

THE BOURGET LAKE

Figures

The Bourget Lake is the largest natural lake in France – 18 km long – an average width of 2,55km – covering an area of 4450 hectares. The lake is 147 m deep at its deepest point and its average depth is 85 m; 3,6 billion cubic metres of water. The surface of the lake is at an altitude of 232 metres.

The mountains

The Bourget Lake is located where the pre-Alps and Jura Mountain ranges meet:

South of Chambéry: The Chartreuse massif (pre-Alps)

- To the south-west, the Epine massif and the Dent Du Chat (Jura)
- To the north-west, the Charves (Jura)
- To the north, on the other side of the Rhône, the Grand Colombier (Jura)
- To the north-east, the Laval, the Chambotte and the Sapenay (Jura)
- To the south-east, Tresserve hill (Jura)
- To the south-east, in the middle distance, the Revard and the Nivolet (pre-Alps)

Water supply – level of the lake

The southern part of the lake is fed by two rivers (the Leysse and the Sierroz). Water leaves the lake at the northern end to join the Rhône via the Savières Canal. This canal is very important as, during significant flood periods, the Rhône reverses the flow of water in the canal so that the water returns towards the lake.

At times like this, if the lake is being fed both from north and south without any outlet, the water level rises very quickly. In the past, during periods of drought, the level could drop, but since a dam, constructed in 1983 at the end of the Savières Canal, has regulated the level of the lake, a minimum level can be maintained (this does not apply for rises in the water level). The official level of the lake is 231.20m in the winter and 231.50m in the summer. The record levels (high and low) reached in the 20th century were 230m during the summer of 1976 and 235.25m on 26 November 1944.

Climate

The Bourget Lake has been classified by scientists as a warm lake, which means that it cannot freeze as the temperature remains globally positive (about 4°C minimum). As a result, the lake plays a part in regulating the climate and enables the surrounding area to enjoy very mild conditions compared to the rest of Savoy. The village of Brison-les-Oliviers is a prime example of the influence the lake has on climate, as olive, palm, orange and lemon trees, mimosas and so on, can be found growing in its open grounds. In the summer, the temperature of the water surface can rise up to 28 degrees Celsius in certain places.

Fish, fishing

The Bourget Lake is one of the most well-stocked in France. At the moment, there are 32 known different varieties of fish in the lake. The most sought-after are the pike, the bleak, the perch, the pikeperch, the trout, and the char. There is also a fish which lives only in the Bourget Lake which is called the Lavaret Du Bourget. Fishing estimates have been made showing that professional fishermen (who number about ten) for about 35 tonnes of fish per year and amateur anglers for about 15 tonnes.

Birdlife

A wide variety of aquatic birds live along the banks of the lake. They include sedentary breeds such as the coot, the crested grebe, the swan, the seagull, the green-backed duck etc... and winter migrating birds like the cormorant or diving ducks or summer migrating birds like the black kite. The abundance of birdlife can be explained by the rich feeding ground that the lake provides (fish, shellfish, algae or grasses).

The priest's pathway

It was said in the old days that, every Sunday morning, a priest used to leave the port of Aix in a rowing-boat and go straight across the lake to the west. He would draw alongside the open banks and moor his boat. Then he would climb up a footpath to the "Chapelle de l'Etoile", at the summit of the mountain. Here in the chapel, he would give mass for a little village which had no priest. Afterwards, he would return to the lakeside by the pathway and row across the lake back to the port of Aix.

Hautecombe Abbey

Hautecombe Abbey is a very important monument in the history of Savoy. Savoy only became French in 1860. Prior to that, since the 10th century, Savoy had successively been a county, a duchy and finally part of the kingdom of the Sard States. During this period, Savoy was ruled by a dynasty called "The House of Savoy". 41 members of this family are buried at Hautecombe. The last king of Italy was also buried there in March 1983, partly because all the kings of Italy were members of the House of Savoy, and partly because the Italians had chosen to have a republic and had forbidden the royal family to reside in Italy. The Abbey was completely ransacked at the time of the French Revolution (at the end of the 18th century). At the beginning of the 19th century, King Charles Felix and his wife Queen Marie Christine had the abbey reconstructed as it can be seen today. They were also behind the idea of the tower, which served as a lighthouse to guide the boats on the lake at night. From its start in the 12th century up to the beginning of the 20th century, Hautecombe had been occupied by successive communities of Cistercian monks. They were replaced from 1922 to 1992 by Benedictine monks. In 1992, the Benedictines left the abbey and were replaced by a movement called the "New Way" made up of monks and lay people. Just by Hautecombe port, slightly to the north of the abbey, stands for the 'ferryboat house'. Under this barn, built both on ground and water, there is a water-filled room where boats could be sheltered. This ferry-boat house was built in the 12th century and is the only one of its kind still in good condition in Europe.

The Grotte of Raphaël

According to a popular local legend, it was here in this grotto that Lamartine sheltered Elvire after having saved her from the lake waters in October 1816.

The Chateau of Saint Gilles

This 19th century Château is now the country home for a family from the region. It cannot be visited. It enjoys an exceptional location with a great deal of land, and a port.

The Village of Conjux

When there were still a lot of professional fishermen on the lake, villages like Conjux, earned their livelihood from this fishing. Now that the number of fishermen is limited, the villages have become residential and make a living from tourism. There is now a beach and a marina in Conjux. Some of the most interesting archaeological sites in the lake can also be found off Conjux.

Marshland at the north of the Lake

The Chautagne marshland stretches from the extreme north of the lake to the Rhone. It is an interesting area sheltering a wide variety of birdlife as well as the Rhone beavers. From the 1930's, the French government began to buy up land in Chautagne. The marshland was partially drained and, from the 1950's, what is now the largest poplar orchard (an interrupted 756 ha) in Europe was planted by the ONF. The Chautagne marshland is crossed by the Savière Canal, the lake's natural outlet to the Rhone.

The Chateau of Chatillon

Standing at the top of the hill at the extreme north of the lake, this chateau/castle has a strategic location. The Romans had already remarked the strategic interest of this position, building a tower there and a port at the foot of the hill. In the 12th century, Geoffroy de Chatillon was born in Chatillon. He was to become Pope as Celestin IV but held his position for only 16 days. The chateau is now a country house and cannot be visited.

The Chambotte

One of the most beautiful views of the lake can be seen from the restaurant at the panoramic viewpoint of the Chambotte. Its terrace overhangs the lake at an altitude of 830m. The restaurant was opened as a simple chalet in 1884 and was run by a Scottish Lady. It was visited the 16th of April 1887 by the Queen Victoria and her daughter Princess Béatrice; from then on, the Queen would occasionally go to the Chambotte carried in a sedan chair, when she would visit Aix. Lots of famous people such as Félix Faure along with Jules Ferry and their wives, Stanley Baldwin, Edouard Herriot or even Princess Marie Louise of Schleswig-Holstein, to only name a few, who signed the guest book which is one of the most prestigious in France.

The railway Towers

The railway line which runs along the northeast bank of the lake was developed in 1857/1858 so that the railway workers, who maintained the lines, could be housed in towers, built at the ends of each of the three tunnels. Four of the original towers have been destroyed. There are only two remaining, at the Brison tunnel. These are protected, having been listed as historic monuments.

The village of Brison Les Oliviers

This is the warmest village in Savoy due partly to the presence of the lake and its influence on the climate and partly to its privileged location (sunshine and shelter from the north winds). Olive, orange, lemon, banana, palm trees and mimosa can be found there.

Grésine Bay

Gresine Bay marks the widest part of the lake, with a width here of 3km500. Behind the bay, the railway line runs along an embankment, built in 1857. Behind this, there is a small stretch of water called the little lake, accessible by boat thanks to the bridge under the railway line. It was here in this bay that the first sub-aquatic archaeological site was found when the embankment was built.

The Chateau of Saint Innocent

The oldest part of the chateau is the square keep to the north, built in the 13th century. Then, in the 15th century, the rest was built while the top floor of the keep was replaced by a pointed roof. The chateau is now private property.

Aix-Les-Bains

The name Aix-Les-Bains is a pleonasm given that the word Aix originates from water. In former times this town was called Aix-en-Savoie. The properties of the spring waters had been appreciated for a long period of time and the Romans had already installed baths. However, it was not until 1783 that a true spa bath establishment would be opened. From then on, the attendance began to increase. Development began particularly in the middle of the 19th century when spa cures were thought of more as a leisure activity than for medicinal purposes. Aix was frequented by crowned heads from all over the world and hotels rivalled each other in splendour and comfort to receive them. Queen Victoria and her daughter Princess Beatrice or even Aga Khan III are ones within the various famous names that would often visit the town. From 1947 changes began to take place. In fact, it was in that year that the social security began to reimburse spa treatments. This enabled more and more people to enjoy the beneficial effects of the spa waters and enabled the cure to be seen as the medical treatment which was to bring fame and success to Aix. There are two theories as to the origin of the spa waters. The oldest claims that the waters come from the Revard, above the town. The second, more recent (1980's) maintains that rain waters infiltrate the limestone mountains of the Charves, on the west bank of the lake. They then go deep, down into the ground under the lake at a depth of between 1500 to 2000 metres and up out at the other side. The waters can in fact come up two different ways; either rapidly through faults maintaining the high temperature acquired by going towards the centre of the Earth, as is the case for the springs in the national spa baths (Arthritis and Rheumatism treatment) which rise at 45 to 50 degrees; or by infiltrating through deposits, whilst cooling and charging up with sulphur, as is the case for the springs of the Marlioz spa bath (E.N.T treatment).

The Mont Revard

Altitude: 1562m – Pre-Alps range – Bauges Massif

Historically, the Revard was the first French ski-resort and is now famous for cross-country skiing. At the end of the 18th century, a cog-railway steam train was put into service between Aix and the Revard. In 1934, a cable-car that went into action to go up the Revard. It had the largest cable in Europe at the time. The cable-car was so successful that two years later the steam train stopped, was dismantled, and then transported to Chamonix where it became the first cog-railway train between Chamonix and the Mer de Glace.

The Mont-Nivolet

Altitude: 1547m – PreAlp range – Bauges Massif

On the top of the Mont Nivolet stands a huge cross whose past has been an eventful one. As the legend goes, the construction of the first cross on the Nivolet is attributed to a Count of Savoy. In the 13th century the aforementioned count found himself with only daughters, which posed some problems as to his succession. He prayed to God for a boy promising to build a monument fitting for the event if his prayers were answered. Later on, he had a son and to keep his promise he had a wooden cross built on the summit of the Nivolet overlooking Chambéry which was, at the time, the capital of Savoy. Time wore away this cross and the next one was erected around 1860 (annexation of Savoy to France). The second cross was destroyed by a storm in 1990. It is made of concrete covered in white-painted aluminium. It is 26m high and is illuminated by projectors every day.

The Belledonne Massif

Located approximately 35km south of the lake, this massif is, for us, the Alps. These mountains rise to an altitude close to 3000 metres and it is here that we find perennial snows and glaciers.

The Mont Granier

Altitude: 1933m – Pre-Alp range – Chartreuse Massif

Now, famous to racing cyclists and rally-drivers, the Mont Granier owes its renown in Savoy in particular to its partial collapse in 1248. It was a terrible catastrophe, said to have claimed about 5000 victims. The rockfall was to come to a halt at the chapel in the village of Myans, a miracle celebrated every year with a pilgrimage. The region is now well-known for its wines, amongst which is the Apremont.

The Epine Massif

Altitude: 1504m – Jura range

Here on this Massif can be found the Dent du Chat (altitude: 1390m, the subject of a legend) but contrary to the effect of optical illusion viewed from Aix, it is not the highest point. The highest point is actually around the television relay station. This can be reached by car and is the departure point for some lovely walks.

The Charves Mountain

Altitude: 1158m – Jura range

At the foot of this massif, along the north-west bank of the lake stretches the wild side of the lake with no roads and no buildings. Only a few rare paths give access to the lake along this side. There is also a path which goes from Bourdeau to Hautecombe but it is half-way up the mountainside.

The Grand Colombier

Altitude: 1534m – Jura range

This mountain, a typical Jurasian anticlinal, is located about 5km to the north of the lake on the other side of the Rhone.

The Chambotte Massif

Altitudes from 800 to 1000m – Jura range

From Aix to Seyssel over a distance of about 20km stretches a regular massif including Corsuet hill, the Mont Laval, the Chambotte, the Sapenay, the Mont Clergeon, and the Gros Foug.

The Colline of Tresserve

This molasse hill is essentially part of the Jura geologically speaking.

It is called “La colline du Poète ou de L’inspiration” (the Poet’s hill or the hill of inspiration) in reference to Alphonse de Lamartine who chose this spot to compose his poem “The Lake”.

Tresserve’s town hall is probably one of the most attractive in Savoy. A bust of Lamartine can be found close by. When the statue was inaugurated a speech on the literary career of Lamartine was given by Daniel Rops. Born in Epinal, Daniel Rops was a novelist and owned a beautiful villa in Tresserve (he is indeed buried in Tresserve). Coincidentally at the time of the inauguration he occupied the same seat at the Académie Française as Lamartine had in the past. In Tresserve, there is a legend which, in brief, tells of how, long ago, in the village, a girl pursued by a young man, had not wanted to give in to his advances. One day trapped above the only cliff in Tresserve on the lakeside (now called “Le Saut de la Pucelle” – “The Maiden’s Leap”) she decided to throw herself off rather than give in. However, she had masses of long hair and was caught in a tree. The young man, not to be discouraged, climbed up the tree and along the branch which consequently broke. Both he and the young girl fell, but the latter fell into a passing hay cart at the foot of the cliff. The young girl married the boy who was driving the cart and they lived happily ever after.

The lakeside road

The embankment which runs the length of Tresserve hill was built at the end of the 19th century to allow through the first railway lines linking Chambéry and Aix. However, this location meant that Aix’s station was located a long way from the town-centre and that the lines were within danger of rising lake-waters. So, at the beginning of the 20th century, the railway lines were transferred to the other side of Tresserve hill, and a road was built along the embankment.

The legend of La Dent du Chat (Cat’s tooth)

There was a time where this mountain wasn’t as sharp as it is now. Back then, there lived a poor fisherman on the lakeside at the bottom of this mountain. He had never caught a fish and found himself very exasperated by it, leading him to promising aloud that he would put the 1st fish he would catch back into the lake. His prayers were answered as he finally caught his first ever fish but that one was a silverfish and as expected, he didn’t want to release it back into the lake so he put it in his pocket without anyone seeing, promising that he would put back the 2nd fish he would catch. He caught a second fish, but it turned out to be made of gold, and as done as before he kept it in his pocket, promising that he would put back in the lake the 3rd fish he would catch. He went fishing for a third time and was very surprised when all he saw was a black cat at the end of his fishing rod. He didn’t dare to throw it back into the lake and decided to leave the cat on the bank of the lake. It started to get bigger, and its body started bloating as well, turning it into a horrendous monster. The cat devoured the fisherman, punishing him for his broken promises. This enormous creature went to the mountains to spread terror in the surrounding areas while eating, ideally, women and kids, pretexting that men were too hard to chew and not edible.

One day, two travellers called Bérius and Melanius were passing through the area and heard about this monster. Since they were great hunters, they decided to bring peace upon the region and left with great weapons. They killed the cat and pulled out one of its teeth, then they dropped it on top of the mountain as a symbol to prove that the cat was truly dead. The inhabitants of the region were very glad to hear the news and gave a lot of presents to the hunters: Bérius received a field which became Chambéry, and Melianus received a mount which became Montmélian. You can now wander around the mountain without risking bad encounters.