées-Orientales.

The tourist office organises guided tours or you can wander alone and choose one of four circuits with details of the trees you will see along the way.

These include a 50 metre tall Sequoia, a magnificent *magnolia grandiflora* at least 130 years old, perhaps the finest example of a Tulip Tree in France and a vast variety of different conifers.

Roger Capela is President of the Association Village Arboretum de Vernet-les-Bains and says they have counted 2,500 trees and 350 different varieties of trees, bushes and creepers. The reason they are there are twofold:

"The first specimens were planted over a period of more than a hundred years from the end of the 18th century and right through the 19th century when it was the fashion to introduce exotic new trees from abroad. Vernet-les-Bains was a popular thermal town, particularly amongst the British aristocracy and it is thought they were responsible for planting many of the finest trees still growing here today.

"The sequoia, for example, is between 130 and 140 years old and dates from the time the first specimens were introduced into Europe from North America. Sadly, no-one ever noted down when the trees were planted, where they came from and who brought them to Vernet-les-Bains.

"In October 1940 there was a disaster, when terrible floods destroyed and carried away part of the thermal baths area, its luxury hotels and their gardens. Gradually the area was replanted with trees, which today also makes up part of the village arboretum."

He says the large variety of trees has flourished because though Vernet-les-Bains is in the Pyrenees at 600m altitude, it has a micro-climate as the area is protected by the surrounding mountains.

This means that it is never very cold nor very hot, so that vegetation that would not exist in most mountainous areas can survive here. There are frosts and snow, so tropical plants might not survive, but the area can support a surprising range of plants.

Mr Capela says that no-one ever really noticed or appreciated the richness of the



This twisted incense Cedar tree is one of the extraordinary specimens to be spotted in Vernet-les-Bains, along with a magnificent magnolia (inset)

vegetation they were living in until the early 1990s when someone happened to mention the village had a remarkable collection of trees at the meeting of a local association Découvertes.

The members discussed this and contacted the primary school who took on the project for its two older class groups, CM1 and CM2 to go out and identify the trees. Over seven successive years, the children collected seeds, leaves, pieces of bark and made drawings which, with the help of their teachers led them to discover that they were indeed living amongst an extraordinary collection.

An association was created and continued the children's work, and it took them 20 years to classify each tree. In 1996, the town council declared itself a Village Arboretum, a completely new concept.

To earn the label, they decided that the arboretum must be an integral part of the village and that the council would be

responsible for the care of the trees and their replacement if they died. For a few years, a new tree was planted for every birth in Vernet-les-Bains.

The council now has a team dedicated to looking after the trees, who have gained specialist knowledge in the treatment of exotic species. Luckily there are not many pests or diseases.

Each tree has a number and there are explanatory panels in the village giving their names. Though the detailed stories of individual trees will never be known, some have developed their own local legends.

"Our magnificent magnolia has a very low branch which hangs about 40cm from the ground. For years, children have sat astride it and played horses on it so

that it is called the Tree Horse.

"One winter there was an exceptionally heavy fall of snow which broke the branch. The *mairie* managed to save it by putting a support underneath. The Tulip Tree has truncated leaves, and if you look at it from the back we like to say it looks like the head of a cat.

"We then have what we call the Boxing Tree. This is the massive Sequoia, which has very spongy bark, 30cm deep and is fantastic for punching practise. It has had to be protected with a bar around it so nobody can do this anymore as it was getting damaged."

One of the most extraordinary specimens, which seems to be unique to Vernet-les-Bains, is a *Libocedrus decurrens* or incense cedar originating from western North America. This particular tree has developed twisted and tortuous branches and no-one knows quite why this has happened and they have never found or heard of another like it.

You can pick up a plan of the four circuits at the Tourist Office. The *Classique* is between 1.5km and 2km depending on which route you take and includes the Giant sequoia, the Tulipier, the Magnolia Grandiflora and the twisted incense cedar as well as a Ginkgo Biloba or Maidenhair tree native to China.

In all there are 312 varieties of trees to spot on this walk through the village. There are the same number of trees in the *Circuit des Parcs*, which is a 1km walk through the public parks. The 1.5km *Circuit des Conifères*, as it suggests, focuses on the huge variety of conifers and the 1km walk through the *Jardin d'Hiver* takes place in a park that was created at

the end of the 19th century to provide colour for winter visitors.

Some of the trees are in private gardens and have to be looked at from a distance, but most are on public land and in parkland.

Mr Capela says it has taught villagers to always take note of the richness that is around them. You can live with an extraordinary

collection of plants and never realise it, he says, as they did for years.

He is sure there are other places with similar collections, particularly thermal spas like Vernet-les-Bains.

www.vernet-les-bains.fr/page/village-arboretum

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"The Connexion"

01-02-2021

<https://www.connexionfrance.com>

Jane Hanks

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Le premier et unique Village Arboretum (www.vernet-les-bains.fr/page/village-arboretum) en France est une collection unique d'arbres remarquables à voir non pas dans un parc majestueux, mais en se promenant dans la petite ville thermale de Vernet-les-Bains, dans les Pyrénées-Orientales.

L'office de tourisme organise des visites guidées ou vous pouvez vous promener seul et choisir l'un des quatre circuits avec des détails sur les arbres que vous verrez en chemin.

Parmi ceux-ci, un séquoia de 50 mètres de haut, un magnolia grandiflora d'au moins 130 ans, peut-être le plus bel exemple de tulipier en France, et une grande variété de conifères différents.

Roger Capela est le président de l'Association Village Arboretum de Vernet-les-Bains et dit qu'ils ont compté 2 500 arbres et 350 variétés différentes d'arbres, d'arbustes et de lianes. La raison de leur présence est double :

"Les premiers spécimens ont été plantés sur une période de plus de cent ans, de la fin du 18e siècle jusqu'au 19e siècle, époque à laquelle il était de bon ton d'introduire de nouveaux arbres exotiques venant de l'étranger.

"Vernet-les-Bains était une ville thermale populaire, en particulier auprès de l'aristocratie britannique, et on pense que c'est à elle que l'on doit la plantation de nombreux arbres parmi les plus beaux qui poussent encore ici aujourd'hui.

"Le séquoia, par exemple, est âgé de 130 à 140 ans et date de l'époque où les premiers spécimens ont été introduits en Europe en provenance d'Amérique du

America. Sadly, no-one ever noted down when the trees were planted, where they came from and who brought them to Vernet-les-Bains.

"In October 1940 there was a disaster, when terrible floods destroyed and carried away part of the thermal baths area, its luxury hotels and their gardens. Gradually the area was replanted with trees, which today also makes up part of the village arboretum."

He says the large variety of trees has flourished because, though Vernet-les-Bains is in the Pyrenees at 600m altitude, it has a micro-climate as the area is protected by the surrounding mountains.

This means that it is never very cold nor very hot, so that vegetation that would not exist in most mountainous areas can survive here. There are frosts and snow, so tropical plants might not survive, but the area can support a surprising range of plants.

Mr Capela says that no-one ever really noticed or appreciated the richness of the vegetation they were living in until the early 1990s when someone happened to mention the village had a remarkable collection of trees at the meeting of a local association Découvertes.

The members discussed this and contacted the primary school who took on the project for its two older class groups, CM1 and CM2 to go out and identify the trees. Over seven successive years, the children collected seeds, leaves, pieces of bark and made drawings which, with the help of their teachers led them to discover that they were indeed living amongst an extraordinary collection.

An association was created and continued the children's work, and it took them 20 years to classify each tree. In 1996, the town council declared itself a Village Arboretum, a completely new concept.

To earn the label, they decided that the arboretum must be an integral part of the village and that the council would be responsible for the care of the

Nord. Malheureusement, personne n'a jamais noté quand les arbres ont été plantés, d'où ils venaient et qui les a amenés à Vernet-les-Bains.

"En octobre 1940, il y a eu un désastre, lorsque de terribles inondations ont détruit et emporté une partie de la zone des Thermes, de ses hôtels de luxe et de leurs jardins. Peu à peu, la zone a été replantée d'arbres, qui aujourd'hui font également partie de l'arboretum du village".

Selon lui, la grande variété d'arbres a prospéré car, bien que Vernet-les-Bains se trouve dans les Pyrénées à 600 m d'altitude, il bénéficie d'un microclimat car la région est protégée par les montagnes environnantes.

Cela signifie qu'il ne fait jamais très froid ni très chaud, de sorte que la végétation qui n'existerait pas dans la plupart des zones montagneuses peut survivre ici. Il y a des gelées et de la neige, donc les plantes tropicales peuvent ne pas survivre, mais la région peut supporter une gamme surprenante de plantes.

M. Capela dit que personne n'a jamais vraiment remarqué ou apprécié la richesse de la végétation dans laquelle ils vivaient jusqu'au début des années 1990, lorsque quelqu'un a mentionné que le village possédait une remarquable collection d'arbres lors de la réunion d'une association locale Découvertes.

Les membres en ont discuté et ont contacté l'école primaire qui a pris en charge le projet pour que ses deux groupes de classes plus âgées, les CM1 et CM2, aillent identifier les arbres. Pendant sept années successives, les enfants ont collecté des graines, des feuilles, des morceaux d'écorce et ont fait des dessins qui, avec l'aide de leurs professeurs, leur ont fait découvrir qu'ils vivaient effectivement au milieu d'une collection extraordinaire.

Une association a été créée et a poursuivi le travail des enfants, et il leur a fallu 20 ans pour classer chaque arbre. En 1996, le conseil municipal s'est déclaré Village Arboretum, un concept totalement nouveau.

Pour obtenir le label, ils ont décidé que l'arboretum devait faire partie intégrante du village et que le conseil serait responsable de l'entretien des arbres et de leur

trees and their replacement if they died. For a few years, a new tree was planted for every birth in Vernet-les-Bains.

The council now has a team dedicated to looking after the trees, who have gained specialist knowledge in the treatment of exotic species. Luckily there are not many pests or diseases.

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remplacement en cas de décès. Pendant quelques années, un nouvel arbre a été planté pour chaque naissance à Vernet-les-Bains.

La commune dispose maintenant d'une équipe dédiée à l'entretien des arbres, qui a acquis des connaissances spécialisées dans le traitement des espèces exotiques. Heureusement, il n'y a pas beaucoup de parasites ou de maladies.

Chaque arbre a un numéro et il y a des panneaux explicatifs dans le village qui donnent leur nom. Bien que les histoires détaillées de chaque arbre ne soient jamais connues, certains ont développé leurs propres légendes locales.

"Notre magnifique magnolia a une branche très basse qui pend à environ 40 cm du sol. Pendant des années, les enfants se sont assis dessus et ont joué aux chevaux, si bien qu'on l'appelle le l'Arbre Cheval.

"Un hiver, une chute de neige exceptionnellement forte a brisé la branche. La mairie a réussi à le sauver en mettant un support en dessous. Le Tulipier a des feuilles tronquées, et si vous le regardez de dos, nous aimons dire qu'il ressemble à la tête d'un chat.

"Nous avons alors ce que nous appelons l'Arbre à Boxe. C'est le Séquoia massif, dont l'écorce très spongieuse, de 30 cm de profondeur et qui est fantastique pour s'entraîner à la boxe. Il a dû être protégé par une barre autour de lui pour que personne ne puisse plus le faire car il s'abîmait."

L'un des spécimens les plus extraordinaires, qui semble être unique à Vernet-les-Bains, est un Libocedrus decurrens ou cèdre à encens originaire de l'ouest de l'Amérique du Nord. Cet arbre-là a développé des branches tordues et tortueuses et personne ne sait vraiment pourquoi cela s'est produit et ils n'ont jamais trouvé ou entendu parler d'un autre arbre comme lui.

Vous pouvez vous procurer un plan des quatre circuits à l'Office du tourisme. Le circuit Classique est compris entre 1,5 km et 2 km selon le parcours que vous empruntez et il comprend le Séquoia géant, le Tulipier, le Magnolia Grandiflora et le cèdre à encens tordu, ainsi qu'un Ginkgo Biloba ou arbre à poils de vierge originaire de Chine.

In all there are 312 varieties of trees to spot on this walk through the village. There are the same number of trees in the Circuit des Parcs, which is a 1km walk through the public parks. The 1.5km Circuit des Conifers, as it suggests, focuses on the huge variety of conifers and the 1km walk through the Jardin d'Hiver takes place in a park that was created at the end of the 19th century to provide colour for winter visitors.

Some of the trees are in private gardens and have to be looked at from a distance, but most are on public land and in parkland. Mr Capela says it has taught villagers to always take note of the richness that is around them. You can live with an extraordinary collection of plants and never realise it, he says, as they did for years. He is sure there are other places with similar collections, particularly thermal spas like Vernet-les-Bains.

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Au total, il y a 312 variétés d'arbres à découvrir lors de cette promenade dans le village. Il y a le même nombre d'arbres dans le Circuit des Parcs, qui est une promenade d'un kilomètre à travers les parcs publics. Le Circuit des Conifères (1,5 km), comme il le suggère, se concentre sur la grande variété de conifères et la promenade d'un kilomètre à travers le Jardin d'Hiver a lieu dans un parc qui a été créé à la fin du 19e siècle pour donner aux visiteurs en hiver le plaisir de voir un peu de couleur.

Certains des arbres se trouvent dans des jardins privés et doivent être observés à distance, mais la plupart se trouvent sur des terrains publics et dans des parcs. M. Capela dit que cela a appris aux villageois à toujours prendre note de la richesse qui les entoure. On peut vivre avec une collection extraordinaire de plantes sans jamais s'en rendre compte, dit-il, comme cela a été le cas pendant des années. Il est convaincu qu'il existe d'autres endroits avec des collections similaires, notamment des stations thermales comme Vernet-les-Bains.

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