

The form of a town

The town of Briançon is located on a rocky peak, 1326 metres above sea level in a circle of high and impressive mountains.

Briançon, where valleys meet

The town lies where five valleys meet - Haute Durance, Guisane, Clarée, Ayes and Cerveyrette - and therefore occupies a remarkable site. Very early, because of its situation amidst valleys radiating out, Briançon benefited from easy access to Provence, Queyras, Isère, Drôme and what is Italy today. This important network of communication routes made Briançon a place for travellers, one of the main crossroads in the centre of the Alps, offering the best conditions to circulate, trade, and exchange cultures.

Prehistory and Antiquity

There was no human settlement in Palaeolithic times because of a succession of Ice Ages. Human occupation of the valleys around Briançon is assumed to have existed during the Neolithic period, and such occupation is certain in both Bronze and Iron ages. The first local tribes (Ligurians then Celts) lived on the flat areas in the valleys, subsisting from agriculture and barter. In early Roman times, Brigantio was possibly located where the Champ de Mars is today. The area remained under Roman occupation until the fall of the Empire in the 5th century.

Birth of the town at the time of the Dauphins

Briançon was part of a region called “Le Dauphiné”, an area that would correspond today to the departments: Isère, Drôme, and Hautes-Alpes. The district was created around Albon, in the neighbourhood of Vienne in Isère, under the rule of a rich family whose members chose the name of Dauphins in the early 13th century. In 1343, the inhabitants of the area, grouped in 51 communities, signed a charter with Humbert the IInd, the last of the Dauphins, which ensured their rights and granted them privileges. In 1349, Humbert the IInd gave his territory to the French king. From then on, the king's heir was to be called “Le Dauphin”, as a reminder of the local lord.

Briançon in flames

Because of its dense housing, most of which was made of wood, Briançon was particularly at risk from fires. The town suffered from fires especially during the 17th century. The first fire burst out in December 1624 and destroyed four fifths of the town. In January 1692, the houses, which had only just been rebuilt, were again burnt down. Once again, the inhabitants rebuilt their houses, and the medieval plan of the town was not altered for they rebuilt the houses on the remaining basements. Yet the appearance of the buildings changed, for they used stone instead of wood that time.

Vauban in Briançon

Vauban arrived in Briançon in autumn 1692, shortly after a serious attack by the Duke of Savoy. At first sight, he realised the place would be difficult to defend as it was totally surrounded with mountains towering above it. By November 21st and 22nd, he had drawn up his project. He ordered the building of bastions, half-moons, and a fausse-braye on the Embrun front. He demanded various improvements to be achieved: the ditches were to be dug deeper, the curtain walls strengthened, new guardhouses built, new embrasures, traverses and posterns created, the main entrance vaulted, more powder magazines and barracks built and the well on the Place d'Armes deepened. On his second trip to Briançon, Vauban inspected the works and wrote a new report dated August 24th, 1700.

Briançon, keeping watch on the border

The Spanish War of Succession, from 1701 till 1714 marked the end of King Louis the XIVth reign. In the Briançon area, battles took place between soldiers from France and Savoy. In 1713, the treaty of Utrecht partly brought an end to the conflict, but its consequences proved disastrous for the country. The border, which so far had been much further east, was brought back to the Montgenèvre pass. France lost Val Cluson, La Varaita and a big part of Susa valley, to gain in return the small valley of Barcelonnette. The town was from then on a frontline border zone. The building of a strong fortified barrier started in July 1721, to be continued for thirteen summers under the Regency then under King Louis the XVth.

19th and 20th century developments

The layout of Briançon was greatly changed in the 19th century. “La Schappe” factory was established in 1863, new barracks were built from 1880, and railways reached the town in 1884. This was the start of a new district down the hill, near the river Durance, around the little hamlet of Sainte-Catherine. Unprecedented changes in the landscape took place in the post war period. Traditional farming activities gave way to tourism and climatic medical centres. The local landscapes changed accordingly.



Briançon where valleys meet



Tritonesse, Roman fountain



View of Briançon



Coat of arms of the Dauphiné, Maison du Roi



Briançon in 1644, painting, collegiate church of Briançon



Vauban, 1633 - 1707



Half-moon of the bastioned front



Houses on the ramparts

The town through the centuries

Central meeting point in the Alps, the town benefitted from economic, political and strategic development, nationally and internationally as well.

Crossroads of trade and influence

People consider the town actually started in the first quarter of the 13th century, when the word “bourg” was first used. The Dauphin encouraged his people to come and trade in town, granting them rights and privileges which gave Briançon an international renown for commerce. When, at the start of the 14th century, the popes settled in Avignon, commerce in the river Durance valley benefitted from another boom. Every year, merchants from France, Comtat Venaissin, Italy, Flanders, Germany and Spain gathered in Briançon for the September fair which could last up to fifteen days.

A strong religious presence

In the Middle Ages, due to the presence of Waldensian movement communities in the area, the Roman Catholic church started evangelizing and repressing. Numerous religious establishments were created. A convent for Franciscan friars was built in town at end of the 14th century. Different confraternities were present and active. Black Penitents erected a chapel in the 16th. At the end of the 17th century, the building of new ramparts made it necessary to demolish the medieval church and its elegant steeple. A collegiate church was then built within the walls. Franciscan friars called “Recollets”, acting usually as military chaplains, built a new convent in the 18th century. Ursuline nuns took care of young girls’ education.

Military life

As early as Gallic-Roman times, because of its location at the foot of Montgenèvre pass, Briançon had been a military stronghold. Successive wars in Italy led to French kings stopping overnight in the town on several occasions. Passing troops repeatedly looted the town and its inhabitants. With the construction of the fortified barrier in the 18th century, the military presence increased with a garrison up to 6000 men in times of conflict. The creation of the “régiment de la neige” (snow regiment) at the end of the 19th century greatly influenced the daily life of Briançon. The “Centre National d’Aguerrissement en Montagne” (national mountain warfare training centre) replaced the 159th Régiment d’Infanterie Alpine (Alpine Infantry Regiment) in 1994.

The Industrial Revolution

Briançon’s economy was really boosted when a new factory was established in the lower part of the town. In the early 1860’s, the “Usine de La Schappe”, intended to transform silk waste, brought industrial revolution to Briançon. The phenomenon altered the economic, social and urban patterns of the town and started a new industrial, commercial, middle-class urban district: Sainte-Catherine. For nearly a century, the factory employed from 700 to 1400 workers. The sequels of WWI and the invention of synthetic silk caused the factory to cease activity in 1933.

The birth of tourism and the development of climatotherapy

In the second half of the 19th century, a new activity appeared in the Briançon area: tourism. With summer and winter sports expanding fast, and thanks to the first international skiing contest in Montgenèvre in 1907, the area soon enjoyed widespread fame. More and more people were attracted to the place. Besides tourism, climatotherapy became another positive economic factor. Enjoying a pure air, dry and sunny climate, Briançon officially became a “health resort” in July 1914, but it was not until the 30s that a genuine health policy appeared and sanatoria were built.

Briançon during WWII

Italy declared war in June 1940, but French artillery soon silenced the biggest threat: the Italian fort of Chaberton. German forces invaded the “free” southern part of France in 1942, and they were in Briançon in September 1943. Occupation generated the development of the “Résistance”, and several underground groups were formed. Allied forces landed in Provence on the 15th of August 1944. Their move forward was very quick and Briançon was first liberated on August 23rd, but a few days later, the town was taken again by the Germans. After more fighting, the town was freed for good on September 6th, 1944.

A town for sports, leisure and culture

Located 1326 m above sea-level, in the heart of the Southern Alps, enjoying 300 sunny days a year and plenty of snow, Briançon, quite naturally turned to winter sports. At the end of the 19th century, the military first practised downhill skiing and started making skis. A first skilift was built in Serre-Ratier in 1941, initiated by the Club Alpin Français (French alpine society) in Briançon. With the construction of the Prorel gondolas in 1990, Briançon invented the new ski-and-city concept. Situated on the Grande Route des Alpes (Great alpine road), the city of Vauban appeals to lots of visitors in the summertime, offering them a rich heritage that is continuously enhanced.



Map of Briançon in the 18th century



Steeple of the Penitents' chapel



Fighting in winter Centre National d’Aguerrissement en Montagne (national mountain warfare training centre)



Manœuvres of the soldiers of the « Régiments du passé »



Old factory of « La Schappe » entrance



Briançon summit of the Prorel



Contemporary sculpture

From one place to another

For years, the town was limited in its development by the requirements of defence. It eventually emerged from its walls in the 19th century, creating a new urban area with space and easy access in mind.

From the fortified castle to the fort du Château
Under the command of the Dauphins, as early as 1060, the town was fitted with a fortified keep located on the rocks towering above the town. When Vauban first came to Briançon, he discovered the medieval castle and was worried because of its poor condition. He felt the fort either had to be improved or demolished, but due to lack of money, the necessary works were not started then. In 1835, the old keep was demolished, and a new fortress completed ten years later: the fort du Château. In 1918, the military turned the fort barracks into a heliotherapy sanatorium for consumptive servicemen. In 1933, “La Grande France”, a bronze statue by Antoine Bourdelle, was erected at the top of the fort.

The Cordeliers church
The church is the only medieval building still standing in Briançon. It shows a Romanesque style front and a doorway decorated with small columns, capitals and rounded arches, and a high splayed window. The upper part is decorated with a succession of small arches, typical of the master builders from Lombardy who worked in the area in the Middle Ages. The inside of the church, under a gothic vault, still has a remarkable decoration of 15th century wall paintings. The pictures show a solar glory, with the Four Evangelists around, each with his own symbols, busy writing their gospels. A representation of the Original Sin, one Christ on his cross, and a Virgin Coronation complete the set of pictures.

Civil architecture
In the Middle Ages, the city was a busy market town. Terraced houses, mostly built of wood, could be seen on each side of the street, on three or four levels, shops, workshops and stables on the ground floor, while the upper storeys were used as housing or barns. After the 1692 fire, houses were rebuilt of stone, with coloured lime rendering. In the main street, the well-ordered facades have one or several bays, with regular windows, and an entrance door, an almost classical style. The facades of the houses opening on to secondary streets is a reminder of the agricultural use of the houses.

The Maison du Temple
Temple Square, which is just a wider part of the street with the same name, is so called because the Order of the Templar Knights was in town in the Middle Ages. The fascinating Maison du Temple forms one of the sides of the square. The house is one of the oldest buildings that remained after the fires, but its history is little-known, and quite mysterious. The way it is decorated with pilasters, pediment and archway, is testimony to a Renaissance style. A coat of arms that was hammered off at the time of the French Revolution, two dates, 1574 and 1575, as well as quotations from St Luke’s gospels “Search and you will find”, and St Matthew’s “Come in through the small door” completes the picture and add to the mystery.

The Place d’Armes
The only open space in a very densely built up area, the square has always been a meeting point for the inhabitants. From the Middle Ages to the 18th century, a vast wooden canopy sheltered a market as well as skittles and real tennis players. Under the reign of Louis the XVth, the growing number of military wanting to show the local people how important they were, turned it into a Place d’Armes in order to use it as a parade ground. Vauban had a well dug in the middle of it to ensure extra water supply in case the town was besieged. The square was lined on the north side by the Maison du Roi, with the Court of Justice, prison cells, guards’ accommodation and a chapel.

Vauban styled fortifications
The town was protected by a rampart, built between 1692 and 1723, with two bastions, one half-moon, a fausse-braye, huge ditches, covered way and glacis. In this way, the town was entirely closed in from the Pignerol gate to the Embrun gate. The south eastern front was naturally defended by the river Durance gorge that could be reached through the Durance gate. With high mountains all around, the defenses were completed with a fortified barrier, the Salettes, Trois Têtes, Randouillet, Anjou, Dauphin forts, plus the Point du Jour redoubt, all positions being interconnected by the Pont d’Asfeld and the Y Communication corridor.

Notre Dame and Saint Nicolas collegiate church
In the year 1700, a King’s decree granted permission to build a “new parish church”, to replace the previous one, located outside the town that had been demolished for strategic reasons in 1692. The plan of it was drawn by military engineer Robelin, supervised by Vauban. The church, which was dedicated in 1726, was promoted a collegiate church twenty years later. The building is a harmonious and imposing landmark on the town’s skyline. The facade, decorated with a series of pilasters and pediments like the King’s fortresses, is an invitation for passers-by to enter the church and discover the sophisticated inner furnishing made of paintings by Louis Court and reredos. Marble trompe-l’oeil paintings enhance the prominent details of the architecture.



19th century etching, view of the fort du Château



The Cordeliers church



View of the ramparts, Embrun gate



Bay and pediment,
Maison du Temple



The Place d’Armes



Collegiate bell-towers

Flavours and savoir-faire

Half-way between the Alps and Mediterranean sea, Briançon makes up its own personal identity from its rocky surroundings and the warmth of the colours around.

The gargouilles

In 1345, the inhabitants dug a watering canal on the mountain side, so that the water from the river Guisane could flow from St Chaffrey to Briançon. The canal reached the inside of the town, not to take sewage waters away, but to ensure an ample and convenient water supply to fight fires. It is still in use today, all along its course, to water gardens. Originally, the water ran in hollow tree trunks, later in stone “gargouilles” which gave their name to the canal itself and to the street as well. Unfortunately, the water was frozen when two raging fires burnt the town down in the 17th century, leaving the inhabitants totally helpless.

The fountains

In the Middle Ages, the town was supplied with drinking water by three public fountains, called, according to their location in the town, top fountain, middle fountain and town foot fountain. The water came through earthenware pipes. In the 19th century, the town authorities initiated an improved hygiene policy and five new water supply points were created to make the life of the inhabitants easier. Originally made of wood, then of stone, the fountain basins underwent many successive repairs along the years. The middle one is the oldest. It is adorned with a column, and its fine gadrooned top, and four zoomorphic water spouts.

The wall paintings: religious pictures and sundials

Two different techniques can be used for painting walls: tempera is the simplest one. A mixture of natural colouring and glue is brushed directly on the wall coating. The other technique, fresco painting (from the Italian *a fresco*) which means that the paint is brushed directly on the wet lime render, is more skillfull. The artist starts on a rough coating, sketching his future picture, then he applies a finer coating on the part of the wall he is going to paint on that same day. A chemical process between plaster and lime soon fixes the colours. This technique requires working fast and expertise, but it makes the picture last for ever.

The sundials

The Hautes-Alpes department has over 400 sundials, 284 of which date back to the 18th and 19th centuries. Such vertical dials are painted a fresco on the walls of some private houses and public buildings. The tradition can be explained in several ways. Contrary to a clock, a sundial required no maintenance by expert craftsmen, sometimes living far from Briançon and not very willing to come during the long winter period. Besides, the area was exceptionally sunny, over 300 sunny days a year, the Italian fresco technique was well mastered and the geographical latitude, close to 45°, made calculation relatively simple, even for an apprentice. Four sundials can be seen in the old walled-in town. The oldest one is majestically situated on

the collegiate church tower.

Dated 1719, it was made using the trompe-l’oeil technique that was in fashion during the classical period. It imitates a gilt wooden statue. The second one, Louis XVth in style, is on the western facade of the Cordeliers church. Two more sundials can be seen on the Place d’Armes, on the facade of the Maison du Roi. On the older one, which was refurbished in 1823, mottos remind that time goes-by, and tell strollers of the commercial, military and judicial activities on the square. The other one, much simpler, is made in the style of a famous sundial maker from Piedmont, Giovanni Francesco Zarbula, who worked in the area in the 19th.

On the Briançon dinner table

Thanks to the Tourist Office of Briançon and the members of the “Association de Protection du Patrimoine Culinaire et des Arts de la table” (specialists in Culinary Heritage), you can enjoy 17th and 18th century refined menus in several restaurants in town. Now rediscovered, dishes from the past can be served on today’s tables : caillettes aux herbes (meat pâté with herbs), sauté d’agneau chamoisé (pot-cooked wine marinated lamb), “*conin*”, the old word for rabbit, in dark sauce or roasted with garlic, stuffed lettuce, “*ganderos*”, made from potato-starch, red cabbage with chestnuts, “*toupinna*”, a strong mixture of goat’s milk cheese and other cheese leftovers, fresh cheese cake with walnuts, walnut

crackers, pear “*rézule*” (stewed pears in pastry). Refined dishes and rich meals were served on special occasions, but often reserved for the well-off. The more humble inhabitants of Briançon lived from their kitchen gardens and hunting, so that sometimes a piece of meat could be added to vegetable pot soup. Due to the rough climate and relatively poor soil, garden plants were rustic, and not very varied: cabbage, parsnips, turnips, Swiss chard, and legume such as lentils and broad beans. There usually was a small square planted with herbs. In these gardens some aromatic and medicinal plants also grew that played a major part in the medical treatments at the time.



The petite gargouille



The Persens fountain at the foot of the town



Saint Matthew's table, Cordeliers church



Collegiate church sundial 1719



A chocolate Vauban - 2007
"Pâtisserie Comte" pastry shop



"Goodies" from the Hautes-Alpes



- 1 Bastions
- 2 Half-moons
- 3 Curtain
- 4 Saint-Mars guardhouse
- 5 D'Artagnan guardhouse
- 6 Fort du Château gun powder store
- 7 Durance front gun powder store
- 8 Site of the old barracks
- 9 Well
- 10 Fausse-braye
- 11 Collegiate church
- 12 Access to the fort du Château
- 13 Counterguard
- 14 Embrun gate
- 15 Durance gate
- 16 Pignerol gate
- 17 Recollets convent
- 18 Cordeliers church
- 19 Maison du Temple (Tourist Office)
- 20 Maison du Pape
- 21 Town hall (Archive Service)
- 22 Maison du Roi (Centre d'art contemporain)
- 23 19th century gun powder store (musée de la Mine)
- 24 Maison des Têtes
- 25 Asfeld Bridge
- 26 Heritage Service and « Vieux colombier » room
- 27 Former priests house and old town hall
- 28 Governor's Garden (jardin du Gouverneur)
- 29 Library
- 30 Black penitents chapel
- 31 Ecrins national Park headquarters and Ski museum
- 32 Casemate
- ✓ Sundials
- Fountains

Guided tours
instructions - user guide

An hour and a half or a bit longer...
Tours and activities available all year round.
Lasting on average from an hour and a half to two hours.
No advance booking required except for children workshops (for 6/12 years old).
For further information:
→ office/reception Heritage Service
Porte de Pignerol
05100 Briançon
tel +33 (0)4.92.20.29.49
fax +33 (0)4.92.20.39.84
patrimoine@mairie-briancon.fr



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Françoise Deshairs
Véronique Faucher
et Julie Crutz
guides-conférencières
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Your guide welcomes you. He knows Briançon inside and out and will help you understand the scale of a stronghold and how the town developed throughout the different districts. Feel free to ask him questions, he's at your service !

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coordinates ideas.

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Information and reservations at the Heritage Service

Porte de Pignerol - 05100 Briançon

tel +33 (0)4.92.20.29.49 - fax +33 (0)4.92.20.39.84

patrimoine@mairie-briancon.fr

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Louis the XVIIIth in gratitude for the brave people of Briançon
who kept their town.
“Past and Present guarantee for the Future”