

The Vézelay route

Arno Cuppen

Introducing the Arles Route, the Confraternity's website encourages visitors "to try alternatives, even for a first pilgrimage, to the increasingly overcrowded Le Puy route". The same is true for the other main routes through France, from Vézelay and Paris, both also roads less travelled. This article offers an introduction to the Vézelay Route to Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port. At the request of the editor, particular attention is paid to the historical aspects.

The historical route

The focus on history fits the French name of this route: La Voie Historique de Vézelay. However, this route has existed only since 2000 and is an initiative of Monique Chassain. She based the route as much as possible on historical sources, hence its name. It was a huge project. The route is more than 900 kilometres, not counting an extra 300 kilometres of variants. Pilgrim accommodation was established and a pilgrim office opened in Vézelay. These initiatives of Mme Chassain had been adopted by five regional Associations of Saint James some years before her death in 2017.

Codex Calixtinus

One of the sources she consulted was the Codex Calixtinus. The Codex, named after pope Calixtus II, dates from the 12th century and is one of the oldest books about the Camino de Santiago. The final part is a travel guide for pilgrims. It describes the four main routes through France and the route through Spain.



Map of route from Vézelay

Relatively few places in France are mentioned. In the chapter about the shrines to be visited by pilgrims, the Codex lists only three saints on the Vézelay route: Saint Mary Magdalene (Vézelay), Saint Leonard (Saint-Léonard-de-Noblat) and Saint Fronto (Pèrigueux). On the Le Puy route only one shrine is mentioned, that of Saint Foy (Conques).

The Codex was written in a period of great economic, spiritual and cultural upswing, in which, for example, Gothic architecture developed.

On their way to Santiago, pilgrims must have seen many churches, abbeys, and other buildings under construction. The Codex is said to have been written by the French monk Aymeric Picaud, supposedly in Asquins, at the foot of the Vézelay hill...

UNESCO World Heritage Sites

The church of Asquins, named after Saint James the Greater, has been a World Heritage Site since 1998, as part of the Route of Santiago de Compostela in France. Along the Vézelay Route ten sites are included, mainly churches. The Vézelay basilica and hill (1979) and Bourges cathedral (1992) had already been selected as World Heritage Sites in their own right.

The UNESCO focus on churches is logical, since this is a pilgrim route. But along it there are more historical themes to be discovered, such as the Hundred Years War. For example: shortly after Limoges, the route passes the castle of Chalus-Chabrol, where King Richard Lionheart died in 1199 while besieging it, and shortly after Saint-Ferme, a variant passes the bastide of Monséguer.

This fortified town was built in 1265 by Eleanor of Provence, Queen consort of England, who in doing so copied French examples of a successful settlement policy. Moreover, the route does not offer spiritual places in only the Christian tradition. For instance, near Saint-Ferme, only 7 km off the route, is Plum Village, Europe's largest Buddhist monastery.

Vézelay

In the 9th century a Benedictine abbey was built on the hill of Vézelay. According to legend, in the 10th century relics of Maria Magdalene were brought here. In 1058 Pope Stephen IX confirmed their authenticity, leading to an influx of pilgrims and the construction of the basilica, consecrated in 1104. So this masterpiece of Romanesque architecture is built on a mystery. That is sometimes beautifully symbolised, when the hill is shrouded in fog and the basilica seems to float.

This is not the only mystery in Vézelay. The overwhelming tympanum and beautiful capitals tell intriguing stories, going back not only to the Bible but also to other ancient sources. A few days a year, around the summer solstice, the narthex and priest's choir are joined by a path of light along the floor from the precisely positioned windows above. Six months later, around the winter solstice, the capitals are highlighted in the same way. Thus, the basilica invites pilgrims to "go to the light".

Before setting out, make time to visit the Maison du Visiteur, halfway down the main street, which tells the fascinating story of this basilica: discover how the universe and the Christian faith were represented in stone many centuries ago.



View of Vézelay

Two variants

Leaving Vézelay the route splits into two variants, via Bourges and Nevers. They meet again after almost 300 kilometres, in the village of Gargilesse.

Places of historical interest along the Bourges variant are the Benedictine priory of Notre-Dame (UNESCO) at La Charité-sur-Loire, built in the 11th century; the cathedral of Saint-

Étienne (UNESCO) at Bourges, built mainly in the 13th century as a replacement for a mid-11th-century structure; and the former Benedictine abbey of Notre-Dame at Déols, built in the 10th century. One of the largest Romanesque churches in France, it is now mainly in ruins.

Along the Nevers variant are the cathedral of Saint Cyricus and Saint Julitta at Nevers, rebuilt in the 13th century after a fire; . Since 1925 the body of Saint Bernadette of Lourdes reposes in the former Saint Gildard Convent, and is now a pilgrimage site in its own right; the cathedral of Saint Stephen (UNESCO) at Neuvy-Saint-Sépulchre, built in the 12th century, with a remarkable, circular ground plan.

The Confraternity's website contains a useful comparison of the variants in terms of landscape and the onward route.

To Saint Leonard

Around 65 kilometres after Gargilesse is Bénévent-l'Abbaye, named after its abbey, built in the 11th century. The Codex mentions as the next destination the tomb of Saint Leonard of Noblac (died 559), who with "his powerful goodness led countless thousands of captives from prison". In the 12th century his cult spread throughout Western Europe following the release in 1102 of Bohemond, a charismatic leader of the First Crusade, from a Turkish prison. The collegiate church of Saint Leonard (UNESCO), built in the 11th century, contains the saint's grave. The Codex refers to him as "sanctum

Leonardum Lemovicensem" (Saint Leonard of Limousin), hence the Latin name of this route: Via Lemovicensis.

To Périgueux

When the Codex was written, the Benedictine abbey of Saint Martial of Limoges, 22 km after Saint-Léonard, was an important spiritual, cultural and scientific centre. After the French Revolution, the building was gradually dismantled. The crypt was rediscovered in 1960.

The next destination, according to the Codex, is "the remains of Saint Fronto, bishop and confessor, at the city of Périgueux". The cathedral named after him was rebuilt in the 19th century. Only the bell tower and crypts, both from the 12th century, were left from previous structures. However important Saint Fronto may have been at the time of the Codex, nowadays very little is known about him.

In 1575, during the Wars of Religion, the cathedral was plundered and his relics thrown into the Dordogne. At Chancelade (shortly after Périgueux) is the abbey of Notre-Dame, founded in the 12th century, rebuilt in the 17th and partially destroyed during the Revolution. Today it is in use again.

To Ostabat

From Périgueux you can choose a slightly longer variant via Bergerac to Sainte-Foye-la-Grande. Places of historical interest after Sainte-Foye are Saint-Ferme, with a former abbey built in the 11th and 13th centuries to welcome pilgrims; La Réole, a fortified town on the Garonne, around a former priory, founded in 977; Bazas, with the cathedral of Saint John the Baptist (UNESCO) which dates mainly from the 13th-14th centuries

and was built on the model of the great Gothic cathedrals of northern France; and at Saint-Sever there is a 12th century Romanesque church (UNESCO) which once belonged to a Benedictine abbey founded in the 10th century.

The Codex Calixtinus mentions that the routes from Le Puy, Vézelay and Paris meet in Ostabat. The meeting point is today marked by the Cross of Gibraltar, a disk-shaped stele, 7 km before Ostabat. From here on there is no more tranquil silence: the route quickly becomes busier and busier.

By the way

Of course, history is not only about saints, royals and enormous buildings. More often it consists of small stories, ordinary people and simple details, for those willing to see them. Sometimes it is just at your feet, as in the region south of Vézelay, once an ocean on the shores of the Morvan.

Along the way you can find shells and ammonites fossils. The shells are like the famous pilgrim's scallops on the shores of Galicia. The ammonites recall the spiral forms on the robe of Jesus on the tympanum of Vézelay.

Another thing to see is the beautiful little 12th-century church of Magdeleine, opposite a former pilgrims' hospital run by the Knights Hospitalier.

Having come from Mary Magdalene on "the eternal hill" of Vézelay to Mary Magdalene at the foot of the Pyrenees, our journey is almost over. It is only another 1.5

km to the city gate of Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port, named after "our" saint, Porte Saint-Jacques (UNESCO). It is the logical end of this "historical route".

“Since 1925 the body of Saint Bernadette of Lourdes reposes in the former Saint Gildard Convent”

Or perhaps not? The Codex names Saint-Jean only once, just in passing. However, Saint-Michel is mentioned three times as the most important place from which pilgrims crossed the Pyrenees. A brief look at the history of Saint-Jean explains why. It was founded in the 12th century. Apparently it was already known when the Codex was written,

but only later it would take over the role of Saint-Michel, now a small village.

Looking back

The Confraternity's website concludes: "This is a demanding route... in the context of a relatively deserted rural environment". Yes, this route lures you out of your comfort zone, but isn't that an essential part of becoming a pilgrim? A pilgrim who walked the Vézelay route last year concluded: "The encounters with the local residents were heart-warming... Every 10-15 kilometres (on average) there was an affordable place to sleep ... For me, it was the ultimate journey for tranquillity and reflection, far away from the hustle and bustle of everyday life".

Arno Cuppen is a member of the working group of the Dutch Association of Saint James which produces guides to the Vézelay Route. During the season he and his wife run a pilgrims' hostel called L'Esprit du Chemin in Anthien, 25 km from Vézelay on the variant via Nevers.