

THE TALE OF A VALE

THE SILVER VALLEY



VILLES
& PAYS
D'ART &
D'HISTOIRE

The Val d'Argent's landscape is marked by its particular geographical position and by the influence of human activity which started in the middle ages.



The Bagenelles pass

© Patrick Schmitt

1. Panoramic view of Sainte-Croix-aux-Mines

© José Antenat

2. Panoramic view of Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines

© José Antenat



A CENTRAL LOCATION

The Val d'Argent is a valley located in the massif of the Vosges Mountains stretching out on 23km and covering a total area of 103 square km. Situated halfway between Lorraine and the plain of the Rhine, the Val d'Argent is a strategic spot only one hour away from Strasbourg, Mulhouse and Nancy, the main cities of the area.

A DIVIDED VALLEY

The valley is divided in two: the bottom, leading to the Bagenelles pass, is a steep sided area becoming wider as it extends towards Sélestat. The lower part of the valley was populated from the Middle Ages onwards, and the rest was only invested later. Many dells protrude into the Val d'Argent's hillsides. Their names, such as "la Hingrie" in Rombach-le-Franc are often associated with local legends.

A RICH SUBSOIL

Tormented by telluric forces, the local subsoil includes a number of faults, where valuable mineral resources such as silver, cobalt, lead, arsenic or copper are concentrated. The area has been profoundly marked by 10 centuries of mining. The accumulation of rubble in front of the mines formed lumps known as "heaps". Around a thousand of them have been counted. The total length of the underground galleries' network is estimated to be 300km.

THE FOREST

The heights of the valley are covered with 600ha of forests and pastures, a natural resource

which has led to the development of forestry and of mountain farming. Originally wooded, the mountainsides were gradually cultivated. In the 17th century, the agricultural skills of the Anabaptists led to a quick expansion of mountain farming. During the agricultural decline of the mid-20th century, the forest regained ground. The stubbles became covered with spruce and fir trees while pine trees grew on the low and medium-altitude pastures.

WATER

The river Liepvrette is a central element of the Val d'Argent. It creates a physical link between the villages, but was also used as a natural border from the Middle Ages to the French revolution. As an essential raw material for the mining activity and textile industry, water played an important part in the local economic development from the 16th century on. The trees and bushes growing along the stream and its affluents contribute to the harmony of the local scenery.

REGIONAL HERITAGE

Steeped in history, the Val d'Argent is full of heritage sites. Amongst them, small architectural elements, such as traditional wayside crosses, old stone fountains or dry walls remind us of the regional traditions and character. Sandstone, for instance, is a fundamental element of the local architecture. This raw material, extracted in Rombach le Franc or from the quarries of Le Hury, was formerly used to build door frames, cornices and lintels.



LANDSCAPE PLANNING

The local environment and landscape are part of the valley's attractive features. A landscape planning process has been initiated in 2003, and intends to rehabilitate the Val d'Argent's natural and urban landscape. This involves preserving the many existing open spaces in association with the farmers, as well as ensuring the good integration of human activities in the area

THE VAL D'ARGENT OVER THE CENTURIES

Populated from the 8th century onward, the valley owes its expansion to two major activities : silver mining and the textile industry.

THE EARLY DAYS

The history of the Val d'Argent (formerly known as Val de Lièpvre and Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines' valley) began in Lièpvre in 732 with the founding of a priory by Charlemagne's private tutor, abbot Fulrad. A century later, another priory was built further up in the valley. The area was gradually populated and the peasants started to clear up the forest as they settled deeper into the valley.

A BORDER REGION

From the 13th century onwards, the lands were confiscated by the local lords. In 1399, the latter divided the valley in two areas, using the Liepvrette as a natural border between their domains.

In the 16th century, the contrasts become

stronger between the two sides of the river. Until the French revolution, this natural border marked the political and legal separation between the lands of the german-speaking protestant lord of Ribeaupierre and those of the French-speaking catholic duke of Lorraine.

THE GOLDEN AGE OF THE SILVER MINES

Throughout history, two periods of intense industrial activity made the Val d'Argent famous. In the 10th century, the discovery of silver seams initiated the mining industry. Abandoned in the 14th century, mining was taken over in the 16th century by 3000 miners from Saxony and Bohemia. Silver and lead were the main minerals extracted at the time. However, from the 18th century on, mining mostly focused on the extraction of copper, cobalt and arsenic. The industry progressively declined until its end in 1940.

COTTON AND WOOL

Textile activities such as hosiery and lace-making developed in the valley as early as the 16th century. From 1740 on, the cotton then the wool industries expanded and the textile creations from Sainte-Marie aux Mines, known as "article de Sainte-Marie", became internationally famous. The textile industry spread throughout the Val d'Argent and many prominent families such as the Dietsch or the Blech settled in the valley's villages. Despite the wars and several crisis, the local factories kept producing high-quality products.



3. Sandstone statue of Fulrad, abbot of Saint Denis

© Alain Kauffmann

4. The pit room at the St-Louis Eisenthür mine. Dug in the 16th century, it can still be visited today, enabling you to discover the mining methods of days gone by.

© Alain Kauffmann

5. Boundary stone on the bridge in Rue de la Vieille Poste in Ste-Marie-aux-Mines. To the left, the dual-bar cross represents the coat of arms of the Duke of Lorraine and to the right we see that of the Ribeaupierres

© José Antenat

6. Old textile factory at Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines

© José Antenat





7. A typical turreted house from the mining period. These houses were used as places of residence by the executives from the mining authority. Here, the protruding staircase is an outward sign of an affluent home.

© José Antenat

8. The Villa Burrus belonged to André Burrus who had a tobacco factory in Ste-Croix-aux-Mines, which he managed with his cousin, Maurice Burrus. Maurice was a world-renowned stamp collector and a generous donor to the district of Ste-Croix-aux-Mines

© José Antenat

9. The swimming pool and the theater of Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines at the beginning of the 20th century

© Archives CCVA

armament factory by the Germans. 2000 foreign deportees worked there until the Liberation.

THE CURRENT INDUSTRIAL SECTOR

Today, the Val d'Argent remains an industrial valley, a sector that provides jobs for almost half of the active local population. The area also relies on the diversity of its economy to develop tourism and getting people acquainted with its unique heritage sites, bearing witness to a prestigious past.

A RELIGIOUS SANCTUARY

From the 16th century onwards, the lords of Ribeaupierre welcomed various religious communities on their land. Escaping persecutions, Lutherans, Calvinists, Anabaptists (at the origin of the Amish movement created in 1693) and Jews settled in Sainte Marie's surroundings. Each community built its own place of worship, leaving a legacy of more than 26 chapels and churches bearing witness to this religious diversity.

THE SCARS OF INTERNATIONAL CONFLICTS

Situated at the crossroads between the French and the German territories since the Middle Ages, the Val d'Argent was not spared by the two world wars. In late 1914, the front line stabilized in the area of the Pass of Sainte Marie. Until 1918, bloody fights took place in the Val d'Argent's mountains, leaving scars in today's landscape. During the second world war, the tunnel linking Alsace to Lorraine was used as an

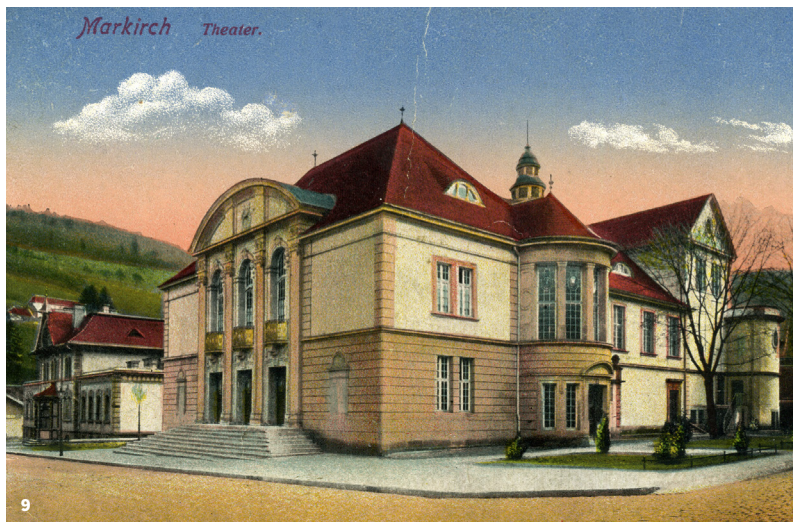
UNCOVER HISTORIC SITES

From the 16th century houses to the mansions; from the industrial buildings to the churches and chapels, explore the unique diversity of the Val d'Argent's heritage sites.

MEDIEVAL PROTECTION

Back in medieval times, the Val d'Argent was surrounded by half a dozen of castles. Their location tells of the proximity of the border and of the valley's strategic position on the way through the Vosges Mountains.

Although many of these castles, such as the castle of Echery in Ste Croix, fell apart over time, some of them are still standing: it is the case of the Haut Koenigsbourg or the Ortenbourg. They can be reached via various hiking trails.



RENAISSANCE ARCHITECTURE

The ten centuries of mining left a mark on the Val d'Argent. This legacy includes civil and administrative architecture such as the Miner's Tower in Echery or the turreted houses of Ste Marie aux Mines.

Built in the 16th century, these houses were granted to the officials of the mining administration. Underground, a sprawling network of galleries entirely dug out by the miners, covers more than 300 kms. Some of the old mines can still be visited today.

FROM RESTORED INDUSTRIAL BUILDINGS....

Many buildings and canals from the industrial era still bear witness to the Val d'Argent's textile heritage. Former factories have been refurbished and given new functions.

Sainte-Marie-aux-Mine's heritage museum displays a collection of hand looms and mechanical weaving looms operated by a weaver. The former Edler-Lepavec factory, in the centre of Sainte Marie aux Mines, will soon be hosting the CIAP (architecture and heritage interpretation centre).

.....TO ELEGANT TOWNHOUSES

The working class neighbourhoods from the 19th and 20th centuries, such as the Blech council estate in Sainte Marie aux Mines, border the former manufacturer's mansions. The chateau and villa Burrus, now housing the inter-district library, are part of them.

Their monumental and ornamental architectural styles, which include balconies, Mansard roofs

and decorated pediments, used to highlight the owner's influence and wealth.

CHURCHES AND CHAPELS

The Val d'Argent's religious tolerance left an uncommon architectural legacy. The Reformed church in Sainte Marie aux Mines is one of the oldest in France: built in 1634, it was spared from the destruction imposed by the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685.

Today, some local religious buildings such as the church of Saint-Pierre-sur-l'Hâte regularly host concerts. This church is currently the only place of worship to be shared between three different religious communities (Catholic, Lutheran and Reformed). Ancient miners' graves can still be seen in the churchyard.

THE BELLE EPOQUE

In 1871, the Val d'Argent became part of the German Empire. It was a prosperous period in terms of architecture, and many facilities were built in the villages. In 1903, Alsace's first heated public swimming pool opened in Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines, encouraging personal cleanliness and providing sanitary facilities for the valley's inhabitants lacking of such amenities at home. The theatre, inaugurated in 1908, was designed by the architect Gustav Oberthür in a German neo-classical style. The college, the post office and the main roads were also built during this period.



10



11

AN AGRICULTURAL VALLEY

The forest of the Vosges has always been the backbone of the local economy and has met the needs of the farming population. Covered with 600ha of forests, the Val d'Argent is today the leading forestry town in the Haut Rhin. Since 1990, the Vincent sawmill in Ste Croix aux Mines has become a museum, offering visitors the opportunity to discover woodcraft step by step on authentic 19th century machines.

CULTURAL TREATS AND NATURAL HERITAGE

Experience the many delights of a region full of colours and contrasts. Discover the secrets of the small local heritage explore the forests and don't miss the array of delicious products on offer from local producers.

MOUNTAIN FARMS

The 16th century hay lofts have been converted into mountain farms. Typical of the Vosges, these farms have been welcoming walkers every Sunday since the early 20th century, offering them the traditional "repas marcaire".

Make sure to try out this delicious mountain meal which includes potatoes roasted in butter and oignons, served with a generous piece of smoked pork, and a slice of homemade blueberry pie for dessert. The local farmers are also quick to offer you the opportunity to taste their specialities such as Munster cheese, eau-de-vie, honey or foie gras.

EXPLORING NATURE

While taking a stroll along a walking trail, uncover the hidden gems of the local fauna and flora. The arboretums are full of various resinous and hardwood species.

Food lovers will be delighted to pick wild strawberries and raspberries as well as delicious wild mushrooms such as chanterelle or cep. It is not rare to spot blue jays in the trees or deers grazing in a clearing, and rainbows trouts can be observed swimming in the streams.

REGIONAL RELIGIOUS HERITAGE

Countless wayside crosses made of Vosges sandstone line the roads and paths of the Val d'Argent. Erected to commemorate a happy or tragic event, they are remnants of the 17th century's strong popular piety.

10. The Hajus Chapel at Sainte-Croix-aux-Mines

© Patrick Schmit

11. At the Bagenelles resort, visitors can enjoy cross-country and piste skiing but also snowshoeing or sledding

©Photo Alain Kauffmann

12. The Mineral & Gem Show of Ste-Marie-aux-Mines (last week-end of June) attracts 1000 exhibitors and more than 30.000 visitors each year

©Photo José Antenat

13. The patchwork show of the Silver Valley attract more than 20.000 visitors each year

© Alain kaufmann

14. Textil exhibition and fashion show at Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines

© Photo Alain Kauffmann



A PICTURESQUE CHARM

The villages of the Val d'Argent are filled with bright coloured house, typical of Alsace. Blue, red, yellow or green mix up to bring the valley's once colourless streets back to life. The local villages were granted the appellation "village fleuri", given to municipalities across the country as a reward for the quality of their flower displays and their urban scenery.

LANGUAGE AND DIALECTS

Once at the crossroad of the Holy Roman Empire and the duchy of Lorraine, the Val d'Argent has always been a meeting place between French-speaking and German-speaking communities. The former spoke the "welche" dialect while the latter spoke Alsatian. The place names also bear witness to the meeting of these two vernacular languages. Today, only a small part of the younger generations still speak the dialects, though several initiatives are taken to preserve these languages. Many conversations sessions in patois (called "Stammtesch" in Alsatian) regularly take place in the Val d'Argent, both in the Welche and Alsatian dialect.

WINTER IN THE VAL D'ARGENT

The semi-continental climate of the region makes it an ideal destination for a winter sport holiday. Since 1964, the ski resort of Les Bagenelles, on the heights of Sainte Marie aux Mines, has been a meeting place for downhill and cross-country skiers. During winter, the snow give a magic aspect to the landscape

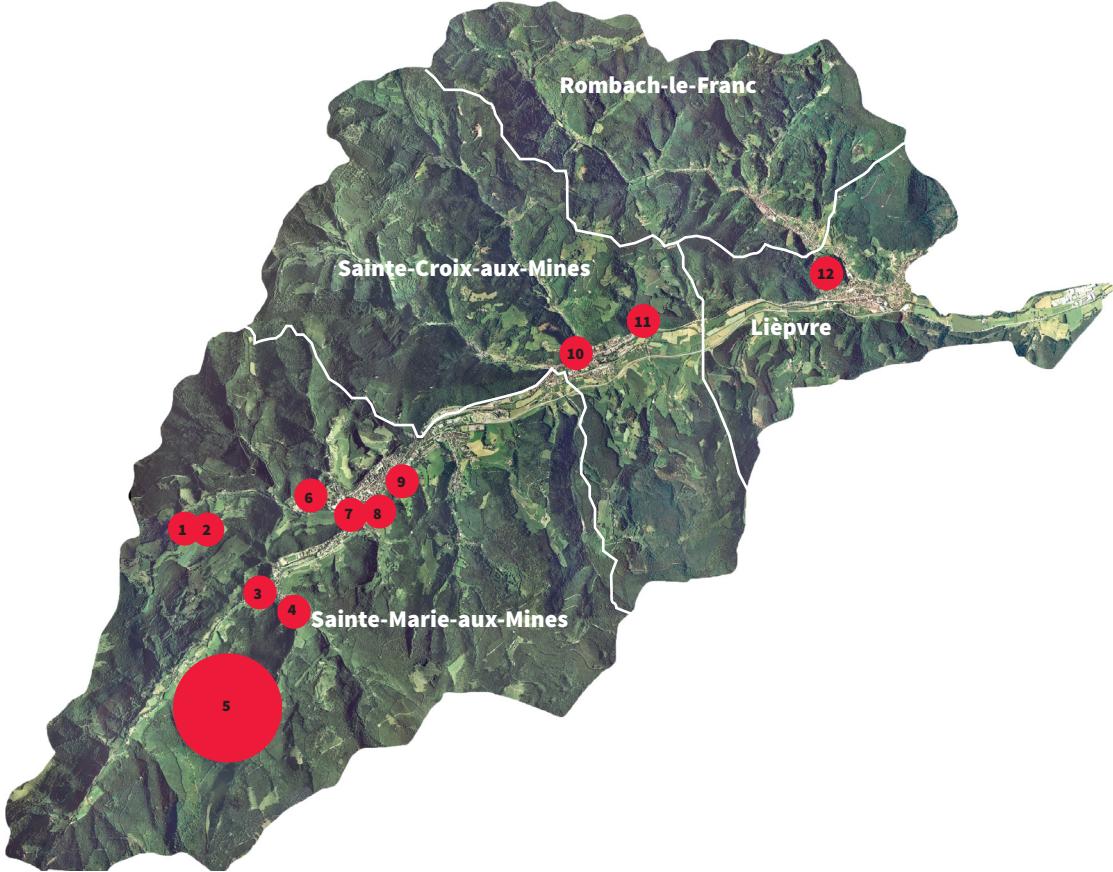
which can be admired from the top of Le Haicot's pass, overlooking the valley at an altitude of about 1000m.

A DYNAMIC CULTURAL LIFE

Proud of its glorious industrial past, the Val d'Argent hosts many annual events related to these aspects of its history. Mineral and Gem (one of the largest mineral, gem and fossil show in Europe) takes place every June and gives visitors a chance to admire thousands of rocks and gemstones from all around the world. In September, the Val d'Argent celebrates the birth of the Amish movement in its mountains during the Carrefour Européen du Patchwork (European Patchwork Show) since 1994. Traditional patchworks and contemporary textile creations are also showcased during Mode et Tissus, a bi-annual textile show.



HISTORIC MONUMENTS OF THE SILVER VALLEY





1. Military pool of the First World War



2. The Swiss Chalet



3. The tower of the miners



4. The church of Saint-Pierre-sur-l'Hâte



5. The Silver mines of the Neuenberg



6. The villa Lacour



7. The theater



8. The Calvinist temple



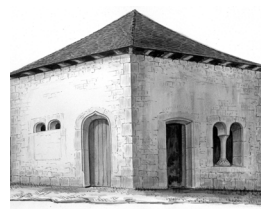
9. The villa Reber



10. The villa of Maurice Burrus



11. The sawmill Vincent



12. The ossuary

Photos

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AN ATTRACTIVE LANDSCAPE GREET'S YOU AS YOU ARRIVE IN SAINTE-MARIE-AUX-MINES, INCLUDING PLAINS, NUMEROUS TOWNS AND STREAMS. THIS IS A TRULY DELIGHTFUL SETTING(◉◉◉◉).

Mlle de MONTPENSIER, granddaughter of King Henri IV, who came to Alsace (Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines) in 1673.

The Silver Valley... a timeless tale...

Discover a region of art and history in the company of a guide-lecturer approved by the Ministry of Culture. The guide is your host. He is fully familiar with all aspects of the Val d'Argent, and will carefully explain everything you need to know to understand the landscape, and learn more about the development of the region through its various towns and villages. The guide is there to help you. Please feel free to ask any questions

The Silver Valley belongs to the national network of Towns and Regions of Art and History.

The architecture and heritage department of the Ministry of Culture and Communication awards the «Towns and Regions of art and history» title to local authorities who have made a

special effort to enhance and promote their heritage. This title guarantees the skills of the guide-lecturers and heritage officers, in addition to the high quality of their activities. From ancient ruins to 20th-century architecture, these towns and villages show the sheer diversity of France's heritage at its best. Today, this network of 180 towns and regions offers you a wealth of knowledge and know-how to be enjoyed right across the country.

The heritage services department coordinates the various initiatives taken by the Val d'Argent, a region of art and history. All year round it offers entertainment features for inhabitants of the Ste-Marie-aux-Mines Valley and for schoolchildren. Feel free to contact the department for any

plans or projects you may have. The Val d'Argent proposes visits all year round by appointment. Brochures designed especially for you can be sent out to you at your request.

Information, reservations

The Tourist Office
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Tel. : +33 (0)3 89 58 80 50
patrimoine@valdargent.com

Nearby

The Guebwiller area is officially a Region of art and history.

The towns of Mulhouse, Sélestat, Strasbourg are officially a Region of art and history.

