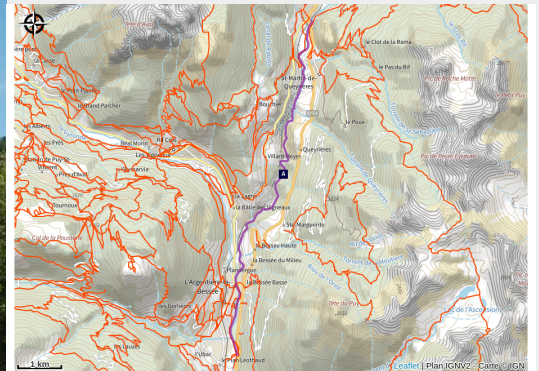


Durance P4 : from Prelles to l'Argentière-La-Bessée

Parc national des Ecrins



Durance (PDE)



The descent starts under the bridge of the national road, straight with some class III **rapids** as a warm up. A few meters after passing under a footbridge, when the train tracks on the right bank disappear into a tunnel, disembarking is necessary to avoid a waterfall.

Useful information

Practice : Canoe-kayak

Duration : 2 h

Class : IV - Très difficile

Disembarking is therefore compulsory on the right bank. A trail enables the portage of the kayaks for about 10 minutes to avoid the waterfall.

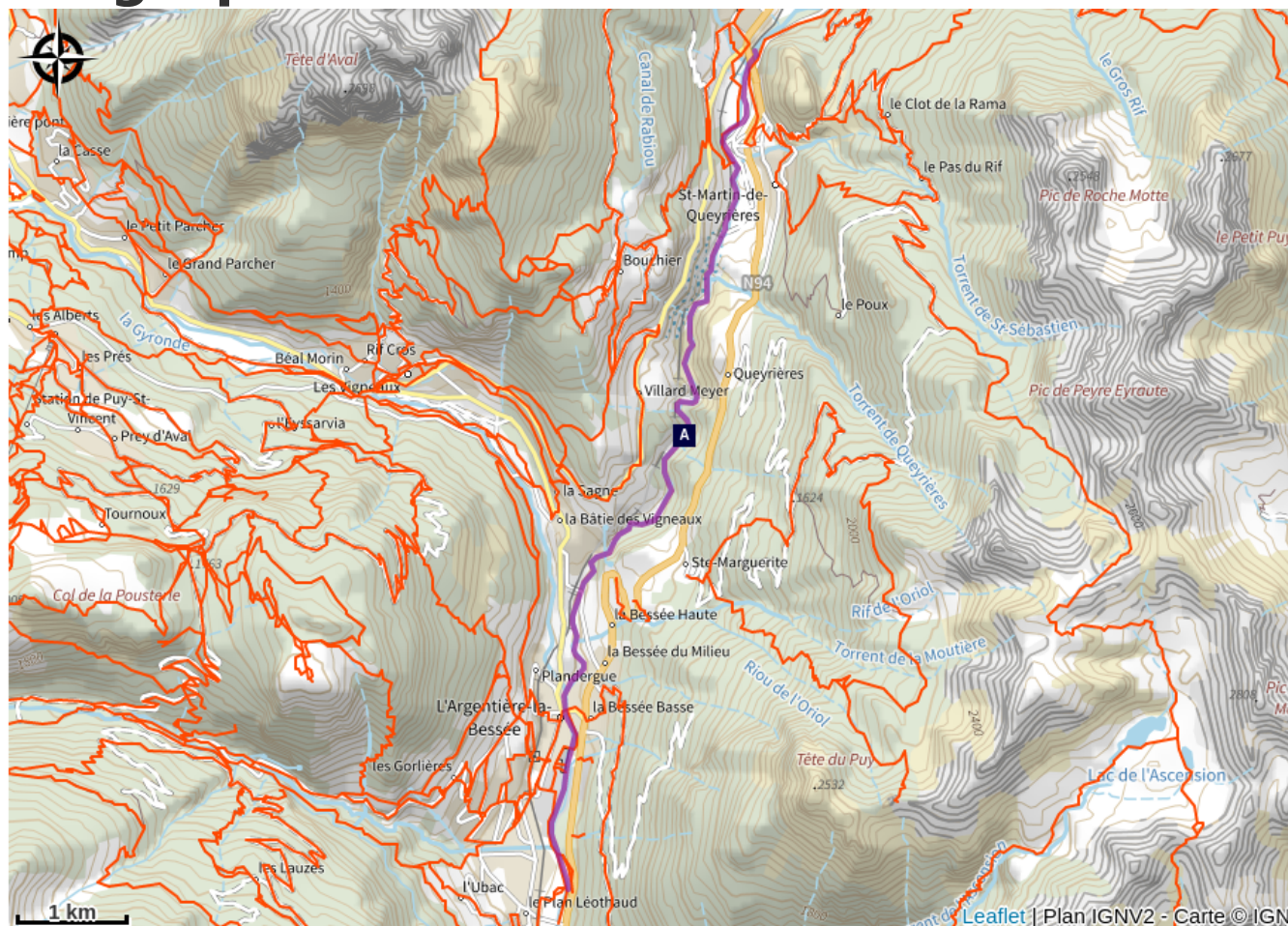
Once back on the water, the itinerary descends into a beautiful **gorge** with succeeding class IV rapids.


After a railway bridge, the river narrows into another **waterfall**. A portage is possible on the river banks to avoid the waterfall. After the fall, be on the lookout for a technical rapid which can get quite strong depending on water levels.

When reaching the end of the gorges, near the via ferrata, and until the confluence with the Gyrone, stay on the look out in the rapids for swimmers, falling trees or jamlogs.

The descent then takes you across l'Argentière, until reaching the white water stadium, where you can stay to practice until 6pm. Disembarking will take place on the right bank, by the parking lot at the end of the stadium.

Geographical location



 The quartzite and the ripple marks (AA)


 The vertical compressor (AC)


 The Péchiney factory (AE)


 The Mines de Fournel rail-cars (AG)

 The giant aluminium bar (AI)

 High-mountain farming (AK)

 The adoux, the nurseries of our rivers (AM)

 The larch, a tree unlike any other (AO)

 The old workers' housing districts (AQ)

 The mines of L'Argentière (AS)


 Gilbert Planche (AU)

 The sundial (AW)

 Former industrial area of L'Argentière-la-Bessée (AY)

 The Fournel (BA)

 The willow tit (AB)

 Louis Leprince-Ringuet and L'Argentière (AD)

 The Francis turbine (AF)

 The mobile compressor (AH)

 The light rail tractor (AJ)

 Straw insulation (AL)


 The Resourcerie (AN)

 Eco-construction (AP)

 The eco-constructed school (AR)

 The clock of Hermes (AT)

 The chapel of Saint-Jean (AV)

 The view over the Durance valley (AX)

 The Durance (AZ)

 The white water stadium (BB)



The penstock pipe (BC)



The chapel of Saint-Jacques-de-Prelles (BE)



The southern swallowtail (BD)

All useful information

Advice

Important information :

- Careful with floods after a storm
- Careful with logjams, especially at the beginning of the season
- Canyoning is authorized between 8:30 and 17:00 only, by municipal by-law
- Please take your trash with you

Attention : Experience is required in order to navigate these rivers without professional supervision. This information is provided for general guidance. Checking weather reports, water levels, flow rates and conditions before embarking is under your responsibility. The tourism office and the national park will not be held responsible in case of an accident.

If you have doubts, please ask a [professional](#). Kayak schools, instructors and renting shops of the valley are here to help you.

Mountain Rescue : dial 112

[Weather report](#)

Water levels at l'Argentière : <https://www.rdbrmc.com/hydroreel2/station.php?codestation=1125>



Gear

Wet suits are strongly recommended (glacier waters can reach under 4°C)

Helmet and life jacket are mandatory

Inflatable kayaks are not suitable and strongly advised against

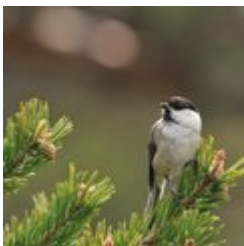
On your path...



The quartzite and the ripple marks (AA)

The rock through which the tunnel has been cut is a quartzite, a metamorphic, siliceous rock which is very hard and formed by grains of quartz welded together. It originates from sand deposited 230 million years ago in the still-shallow waters of the nascent Alpine ocean, and brought here by the erosion of the surrounding topography. In places, undulations can be seen on the tunnel wall: these are ripple marks, "fossilised" creases created by water flowing over the sand.

Attribution : Jean-Pierre Nicolle - Parc national des Écrins



The willow tit (AB)

A small resident passerine with a black cap, brown back and white underside, the willow or alpine tit lives in the mountain forests. It selects a trunk with rotten wood in which to build its nest, because its beak is not designed for pecking into very solid trunks. This tit is very similar to the marsh tit, which tends to live below 1,400 metres. To distinguish between them, you have to listen carefully to the singing and calls of these two birds.

Attribution : Mireille Coulon - Parc national des Écrins



The vertical compressor (AC)

In 1910, a 22-year-old engineer, Gilbert Planche arrived in L'Argentière-La Bessée to take advantage of the water here and open a large aluminium factory.

The vertical compressor is the forerunner of the pneumatic drill. The mine operators needed a large quantity of coal and compressed air helped to accelerate coal output. In 1852, Swiss physicist Jean-Daniel Colladon invented the pneumatic drill. The vertical compressor enabled the production of compressed air which powered a drill and simplified coal excavation. The compressor is placed vertically on its support, hence its name.

Attribution : Office de tourisme Pays des Écrins



Louis Leprince-Ringuet and L'Argentière (AD)

Louis Leprince-Ringuet was the director of the Physics Laboratory of X ("X" being a polytechnic school in Villeurbanne) established in L'Argentière. During the summer of 1942, he took in several Jewish students, thus saving them from the Nazis and deportation to Auschwitz. A panel presents the discoveries made by Louis Leprince-Ringuet in this laboratory. A text by Bernard Lévi is also displayed. As a young Jewish student, he took part in research at the laboratory during the summer of 1942. In it he thanks the scientific team for helping him to escape the anti-Semitic barbarism.

Attribution : Office de tourisme du Pays des Écrins



The Péchiney factory (AE)

This French electro metal company established itself in L'Argentière in 1907. The construction of the aluminium factory started in 1909 and it opened its doors in 1910, powered by the electricity plant built by Gilbert Planche. With it, L'Argentière became an industrial town. The economic crisis of the 1970s and the rise of foreign sources of supply led to the factory's closure in 1985. It was partially demolished in 1988. The workers left the town and in order to prevent the abandonment of L'Argentière, a restructuring project was launched.

Attribution : Office de tourisme Pays des Écrins



The Francis turbine (AF)

The American James Francis developed the Francis turbine between 1849 and 1855. It is a “à réaction” turbine suitable for medium-sized waterfalls (with a water head of between 15 and 500 metres). The water enters the turbine and then circulates between the turbine blades, which are fixed, while the inner wheel is mobile. The pressure at the wheel intake is greater than the pressure at the outlet.

Attribution : Jan Novak Photography



🕒 The Mines de Fournel rail-cars (AG)

Filled with materials excavated from the mine face, the rail-cars were pushed along the rails by the miners.

They were called “mine dogs”. They were originally made from wood and over time iron pieces were added. They were made entirely from metal by the end of the nineteenth century.

Attribution : Jan Novak Photography



🕒 The mobile compressor (AH)

In the mines, compressed air is used to remove dust and to create power for the drills. The mobile compressor holds compressed air in a resistant tank. This is brought to a high pressure via a pump (the compressor). The compressed air is then distributed to the mine machinery through a conduit system.

Attribution : Jan Novak Photography



🕒 The giant aluminium bar (AI)

A young metal, aluminium is the most abundant metallic element on earth. Today, the aluminium industry is the second biggest after steel.

This enormous ingot was made in L'Argentière-La Bessée.

Attribution : Office de tourisme Pays des Écrins



🕒 The light rail tractor (AJ)

A locomotive? No, its little cousin, the light rail tractor. This replaced manually pushed carts and horse-drawn vehicles. Less powerful than a locomotive, it travelled along narrow-gauge tracks which could be laid on different types of terrain. An information panel also described the role of this vehicle during the Great War.

Attribution : Jan Novak Photography



High-mountain farming (AK)

The mountains are areas naturally used for agriculture. These agricultural practices have been carefully thought-out in order to protect the environment. Agri-environmental measures have been introduced. They are designed to encourage and remunerate volunteer users of mountain spaces in their actions to protect natural environments. These measures prevent over-grazing, the invasion of bushes and shrubs and the proliferation of invasive plants.

Attribution : Office de tourisme Pays des Écrins



Straw insulation (AL)

Straw can be used as an insulation material. In fact, it can even be used in its natural state to insulate walls. Straw is available everywhere, it is an abundant resource and its production creates no pollution so it makes a very eco-friendly material. In addition, it offers excellent sound insulation.

Attribution : Robert Keck - Parc national des Écrins



The adoux, the nurseries of our rivers (AM)

Adoux are water courses in which fish can rest, breed and grow within a remarkable ecological reservoir. An ecological reservoir is an area which contains all the natural habitats necessary for the life cycle of a species: from reproduction to feeding and growth. So it could be said that an ecological reservoir assures the survival of the species and fulfils the function of a breeding ground.

Attribution : Parc national des Écrins



The Resourcerie (AN)

This former school has acquired a new function: that of giving new life to obsolete furniture and objects. The Resourcerie reclamation and repurposing centre makes new objects out of other, unwanted items. No new raw materials are used in their production, thereby helping to prevent the accumulation of waste. Eco-friendly and sustainable, the reclamation and repurposing centre reduces waste and creates employment.

Attribution : Office de tourisme Pays des Écrins



The mines of L'Argentière (AS)

The municipality of L'Argentière owes its name to the silver mines exploited here. They were first worked in the early Medieval period and later abandoned before exploitation resumed again in the nineteenth century. They were finally closed in 1908. Since 1992, the site has been the subject of archaeological excavations, with major work to clear materials carried by the Fournel when in flood. They can be visited with a guide (by appointment), leaving the visitor in awe: how much ingenuity has been involved in extracting the silver-bearing galena!

Attribution : Thibault Blais Photographie



The clock of Hermes (AT)

The Tour des Hermes is a clock tower built in 1922 by the Gilbert Planche company which used to run the aluminium factory in L'Argentière. It would chime to remind the factory workers of the time, and to make sure they arrived for work on time!

Attribution : Office de tourisme Pays des Écrins



Gilbert Planche (AU)

In 1910, a 22-year-old engineer, Gilbert Planche arrived in L'Argentière-La Bessée to take advantage of the water here and open a large aluminium factory. Many workers were employed and workers' housing estates were built (now demolished). As the result of financial problems, the factories closed its doors in 1985 and the area gradually emptied. Today, derelict sites bear testimony to the town's industrial past.

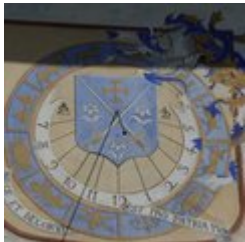
Attribution : Office de tourisme Pays des Écrins



The chapel of Saint-Jean (AV)

Built in the twelfth century and listed as a Historical Monument, the chapel of Saint-Jean is of Romanesque style. Tombs cut into the rock were discovered in recent archaeological excavations.

Attribution : Office de tourisme Pays des Écrins



The sundial (AW)

The sundial is an eighteenth-century tradition widespread across the Southern Alps where the sun is ever-present. Artisan sundial makers produced these sundials, which were added as a decoration to house fronts, religious buildings or, as here, a tower. The sayings inscribed on them make some of these artistic works philosophical as well as decorative.

Attribution : Office de tourisme Pays des Écrins



The view over the Durance valley (AX)

Protected from Atlantic influences by the Pelvoux massif, the upper Durance valley is subject to a very dry climate, with wide seasonal temperature fluctuations. It features grasslands very similar to the steppes of Central Europe, and which are rare in France. It is part of the Natura 2000 site, "Steppique durancien et queyrassien".

Attribution : Thierry Maillet - Parc national des Écrins



Former industrial area of L'Argentière-la-Bessée (AY)

On the two walls of these now-disused industrial structures, you can read the history of L'Argentière-la-Bessée. The town is marked by its industrial past, in particular by the presence of a hydroelectric power station built between 1907 and 1909 to harness the power of the mountain waterfalls. At the time, it was the most powerful power station in Europe. Other industries were also established here, like the Société du Quartz Fondu fused quartz works and the aluminium factory which provided livelihoods for a large number of workers.

Attribution : Office de tourisme du Pays des Écrins



The Durance (AZ)

The Durance is the biggest river in Provence. Its source rises in the municipality of Montgenèvre at an altitude of 2,390 metres, and it flows down to meet the Rhône to the south of Avignon. This is a "pluvio-nival" river, that is to say, its flow depends on the natural addition of water due to snowmelt and rainfall. It thus constitutes a real playground for kayakers from across Europe.

Attribution : Office de tourisme du Pays des Écrins



The Fournel (BA)

The source of the Fournel rises in the Fournel valley, in the heart of the Parc National des Écrins, and flows into the Durance near the white water stadium. It is known as a high alpine canyon offering lots of sport and leisure possibilities, and is the most popular in the Haut Val Durance. It is ideal for an introduction to vertical activities, in particular thanks to the presence of several jumps, toboggan runs and rappel sites. Access is authorised from April to October and is regulated because it is located upstream from an EDF water intake, which presents a real hazard.

Attribution : Office de tourisme du Pays des Écrins



The white water stadium (BB)

As part of its restructuring after the closure of the industrial site, the town of L'Argentière-la-Bessée opted for sports tourism, exploiting the natural elements present on the site, that is to say, water. Standing at the beginning of the longest navigable section of the Durance river, in 1993 the municipality decided to establish itself as a major white water centre by creating this stadium which covers a 400-metre stretch. So thanks to its reputation and its ideal situation, every year this stadium hosts several elite competitions at national and international level.

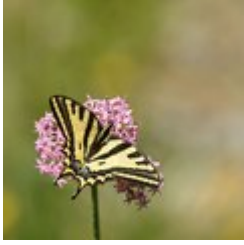
Attribution : Office de tourisme du Pays des Écrins



The penstock pipe (BC)

It was in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that hydropower really came into its own in L'Argentière-la-Bessée. There was plenty of water flowing from the mountains here to generate electricity, at a time when electricity transmission - let alone diversion - technology had not yet been developed. This was achieved by digging out a number of tunnels and laying penstock pipes. Aluminium production became possible and so, too, did a fused quartz activity, making specialised glass for the chemicals industry.

Attribution : Parc national des Écrins (collection)



The southern swallowtail (BD)

This very beautiful but rare butterfly is similar to - and can easily be mistaken for - other more common butterflies, the scarce swallowtail (common despite its name) and the common yellow swallowtail. It lives on hot, limestone hillsides. Although protected, it is threatened by the disappearance of its habitat, due in particular to urbanisation and its capture and trade (both illegal) for collectors.

Attribution : Mireille Coulon - Parc national des Écrins



The chapel of Saint-Jacques-de-Prelles (BE)

The chapel of Saint-Jacques-de-Prelles was built in the Middle Ages, in 1502, on the ancient pilgrims' way from Italy to Santiago de Compostella. It is surmounted by an arcade bell tower, decorated at the top with blind arcades with pointed arches. A number of wall paintings depicting historical episodes adorn the interior of the chapel, likely dating from the fifteenth century. They were restored in 1955. This chapel was listed as a Historical Monument in 1906 and it contains objects also listed as Historical Monuments, such as the bell which dates from 1639 or the eighteenth century silver, gold and brass ciborium.

Attribution : Office de tourisme du Pays des Écrins