

As early as in the second millennium BCE, the source of the river Jaur, which gushes forth in a mountain amphitheatre, encouraged various peoples to come down into the valley and settle on the north bank of the river. Thomières was thus born.

In 936, Count Raymond III of Toulouse and his wife founded the abbey of St. Pons on the south bank of the Jaur in honour of the martyr Pons de Cimiez. An initial inhabited nucleus was established around the abbey, and the town of Saint-Pons was created.

The two towns have their own fortifications and are duly known as St. Pons, la ville Mage ("the Magus Town"), and Thomières, la ville Moindre ("the Lesser Town"). It was in the 17th century that the two towns were joined together to create the town of Saint-Pons-de-Thomières.

The economy thrived in both towns, firstly with trade in woollen cloth, then in a second period with textile factories. It was at the end of the 19th century that economic decline set in with the closure of all the textile industries.

Today, St. Pons is enjoying a new boom with the re-opening of the old marble quarry, and this noble material has become the town's emblematic image.

The Tourist Office

Housed in the old corn exchange, a building whose distinctive feature is that it was built over a vault straddling the river Aguze.

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1 The source of the Jaur

A prehistoric sanctuary situated beneath le roc de la Masque (the "Masque Rock")

2 The church of Saint Martin du Jaur

Vestiges of a church built from the 5th century on the ruins of an old pagan temple; the building was subsequently altered in the 15th and 16th centuries, then converted into dwellings at the end of 18th.

3 The Gascagne Tower

A mediaeval tower situated on the old fortifications of Thomières, on the southwest side.

4 The church of Notre-Dame du Jaur

A mediaeval church built, legend has it, by a knight who was saved by the Virgin Mary.

5 The Chapel of the Penitents

A building erected in 1616 by the secular confraternity of the Grey Penitents.

6 Rue de l'Empéry

The old trading street of the town of Thomières, with lots of 16th and 17th century shops.

7 The shops

A presentation of the different styles of 16th and 17th century shops.

8 The windows

A presentation of the way windows evolved from the 12th to the 17th century.

9 Notre-Dame bridge

An old Romanesque fortification which made it possible to cross the Jaur and enter the ville Mage ("Magus Town").

10 Rue Villeneuve

In the 17th century, this was the nobles' street, lined essentially with mansions with inner courtyards.

11 The doors

A presentation of the way doors evolved from the 12th to the 18th century.

12 Tower of Count Pons

Also known as the Bishop's Tower, it was part of the fortifications of the town of St. Pons and formed the boundary of the old bishop's palace.

13 The Portanelle

A fortification of the ville Mage ("Magus Town"), a small secondary door giving access to the monastery's garden and wash house.

14 The Cathedral: the tympana

Sculpted bas-reliefs decorating the portals of the old west entrance to the abbey church. These tympana are located above the building's main entrance, used in the 11th century, the last period when the portals were sealed.

15 The Cathedral: the Door of the Dead

A Romanesque portal, situated to the north of the old abbey church, built in its fortified façade. Used as a secondary entrance in the 12th century, it also gave access to the nearby cemetery, whence its name.

16 The cathedral: how the building evolved

An abbey church from 936 to 1318, then a cathedral at the creation of the bishopric from 1318 to the Revolution of 1789.

17 The cathedral: the cloister

Vestiges of an entirely destroyed cloister, made up of many sculpted capitals in local marble.

18 The gate of Nostre-Senhe

An old gate situated in the walls of the town of St. Pons.

Saint-Pons-de-Thomières From the Abbey to the Cathedral

Saint-Pons-de-Thomières

The town of Saint-Pons-de-Thomières lies at the heart of the Haut-Languedoc Regional Nature Park, a tourist cross-roads at the foot of the Montagne Noire ("Black Mountains") and the Monts du Somail ("Somail Mountains").

This town has a rich heritage. Visit it, and admire its monuments, with their panels, educational games and audio-visual commentaries.

Follow the circuit which will reveal the historic centre of the two ancient towns.

The site, which has been occupied since the Neolithic, has preserved the evidence of the St. Pons civilization. Discover the prehistoric vestiges on display at the Museum of Prehistory.

Another noteworthy site is the La Devèze Grotto, also known as the Palace of the Glass Spinner, where you can discover the splendours of the subterranean world.

Many caves are accessible to the public, and there are organized tourist and sporting visits.

Added to this archaeological and speleological interest is the presence of marble quarries, in operation since the Middle Ages, to which the town owes its fame, being known worldwide, today, as the "City of French Marble". This name is based on the widespread presence in the town of this noble stone, still being quarried and currently enjoying a revival.

The Origins of the site

The caves and source of the river Jaur encouraged human occupation at a very early date. In the late Neolithic, the site was home to a local population, hallmarked by the “Saintponienne” culture.

Menhirs

At the end of the Neolithic, this people left behind strange carved standing stones called “menhirs”. Interpreted as the representation of the tribal chief, these ‘statues’ have features (pendants) which distinguish them from other standing stones.

The Abbey of St. Pons

The abbey of St. Pons was founded in 936, on the south bank of the Jaur, by Count Raymond III of Toulouse and his wife Garsinde, daughter of the Viscount of Narbonne. Built in honour of the martyr Pons of Cimiez, the abbey was entrusted to thirteen monks from the Benedictine monastery of Saint-Géraud d’Aurillac. Shortly thereafter, one of the monks was named abbot and the following year the church was dedicated. In 939, the abbey was placed under the protection of the king of France, Louis IV, and as a result donations increased, and the abbey prospered.

The arrival of one or two abbots of great renown enabled the abbey to consolidate many landed possessions, estates and other places, from which it received revenue, in the environs of St. Pons, and well beyond, with in particular those from mainly Catalan monasteries (San Benet de Bages between Vic and Manresa, San Cugat del Vallès, close to Barcelona, and San Pere de Roda on what is now the Costa Brava). These possessions were complemented on the far side of the Pyrenees by those situated in Aragon, especially the sites of Jaca and Huesca.

The monks at the abbey of St. Pons included Ramirez II, king of Aragon (Spain), the last son of Sancho I Ramirez. Having chosen the monastic life, when his brother died leaving no heir, he had to return to the kingdom of Aragon. During his reign, the abbey of St. Pons enjoyed his special favour...

The Cloister

The monks of the abbey of St. Pons lived by the rule of St. Benedict, written by Benedict of Nursia, to guide his disciples in their communal monastic life.

When the building was constructed, there were thirteen monks; in 967 the number rose to 29. During the abbey’s golden age, the number increased further until 1318, when the abbey became a bishopric. There were then 50 Benedictine monks. From then on the number dropped, until there were just nine monks, after the Protestant intrusion in 1567. As the emblematic centre of the monastic life of the Benedictines, a first cloister, probably quite rudimentary, appeared in 936 after the founding of the abbey. It was twice altered, but re-built entirely in marble in 1171, after Trencavel’s incursion, and then in 1668, a century after the passage of the Protestants. It was totally destroyed in 1785 when the present-day Grand-rue was built. It bears comparison, in terms of design, with a similar cloister at Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa in Roussillon, using the same material and a similar kind of capital.

The Capitals

After the destruction of the cloister by the Protestants, the rich capitals carved in local marble were scattered by the chapter but also by the town’s inhabitants. They come from two different periods, the 11th and late 12th centuries. Thirty-three capitals have been inventoried and studied, but there must be others.

The Cathedral

In 1318, during the creation of the new bishoprics of St. Pons, Saint-Papoul and Alet, the abbey church was accorded the dignity of a cathedral by Pope John XXII.

At the end of the 15th century, works were undertaken to give the edifice a large Gothic choir with an ambulatory and radiating chapels.

Finished in about 1550, it was ruined shortly thereafter. In fact on 1 October 1567 the Protestants entered the town and destroyed the monastery and the church.

The choir, nothing less than an Episcopal masterpiece dominating the church, built entirely of marble, and the town were deliberately leveled.

Three of the bell-towers were pulled down, the monastery buildings set on fire and part of the fortifications demolished.

In the 17th century, rudimentary repairs were undertaken on the church, but the buildings set around the cloister were not rebuilt, because the canons around the bishop were secularized and lived in the town.

An attempt was made by bishop Percin de Montgaillard to undertake the reconstruction of the great choir, but it came to naught. One of his successors would undertake the task in the 18th century, lending the building its present-day look.

The ruins of the choir were demolished and the church’s orientation was reversed.

It was in that period, in 1713, that a new classical façade was built in place of the temporary closure of the old choir. Oriented towards the east, it offered a new access to the edifice, doing away with the old Romanesque access on the west side, which was turned into a sacristy.

Subsequently, a new liturgical choir was embarked upon, based on a new organization of the 17th century stalls, preceding the development of a classical choir clad in marble.

The Cathedral Choir

The work on the choir was the last attempt to rehabilitate the cathedral after its change of orientation in 1711.

Carried out between 1760 and 1772, it gave rise to one of the most outstanding examples of 18th century Baroque art, including delightful cherubs, statues in ecstasy, Christ radiant, gilding and polychrome decorations.

The aim was to retranslate an idealized image of Paradise.

This unique work thus attested to the refound power of the Catholic Church bordering regions under Protestant influence.

Things to lookout for

- separating the choir from the nave, the iron railings made by the blacksmith Bongues, dated 1771.
- the 17th century side stalls with misericords all decorated with sculptures.
- the presence of a so-called Bishop’s cathedra, in walnut wood, and remade in the 19th century.
- the main altar and the retable in polychrome marble, dated 1767, of regional or Italian origin.
- the organ dated 1772 which, most unusually, faces the congregation. Its outstanding state of preservation makes it a very rare example of the construction of this instrument at that time.