

Le Bocard trail

Mont Lozère



Usine du Bocard (© Olivier Prohin)



In Vialas, close to the swimming holes, lies an impressive, abandoned stone-built factory, its countless vaults peeking out of the brambles...

On the banks of the Luech river sit the ruins of a factory consumed up by ivy – an astonishing sight. In the 19th century, this was where galena, a lead ore containing silver, was processed using deafening machinery. After being extracted from tunnels close by, the ore was sorted and processed on site. In 1847 Vialas produced one-quarter of France's silver, and its output did not stop increasing until 1862, when it reached 1,930 kg of refined silver. Shut down in 1894, the factory has recently been rediscovered yet keeps some of its mystery intact.

Useful information

Practice : Discovery trails

Duration : 2 h

Length : 2.5 km

Trek ascent : 98 m

Difficulty : Very easy

Type : Loop

Themes : History and culture,
Water and geology

Trek

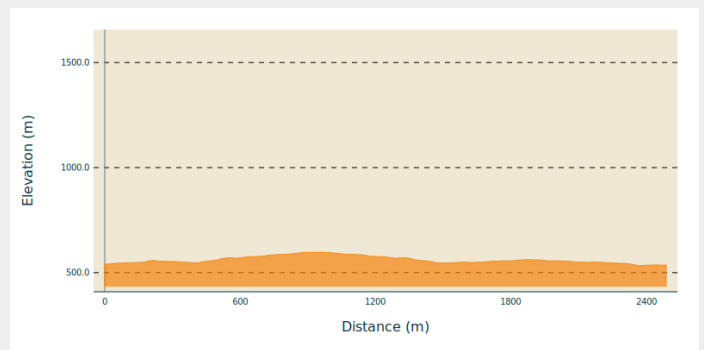
Departure : Hamlet of La Planche (Vialas)

Arrival : Hamlet of La Planche (Vialas)

Markings : → Discovery

Cities : 1. Vialas

Altimetric profile



Min elevation 533 m Max elevation 597 m

The trail stays on the tarred road for 400 metres, then takes a path to explore the world of mining. After you have turned back towards the factory, you pass through one of the vast arches of the stack and reach a viewpoint which gives you a perspective on the different stages of the transformation of the ore.

On your path...



We're recruiting! (A)
Let's start mining! (C)
How the factory was organised (E)
Getting hot! (G)
Cover everything ! (I)

The good filon (B)
The pithead (D)
Mechanical processing (F)
Going up in smoke (H)
Sleeping Beauty mine (J)

All useful information

Advices

For your security and to preserve the site, you must stay on the defined path. It is strictly forbidden to remove stones or other objects from this protected site, which is classed as a Historical Monument.

How to come ?

Access

From the village of Vialas, on the small road towards La Planche, col de Banette.

Advised parking

Parking area 50m after the bridge of La Planche hamlet.

Information desks

Office de tourisme Des Cévennes au mont Lozère

le Quai, 48220 Le Pont de Montvert sud mont-Lozère

info@cevennes-montlozere.com

Tel : 04 66 45 81 94

<https://www.cevennes-montlozere.com/>



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/>



Source

On your path...



We're recruiting! (A)

In the 19th century, miners had an advantage over farmers: they were paid their wages directly. Like other companies at the time, the factory in Vialas had developed paternalistic policies that led its staff to abandon farming and become proletarianised. At its height, in 1866, the factory had 522 employees spread over several sites. The company's difficulties from the late 19th century onwards had demographic repercussions on the municipality, which lost almost 40% of its population in about 50 years, with most probably migrating to the mining basin of Alès.

Attribution : © E. Balaye



The good filon (B)

All rocks are minerals but some are considered ores because they contain a metal or precious substance. As soon as the mineral is mined for the metal it contains, it is called an ore. Galena is an ore found in seams; it contains lead. However, it was not lead that was mined in Vialas, but silver: when the seams formed, a substitution of atoms occurred which produced lead ore containing silver: argentiferous galena.

Attribution : © E. Balaye



Let's start mining! (C)

When the ore seams were discovered in 1781, nobody remembered any previous mining in Vialas. And yet, according to the mine director at the time, some tunnels showed signs of having been mined using fire. This technique, known since prehistory, consists of heating the rock face to make the rock shatter. This is supposedly why one of the seams is called "ancestors' seam". We do not have sufficient evidence today to determine definitively whether or not there was mining here before the 18th century.

Attribution : © E. Balaye



The pithead (D)

At the exits of the mine's main tunnels were several areas and corridors for sorting the ore, such as these.

Attribution : © E. Balaye



How the factory was organised (E)

The factory is below you. It gained the name of Le Bocard from one of the particularly noisy machines which crushed the ore. Opposite you, many workshops for mechanical processing have been destroyed. These buildings also provided lodgings for staff on the first floor, and were arranged so as to take advantage of the water supply. Water was the main driving force of the factory's machinery, which meant that periods of drought or frost were very disruptive.

Attribution : © Olivier Prohin



Mechanical processing (F)

This operation removed as much sterile rock as possible, keeping only the rock richest in ore that was ready for smelting (called schlich). Several machines were used at various times to crush and then categorise the ore by size and density: the higher the ore content, the heavier the rock.

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Getting hot! (G)

The foundry was established in 1827, before being modified and extended in 1860. The schlich arrived at the foundry for metallurgical processes, which were the final step to obtaining pure silver. First the metal – meaning the argentiferous lead – had to be separated from the galena. This was done by roasting and then smelting it in a reverberatory furnace. This produced lead containing silver, called lead bullion. The lead then had to be progressively separated from the silver it contained, using cupellation. In 1847, Vialas produced one-quarter of France's silver.

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Going up in smoke (H)

Smoke was emitted as far as possible from the factory. But it contained lead and silver particles, which were collected using the sack-like filters that you can see in the corner of the stack, by the side of the path. These “sacks” trapped the silver and lead particles, which were heavier than the other components of the smoke. The silver was transported to Paris by stagecoach, the lead and other products by cart and then by train to Beaucaire.

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Cover everything ! (I)

There was not enough space available in the valley for the factory. To save space, the factory was given a vaulted ceiling, which created a flat area. Consisting of several sections and built from small slate blocks, the vault covers La Picadière brook for almost 100m. The brook was not used to drive the machines, its flow being too irregular. Instead, the Luech river was partly diverted to supply the factory.

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Sleeping Beauty mine (J)

This is a green hollow and the literary inspiration for the first chapter of Jean-Pierre Chabrol's novel *La Gueuse*, which is entitled "The Sleeping Beauty Mine". The association *Le Filon des Anciens* maintains the site, cutting back brambles and revealing forgotten elements, such as the canal that used to carry the river water, which you will spot below the path by the factory. Regular maintenance of the site preserves this exceptional heritage and may uncover further elements.

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