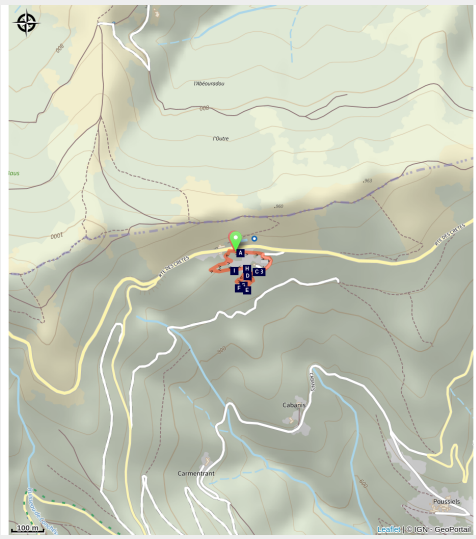
This path has rocky and vertiginous sections. For your own safety, you must stay on the waymarked path.

Mont Lozère - Ventalon en Cévennes

Châtaignes (© B. Daversin)



The revival of the Cévennes chestnut orchard on traditional terraces.

Having been abandoned for over a century, the chestnut grove at L'Espinas is today being restored. The association Épi de Main raises awareness of modern chestnut farming and of the preservation of chestnut orchards in the Cévennes. This short walk of 11 stages shines a light on the past and examines the future of this emblematic local tree.

Useful information

Practice : Discovery trails

Duration : 1 h 30

Length : 0.8 km

Trek ascent : 51 m

Difficulty : Very easy

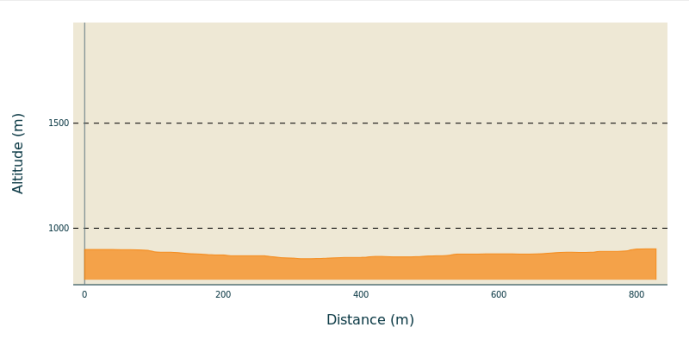
Type : Loop

Themes : Agriculture and livestock farming, History and culture

Trek

Departure : Relais de L'Espinas
Arrival : Relais de l'Espinas
Cities : 1. Ventalon en Cévennes

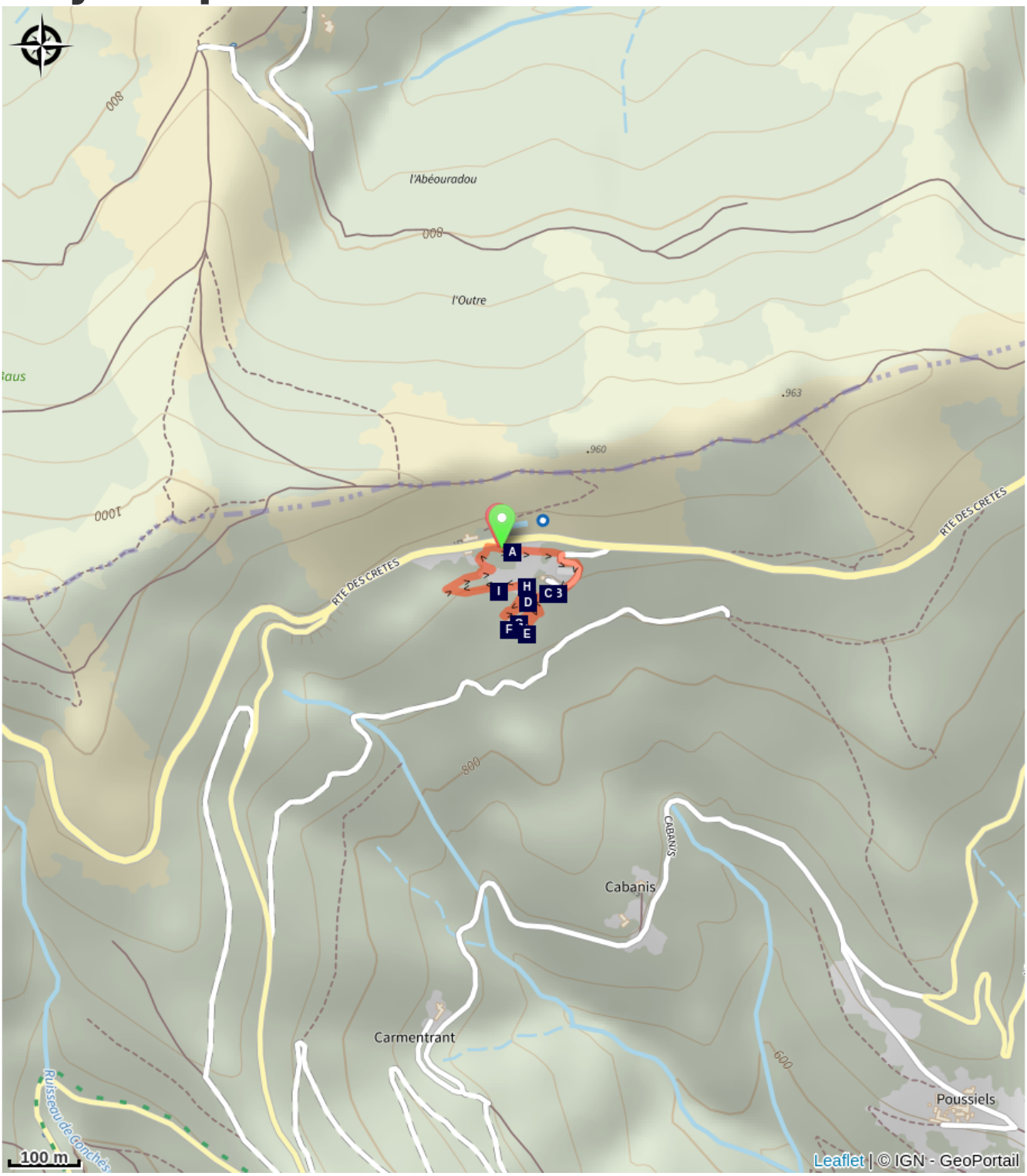
Altimetric profile



Min elevation 855 m Max elevation 902 m

The path enters the chestnut orchard below the Relais de L'Espinas before crossing the traditional terraces and overlapping with the path dedicated to dry-stoning.

On your path…



Some reference points (A)
What to do with chestnuts (C)
Designing a chestnut orchard (E)
Long live diversity! (G)
Sculpted landscape (I)
The chestnut in the Cévennes (B)
A lengthy restoration project (D)
Dead wood, living space (F)
Marked for life (H)
Versatile and resilient (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

A guide leaflet is available at the Espinas relay.

How to come ?

Access

D 35 between the Col de la Croix de Bertel pass (Saint-Maurice-de-Ventalon) and the Col de Banette pass (Vialas).

Advised parking

Car park for the Relais de L'Espinas (100m on foot).

Information desks

Tourism'house and national parc, Génolhac
Place du Colombier, 30450 Génolhac
contact@cevennes-tourisme.fr
Tel : 04 66 61 09 48
http://www.cevennes-tourisme.fr/

Tourism office Des Cévennes au mont-Lozère, Vialas
info@cevennes-montlozere.com
Tel : 04 66 45 81 94
https://www.cevennes-montlozere.com/

Source

Epi de main

https://www.lerelaisdelespinas.org/

Parc national des Cévennes

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

On your path...

Some reference points (A)

The path is at an altitude of about 900m, which, locally, is the maximum altitude for chestnut trees. Chestnuts are one of the few possibilities for producing food on the otherwise uncultivated slopes where the trees grow. It is estimated that, every year, chestnuts are harvested on 1,500 hectares of orchards in the Cévennes, which is 4% of the total surface area.

Attribution : © A.Waterschoot

The chestnut in the Cévennes (B)

Like most chestnut orchards in the Cévennes, the one at L'Espinas was abandoned after the rural exodus of the 20th century. For the past twenty years or so, chestnut farming has been revitalised. Here, you will not see a fully productive orchard but a chestnut grove that is progressively being restored.

Attribution : © A. Bouissou/TERRA

What to do with chestnuts (C)

In autumn, when the chestnuts naturally fall from the trees, they are gathered using nets that have previously been spread out on the ground. Most of the harvest is destined to be dried. Traditionally this is done in a clède (Occitan: cleda), a two-story drying building often found in the chestnut orchards themselves, or close to farmhouses. Fresh chestnuts can be transformed into jam, chestnut cream, cordial, preserves and ice cream or simply be eaten roasted.

Attribution : © Olivier Prohin

A lengthy restoration project (D)

The restoration of the chestnut orchard at L’Espinas has been a collective project from the beginning, as part of the site’s philosophy and history.

Attribution : © A. Bouissou/TERRA

Designing a chestnut orchard (E)

Traditional orchards consist of several chestnut varieties. Over 900 varieties have been identified just in France, each of which has specific characteristics. To “design” a chestnut orchard in the Cévennes, varieties are chosen based on criteria that differentiate the nuts (early ripening, taste, size, shelling) and the trees (resistance to disease, environmental requirements, etc.)

Attribution : © Régis Domergue

Dead wood, living space (F)

Dead wood – whether it is still standing or on the ground – has a key role to play in chestnut orchards due to its many functions. On the ground, it regulates the carbon cycle and especially the replenishment of the humus layer due to the activities of organisms that only consume dead wood. Standing, it ensures long-term carbon storage and can be the home of various owl and woodpecker species.

Attribution : © KARCZEWSKI Gaël

Long live diversity! (G)

In the second half of the 20th century, at the instigation of the French National Forestry Fund (FFN), the Cévennes – abandoned following the rural exodus – underwent a major change: chestnut orchards were felled in favour of single-species conifer plantations, here Douglas firs.

Attribution : © Y. Maccagno

Marked for life (H)

On their trunks, old trees often bear the mark of having been grafted. This graft line shows where graft and rootstock were joined. Depending on the grafting process used, it can be more or less obvious; usually it can be spotted as a bulge in the bark all the way around the trunk.

Attribution : cc

Sculpted landscape (I)

The chestnut tree is naturally content with poor soils, its taproot plunging deep into the ground to bring up nutrients. Of course it grows better and bears more nuts on deep and rich soils! This is why locals carried up the alluvial soil from brooks, often on their own backs, to create cultivatable plots: meadows, fields, gardens and orchards.

Attribution : © A.Waterschoot

Versatile and resilient (J)

The farmers of the Cévennes have managed over time to put in place polyculture-livestock systems that meet the crucial challenge of optimising the available space and resources around farms. This organisation brought independence and resilience to hazards by thinking through complementary productions that were consistent with the immediate surroundings.

Attribution : © A.Waterschoot