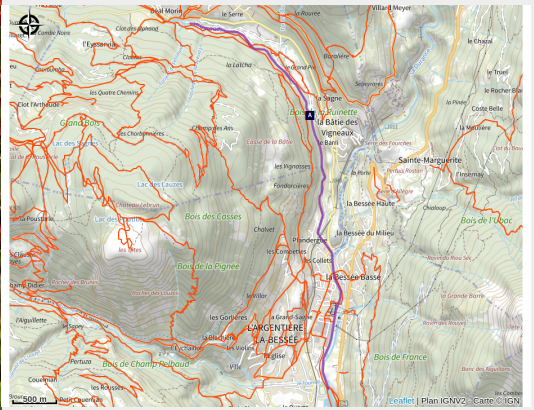


Gyronde P2 : from the Vigneaux to l'Argentière-La-Bessée

Parc national des Ecrins



Gyronde (PDE)

This 5 km section starts at the beginning of the Vigneaux hamlet, right after the class VI impass. The first rapids are rated IV to IV+ depending on water levels, as there is a big drop. The descent gets easier (class III) when reaching the the Vaudois campsite.

Useful information

Practice : Canoe-kayak

Duration : 1 h 30

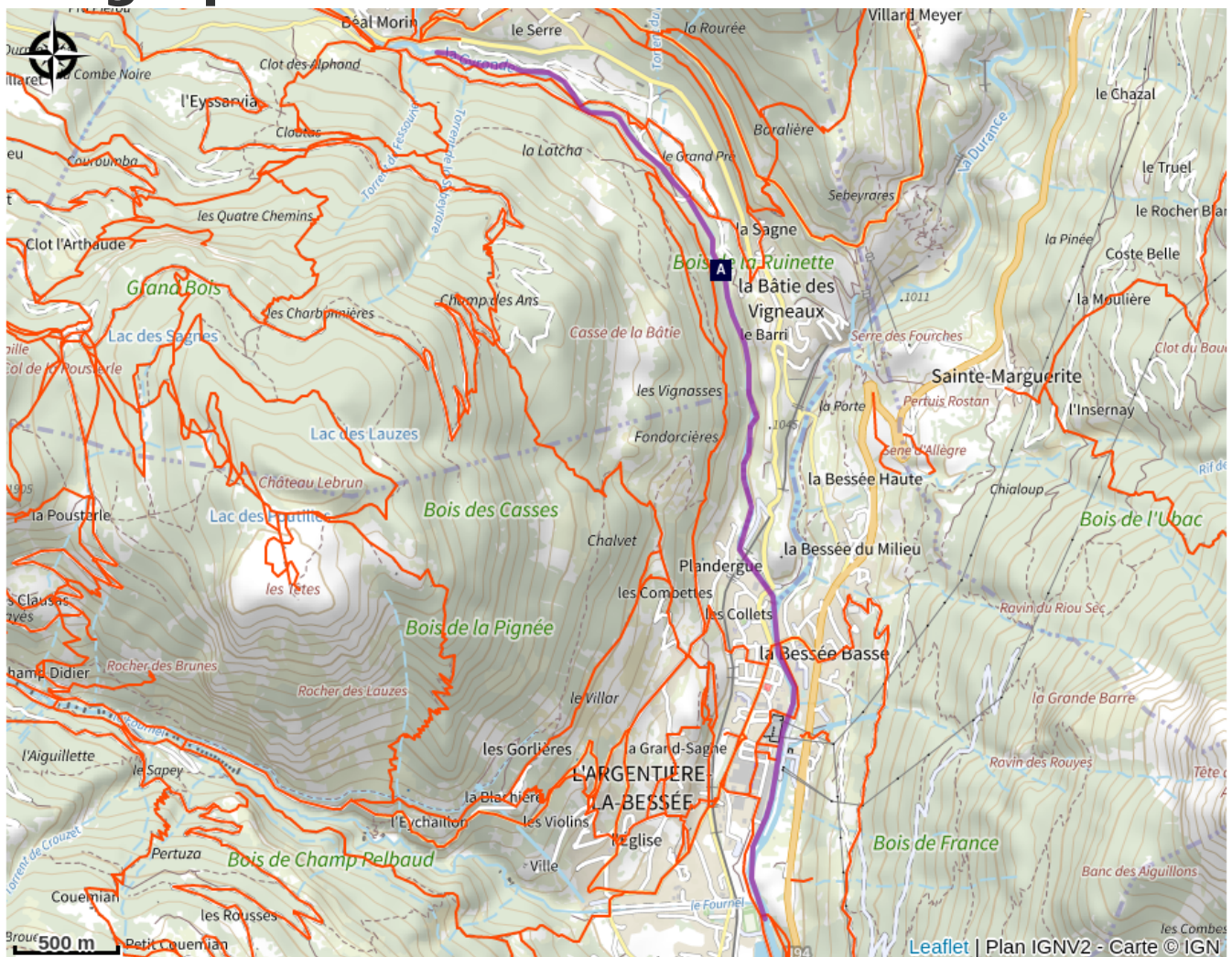
Class : IV - Très difficile





























After a few kilometers, along a dirt road, the Gyronde river dives into impressive gorges. In the middle of the gorges, near the dam, there is a weir which can be avoided by realising a portage on the left bank. The river then widens as approaching the confluence with the Durance river.

The section ends when reaching l'Argentière-La-Bessée, passing through the town center. You can disembark at the start or at the end of the white water stadium if you wish to go through the course.

Return : At the end of the stadium, take a right towards the stadium parking lot. From there, go back up towards l'Argentière-la-Bessée town center, to take the D994e road in the Vigneaux direction.

Geographical location



- | | |
|--|--|
|  The village of Les Vigneaux (AA) |  The church in Les Vigneaux (AB) |
|  The roe deer (AC) |  The vertical compressor (AD) |
|  Louis Leprince-Ringuet and L'Argentière (AE) |  The Péchiney factory (AF) |
|  The Francis turbine (AG) |  The Mines de Fournel rail-cars (AH) |
|  The mobile compressor (AI) |  The giant aluminium bar (AJ) |
|  The light rail tractor (AK) |  The sessile-leaved cytissus (AL) |
|  The old workers' housing districts (AM) |  The field horsetail (AN) |
|  The chaffinch (AO) |  The Scots pine (AP) |
|  The downy oak (AQ) |  The admiral butterflies (AR) |
|  La Bâtie des Vigneaux (AS) |  The mines of L'Argentière (AT) |
|  The clock of Hermes (AU) |  Gilbert Planche (AV) |
|  The chapel of Saint-Jean (AW) |  The sundial (AX) |
|  The view over the Durance valley (AY) |  The view over the Montbrison massif (AZ) |
|  The communal oven (BA) |  Images of the grapevine (BB) |



The sundial (BC)



The Durance (BE)



The white water stadium (BG)



The southern swallowtail (BI)



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



The Fournel (BF)



The penstock pipe (BH)

All useful information

Advice

Important information :

- **Before embarking, the beginning of the section can be examined by taking a piste along the river on the left bank, in order to check for the presence of jamlogs along the Gyrone river bed**
- **Look at for the weir at the confluence with the Durance river. Do not hesitate to realise a portage if need be**
- Careful with floods after a storm
- Careful with logjams, especially at the beginning of the season
- 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 village of Les Vigneaux (AA)

In spite of the altitude, the region's dry climate and the local growing conditions of limestone and sediments facing due south made the planting of grapevines possible as far back as the tenth century. The municipality owes its name to the presence of these vineyard operations, which were very significant in the late nineteenth century. The almost simultaneous appearance of the phylloxera aphid and the Briançon train, bringing wine from Provence, spelled the end of this activity here.

Attribution : Blandine Reynaud - PDE



The church in Les Vigneaux (AB)

The church of Saint-Laurent with its elegant porch dates from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. On its south wall there are frescoes depicting the vices, dragged towards hell by a demon, and their punishments. Enough to make you shudder! Its Lombard Romanesque bell tower has a very rare one-handed clock dating from the eighteenth century. It is one of the oldest working clocks of its type.

Attribution : Office de tourisme Pays des Écrins



The roe deer (AC)

The forest is home to roe deer, which can often be seen. This ungulate (hoofed mammal) is rather unusual because the rut does not take place in autumn, for births in May and June as is the case with other mountain-dwelling ungulates, but in summer. After fertilisation, however, egg development is suspended for 6 months (this is called embryonic diapause). Gestation then resumes so that the fawn (or twin fawns) can be born in spring, a period more favourable for its survival.

Attribution : Robert Chevalier - Parc national des Écrins



The vertical compressor (AD)

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 (AE)

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 Pechiney factory (AF)

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 (AG)

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 (AH)

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 (AI)

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 (AJ)

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 (AK)

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



The sessile-leaved cytisus (AL)

This small shrub which grows to 1 to 2 metres in light woods is characterised by three-lobed leaves on the flowering shoots which are sessile, that is to say without a stalk. It is easy to confuse with the scorpion senna, which has the same leaves but they are divided into 7 or 9 lobes. Both produce very beautiful yellow flowers in May to June.

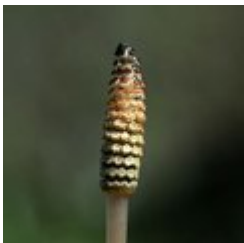
Attribution : Bernard Nicollet - Parc national des Écrins



The old workers' housing districts (AM)

Workers' housing districts were built to house the many workers who were employed at the Péchiney factory. These districts have now been demolished. The architecture of the houses varied according to the status of the employee. A town hall, a cinema, a bandstand and churches were also constructed.

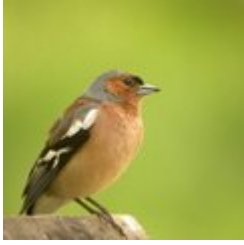
Attribution : Jan Novak Photography



The field horsetail (AN)

At the bottom of a water fountain, on the edge of a ditch a plant grows which resembles a large bottle brush... or a horse's tail, depending on your imagination. It's the field horsetail, a plant related to ferns. It is known for its medicinal properties because it is rich in silica, a powerful remineraliser for the bones, cartilage and skin. There are several species of horsetail.

Attribution : Cédric Dentan - Parc national des Écrins



The chaffinch (AO)

A very common bird, the chaffinch lives in forests as well as villages. The male is in shades of pink, with a blue-grey cap; the female is duller, in shades of greenish grey. It is a rather gregarious bird, except in the breeding season, and the birds often communicate with one another by their « pink, pink » calls. It is partially migratory. The populations from Northern Europe come to spend the winter in France and other temperate countries.

Attribution : Damien Combrisson - Parc national des Écrins



The Scots pine (AP)

On the edge of the track, there is a large stand of Scots pines. This softwood tree can be identified by the beautiful salmon colour of its branches and the upper part of its trunk. Its short bluish-green needles are grouped in pairs. Capable of withstanding both low temperatures and summer droughts, it is perfectly adapted to the semi-continental climate of intra-alpine valleys.

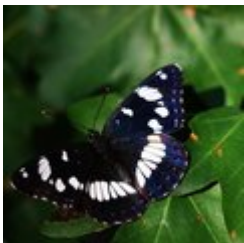
Attribution : Parc national des Écrins



The downy oak (AQ)

In the wood, downy oaks grow alongside Scots pines. . It is a small oak tree with marescent leaves: they dry out in the autumn but remain on the tree all winter. It is called "downy" because the young branches, buds and sometimes the undersides of its leaves are covered in a fine down. Forests of Scots pine and downy oak are typical of the warm, south-facing mountain slopes in intra-alpine valleys.

Attribution : Parc national des Écrins



The admiral butterflies (AR)

You might be lucky enough to spot the white admiral and the southern white admiral, butterflies with dark wing uppers intersected by a white strip and with an orangey-fawn underside. They are difficult to spot as they use their colouring and the shadows under the trees to blend into the background. They are both very shy. These two species are very similar; the females, unusually, lay their eggs on honeysuckles.

Attribution : Damien Combrisson - Parc national des Écrins



La Bâtie des Vigneaux (AS)

This hamlet owes its name to an old fortified house, no longer in existence, owned by the lords of La Bâtie. The colourful little chapel is dedicated to Saint Claudius.

Attribution : Jan Novak Photography



The mines of L'Argentière (AT)

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 (AU)

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 (AV)

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 (AW)

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 (AX)

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 (AY)

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 Maillat - Parc national des Écrins



The view over the Montbrison massif (AZ)

The path offers a beautiful overall view of the limestone massif of Montbrison, overlooking the hamlets of Pelvoux and including the Cime de la Condamine, the Tête des Lauzières, the Pic de Montbrison and the Tête d'Amont.

Attribution : Office de tourisme Pays des Écrins



The communal oven (BA)

Legend has it that the Lord caused a communal oven to be built and kept it maintained. The local people could use this oven in exchange for the payment of a levy. Families would prepare and knead their own dough at home and then bring it to the oven for baking. Names were drawn by lot to establish their turns.

Attribution : Office de tourisme Pays des Écrins



Images of the grapevine (BB)

Les Vigneaux owes its name to the vine cultivation once plied on its hillsides. The grapevine is also depicted on the town's coat of arms, which has a vineplant, and also on the traditional houses with vine trellises. Houses with grape presses are also a reminder of the importance of the grapevine.

Attribution : Office de tourisme Pays des Écrins



The sundial (BC)

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



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

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 (BE)

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 (BF)

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 (BG)

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.

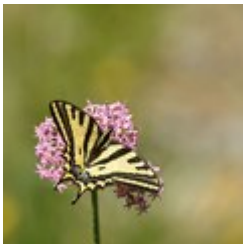
Attribution : Office de tourisme du Pays des Écrins



The penstock pipe (BH)

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 (BI)

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