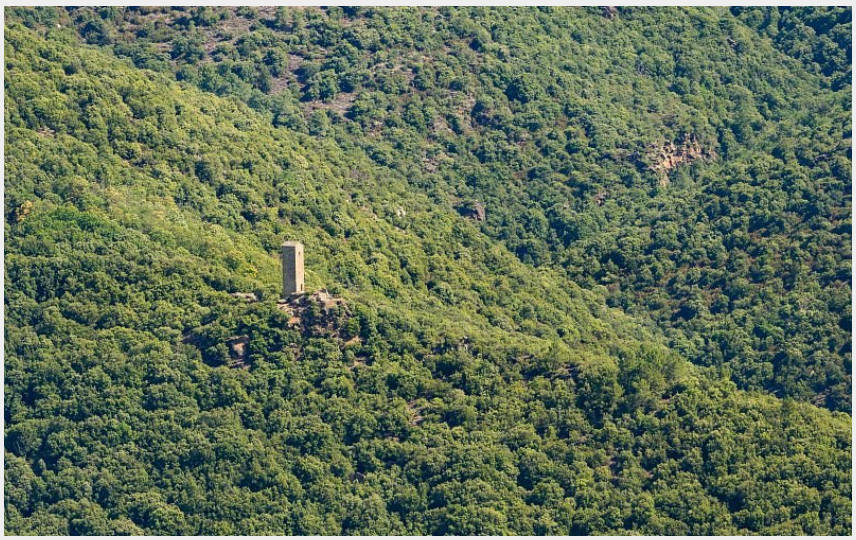
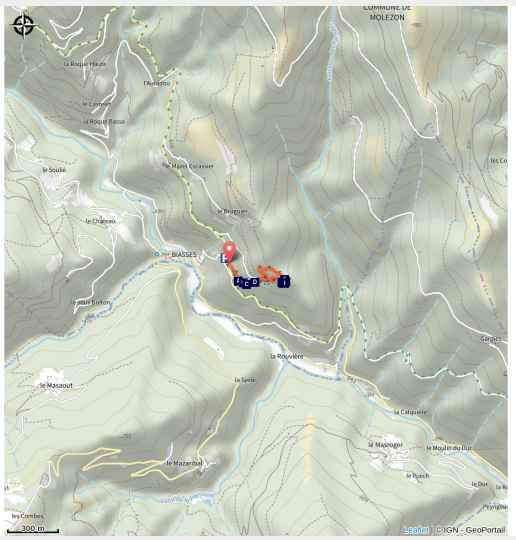
The Tour du Canourgue

Vallées cévenoles - Molezon



(© A.Bouissou/TERRA)



This trail takes you in the footsteps of the lords of the Tour du Canourgue through the remains of a fortified hamlet, where history and architecture mingle.

Archaeological excavations carried out at the Tour du Canourgue have shown that it was the keep of a château, which was probably abandoned in the late 14th or early 15th century. A whole set of buildings once backed onto the keep outside the fortifications. Their ruins are today covered by vegetation. Mediaeval castra were built for both prestige and defensive purposes. Did Le Canourgue castrum ever have to defend itself? For two centuries, scholars have evoked the existence of a network of “signalling towers” designed to keep locals safe. Was that Le Canourgue's purpose?

Useful information

Practice : Discovery trails

Duration : 1 h 30

Length : 1.1 km

Trek ascent : 118 m

Difficulty : Easy

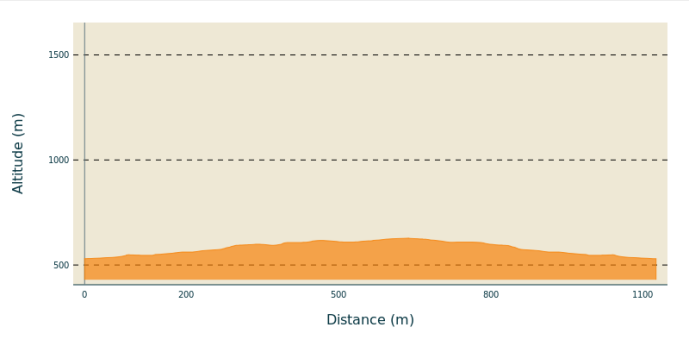
Type : Loop

Themes : Architecture and village

Trek

Departure : On the D 983 road between Barre-des-Cévennes and Pont-Ravagers (Molezon)
Arrival : On the D 983 road between Barre-des-Cévennes and Pont-Ravagers (Molezon)
Markings : découverte PNC
Cities : 1. Molezon

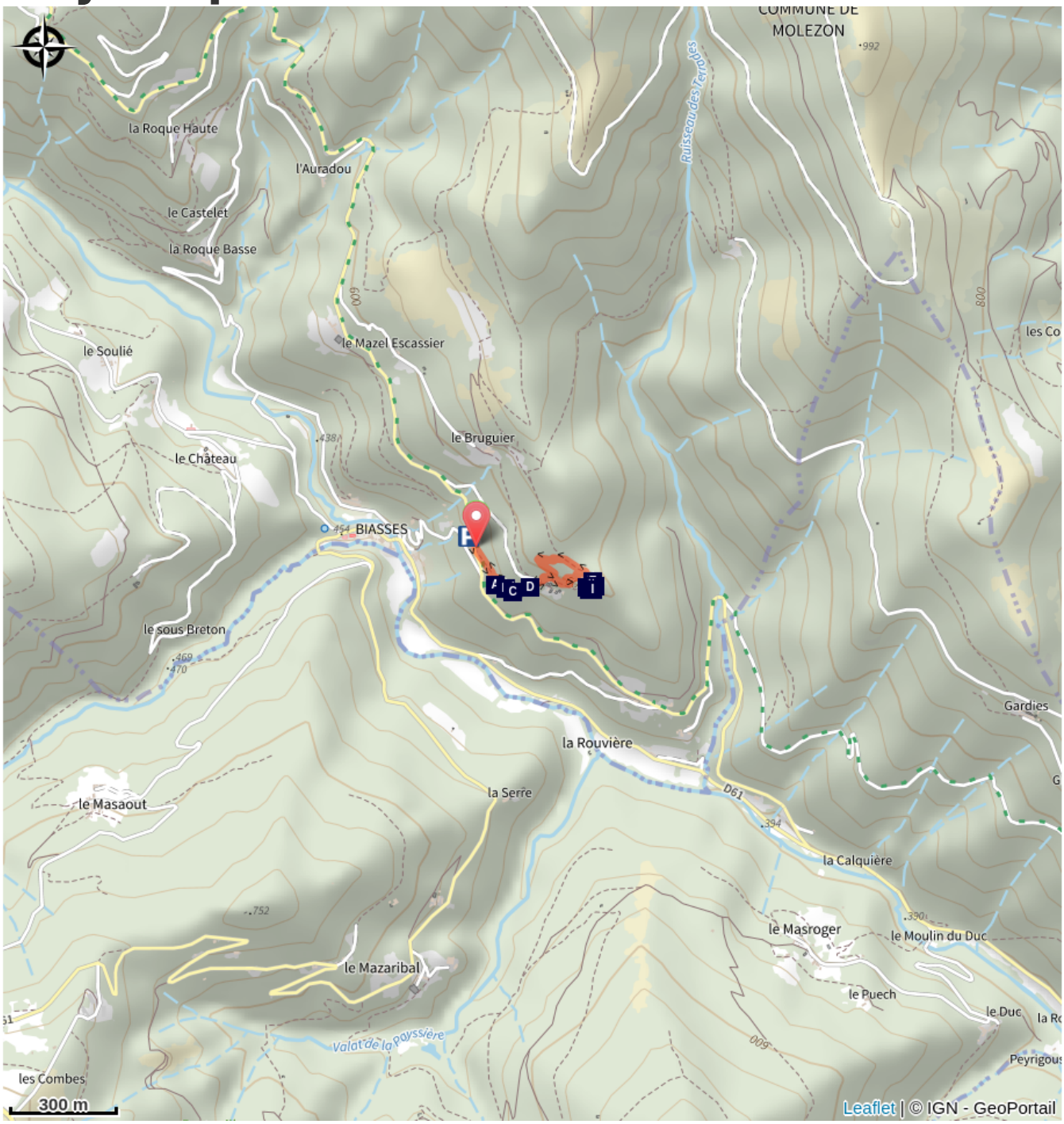
Altimetric profile



Min elevation 530 m Max elevation 628 m

The trail passes through a grove of holm oaks before offering you several panoramic viewpoints over the Vallée Française. It then winds uphill through a ruined hamlet to the rocky spur on which stands the keep of Le Canourgue castrum (late 12th or early 13th century). After the defensive ditch, the path follows in the traces of disappeared buildings... Maps and illustrated scenes of mediaeval life have been reproduced inside the keep.

On your path...



- The scenery (A)
- The Vallée Française (B)
- A glimpse of the Tour du Canourgue (C)
- Holm oak or chestnut (D)
- Dating the site (E)
- An oven (F)
- Defending and asserting one's authority (G)
- Income from land and redevances (H)
- The signal-tower hypothesis (I)
- The tower's architecture (J)

All useful information

Is in the midst of the park

The national park is an unrestricted natural area but subjected to regulations which must be known by all visitors.

Advices

Steep path with sections that are slippery when wet. Be sure to hold children by the hand.
Going all the way around the tower is dangerous. After Marker 10, it is advisable to retrace your steps to reach Marker 11.
Horse-riding or mountain-biking are not allowed on or adapted to discovery trails.

How to come ?

Access

On the D 993 between Pont-Ravagers et Barre-des-Cévennes

Advised parking

On either side of the D 983

Information desks

Information center Le Pompidou
La poste, 48400 Le Pompidou

cipnc@orange.fr
Tel : 04 66 60 31 26

Tourism'house and national Parc at Florac
Place de l'ancienne gare, N106, 48400 Florac-trois-rivières

info@cevennes-parcnational.fr
Tel : 04 66 45 01 14
https://www.cevennes-gorges-du-tarn.com

Source

Parc national des Cévennes

http://www.cevennes-parcnational.fr/

On your path...

The scenery (A)

From this vantage point you can discover the uppermost part of the Vallée Française, notably the temple (Protestant church) at Molezon and the tower of Biasses on the valley floor. In the west, the horizon is foreshortened by a limestone plateau: the Can de l’Hospitalet. This represents one of the furthest reaches of the ocean in the Mesozoic period, when it largely covered the old schist massif of the Cévennes.

Attribution : © Sandrine Forge

The Vallée Française (B)

The Vallée Française, originally known as the Val Francesque, is the middle valley in a system of three parallel Cévenol valleys (incl. Vallée Longue to the north-east and Vallée Borgne to the south). Legend has it that under the command of Roland, one of Charlemagne’s valiant knights, the valley fought off the Saracen invasion and remained Frankish. Other hypotheses refer to a valley that was franche, meaning exempt from certain taxes. However, it is more likely that the Vallée Française was a Frankish foothold in Visigoth southern France (5th and 6th centuries) during the times of division that followed the fall of the Roman Empire under the pressure of the so-called “Barbarian” tribes.

Attribution : © Guy Grégoire

A glimpse of the Tour du Canourgue (C)

Architectural deterioration caused by the wear and tear of time as much as by removal of stones almost vanquished this impressive monument, which has stood for centuries at the point of a rocky promontory. The conservation efforts of several Cévennes-loving volunteers kept the tower standing in the 1960s, but without saving it for good. The Cévennes National Park bought it in 1990 with the aim of turning it into one of the components of the Cévenne Eco-Museum, and fully restored it the following year. The holm oaks growing near this point partially hide a set of terraces that bear witness to farming in days gone by.

Attribution : © Sandrine Forge

Holm oak or chestnut (D)

As you walk uphill towards Le Canourgue Tower, you will see the distinct asymmetry between the two slopes and its effect on vegetation and farming. On the south-west slope, which is drier, rocky and steep, holm oak dominates. On the other side of the valley, the exposure to the north-east (and therefore lower temperatures) and the gentler gradient are accompanied by deeper soils, which favours chestnut trees.

Attribution : nathalie.thomas

Dating the site (E)

The oldest records mentioning the Château du Canourgue date from 1219, but it is probably older. Throughout the 13th century, it was a fief of Raymond d’Anduze, then of Raymond de Barre. It then became a joint property of the King of France and the Bishop of Mende. Archaeological excavations have not been able to pinpoint exactly when it was built, but do show that it was abandoned in the late 14th or early 15th century, based on fragments of kitchenware discovered here (jugs and cooking pots from St-Quentin-la-Poterie, near Uzès).

An oven (F)

At the valley-end of the staircase was a partially overhanging building. On the ground, at a hollowed-out spot, is a sandstone millstone wedged into place on its base by small upright schist slabs. It was probably re-used as an oven floor, but research has not shown what kind of oven – for bread or other purposes.

Defending and asserting one's authority (G)

There was a square building here that controlled access to the tower. Between the staircase and the entrance into the tower, staggered walls and a narrow corridor intersected by doors reinforced the keep’s defences. Its defensive capacity should not be over-estimated. Ten or so armed people could surely capture it. Though it was a fortification, above all it enabled the lords who owned it to project their authority symbolically. But this was also a residence of local seigneurs. Although there is no precise information about the Tour du Canourgue, by comparison with similar buildings one can estimate that 20 to 30 people lived in it.

Income from land and redevances (H)

The lords of Le Canourgue had to live on the income from their lands, meaning the rents paid, especially in kind, by the peasants who farmed the estate's lands: sweet chestnuts or rye (grown underneath the chestnut trees), nuts and fruit (walnuts, plums, etc.), wine (not much) and meat products (essentially pork). Once a year, on a fixed date, the peasants living in the valley’s various mas or farms came to bring the rent they owed. Some farmed the terraced crop land near the castle and lived (among other professions) in the village built at its feet.

The signal-tower hypothesis (I)

The Tour du Canourgue is sometimes described as a “signal tower” similar to the towers near the coast, which allowed locals to watch out for the “Barbary corsairs”, and to communicate using fire. Such a system would have required joint organisation and solidarity between the local lords. This was not exactly the most common scenario in the Cévennes from the 11th to the 14th centuries, when alliances, counter-alliances and conflicts followed one another. The Tour du Canourgue may have been used for sending signals – though no records have so far been found to support this theory – but that was patently not its primary function.

The tower's architecture (J)

On the facade, besides arrow-slits and one window, are two times two holes. This was probably where a wooden gallery (hoarding) was built on corbels to overhang the access. Inside, on the first floor, the dimensions of the openings suggest that this was a living space despite its small size. On the top floor, the edge of the vault is embellished with a decorative cornice, an exact replica of the one in the keep at Garde-Guérin (north of Villefort). The double-sloped roof is the most common type for this kind of building. In the late 19th century (Romanticism), it was fashionable to add terraces and battlements when restoring towers.