



Vitrolles Village tour

A trip through 1,000 years of history



Along this path, the city of Vitrolles invites you to discover its historic heart, a Provençal village nestled at the foot of a monumental rock, from which you can enjoy a magnificent view over the Etang de Berre.

0. WELCOME TO VITROLLES

Throughout the visit, you will discover monuments, the medieval architecture, as well as the people who built the history of the city.

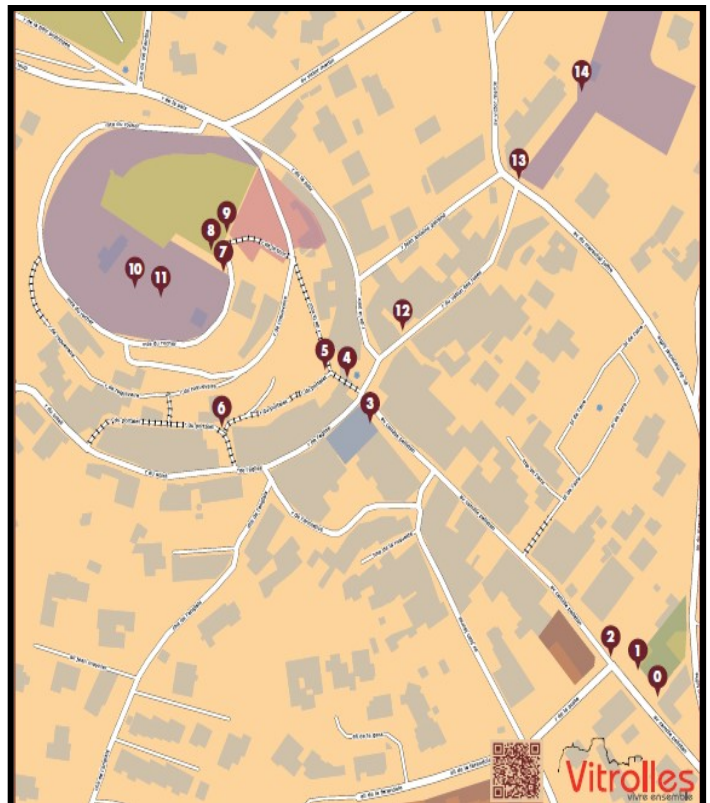
Did you know?

- The first name of Vitrolles was « *castrum quod vocatur Vitrola* »(994) which means « Fortified place named Vitrolles »
- This village has been here since the 5th century. Before then people lived on the shore of the Etang de Berre near the ancient and mythical *Villa Leonio*, which is probably where the name of the old salt marshes, Les Salins du Lion, comes from.
- You will walk along the picturesque alleys winding around the Rock(Le Rocher), after stepping through Notre-Dame gate (at the top of Camille Pelletan avenue, where you are now).

1. YOUR ITINERARY

Walking up the Camille Pelletan Avenue (2) this path will lead you to:

- (3) Saint-Gerard Church dedicated to the founder of Malta Order
- (4) Republic square and its fountain
- (5) The Portalet street and the western gate of the city walls called "Portalet"
- (6) The Four Banal (seigneurial oven) uphill street, starting point of the 1720 plague
- (7) Entrance of the old cemetery called "cimetière du Roucas "
- (8-9)The way up to the Rock to admire the view
- (10) Saracen Tower (registered as Historical Monument)
- (11) Notre-Dame-de-Vie Chapel built around the year 1000.
- (12) Old houses of "de la Tour" and "Vallon des Roses" streets
- (13-14) End up with Christine Gounelle Park



← 2. CAMILLE PELLETAN AVENUE

Don't forget:

When you are in front of the sign in the street, follow the direction: left ← or right →.

2. CAMILLE PELLETAN AVENUE

CITY HALL OF THE VILLAGE built in 1883. Its current aspect dates back from 1961. Redecorated and approachable for people with reduced mobility in 2013, it is highly appreciated for wedding celebrations. Municipal departments among which Tourism and Heritage Departments as well as an exhibition hall dedicated to Heritage in all its forms, use it.

HOUSES OF THE AVENUE

In the 18th century, the village extended beyond the medieval ramparts. Houses in the Provençal style with a 2nd low ceiling floor used as attic, some of these houses along the hardly passable path were used as oil mills and other houses as notary offices.

Did you notice?

On the house fronts, arch-stones are ornamental elements located on the superior frames above windows or doors.

POLITICS IN THE VILLAGE MORE THAN 100 YEARS AGO

Two political tendencies existed: the Reds (republican and anticlerical* and the Whites (clerical). The often stormy meetings were held in different places called "cercles". Camille Pelletan (1846-1915) – MP for the Département des Bouches du Rhône – was a member of one of the Reds clubs named "Equality". Members met at n°12. The last White club closed around 1925.

Did you notice?

On n°37 house front (old Whites club), a stone wears date of May 11 1776.

* Anticlerical = opposite to the influence of the Church.

SOCIAL ASSISTANCE IN THE VILLAGE MORE THAN 250 YEARS AGO

At n°15, the old hospital or hospice built in 1755 was a place of charity and assistance. In this place, were accommodated travellers and pilgrims, and persons were helped with foods and medicine distributions as well as loans of seeds.

← SAINT GERARD CHURCH

3. SAINT GERARD CHURCH

The present church, blessed in 1744, was built outside of the medieval ramparts. It's dedicated to Saint-Gerard Tenque (1040-1120), who was the founder of the Military Hospitalier Order of Saint John of Jerusalem, which will become the Order of Malta.

The first Saint Gerard church was at the foot of the Rock, at the bottom of the old cemetery (sign 7).

Don't miss:

- A high altar, made of golden and sculptured wood in the 18th century style, credited with Pierre Puget or with his student Christophe Veyrier
- Paintings including "L'Assomption de la Vierge" (Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary) by Jean-Claude Cundier (1709)
- Stained-glass windows dated the 18th century, from the workshop André of Aix-en-Provence
- Two registered bells dated 1763 and 1770, (outside)

To visit the inside of the church, contact the Tourist office, Camille Pelletan Avenue.

→ REPUBLIC SQUARE

4. REPUBLIC SQUARE

THE FOUNTAIN

For a long time, water had been a problem in Vitrolles. Built in 1894 when the Durance waters were available, this fountain made villagers' life much easier, up to then they had to get the water from both municipal wells located outside of the village.

Did you notice?

The bowl of the fountain is made of Cassis stones. A bust in cast iron representing Marianne, symbol of the French Republic, crowns the pyramid in Vitrolles red marble.

Placing Marianne's bust in city halls became the rule from the third Republic. Its presence, outside, on squares or in front of city halls, dates especially from 1889, year of the centenary of the French Revolution.

NOTRE DAME GATE

Southern gate of medieval ramparts.

From 1668 to 1883, a small room located over the vault, on the first floor, housed the city hall.

Did you notice?

Walk through the portal and look upward, on the northern frontage a niche shelters a statuette of the Virgin.

THE OLD PRESBYTERY, THEN THE POST OFFICE

The house at the corner of the Republic Square the street of Vallon des Roses acted as presbytery from 1755 to 1905, before being the post office from 1912 until 1961.

To join now the medieval part of the village, turn left after the Notre-Dame gate and follow the "Rue du Portalet".

← PORTALET STREET

5. RUE DU PORTALET (PORTALET STREET)

Around the 5th century, in order to protect itself from barbaric invasions, the population settled down at the foot of the Rock. The Rock was used as a withdrawal and protection area. The Portalet Street was the main street of the medieval village. You can find various architectural elements, remains of this period:

- The typically medieval houses with their thick walls pierced with low doors and narrow windows.
- A sculptured lintel, bows of a door and a window leaning on the same pillar, doorways which could have sheltered some "shops".

PORTALET GATE:

You have to walk up to the end of the street to reach it.

Did you notice?

Watch the front of the last house on the right, a statue of Jeanne (1326 -1382), Queen of Naples, countess of Provence and Forcalquier is set there. A real tragedy heroine, 8 year-old bride, suspected of having decided the murder of her husband, she died assassinated. She sold her "fief" of Vitrolles in 1379.

← THE "FOUR BANAL" WAY UP

6. THE "FOUR BANAL" WAY UP

FOUR BANAL: (seigneurial bake oven)

You will find nothing left of this medieval period building. The Lord of Vitrolles, taking advantage of his command power (ban right), required villagers to use the oven built and they had to pay fees called "banality". "Banalities" will be paid until the French Revolution

Did you know?

The "Oven man" was the person in charge to bake bread prepared by residents into the oven once or twice a month.

THE 1720 PLAGUE:

It is at this very place that began the 1720 epidemic of plague in Vitrolles. François Guilhen, the oven-man, went to Marseilles to buy oakum to prepare his fire and he brought back the plague with him. Fleas that were into fibers were at the origin of the contamination. François Guilhen's wife died on August 3rd and François Guilhen on August 14th. Portalet Street was contaminated in less than 3 days and the plague ran into the village.

"The consuls of vitrolles declared that before the contagion there were in the place approximately 800 persons. The contagion began on August 12, 1720 until April 1, and there had been 225 sick persons with 209 dead and 16 persons were restored to health."

Archives of the Département des Bouches du Rhône

➔ TO FOOT OF THE ROCK

7. AT FOOT OF THE ROCK

THE OLD CHAPEL OF BLUE PENITENTS:

Blue penitents were laymen who helped for funeral processions.

Did you notice?

On the front, a cross mentioning 1619 is the only remain of this chapel which was abandoned before the 1789 French Revolution.

THE JEAN GIONO OPEN AIR THEATER:

This open-air stage with a capacity of 450 seats received the most famous names: Barbara Hendricks, Julia Migenes, Graeme Allwright, Alan Stivell or the Corsican group A Filetta.

Every summer the shows follow one another in this charming place located at the foot of the Rock. During its construction, some relics belonging to a housing environment of the 5th century were discovered: Bones, shells (oysters resulting from the Etang de Berre) and pieces of pottery. The Eastern wall is a trace of a medieval rampart.

THE OLD CEMETERY OR CEMETERY OF ROUCAS:

The only remain of the first church of the village, probably built during the middle ages, can be seen at the end of the cemetery, on the left, at foot of the Rock.

Falling stones from the Rock caused important damages and at the beginning of the 18th century, it was decided to build a new church outside of the village walls. This church is the present Saint-Gerard church. In the cemetery, you can find a very old grave. It's Casimir de Montvalon's, a former mayor of Vitrolles (1813).

← WAY UP TO THE ROCK – PILGRIMAGE TO NOTRE DAME DE VIE

8. WAY UP TO THE ROCK

Go up the 96 steps to discover:

SARACEN TOWER (10)

NOTRE DAME DE VIE CHAPEL (11)

To visit the chapel, please contact the municipal tourist office, City hall of the village, Camille Pelletan Avenue

VIEW OVER THE ETANG DE BERRE (fresh/salted water Pond)

9. NOTRE DAME DE VIE PILGRIMAGE

Every year, in the evening of August 14th the statue of NOTRE DAME DE VIE dating from the 17th century, is taken down from its chapel on the Rock down to the Saint-Gerard church during a walking torch procession. Before arrival at Saint Gerard Church where the statue will stay up to the Sunday evening after August 15th evening, usually there is a stop in Christine Gounelle Park (13) to celebrate a mass.

Until 1904, this festive walking procession livened up the village. There were many people around this walking procession led by congregationists. The children who had taken communion for the first time that year were part of it. The windowsills were lit by candles and the house front doors decorated with simple bed sheets or with beautiful cotton pieces. The children of the village standing on tables in front of their houses recited compliments to the Virgin. Hunters formed a guard of honour and shot in the air! All this had for result to forbid the processions in Vitrolles (decree of August 11th 1904)

Did you know?

This Virgin with a child statue has several dresses used in religious celebrations. Local families have offered them. In 1942, they were hidden into the presbytery during the German occupation of the village.

The oldest suit of Notre-Dame-de-Vie is composed of a dress and a veil in green silk lined with purple stripes, characteristic of Louis XVI period (not kept on site).

The Notre-Dame-de-Vie association, located in the village, takes part in the valorisation of the chapel and organizes guided tours.

Information at the city tourist office: 04 42 77 90 27

← SARACEN TOWER – NOTRE DAME DE VIE CHAPEL

10. SARACEN TOWER

The tower, now ruined, was 4 m x 4,30 m. The walls were 1,10 m thick and about 6 m high. It was probably a part of a fortified complex and could have been used as garrison, even as prison. The adjective "Saracen" seems to have been used only from the 20th century.

COAT OF ARMS OF VITROLLES:

"Of gold with a red tower of gules on a terrace too".

The tower and the mount represent the Saracen Tower and the Rock. The gold (yellow) and the gules (red) are colors of Provence.



DIFFERENT OFFICIAL NAMES OF THE CITY OVER THE YEARS

Vitrola	
Vitrolles les/lez Martigues	1501 -1790
Vitrolles les:lez Marignane	1790 -1802
Vitrolles	1802 -1931
Vitrolles le Roucas	1932 -1953
Vitrolles lou Roucas	1954 -1964
Vitrolles	since 1964

11. NOTRE DAME DE VIE CHAPEL

The chapel, dedicated to the Virgin, was built around the year 1000. The building includes a single nave ended with a semicircular apse. The entrance into the nave is from the side (southern facade). A small sacristy is placed onto the northern wall. The chapel is crowned by a bell wall tower in which a bell is rung thanks to a rope from the nave.

On the bell tower you can see a statue of the Virgin.

The chapel holds decorations especially a decorated ceiling with stuccos cartouches, with paintings (5 scenes of the life of the Virgin). The whole decoration is in the 18th century style.

A set of engraved ex-voto with the oldest one from 1881 and the most recent dated 1935 can be seen outside under the porch.

← ACTIVITIES OVER THE YEARS

12. ACTIVITIES OVER THE YEARS

The Vallon des Roses street is the old road to Aix. It will lead you up to Christine Gounelle Park, our next step. In this street, several houses were used as oil mills or notary offices.

In 1826, the city had:

- 16 oil mills
- 4 flour mills among which 2 wind mills
- Salt marshes and a big soda factory.

Up to World War I, agriculture was the first revenue stream for the people of Vitrolles. Vineyards and fruit trees (mainly almond trees) grew near the village. However, the culture of the olive trees was the most important. So, from foliage for animal litter to olives for food and fuel, everything was used. The last mill was closed after the big frost of 1956.

→ CHRISTINE GOUNELLE PARK

13. CHRISTINE GOUNELLE PARK

Offered to the town by the Gounelle Family, the park has a surface of 6000 square meters and goes up the hill in five terraces (stony low walls) variously laid out and equipped. The first one is for children with a play space.

The second level is a terrace with a planted pergola.

The terrace above is a special "French" garden with rosebushes and Mediterranean plants.

The two last stony walls are kept in a wild natural state. Between each terrace, walls have been rebuilt in the old fashion way (by Italian mosaic makers' artists) with an invisible masonry wall onto which dry stones are built up. The restoration revealed and protected two underground accesses, one to running waters ("gourg" may be a spring) and the other one to an old ice storage place (14).

← THE ICE STORAGE WELL AND WATER SPRING

14. THE ICE STORAGE WELL AND WATER SPRING

Before the arrival of the artificial ice, using ice (during the summer) was a luxury to refresh drinks and especially to keep food.

From the middle of the 18th century, ice storage wells were built in gardens. The natural ice was stored in a natural or built-in cavity. It consisted of a tank equipped with a duct to evacuate waters. They had a masonry roof and a door used for loading and taking the ice out.

In Vitrolles such equipment allowed to keep blocks of ice, probably produced in La Sainte Baume. Light carts brought the ice during the coolest hours. In order to limit ice melting during the journey, ice blocks were covered by hessian then straw or foliage.

For more explanations: Ice museum Mazaugues and Pivaut ice storage well (83):
http://www.la-provence-verte.net/activites/patrimoine-mazaugues-glaciere-de-pivaut_840.html

WATER SPRING: (in a recess on the right):

Gourg is a provençal name for a cave, a cave with water or a deep puddle in a rock bottom. The water seemed coming from the "Plateau of Vitrolles" by seepage or from the same spring which feed "le Chemin des Vignes", the old Escounière laundry shed and the old city wells on the Park Square.

Here ends the discovery-path of the old village, one of the jewels of the inheritance of the city of Vitrolles.

We hope you will be on this path again.

Enjoy your visit of Vitrolles!

Tourist office ☎ **33 (0)442779088** ✉ tourisme@ville-vitrolles13.fr

Translation into English by courtesy of Mrs Danielle PIQUET – Association culturelle VITROLA