

Secrets de village... Besse s/ Issole

Distance: 900 m • Start: Le Pradon car park

Besse owes its fame to the highway robber Gaspard BOUIS, known as Gaspard de Besse, who was born in 1757. He attacked and robbed stagecoaches, but legend has it that he had spared the poor. He was betrayed and then broken on the wheel in Aix-en-Provence in 1781. Gaspard was mourned by the people: he had rebelled against a life of poverty and, in his own way, heralded the revolution. Sheltered by its castle, Besse still has its maze of old streets, some leading to a small lake, making this old village on the plains a very pleasant place to stroll around.



1 The so-called Romanesque fountain: built in 1542 in hewn limestone, it is without a doubt one of the oldest in the Var. It consists of an octagonal basin and a column topped with an obelisk, which is crowned with a ball. The water gushes from four canons, with gargoyles carved in high relief.

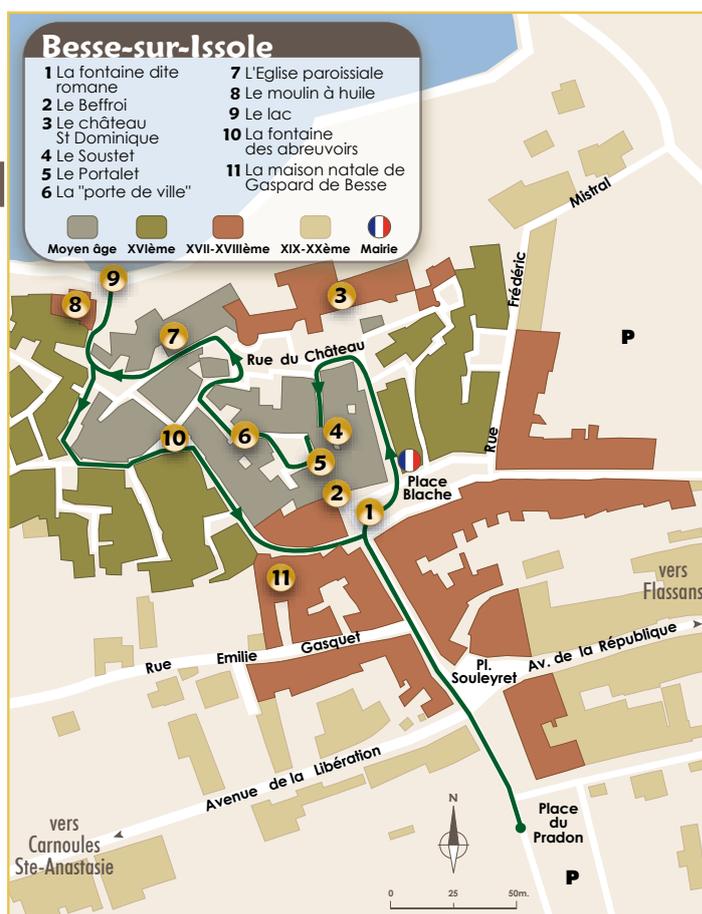
2 The Belfry: built in 1655, this tower marks the location of fortification gate in the medieval wall, and has four levels. The village coat of arms sits between the sundial and the clock. The bell weighs 280kg, and the bell tower is hexagonal in plan. An openwork dome on the top is crowned with a ball, that in turn carries a lightning conductor and a weather vane.

3 The Château St Dominique: belonged until the Revolution to the powerful Provostship of Pignans. It was part of the clerical wealth seized during the Revolution, and was sold at auction in 1791. It was divided in two at this time, and this is still evident today. From its south façade the castle resembles the Château d'Entrecasteaux. Older relics from the medieval era have been identified in the foundations, while a late-14th-century gate-tower still survives. It is very difficult to imagine the original medieval building, since it has been substantially rebuilt over the centuries. The current building is believed to have been built at the beginning of the 18th century; classical in style, it is on four levels, flanked by two scroll buttresses and bordered laterally by flat pilasters. All the bays are segmentally arched, except on the two upper levels of the central part, which has semi-circular bays.

4 Le Soustet : A passageway beneath a dwelling, known in Provence as a soustet. There is a carved head near the ceiling, dating from the beginning of the century and known as la tête de Gaspard by the villagers. However, it does not represent the head of the Besse's famous bandit: the only existing portrait of him is in the Musée Granet in Aix-en-Provence.



5 Le Portalet : beneath the hewn stone vaults, the



half-arched door opened onto a small room, which is believed to have been used as a place of detention.

6 La "porte de ville" : the 15th-century 'city gate' is a remnant of medieval fortifications. The inhabitants could throw projectiles at attackers through the machicolations.

7 The parish church: built between 1643 and 1646 on the site of the medieval church. It has a single nave, a square tower and a Gothic-style gate. It contains a work by Frédéric Montenard, a painter of Provençal light, who was appointed official painter to the Navy in 1921, and died in Besse in 1926.

8 The oil mill: believed to date from the 18th century. The building is a superb specimen, with an upper level where the olives were stored. On the ground floor are the turbine, the cast iron gears, the tank, the grinding wheel and the wooden crown wheels, two cast iron presses and three 'chapels' in the strengthening wall, which has a hanging cornerstone (rare). Unfortunately, since the great drought of 2007 the mill has been closed to the public and awaiting restoration work.

9 The lake : fed by a resurgence of the River Issole, and covering an area of some four hectares. The lake has its own legend: it is said that it was once a wheat threshing area. And on Saint Anne's day, which was then a non-working day, two miscreants went there to thresh their crop. Suddenly, a powerful spring gushed forth, drowning the miscreants and their mules. Legend has it that they can still be heard on St Anne's day, roaming around and cracking their whips in the depths of the lake.

10 The fountain at the drinking troughs dates from the 16th century. Made of hewn limestone, it consists of a hexagonal basin, a column with three canons and a small obelisk topped with a sphere.

11 The birthplace of Gaspard de Besse (n°7 in the street).

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