

The Val d'Argent... 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 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.

For groups

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

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The Val d'Argent belongs to the national network of Towns and Regions of Art and History.

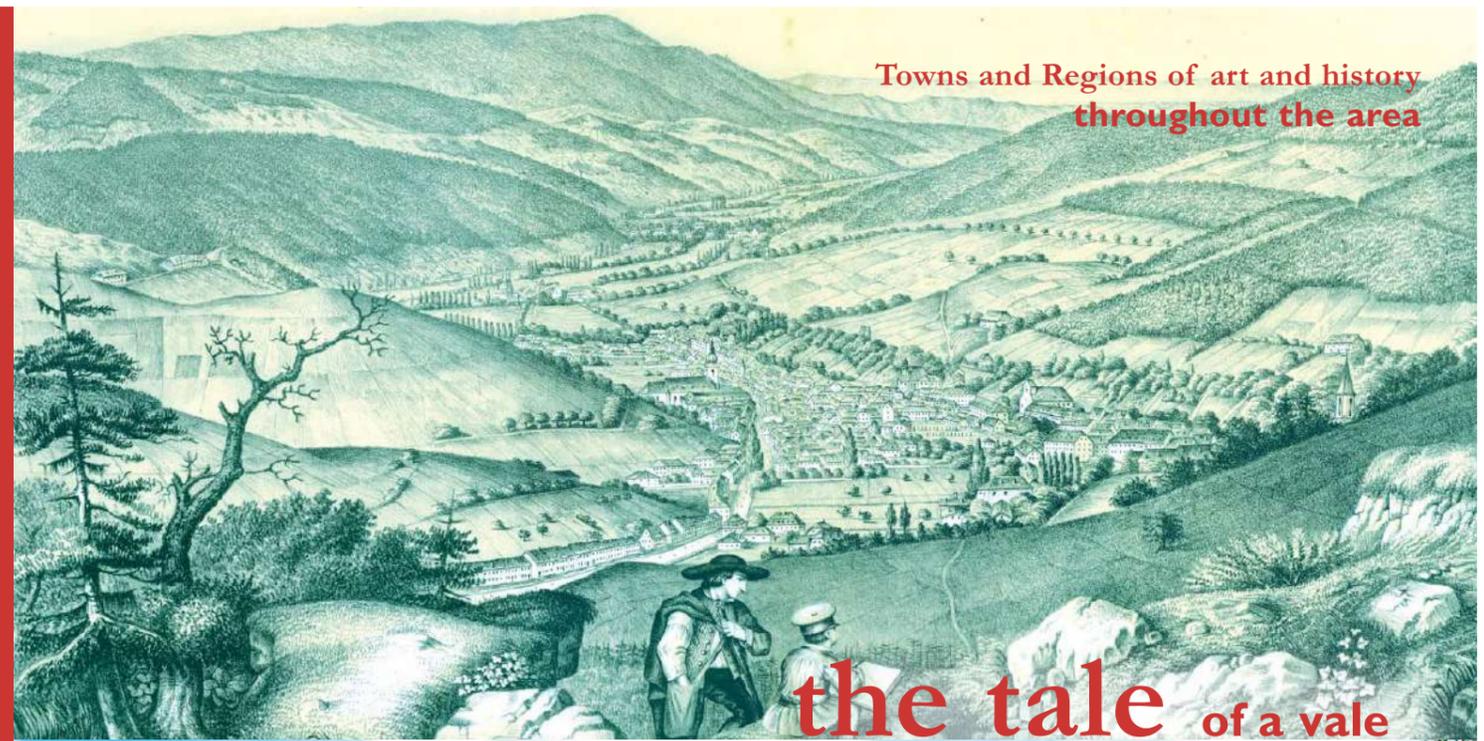
The architecture and heritage department of the Ministry of Culture and Communication awards the "Towns and Regions of art and history" title to local authorities who have made a special effort to enhance and promote their heritage. This title guarantees the skills of the guide-lecturers and heritage 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 130 towns and regions offers you a wealth of knowledge and know-how to be enjoyed right across the country.

Nearby,

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

An attractive landscape greets you as you arrive in Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines, including plains, numerous towns and streams. This is a truly delightful setting (...). A stream separates Lorraine from Alsace.

MISS DE MONTPENSIER (GRANDDAUGHTER OF HENRI IV
who came to Alsace (Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines) in 1673.

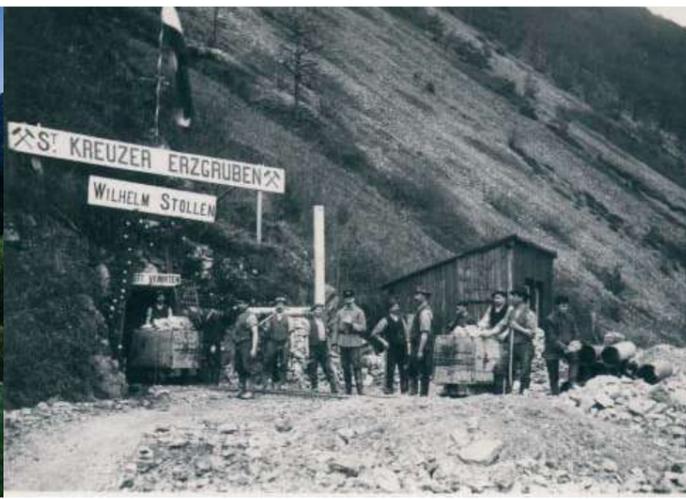


The landscape

Influenced by human activity since the Middle Ages, the landscape of the Val d'Argent continues to be marked by its geographical location.



View down to the end of the valley



Entrance to the St-Guillaume mine in Ste-Croix-aux-Mines. Photograph from the late 19th century. The miners deposited rubble in front of the mine entrances. These rubble heaps can still be seen today.



Originally from Switzerland, the Anabaptists arrived in the Val d'Argent in the 16th and 17th centuries. They introduced new techniques to boost the productivity of local agriculture.



Cattle and sheep rearing continues in the area's high pastures and meadows.



The Lièpvrette runs through the Val d'Argent for a distance of over 25 km, fed by more than 20 streams.



The region is rich in vernacular heritage. A former well dating from 1690, in Echery.

A central location

The Val d'Argent is a valley in the Vosges, with a surface area of 103 km² and a length of 23 km. Located in the heart of the Vosges range, it enjoys a strategic position in central Alsace. It is situated one hour away by road from the major regional urban centres including Nancy, Strasbourg and Mulhouse.

The two faces of the valley

The valley is divided into two parts, including a steep sided area at the bottom of the valley heading towards the Bagenelles pass, which was only tamed by man later, and a gentler, more open landscape which was the scene of construction work from the Middle Ages onwards. A number of vales protrude into the Val d'Argent's hillsides. Their names are often associated with legends such as La Hingrie in Rombach-le-Franc.

Ancient hillsides

Tormented by telluric forces, the subsoil of the Val d'Argent includes a number of faults, around which valuable mineral resources are concentrated including silver, cobalt, lead, arsenic and copper. The area has been profoundly marked by 10 centuries of mining here. The accumulation of excavated rubble near the entrance to each mine forms a pile known as a «heap». Around a thousand separate heaps have been recorded. The network of underground galleries covers a total estimated length of 300 km.

Endless forests

The presence of a 6000 ha forest and pastures in the higher areas has encouraged the development of the forestry and high altitude farming sectors. Originally heavily wooded, the mountainsides were gradually turned over to agriculture. The arrival of the Anabaptists in the 16th and 17th centuries saw a rapid expansion of mountain farming. During the agricultural decline of the mid 20th century, the forest reconquered the slopes. Up on the high pastures we find fir and spruce trees while pine trees continue to encroach on the lower and middle altitude pastures.

Water !

The river Lièpvrette is a vital feature of the Val d'Argent. Forming a physical link between the various districts, it also served as a border back in mediaeval times. Providing a natural resource crucial to the local mining and textile industries, water was channelled to help develop the Val d'Argent's economic activities from the 16th century onwards. Trees and bushes grow along this waterway and its tributaries, adding to the charme of the landscape.

Regional heritage

Heritage attractions abound here, in the form of the area's many wayside crosses, drinking troughs, dry stone walls or water features. It stands as a reminder of the region's natural resources and local character. In particular, sandstone was brought from Rombach-le-Franc or the Le Hury quarries in Ste-Croix-aux-Mines and were used for door frames, ledges and lintels. This raw material forms a key aspect of the local architecture.

The landscaping plan

The environment and the local landscape are valuable assets for the valley. An all-embracing initiative was launched in 2003. This «Landscaping Plan» makes it possible to manage the Val d'Argent's natural and urban landscape in a coherent, overall manner. This involves protecting the many existing open spaces working with farmers, but also to ensure the best possible integration of human activity in the area.

The region over the centuries

Populated from the 7th century onwards, the Ste-Marie-aux-Mines Valley expanded on the back of two key products: silver and textiles, of which many traces can still be seen today.

The early days

The history of the Val d'Argent, (which was previously known as the Val de Lièpvre and later as the Ste-Marie-aux-Mines Valley), began when the first priory was established in Lièpvre (*Fulradi Villare*) in 774, by Charlemagne's private tutor abbot Fulrad. A century later, a second priory was created further up the valley. Local population centres gradually developed along the valley, and set about clearing the forests.

A border region

From the 13th century onwards, the land was confiscated by local aristocrats, who in 1399 divided the valley in two, with the Lièpvrette forming the border between their estates. In the 16th century, the contrasts between the two sides of the river were very noticeable. Up until the French Revolution, this river formed the political and legal boundary between the lands of the Protestant, German-speaking Lord of Ribeaupierre, and those of the catholic, French-speaking Duke of Lorraine.

The silver golden age

Throughout its history, the Val d'Argent has witnessed two major periods of single-sector industrial activity. The discovery of the first silver seams in the 10th century saw the start of mining here. Abandoned in the 13th century, these were reworked in the 16th century by 3000 miners from Saxony and Bohemia, who came here to mine silver and lead. From the 18th century onwards and up until 1940, mining activity was focused chiefly on the extraction of copper, cobalt and arsenic.

Cotton and wool

From the 16th century onwards, textile activities expanded throughout the valley including hosiery and trimmings. After 1740, the cotton and later wool industries developed here and "Sainte-Marie items" made their name in a number of countries. This activity affected numerous districts in the area, and great families made their homes here including the Dietschs in Lièpvre or the Blechs in Ste-Marie-aux-Mines. Despite the wars and crises, the area continued to produce high-quality products.

A land of religious asylum

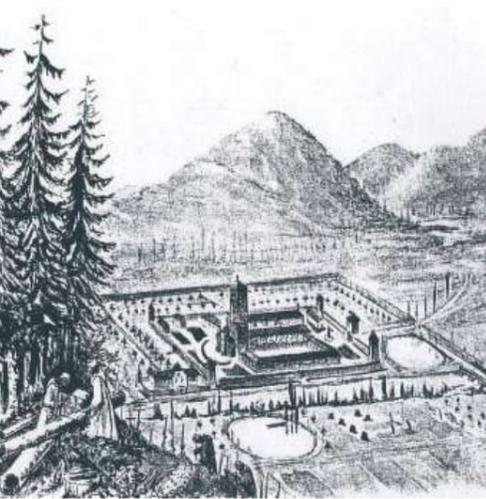
From the 16th century onwards the Ribeaupierres welcomed various religious communities on their land, who came here to seek asylum including Lutherans, Calvinists, Anabaptists (resulting in the creation of the puritan Amish movement in Ste-Marie-aux-Mines in 1693) and Jews. More than 26 chapels and churches bear witness to this religious diversity, as each community created its own place of worship.

Marked by international conflicts

Situated in a border area from the Middle Ages onward, the Val d'Argent did not escape the fighting of the two world wars. After 1914, the fighting centred on the Ste-Marie-aux-Mines Pass. Extremely bloody, it continued up to the liberation in 1918, leaving numerous traces on the local landscape. Opened in 1937, the tunnel linking Alsace to Lorraine was used as an armaments factory during the Second World War by the Germans. Some 2000 foreign forced labourers worked here until the liberation in 1944.

A healthy modern industrial sector

Today, the Val d'Argent remains an industrial valley, which provides jobs for almost half of the active population. It also benefits greatly from the diversity of its economy, and is developing tourism, providing a chance to discover unusual heritage sites which bear witness to its rich past.



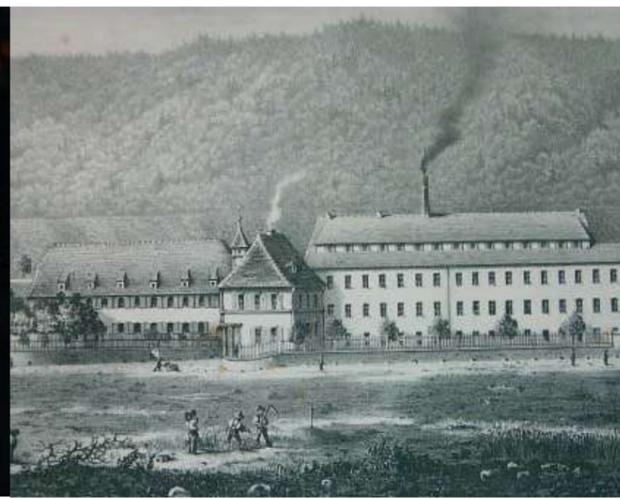
Engraving showing Lièpvre priory in the 16th century. Built in the 8th century by Fulrad, it was gradually destroyed in the 18th century. A number of stones have been reused in Lièpvre's buildings.



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.



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



The Weisgerber textile mill around 1850. The three-floored building on the right housed the textile production units. This "factory block" architectural style was popular at the time.



Sample of Ste-Marie items or fabrics. This name is also used to refer to the Jacquard or tartan fabrics which made the local textile industries so famous during the 19th and 20th centuries.



Situated on the hillside of Ste-Marie-aux-Mines, each summer the Church of St-Pierre-sur-l'Hâte is the scene of candlelit classical music concerts.

From place to place

From the freestone facades to the mansions, and from the industrial buildings to the many churches and chapels, come along and discover the sheer diversity of the Val d'Argent's local heritage.



The castle of Echery in 1785. Built in the 11th century, it provided protection for the Echery priory. It was destroyed by the Swedes during the Thirty Years War.



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.



A mechanical weaving loom exhibited at the Maison de Pays. These looms gradually replaced the hand looms used until the 1930s.



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. The latter was a world-renowned stamp collector and a generous donor to the district of Ste-Croix-aux-Mines.



In the Val d'Argent, religious tolerance dates back to the 16th century. The Reformed Church on the left is located in the former Ste-Marie Alsace (Protestant). It is situated close to the Church of la Madeleine (to the right) located on the land of the former Ste-Marie Lorraine (Catholic).



Advertising poster for the Ste-Marie-aux-Mines swimming baths. The picture shows the pool as it was originally laid out with its cabins around poolside, its stained glass and its enamel frieze.

From renovated industrial buildings...

The industrial buildings and canals can still be admired in large numbers, bearing witness to the Val d'Argent's textile heritage. Former factories have been converted to new uses. The "Maison de Pays" textile Museum features a collection of hand looms and mechanical weaving looms which are still operated by a weaver. The planned restoration of the former Edler-Lepavec factory in the centre of Ste-Marie-aux-Mines will see this site becoming home to the *Maison Européenne du Patchwork* (European Patchwork Centre).

... to wealthy homes

The working class housing of the 19th and 20th centuries such as the Blech estate in Ste-Marie-aux-Mines or the homes in Rombach-le-Franc, stood in stark contrast to the wealthy mansions such as the Burrus chateau or villa in Ste-Croix-aux-Mines, which today houses the inter-district media library. Their monumental and ornamental architectural styles (including balconies, mansard roofs and decorative pediments) served to highlight the owners' economic domination of the area.

Churches and chapels

Thanks to its religious tolerance, the Val d'Argent has more than 26 places of worship. The Reformed Church in Ste-Marie-aux-Mines is one of the oldest in France. Built in 1634, it escaped the destruction brought about by the revocation of the Nantes Edict in 1685. Other religious buildings also regularly host concerts, such as the Church of St-Pierre-sur-l'Hâte. This is currently the only church at which three separate religions are celebrated (Catholic, Lutheran and Reformed). Ancient miners' graves can still be seen in the cemetery.

The Belle Epoque

In 1870, the Val d'Argent came under German authority. These were good years for the local architecture, and the valley's villages obtained a number of new amenities. In Ste-Marie-aux-Mines, Alsace's first heated swimming pool opened in 1903, encouraging regular bodily hygiene among the town's inhabitants lacking suitable washroom facilities at home. The theatre was built by Oberthür in 1907 featuring a German neo-classical style. The secondary school, the post office and the main roads were also built at this time.

An agricultural valley

The Vosges forest has always formed the backbone of the local economy, and has covered the needs of the agricultural population. With almost 6000 ha of forests, the Val d'Argent is today the leading forestry district in the Upper Rhine area. Since 1990, the Vincent sawmill site in Ste-Croix-aux-Mines has been used to help visitors discover the wood industry as they watch logs being converted into planks before their very eyes.

Local tastes & local know-how...

Take the time to stroll here and to appreciate this region with its varied fragrances and colours. Throughout the day you can discover the many facets of its rich heritage.

A mountain fragrance

The 16th century haylofts have been converted into mountain farms. Featuring a typical Vosges architecture, these have welcomed hikers and ramblers every Sunday since the early 20th century in the area's famous farm-inns, where they can tuck into a delicious *repas marcaire* (traditional mountain meal). Local farmers are also keen to present their specialities including Munster cheese, brandy, honey and foie gras.

Discovering nature

While out walking the many marked-out hiking trails, be sure to look out for the area's hidden fauna and flora. Discover the coniferous and broad-leaved tree varieties in the arboretums. Food lovers and mycologists can enjoy picking wild strawberries or wild red raspberries; and chanterelle, cep and parasol mushrooms. You may well surprise a blue-feathered Eurasian jay or stags walking in the meadows, while in the streams you can admire the rainbow trout swimming upstream.

Crosses by the score

There are countless wayside crosses produced from Vosges sandstone lining the roads and trails of the Val d'Argent. Erected to mark some happy or tragic event, and demonstrating an increasing religious devotion from the 17th century onwards, these crosses stand as timeless examples of the region's rural heritage.

The joys of life in the valley

The villages of the Val d'Argent are attractive and colourful, with a coherent and harmonious mix of coloured houses. The reds, blues, yellows, greens or whites combine marvellously to bring these once uniform streets to life. These villages are often also prize-winning "villages in bloom", recognised for the quality of their flower displays and their attractive setting.

Languages and dialects

In the Val d'Argent, the presence of the border has encouraged contact and dialogue between the French-speaking and German-speaking communities. The former speak the "welche" dialect while the latter speak Alsatian. The place names also bear witness to this meeting of vernacular languages. Today, the old dialects and patois are spoken far less frequently by the younger generations, although a number of initiatives seek to protect the memory of these languages including the *Stammtesch* (conversation sessions in the Alsatian dialect) and conversation in the *welche* patois.

Let it snow !

The Val d'Argent's semi-continental climate means that winter sports can also be enjoyed here. Since 1964, the resort of les Bagenelles has been welcoming both alpine and cross-country skiers. From high up at le Haïcot, visitors can discover a completely transformed landscape during the winter months.

Constant cultural activities

Proud of its mining and textile past, each year the Val d'Argent welcomes a number of major events related to these aspects of its heritage. In June, the *Bourse aux Minéraux* (the largest mineral, gem and fossil show of its kind in Europe) provides a great opportunity to spend hours strolling among thousands of rocks and minerals. In September, the Val d'Argent celebrates the Amish during the *Carrefour Européen du Patchwork* (European Patchwork Meeting), created in 1994. Patchwork and fabric designs can be admired in the valley's unusual exhibition venues and its churches.



A farm on the Chaume de Lusse in 1850, on the high ground near Ste-Croix-aux-Mines. Its architecture is very typical of a Vosges farm with its carriage entrance.



The local farmers enjoy welcoming tourists at their farms, where high-quality local products are on sale.



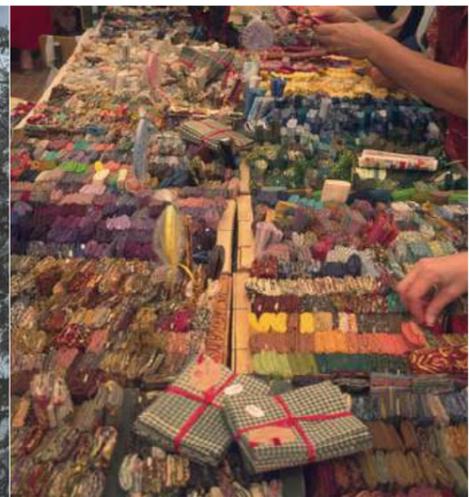
One of the region's many wayside crosses, in Lièpvre.



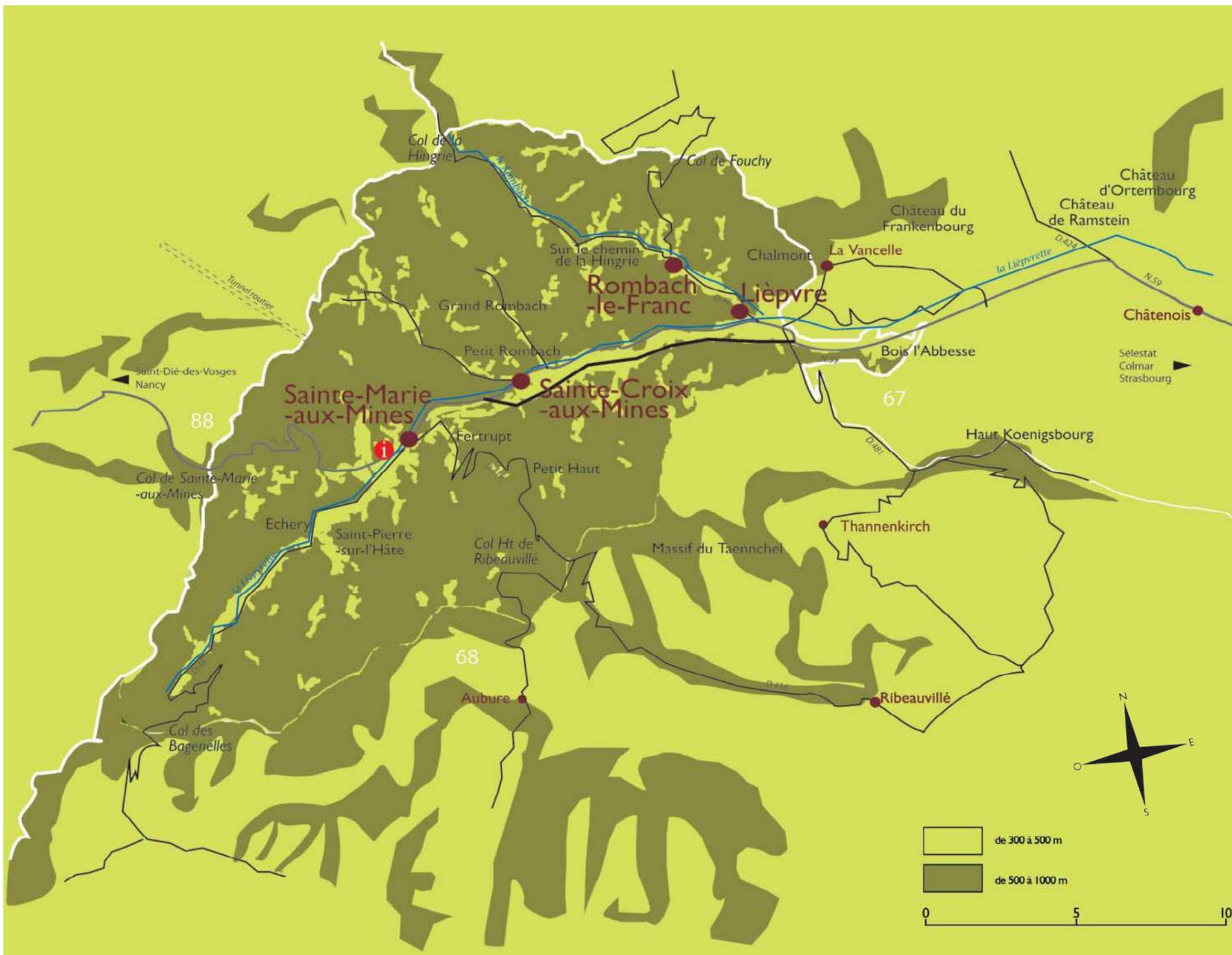
A typical example of a colourful, flower-decked house.



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



Several thousand visitors flock here each year, during the many cloth-related events.



"Must-see" attractions in the Val d'Argent...

The former silver mines

- Tellure, The Underground Worlds Exploration Centre
- The Saint-Louis Eisenthür mine
- The Gabe Gottes mine
- The Saint-Barthélemy mine
- The Neuenberg Geology Trail
- The St-Pierremont Wood Trail

Textile heritage sites

- The Maison de Pays
- The European Patchwork Centre (to open soon)

Forestry heritage sites

- The Vincent Sawmill museum
- Forestum

Religious heritage sites

- Discovery Trail of the 26 churches and chapels in the Val d'Argent
- The Church of Saint-Pierre-sur-l'Hâte
- The Reformed Church
- The Lièpvre Church

Military heritage sites

- The ruins of the castle of Echery
- The Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines First World War Trail

Educational heritage

- The School Museum

Discovery visits: a practical guide

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An hour and a half or thereabouts...

The visits and activities last for an average of an hour and a half. The guides look forward to seeing you at the

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