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Andorra-la-Vella > Saint-Girons

Saturday July 11th • Stage 8 • 176.5 km

Region

- **Midi-Pyrénées**

With eight counties and a surface area of 45,000 km², Midi-Pyrenees is France's vastest region (with French Guiana) and is bigger than Denmark, Belgium or Switzerland. This immense area which is bordered by the Pyrenees Mountains to the south and the Massif Central to the north east is obviously very diverse even if the sunny climate, the love of gastronomy, rugby and the capacity to welcome visitors are attractions that all of the counties have to offer.

The region's economy is dominated by the dynamism of Toulouse, the regional capital, whose activity influences those of the other neighbouring major cities, Pau or Carcassonne. The Pink City is the third biggest student city in France and is also the French capital of the aeronautics industry.

In the rest of the region, the arms industry (Tarbes) or the pharmaceutical industry (Castres, Agen) are both leading activities. However agriculture dominates the region making Midi-Pyrénées the country's second leading agricultural centre.

Tourism is also rapidly developing and the Pyrenees' many winter ski resorts attract alpine sports and nature enthusiasts alike.

Website: <http://www.midipyrenees.fr/>

County

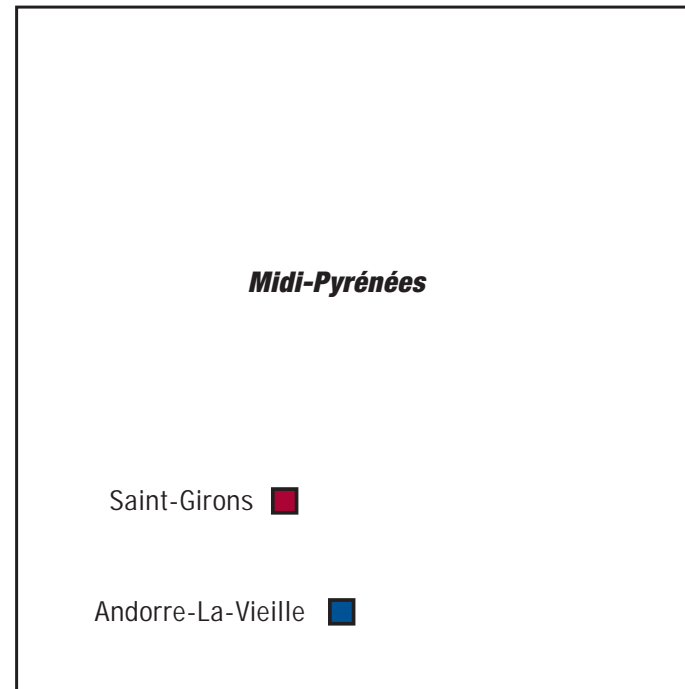
- **Ariège**

Prefecture: Foix

Sub-prefectures: Pamiers, Saint-Girons

Population: 146,000

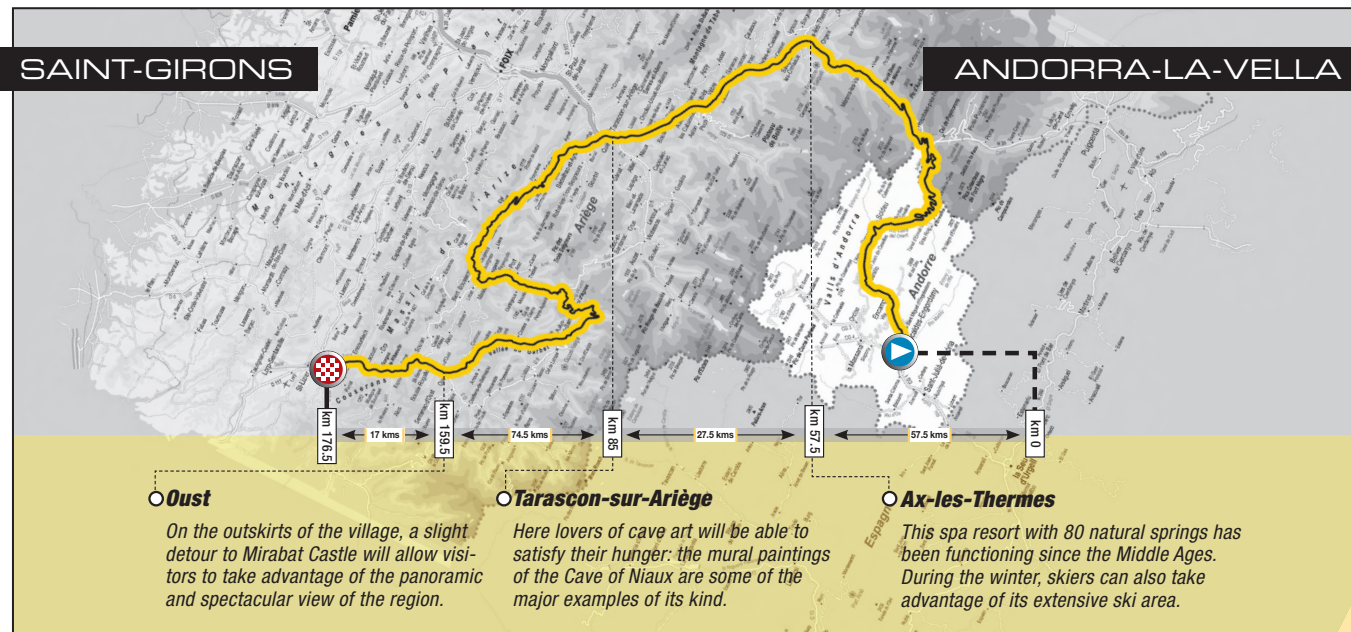
Website: <http://www.cg09.fr>



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The Tour pays
a visit to...



Claude Sans

Claude Sans, the chairman of the association, “Autrefois le Couserans” organises an annual rural parade in Saint-Girons, his native village. “Since 2005, I have presided over this association. Its objective is to create rural activities, allowing people to experience again, the ones with which they were familiar as children. Every year, on the first weekend in August, we organise a weekend of entertainment, with a parade on Sunday morning which is also called “Autrefois le Couserans”. It brings together old agricultural machinery, horse drawn carriages, animals and almost over 700 extras dressed in period costumes. Roughly 15,000 people attend the parade and 20,000 visitors come to Saint-Girons during weekend. I am a typical product of Saint-Girons, and of Couserans. It is a preserved region where visitors can go on many hikes.

Saint-Girons borders Spain, and I remember during my childhood that many Spanish refugees came to settle here. It is a very dynamic town with regards to community life, with a lively centre around the “Pont Vieux” (Old Bridge) or the River Salat. The charming village of St. Lizier is a stone’s throw from here and has two cathedrals, of which one has a beautiful cloister. As far as gastronomy is concerned, traditional soups such as “azinat” have been adapted by local restaurant owners to appeal to modern palates and I also recommend the cheese, “tomme des Pyrénées”. I am interested in the Tour de France as a spectator. But a several years ago, I also followed the “Ronde de l’Isard” race with interest. It allowed many riders to begin their cycling career before going on to succeed in the Tour de France.”

▶ ANDORRA-LA-VELLA

Andorra-la-Vella today

Andorra-la-Vella is the highest capital city in Europe and is situated at an altitude of 1,409 m. Its closeness to the neighbouring parish of Escaldes-Engordany will allow visitors to discover Caldea, the biggest spa and well-being centre in Southern Europe. Additionally, the main streets that cross both towns form the leading shopping centre in the Pyrenees, offering the best prices on all international brands.



The church of Santa Coloma (10th century) - Photo : Andorra Turisme SAU

Andorra-la-Vella is the country's political and cultural centre. The seat of the government is located here as well as the cultural centre, "La Llacuna" which presents the most famous dance and theatre festivals in the country.

The city's old town permits visitors to discover a picturesque grouping of old streets and traditional houses made from wood, granite and forged iron which reveal the traditions of Andorran culture.

The church of Santa Coloma (10th century), which bears witness to the country's Romanesque art, or "Maison des Vallées" (16th century) which houses the current Andorran Parliament, are examples of this.

- **Population:** 83,000 inhabitants, natives known as Andorrans (m), Andorranes (f)
- **Languages:** Catalan (the official language), Spanish, French
- **Economy:** commerce, tourism (60% of the GDP), banking
- **Local celebrities:** the Bishop of Urgell, the sculptor Sergi Mas, the painter Galobardes
- **Festivals:** the Music and Dance Seasons Festival of Andorra, the International Festival of Narciso Yepes (Ordino), the Colours of Music (Escaldes-Engordany)
- **Local fare:** trout, escudella (soup), trinxat (truffles, green cabbage, bacon, potatoes, garlic), cured meats from the mountains, (donja, bull, bringuera), Toupi (terrine of goat's cheese) and since 2008, the white wine Cim de Cel (summit of the sky)
- **Slogan:** land of the Pyrenees
- **Website:** <http://www.andorra.ad>

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▶ ANDORRA-LA-VELLA

Andorra-la-Vella and cycling

The second Principality visited by the 2009 Tour occupies a first-rate place in the heart of the first two mountain stages. The stage will start in the capital and take the racers to Port d'Envalira first. The most knowledgeable fans will remember that in 1964 Jacques Anquetil had a memorable moment of weakness on this slope before rallying to win his fifth Tour de France. Andorra also hosted the arrival of the Tour of Spain, where the sadly missed Jose Maria Jimenez, the brother-in-law of Carlos Sastre, won the race twice (in 1998 and 2001).



Jacques Anquetil, Fédérico Bahamontes and Raymond Poulidor climbing the slopes the Port d'Envalira in 1964.
Photo : Presse Sports

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- **9th Century** : Legend has it that Charlemagne founded Andorra in recognition for the support that its inhabitants provided in the struggle against the Moors.
- **1278**: Andorra-la-Vella was created by a treaty (parage) between the Count of Foix and the Bishop of Urgell who became its co-princes.
- **1419**: The creation of the “Casa de la Vall” (land council), which became the General Council in 1702 and is Andorra’s current parliament.
- **1607**: An edict was signed making the King of France and the Bishop of Urgell the official co-princes of Andorra.
- **1812-1814**: The French invaded Catalonia and Andorra.
- **1933**: Introduction of universal suffrage for men.
- **1934**: Russian-born Baron Boris Skossyreff was proclaimed as the King of Andorra and was deposed one week later.
- **1939**: A treaty was signed with Germany proclaiming Andorra’s neutrality during the Second World War.
- **1993**: The first constitution was adopted by referendum on March 14th. Andorra also became a member of the United Nations.
- **1994**: Andorra became a member of the Council of Europe.

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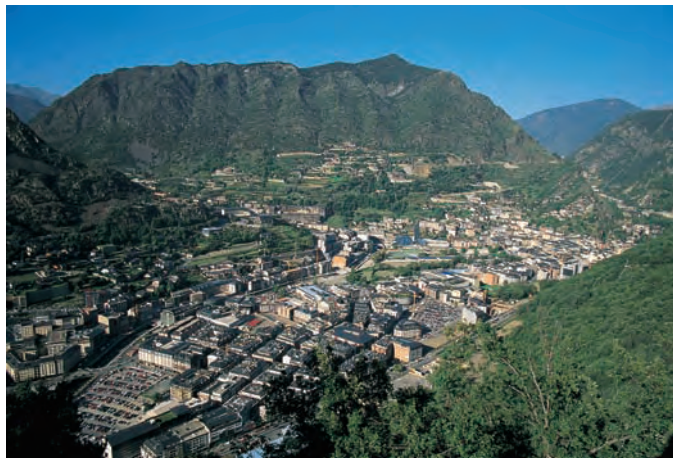
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▶ ANDORRA-LA-VELLA

The story of the man who was king ... for one week

Baron Boris de Skossyreff, an adventurer, spy and womanizer, almost radically changed Andorra's political destiny in 1934. But the extraordinary story of this incredible and tragic hero was short-lived, as he was the Principality's king for only one week.

Having fled the Revolution of 1917, this white Russian led the life of a jet-setter and legend has it that he was a spy. In 1931, he married a rich French woman, Marie-Louise Parat de Gassier, whom he left for a young English woman, Polly Heard. It was with latter and another female companion, Florence Marmon, the ex-wife of an American multi-millionaire, that he arrived in Andorra in July, 1934, following his expulsion from Majorca for disrupting law and order. He took advantage of the Principality's year of political and social instability to attempt to force the hand of destiny. Supported by a member of the General Council, Skossyreff won over the House with his undertaking to set up a liberal and modern government. He disputed the French occupation of Andorra and he proclaimed himself King of the government of Andorra on 6 July 1934.



A panoramic view of Andorra-la-Vella - Photo : Andorra Turisme SAU

A constitution which foresaw political and religious freedom was drawn up. But the venture was short-lived. The only opponent to have refused the King's accession went to see the Bishop of Urgell to warn him about the situation. The co-princes - the Bishop and the French President, Albert Lebrun - pronounced the dismissal of the short-lived king, who was arrested by the Spanish Civil Guards. He was imprisoned and exiled before becoming a Nazi collaborator. He then disappeared without a trace. He died in Russia at the end of the 1980s.

LA CASA DE LA VALL

Andorra-la-Vella is the centre of Andorran politics. The "Casa de la Vall", which is the seat of Andorra's Parliament, can be visited as well as Gothic frescoes which depict scenes of the Passion of Christ.

THE ROMAN CHURCHES

Exceptionally well preserved, Andorra's churches form a unique and coherent architectural grouping. They can be visited during the summer months with free cultural guides. Topped by spectacular bell towers which are inspired by Lombard architecture, they often house evocative art which is typical of the region. The most famous of the religious buildings are the church of Santa Coloma and the Meritxell Sanctuary, which was damaged in 1972, and was restored by Ricardo Bofill.

THE MADRIU-PERAFITACLAROR VALLEY

This glacial valley covers 10% of the country and has been a listed UNESCO World Heritage site since 2004.

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Along the way...

PORT D'ENVALIRA - km 23.5

The Port of Envalira reaches 2,407 m at its highest point and has been climbed seven times by the competitors of the Tour de France. From Andorra-la-Vella, the ascent is 23.2 km long with an average gradient of 5.1% from to start to finish. From Julio Jimenez, who was the first rider to reach the summit in 1964, to Richard Virenque in 1997, without forgetting Federico Bahamontes, it has always been the true climbers that go over the top of the mountain passes first.

LE PAS DE LA CASE - km 28 Pop. 3,000

Le Pas de la Case is named after the only building that was situated there at the beginning of the 20th century. Cross-border and duty-free commerce as well as skiing have transformed this locality which belongs to the parish of Encamp, a popular tourist resort.

ARIÈGE (09)

Nestled in the heart of the Pyrenees, bordering Andorra and Spain, Ariège is a land of plains, mountains and lakes, which has been influenced by human presence since the dawn of time. Twelve decorated caves reveal genuine treasures, while an exceptional heritage in terms of Romanesque art in this region, which was that of the Cathars, was the legacy of the Middle Ages. The county offers the best natural resources for outdoor activities to be carried out all year long: water, air, snow and sun. Visitors are charmed by its rich and varied cultural heritage. Additionally, the county's gastronomy has kept its traditional flavours and distinctive quality and its accommodation has preserved the appeal of its authenticity. This exceptional natural setting represents an area which is favourable to the creation of new companies and innovation within existing ones. The professional involvement and the quality of work of the inhabitants of Ariège have been amply demonstrated, and have proved the famous saying of one of Napoleon's officers, "Ariège produces men and iron", to be right. The opening up of the region, due to of the construction of the A 66 motorway, the "Ariégoise", contributes to the county's development programme.

AX-LES-THERMES - km 57.5 Pop. 1,500

Its name speaks for itself: Since the antiquity "Ax" has been devoted to water and water cures. Ax is located at a confluence of three valleys and has taken advantage of its position as an essential stop-off point, including for the Tour de France. The race has stopped off there nine times, counting the arrivals on the Plateau of Bonascre. The site was frequented during the Roman Empire and the town takes its name from the Latin word, "Acquae", waters. Its 80 springs made it a popular spa in the Middle Ages. In 1260, during the reign of Saint Louis, the Count of Foix, Roger IX built a leper hospital there for soldiers infected during the Crusades. It was from this date that the warm sulphur springs activity of Ax was developed, of which the hottest reaches 77°F. Cattle and sheep rearing were Aix-les-Thermes' other resources until the arrival of winter sports made Ax-3 Domaines a renowned resort which has the third biggest ski area in the Pyrenees.

USSAT-LES-BAINS - km 81.5 Pop. 370

This reputable spa is known for its therapeutic treatments for stress-related psychosomatic illnesses as well as certain neurological disorders like Parkinson's

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disease. The effect that its waters have on the nervous system has allowed breaks focused on relaxation and anti-stress to be developed.

The first written proof which mentioned the healing properties of the water of Ussat goes back to the 15th century and the first medical book which treated this subject dates from 1771. The springs had been used by the local population to relieve their ailments for a long time, but from this period onwards, the baths were developed through the impetus given by the Baron of Ormolac, Louis de Fraxine.

Rapidly the waters of Ussat became widely renowned due to the celebrities who came to take the waters there such as the King of Holland, Louis Bonaparte, Napoleon 1st's brother, or the poet, Lamartine. The spa experienced its heyday at this time and the "Grand Thermes", which are today a listed building, were built in 1845 on the site of a former spa. The spa, which had fallen into a state of lethargy, belonged to the "Hospices de Pamiers" until 1982. Today its activity has been relaunched under the leadership of private owners.

TARASCON-SUR-ARIÈGE - km 85 Pop. 3,500

Tarascon's name originates from two Indo-European roots which mean fault

passage. Its prehistoric heritage is exceptional. It is still possible to admire part of the mural paintings of the Cave of Niaux ("le salon noir"- the black room) or visit the biggest cave in Europe, that of Lombrives, the resting place of Pyrene, with whom Hercules had fallen in love.

Tarascon's history actually began in 778, when the town was the scene of a battle which allowed Charlemagne's troops to drive back the Saracens. The Notre-Dame de la Victoire Chapel was built to celebrate this victory. Peace was restored in the region and it came under the control of the Counts of Foix in the 11th century. The Count's castle was built three centuries later.

In the 16th century, the Wars of Religious bathed the town in blood again as Protestants and Catholics successively slaughtered each other. The castle and two of the town's other strongholds were demolished under the reign of Louis XIII, while Tarascon was destroyed twice by fires, the most deadly of those taking place in 1701. In 1775, the Tower of Castella was built on the site of the former keep. The stone bearing the coat of arms of the Counts of Foix was recovered from the former castle and can still be seen above the gate of the tower. In 1998, Tarascon was a departure town for the Tour.

THE PARK OF PREHISTORIC ART

This wonderful setting in a mountainous park has been enhanced with rocks and ponds and water falls, offering a unique approach to Ariège's prehistoric heritage which is one of the finest in Europe. Many interactive activities and a sound and light show which recount the history of cave art are situated in a modern building. They are aimed at children as well as adults, the uninitiated or enthusiasts. A recreation of the Cave of Niaux in particular allows visitors to admire the cave paintings which are no longer open to the public. Additionally, contemporary art exhibitions allow the work of modern artists to be compared to that of their distant ancestors.

AULUS-LES-BAINS - km 142 Pop. 200

In the heart of the Garbet Valley, the village of Aulus-les-Bains is divided into the upper part of the village with its pastoral traditions and the lower more modern part which is focused on tourism. It is from Aulus that visitors will be able to discover the waterfall of Ars, which is one of the highest in the Pyrenees. For a long time, the village drew its livelihood from the working of lead-silver mines, which were progressively closed down. In the

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19th century, the village's spa activity took over from mining.

In 1822, Lieutenant Darnagnac who was suffering from syphilis, found relief in the benefits of the local springs. The cures have been medically supervised since 1845. The bars, thermal baths and many hotels which were built made Aulus a renowned resort which was boasted baccarat. But the Second World War put an end to this golden age.

For the last 30 years, the authorities have been trying to relaunch the spa activities, whose waters have many therapeutic properties. In 1989, the new thermal baths of Aulus-les Bains were built, elegantly combining the brightness of glass and the warmth of wood. Aulus waters are particularly recommended for the treatment of metabolic disorders (cholesterol, obesity, diabetes) and reno-urinary illnesses.

but the more traditional specialities such as: "tomme des Pyrénées", "Rogallais", "Calabasse", "Bamalou", "Estive", "Moullis" or "Toudeill" ...

When leaving Oust, it is possible to visit Mirabat Castle, considered to be one of the oldest in the region. The castle, which is now in ruins, probably replaced a tower built by Charlemagne. It allows visitors to enjoy a spectacular and panoramic view of the region.

OUST - km 159.5 Pop. 500

Oust has been known for its dairy products since the beginning of the 20th century. In particular the town made a delicious camembert, which won all the prizes and honours before it became a victim of the wars and local restructuring and disappeared. Oust (Augusta), a charming village which already existed during the Roman Empire, still produces excellent cheeses

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SAINT-GIRONS

Saint-Girons today

The Nature Park of the Pyrenees of Ariège

In the west of the county of Ariège, the Nature Park of the Pyrenees of Ariège brings together the highest valleys and mountain peaks bordering Andorra and Spain (the Peak of Estats - 3,144 m, the Mont Valier - 2,838 m, the Montcalm - 3,077 m) and extends to the villages, Piedmont hills and the limestone ridges of Plantaurel.

It is one of the best preserved regions in the Pyrenees. It boasts an exceptional natural heritage with remarkable scenery and many local and endangered species: Pyrenean Chamois, bearded vultures, desmans (semi-aquatic mammals), Pyrenean Brook Salamanders, capercaillies and lilies of the Pyrenees. The region is also home to a variety of activities such as agriculture, craftwork and industry, but above all, pastoral farming which has influenced and has shaped its history. Its prehistoric and historical sites (Niaux, Bèdeilhac, the Mas of Azil and Saint-Lizier) its history, its culture, its architectural heritage and landscapes also make this one of the most appealing areas in the Pyrenees. The regional nature park is supported by this preserved heritage and a dynamic economy. It contributes to sustainable development in this area, which extends over 2,500 km² and has a population of about 43,000 inhabitants.



Saint-Girons in its natural setting - Photo : Mairie de Saint-Girons

- **Population:** 6,800 inhabitants, natives known as Saint-Gironnais (m), Saint-Gironnaises (f)
- **Economy:** paper mills, tourism, the food-processing industry
- **Local celebrities:** Roger Fauroux (former Mayor and Minister), Patrice Bonnet (architect)
- **Sports Clubs:** Saint-Girons RC Rugby Club
- **Festivals:** the Sacred Art Festival (May), the Transhumance Festival (June), "Autrefois le Couserans" (August), "Festival du Rite" (international folklore meeting - August), the Theatre Festival
- **Local fare:** confits, "garbure" (soup made from beans, ham bones, morsels of duck or goose confit, pork, cabbage, leeks, carrots, turnips, onions and garlic), cheeses made from raw milk ("bethmale", "moulis", "rogalle", "Saint-Lary", "la Calabasse"), "la croustade" (apple crumble)
- **Labels of approval:** host town of the 2008 Telethon
- **Website:** <http://ville-st-girons.fr>

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SAINT-GIRONS

Saint-Girons and cycling

Saint-Girons is a crossroads which allows eighteen different valleys to be reached. The Tour de France's peloton has often passed through there. On the other hand, when the town hosted a departure stage, it gave its inhabitants the opportunity to see cyclists when they were not on the move. This has previously occurred four times. This is the first time that Saint-Girons will be an arrival town, at the end of a stage which promises to be action-packed.

Apart from the first departure stage which was held there in 1984, (with the victory of Pascal Poisson in Blagnac) Saint-Girons has traditionally been the launch pad for the race's climbers as the three following arrivals took place in the prime sites of Pyrenean cycling. In 1988, Laudelino Cubino won the stage finishing in Luz-Ardiden, in 1995, Richard Virenque was the winner in Cauterets and in 2003, Gilberto Simoni won the stage which arrived in Loudenvielle. Saint-Girons was the departure town in 1995, when Fabio Casartelli, Lance Armstrong's team mate and the former Olympic champion, unfortunately died as a result of a terrible fall during his descent of the Aspet Pass. Every year in October, the Fabio Casartelli Memorial brings together a great number of riders who compete on 3 different routes which cover 30, 85 and 125 kilometres. A former yellow jersey winner, Frédéric Moncassin, has settled nearby and has opened a hotel-restaurant "La Flamme Rouge" which pays tribute to the strong finisher's qualities.



Overview of Saint-Girons - Photo : Mairie de Saint-Girons

- **407** : The Martyrdom of Saint-Girons, who was a Vandal and was converted to Christianity by Saint-Sever. An oratory was created in his honour on the banks of the River Salat.
- **1120**: Saint-Lizier was destroyed by Bernard de Comminges and consequently Saint Girons flourished. The Viscounts of Couserans built their castle there with ramparts to protect the town against the upsurges of the Aragonese.
- **1300**: The village of Villefranche developed on the left bank of the River Salat. It was only incorporated into Saint-Girons during the Revolution.
- **1309**: Religious orders were established in Ariège to thwart the Albigensian Heresy.
- **1576**: The city was occupied by the Huguenots.
- **1721**: A fire destroyed the city.
- **1872**: The JOB cigarette paper factory was built.
- **1880**: The railway system was established in Saint-Girons and the Lédar paper mills were created.
- **1908**: The railway station's awning was built by the Eiffel Company of Saint-Girons. Today it no longer exists.
- **1940**: Couserans became one of the main transit zones between France and Spain. Local smugglers made it possible for more than 2,300 people to cross the border.
- **1970**: The railway lines were permanently closed and were replaced by roads.

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🍷 SAINT-GIRONS

Aristide Bergès and hydro-electric power

Saint-Girons is situated at the confluence of the River Lez and the River Salat. These two waterways had an important indirect effect on the history of hydro-electric energy. Indeed, it was the son of a paper-maker from Lorp, one of the town's suburbs, who was instrumental in developing this energy and who created the expression "houille blanche", (hydro-electricity), to describe it. Aristide Bergès was born on the banks of the River Salat in 1833. At 15 years of age, he obtained his school leaving certificate and when he was 19 he gained a degree from "l'Ecole Centrale des Arts et Manufactures" (a prestigious engineering school). He created a multitude of inventions including a compactor to prepare ground for asphalt coverings and a grinder which was capable of producing homogenous pulp, whose system was installed in the Lorp Paper Mill.

This young man from Ariège made a fortune in the Alps: he had come to Lancey to build a paper factory and became very interested in the Belledonne mountain range. He set up a turbine power station there, which allowed his factory to make 2,000 tons of pulp per year. It was at the Universal Exhibition of 1899 in Paris, that Bergès created the expression which made him famous: "When mountain glaciers are used as motive power, they are resources which are as precious



View of the River Salat and the church bell tower - Photo : Mairie de Saint-Girons

to their region and the State as deep coal. When we look at the source that has produced thousands of horse power in this way, and the wide range of services that can be provided as a result, glaciers are no longer merely glaciers. They should be considered as the mine of hydro-electric power from which we draw our energy and infinitely preferable to other alternatives." Bergès died in Lancey in 1904 and was buried in Toulouse at the foot of the mountains where he was born. An association was formed in his valley, bringing together enthusiasts, professionals from the paper industry and local members of parliament which has succeeded in preserving the house where he was born and turning it into a museum.

SAINT-GIRONS CHURCH

Built in 1857 by Auguste Tisé on the site of a former 14th century church, only its bell tower still remains today, which is topped by an arrow capped with wolves' heads.

SAINT-VALIER CHURCH

The church was most likely built by monks in 1138. Its west gate, situated at the entrance of the church, dates from this period. Inside, there is a Gallo-Roman sarcophagus, which is probably that of Valier, the first Bishop of Couserans.

THE MEDIEVAL CITY OF SAINT-LIZIER

Located 5 km from Saint-Girons, this medieval village is situated on the famous road of Saint James of Compostela and has the only cloister which still exists in Ariège. The Bishops Palace houses the county's museum and an 18th century pharmacy can be visited.