

# PARCOURS USSON

PAYS D'ART ET D'HISTOIRE

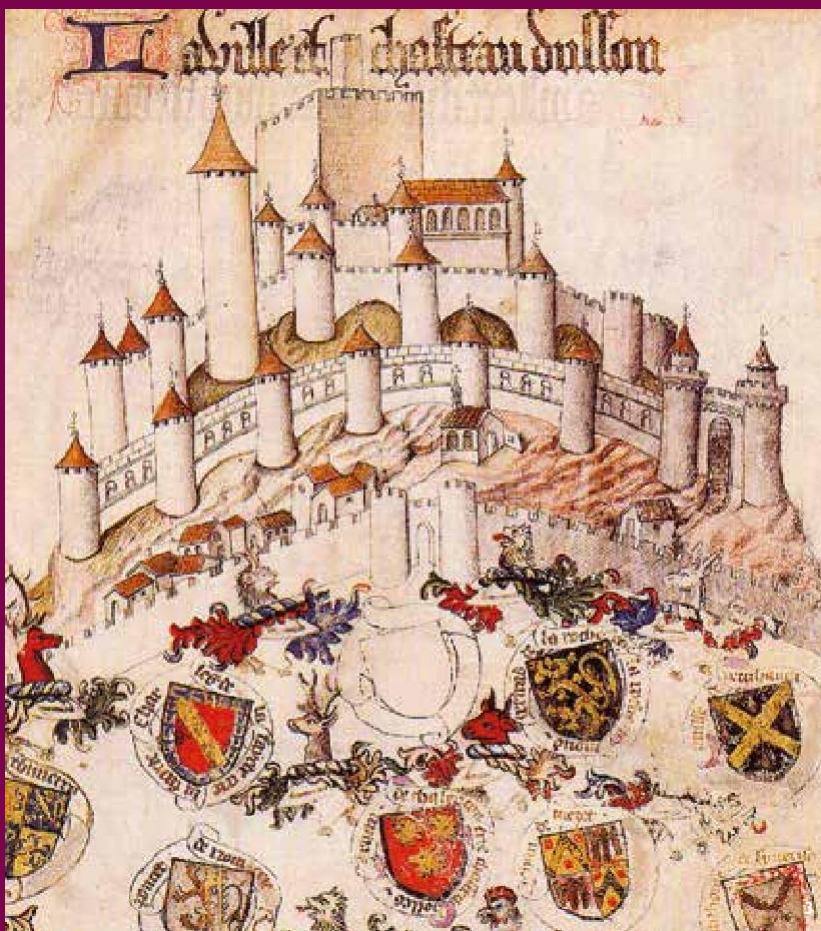
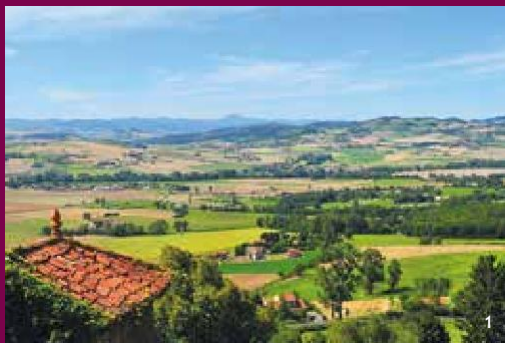
AGGLO PAYS D'ISSOIRE

*ENGLISH VERSION*

AUVERGNE  
RHÔNE-ALPES



VILLES  
& PAYS  
D'ART &  
D'HISTOIRE



1. View under the church, secluded tower and northern panorama
2. The organs of Usson's quarry  
© David Frobert
3. Armorial of Revel, circa 1456  
© BNF/Gallica

Réalisation  
service Patrimoine de  
l'Agglo Pays d'Issoire

Crédits photos  
Agglo Pays d'Issoire

Maquette  
VICE VERSA  
d'après DES SIGNES  
studio Muchir Desclouds  
2015

Impression  
SIC

# HISTORY OF USSON

Clinging to a volcanic peak, the village dominates the Val d'Allier. This privileged position justified the construction of one of the most important castles of Auvergne, represented at the 15<sup>th</sup> century in the Revel\* armorial. Marguerite of Valois, the Queen Margot, resided there from 1586 to 1605, before it was demolished in 1633.

## A PANORAMIC POSITION

Isolated in a loop of the stream "L'Eau Mère", the volcanic mound of Usson culminates at 634 metres, between the granite mounts of the Livradois and Allier valley. The alleys of the village and the summit offer sumptuous panoramic views over the Issoire plain where the river meanders, bordered by its alluvial forest.

On the horizon are the silhouettes of the volcanic massifs of Cantal, Cézallier, of the Monts-Dore and the Dome Mountains. To the north, the forest of the Comté covers the most ancient cluster of volcanoes in Europe, with green, blunt, green eroded reliefs.

## A VOLCANIC NATURE

The Usson Mound is linked to volcanism of the Limagnes of Val d'Allier. It has its origin in a phreatomagmatic eruption\*, 18 Million years ago, when the plain was a vast lacustrine area. Gradually sculpted by erosion, the volcanic edifice dominates by inversion of relief. The ancient lava lake offers a remarkable array of cooling prisms. These can be seen in the old quarry or on the north slope, covered by a layer of scree.

## BUILDING MATERIAL

The Usson stone is a basanite\*. Prismatic blocks was a material of choice for the construction of the castle and village walls, the terraces and the ancient habitat. The walls show long hexagonal blocks, arranged perpendicularly to the slope, forming a honeycombed facing, with internal blocking in sand and lime mortar.

## ONCE UPON A CASTLE ...

The castle of Usson, held by a family of lords of the same name, is mentioned from the 10th century. In 927 the Duke of Aquitaine and Count of Auvergne Acfred, gave to the neighbouring abbey of Sauxillanges properties located in Utiense (Usson), a vineyard in castello (castle), houses and vineyards in Utione (village). The chapel of Saint-Maurice was then part of the parish church of Saint-Germain de Chassagne, situated at the bottom of the south-western slope of the hill, which has now disappeared.

## ...COUNTAL, DUCAL AND ROYAL

The castle belonged from the 12th to the 14th century to the Counts of Auvergne. In 1387, Count Jean II sold it to Duke Jean de Berry, who carried out works there, as in the neighbouring castle of Nonette. Upon his death in 1416, the castle

1. Old postcard. Exit from mass in the 1900s - Coll. Livet
2. Marguerite de Valois - © Le Puy-en-Velay - Musée Crozatier



becomes part of the royal estate. In 1466, Louis XI in donated to Louis from Bourbon-Roussillon. To the end of 15th century, it is defined as "the one of the strongest and lordly places in the kingdom". The motto "Keep the traitor or the tooth" meant that only betrayal or starvation could overcome its resistance. It became royal again in 1507.

### THE TIARA, AN IMPREGNABLE DEFENSE

According to a very symbolic representation in the Revel\* armorial, the castle envelops the top of the hill like a triple crown. It is dominated by a massive Romanesque keep, quadrangular, crenellated and topped by a watchtower. A narrow farmyard bounded by a polygonal enclosure encloses a vast main building. Two crenellated enclosures, flanked by circular towers, stepping up and down the slope. The 3rd enclosure is pierced by cannoniers and opens to the south-west by a monumental gate, flanked by two high towers. A 4th enclosure protects a district of housing.

### MARGOT, FROM HISTORY TO MYTH

Marguerite of Valois (1553-1615) was imprisoned in 1586 at the castle of Usson on the orders of her brother Henri III, during

the political and military turmoil of the Wars of Religion. Daughter of Henri II and Catherine de Medici, she married in 1572 in a political marriage that became famous, Henri of Navarre, leader of the Protestants and then King Henri IV. Her image was long troubled by the Satyric Divorce (1607), an anonymous pamphlet that fed her black legend. Rehabilitated by contemporary historiography, Queen Margot is an unavoidable noble figure of the second half of the 16th century. As early as 1587, she negotiated the conditions of her freedom and regained her status as a châtelaine, with the castle of Usson as part of her dowry. She lived there for 19 years, until her return to Paris in 1605 after the disbanded marriage to Henri IV (1599).

### THE ARK OF SALVATION \*

Trained in Renaissance humanism, Marguerite created a princely court in Usson, frequented by renowned artists and writers, such as Honoré d'Urfé. She wrote Memoirs that inaugurated a successful sustainable genre. It re-establishes its suzerainty over the Auvergne nobility and re-conquers its



3. Porte de France

4. Old postcard - Usson vineyards 1903-1904- Coll. Livet



possessions in the Comté d'Auvergne. Their bequest to the Dauphin, the future Louis XIII, completed the integration of Auvergne into the royal domain upon his death. Legends abound about his stay in Usson and his name still appears in the obits\* read at the beginning of the 20th century at the parish mass. When she left, she gave the poor of Usson the incomes of its lordships of Ybois and Saint-Babel, ceded in 1663 to the Minimes of Usson and then to the General Hospital of Clermont.

### A DEMOLISHED CASTLE

The castle barely survives the departure of Marguerite de Valois. It is awarded for demolition by the Royal Order of 1633 on the destruction of the main fortresses of Auvergne, as part of the affirmation of the monarchical power over the local nobility. There are still a few elements to be discovered along the steep paths, including an imposing block of prisms that can be seen on the upper north slope.

### A FORTIFIED VILLAGE

A late medieval wall protected the village. The north rampart is still clearly legible. This district, represented towards 1450 in the Revel armorial, is gradually abandoned in the 2nd half of the 19th century, as well as a group of dwellings hidden in the vegetation, nestled at the foot of the east side, near the stream Nugère. From the

late Middle Ages onwards, the main village extends to the West and south. It contains several dwellings of vast proportions and bays with carved frames from the 16th-17th centuries.

### THE WINE CIVILIZATION

Vine growing is historical in Lower Auvergne and is concentrated in the Allier valley. It is mentioned many times in the 10th century in the cartulary\* of Sauxillanges. It spreads over the hillsides in the 18th century and 19th centuries before its destruction by phylloxera\* disease, attested in Usson in 1899. The church of Saint-Maurice preserves a statue of the patron saint of winegrowers, Saint VERNY. The winegrower's dwelling is well recognizable by its compact foundation and its porch providing access to the cellar and the vatting house. The traditional facades, with their coloured rendering, have inspired some superb contemporary restorations, topped with Romanesque tile roofs with a low pitch on Genoese\*.



1. The Captains' house - © M-H. Sauvadet



2. Saint-Maurice Church

3. The church - Canopy of Saint Radegonde and Saint Maurice, 19<sup>e</sup> century - Atelier Chatain



3

## GLOSSARY

**Armorial de Revel** : illustrated manuscript, collection of coats of arms of the noble lineages of Auvergne, Bourbonnais and Forez composed by Guillaume Revel around 1456 "in memory and remembrance" of Charles I, Duke of Bourbon.

**Phreatomagmatic** : type of volcanism defined by the explosive meeting of magma and water underground or on the surface.

**Basanite** : grey-black volcanic rock, the composition is close to that of basalt.

**Apparatus** : in architecture, a term relating to the way stones are assembled in masonry.

**Arch of Salvation** : expression used by Marguerite de Valois to designate her long stay in Usson.

**Obit** : Mass celebrated for a deceased person on the anniversary of his or her death.

**Cartulaire** : collection of acts attesting to the properties of a religious community.

**Phylloxera** : an insect that causes a disease of the vine that attacks and destroys the roots.

**Génoise** : rows of superimposed canal tiles creating a roof overhang to protect the facade rendering of the water flow.

**Crank** : name probably derived from "Galileo" to designate the porch of a church.

# FROM ONE PLACE TO ANOTHER

## DISCOVERY-ROUTE

### **D** DEPARTURE

Visitor parking.

### **1** CULTURAL SPACE & TOURIST RECEPTION

Tourist information, art exhibitions, scenography on the history of the village.

### **2** QUEEN MARGOT FOUNTAIN

The main source of the village, fed by an underground gallery that channels the water to the fountain. The water was then distributed, in down below, to the watering hole and then to the wash-house. Carved blazon with the arms of the city "Azure with the door or accompanied in chief by two stars".

### **3** CAPTAIN'S OR GUARD'S HOUSE (PRIVATE)

Vast group of buildings organized at the rear on two courtyards, around a high central body. Street facades with cross-bays or transoms from the late Middle Ages or more recent. Portal with impost and sculpted entablature, adorned with the coat of arms of the Matharel family, a family of Italian origin, established in Auvergne around 1385. In 1464, Étienne de Matharel ran a hotel in the "Porte Fontaine" district. Antoine de Matharel was captain-châtelain for the king of the castellany of Usson at the end of the 16th century.

You can observe the building materials and their differentiated use. The houses are built with prismatic blocks from the basalt organs overlooking the village, while the frames of

the openings are carved from granite rocks or from a softer stone, arkose, a variety of sandstone from local quarries. Dark or light, these tones are enhanced by the vermilion of the genoises\* or brick cornices lining the roofs with canal tiles.

### **4** OLD HOUSES

This district preserves several buildings and architectural details from the end of the 16th and 17th centuries: tower staircase, bays with sculpted frames, basket-handle arches, walled bay, brackets, etc.

### **5** BELL TOWER STOOP

View on an old tower of the village walls. Panorama of the Issoire plain, the western mountains and the Comté volcanoes to the north. Gothic framed door. Reading table on volcanism.

### **6** SAINT-MAURICE CHURCH

The present church is a complex building built in the 12th century reworked and enlarged in the late Middle Ages, in the 16th century and in the 18th-19th centuries. Roof restored in 2008. Enjoy, from the outside, the architecture of the so-called Queen's Chapel, with its rectangular plan and two corner buttresses. The tower of the bell tower, rebuilt in modern times, is supported by the vaulted passage. Crank porch\* from the

1. Church, Matharel Chapel - Saint Blaise
2. Church, Resurrection of Lazarus, detail



16th century covered with a cross of warheads with hanging key and shield. Gothic portal with painted decoration.

Inside, the nave opens through arcades on ribs and a flat chevet choir lit by a Gothic bay. It is preceded by a Romanesque cross-braced span with deformed arches, resting on capitals and carvings decorated with palmettes, interlacing, grimacing masks, scrolls and Greek motifs. The choir is lined with chapels which ribbed vaults rest on bases carved with faces. To the north, the funeral chapel of Matharel family. South-Western chapel with keystone vault armed with the lords of Boisrigaud, manor house located below the village.

The present sacristy is a 16th century chapel which communicates with the church through a large bay and a door of which the inscription relates its restoration by the Viscount of Matharel in the 19th century. It is covered by a four-part vault of ribs, in the flamboyant gothic style. The central key is decorated with the letters MV, monogram of the Virgin or, according to tradition, of Marguerite de Valois. The painted decoration of the 19th century, of medieval inspiration, is an abundant repertoire of motifs, friezes, false walls, foliage, flowers, underlining the architecture. It covers anterior mural paintings.

## THE FURNITURE

**South entrance :** Wooden Christ, 15th century-16th centuries.

**South-west chapel:** Octagonal tabernacle in painted wood (1620) in Renaissance style with colonnades and depictions of Saint Verno, Saint Roch, Saint Radegonde and Saint Maurice. Equestrian statues of Saint Maurice, 16th century and 19th century. 17th century reliquary busts.

**Nave :** Baptismal font with two stone vats, lid with wrought iron spikes.

**North side:** Liturgical cupboard with walnut leaf and green lock. Door with a 15th century bolt

**North-facing chapel :** Statues of Saint Roch and Saint Verno, patron saint of winegrowers (19th century).

**North-facing funerary chapel :** Altar tier, tabernacle and wainscoting with decoration Carved wooden rock garden of the 18th-19th centuries. Matharel and Montgolfier weaponry and coats of arms. Funerary slabs. Statue of Saint Blaise from the 16th century.

**Chapel known as the Chapel of the Queen :** Painted panel of The Resurrection of Lazarus (15th century), possible commission from Louis Bâtard de Bourbon. On a landscape with an animated relief of a church and fortifications, ten characters frame Christ and Lazarus surrounded by Peter and John. On the left the donor in the sober garment is praying. The identification of the two feminine figures is still uncertain : sisters of Lazarus or donors? The chromatic palette and the attitude





3. Virgin and Usson summit - © David-Frobert

4. View on the roofs of Usson from the rue de l'Eglise - © J-C Millot



the actors of the scene are full of contrasts and intrigue.

Wooden painting of The Crucifixion (1518) by the Bernese painter Niklaus Manuel dit Deutsch (1484-1530). Probable acquisition by Louis d'Augerand de Boisrigaud, the king's ambassador to Switzerland in the 16th century. A major work of the Renaissance in Bern, the dramatic staging of which, around the central figures of Christ and Mary Magdalene, creates a symbolic partition between good and evil. At the feet of Christ and the two thieves, two holy women, Mary supported by St John and Mary Magdalene, bent in pain. To the right are soldiers and witnesses to the scene.

### 7 WAR MEMORIALS 1914-1918

Stone obelisk on square pedestal and Usson stone base (1922). Decorated with the town's coat of arms. Memorial plaques engraved with the names of the 21 victims of the two world wars, surmounted by an antique trophy and a war cross. Enamelled lava plaque with portraits of ten of the town heroes "Dead for France".

### 8 MOUND TOP : Site of the old castle (634 m), monument to the Virgin (1893-1914)

The pedestal rests on fallen masonry from the old Romanesque keep. Cast iron statue of 6.27 m, cast in Tusey (Meuse). Pilgrimage on the last Sunday of May. Small oratory, ex-votos. Exceptional 360° panoramic view, orientation and landscape reading tables.

### 9 BASALT ORGANS

This vertiginous colonnade of volcanic prisms is the result of the slow cooling process of the lava, which contracts and evolves into rock. The long and regular hexagonal prisms, called organs, were brought to light by the exploitation of a quarry. Towards the top, the bases of the walls of the old castle can be seen.

### 10 OLD EAST DISTRICT

On either side of the path between the trees, ruins of an old district, dominated by low terrace walls, still inhabited around 1829 according to Napoleon's land registry.

### 11 PLACE DE LA NUGÈRE

Spring, well and cross. Continuing by the rue du Bourgealat, view of a winegrower's house with a large outside porch covered with a canopy (left).


### 12 NORTHEASTERN RAMPARTS

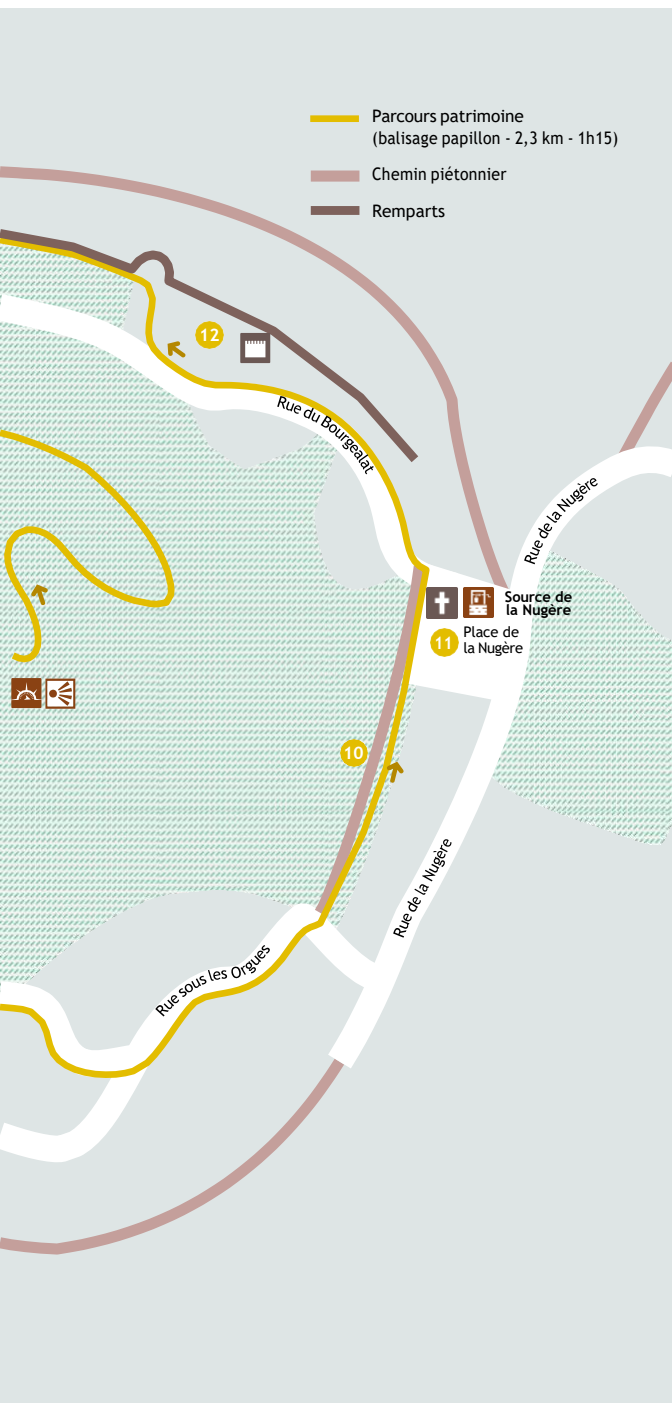
This area retains important remnants of the walled enclosure and adjoining houses, with circular tower base dated from the late Middle Ages. Panorama on Sauxillanges, the mountains of the Livradois and the volcanoes of the Shire.




### 13 PORTE DE FRANCE, NORTH DISTRICT

Crossbar window in the rampart. The current Porte de France is a construction late which succeeds an old door represented on the armorial of Revel.




 Départ des sentiers de découverte  
 « La Salamandre »  
 (1,1 km - 0 h 30 + A/R  
 sommet de la butte  
 0,6 km - 0 h 20),  
 «Géologie, volcanisme  
 et paysages » (2,4 km  
 - 1 h 45) et du chemin  
 de randonnée  
 « Sur les pas de  
 la reine Margot »  
 (balisage vert -  
 12 km - 4 h).

















-  Parcours patrimoine (balisage papillon - 2,3 km - 1h15)
-  Chemin piétonnier
-  Remparts

## USSON

- 1 Tourist Office
- 2 Queen Margot Fountain
- 3 Captain's or Guard's House (private)
- 4 Old houses
- 5 Bell tower stoop
- 6 Saint-Maurice Church
- 7 War memorials 1914-1918
- 8 Mound top
- 9 Basalt organs
- 10 Old east district
- 11 Place de la Nugère
- 12 Northeastern ramparts
- 13 Porte de France, North District

## KEY

-  Food service
-  Picnic area
-  Temporary exhibition
-  Viewpoint
-  Fountain, spring, well
-  Orientation table
-  Old ramparts
-  Cross
-  Belvedere
-  Old wash-house
-  Town Hall
-  Information
-  Car park
-  Toilets and water point

## CONTACTS

- **Usson Town Hall**  
(church visit from May to September).  
12 rue de la Mairie - 63490 Usson  
04 73 71 05 90  
mairie-usson@wanadoo.fr  
**Art exhibition**  
expositions-usson@orange.fr
- **Usson Tourist Office** (April to September) :  
Place de la reine Margot - 63490 Usson  
04 73 96 08 97  
bt.usson@capissoire.fr
- **Pays d'Issoire Tourist Office** :  
9 place Saint-Paul - 63500 Issoire  
04 73 89 15 90  
tourisme@capissoire.fr  
issoire-tourisme.com
- **Land of Art and History** :  
Culture and Heritage Department  
Agglo Pays d'Issoire  
04 73 55 58 50  
patrimoine@capissoire.fr

# « Of this belvedere, we had underfoot the cascade of roofs, the raid on the vineyards... The view was long over the kingdom of the mountains »

Henri Pourrat, *En Auvergne, Les Limagnes*, 1952.

Listen closely to the history of the Pays d'art et d'histoire of the Pays d'Issoire...

... with a guide accredited by the Ministry of Culture and Communication. The guide welcomes you. He knows all the aspects of the Land of Art and History of the Pays d'Issoire and gives you the keys to understand the scale of the landscape, the history of the land through its towns and villages. The guide is at your disposal. Do not hesitate to ask him any questions you may have

If you are in group, the Land of Art and History of the Pays d'Issoire offers you visits all year upon reservation. Brochures are available on demand.

## The Heritage Department

It coordinates the initiatives of the Pays d'Issoire. All year round, it offers activities for the local population and for schoolchildren. We are at your disposal for any project.

Contact Information Land of Art and History of the Agglo Pays d'Issoire :  
Service Culture et Patrimoine  
63500 Issoire  
04 73 55 58 50  
capissoire.fr  
patrimoine@capissoire.fr

Pays d'Issoire  
Tourist Office  
Saint-Paul Place  
63500 Issoire  
04 73 89 15 90  
issoire-tourisme.com  
info@issoire-tourisme.com

The Land of Art and History of the Agglo Pays d'Issoire is part of the national network of Cities and Lands of Art and History :

The Ministry of Culture and Communication, Director of Architecture and Heritage, assigns the designation and Town Lands of Art and History to local authorities that promote their heritage. It guarantees the competence of tour guides and heritage hosts and the quality of their actions. From ancient vestiges to the architecture of the 20th century, cities and lands present the heritage in its diversity. Today, a network of 184 towns and cities offers you their know-how throughout France.

## Nearby

The towns and Lands of Art and History of Moulins, Riom, Billom Community, Saint-Flour, the Haut-Allier and the Puy-en-Velay.

