

CÔTÉ SAINT-GILLES

Au fil des pierres de lest



This route steeped in remarkable heritage travels around historical sites from Pont de la Concorde, spanning the river Vie, to Vieux Saint-Gilles, the oldest district of the maritime city, renowned for its typical charming alleys. This tour explores the left bank, once home to merchants, ship captains and notables. On the right bank, Croix-de-Vie grew around a community of fishermen and salt workers.

1 Saint-Gilles-Croix-de-Vie marked by its history

Saint-Gilles-sur-Vie on the left bank dates back to ancient times when it was known as "Sidunum". It is one of the oldest ports on the Atlantic coast. The many traces of human life dating back to prehistoric times signal the passage of the Phoenicians which stopped here on the famous "tin route". The port continued to develop throughout the Middle Ages until the 18th century, sheltering ships holding up to 100 barrels.

2 Sculpture of Pierre Garcie Ferrande

Born in Saint-Gilles-sur-Vie in 1441, Pierre Garcie became a rich ship owner. He was navigating all the seas of Europe during the period when England and France began fighting for control over the open sea. The best kept secret of the 15th century was the calculation of longitude, jealously guarded by the Portuguese and Genoese. Revealing the secret was punishable by death! Without longitude, sailors were limited to coastal shipping. Pierre Garcie published the secret in his 1483 work entitled "Grand Routier de la mer". Commended by King Francis I, the outstanding navigator listed the peculiarities of the European coast including the seabed, wind force, dangers, and safe routes. Republished over and over and translated into several languages, the book was the reference for English and French sailors for three whole centuries. The city of Saint-Gilles-Croix-de-Vie has paid tribute to this legendary figure by naming a quay and school after him. The bust was sculpted by artist Ian Olteanu in 1992.

3 Sculpture of Marina Tsvetaïeva

Made by Russian sculptor Zourab Tsereteli and presented to the city in 2012, the statue is a tribute to the famous Russian poet. Exiled several years after the Bolsheviks came to power as a result of the Russian Revolution in 1917, Marina stayed in Saint Gilles for the summer of 1926. Considered one of the greatest poets of the 20th century, Marina's poetry was imbued with poignant melancholy and tension. Her universe bears traits of rebellious Romanticism typical of Arthur Rimbaud. This dancing soul committed suicide two years after returning to her homeland in 1939.



4 The caravelle

Opposite number 4QUA of Rue Abel Pipaud, glass protects graffiti on the wall of ballast stones. Etched into the stone, it represents the three-mast ship called a caravel. This image bears testimony to the importance of the booming shipping trade in the port between the 15th and 18th century. Many ships from England and Holland stopped here and local boats set sail to fish for cod in Newfoundland. Saint-Gilles became the port for transiting salt, wine and wheat.

5 Château de Saint-Gilles

The castle of the lords of Saint-Gilles dates back to the 17th century. Nicolas Daniau, a Saint-Gilles lord and advisor to Parliament, had it built in 1684 on the site of a little old "hostel" and fortifications dating back to the Middle Ages. The fortress was surrounded by moats and vast French gardens. The castle stayed in the Daniau family until 1737, when Jean Piou from Nantes and secretary to the king bought it. Underground vestiges connecting the castle to the river Vie still exist. The castle has passed through several hands since the Revolution. It was recently restored by a private owner and is not open to the public.

6 Bas-relief medallions

Many bas-relief medallions are still visible on old houses. At numbers 77 and 75, decorated cartouches bear signs of the professions once living there including coopers, seamen and shipowners.

7 No.7 rue Sœur Saint-Sulpice (1844–1933): the city's first nurse

Eugénie Girard left her homeland in Vendée to enter the Saint-Charles d'Angers congregation in 1864. She became Sister Saint-Sulpice in 1869. After training as a nurse, she arrived in Saint-Gilles-sur-Vie to care for the ill and maintain the sacristy and the sisters' home. She devoted her life to her mission for 60 years.

8 Ballast stone walls

Some of the walls in both Saint-Gilles and Croix-de-Vie are made of a wide variety of ballast stones. This stone is a legacy from the period when the European maritime trade was the port's main activity. Many ships transporting salt were ballasted with these stones to avoid capsizing. The rocky fragments were then thrown into the channel to make room for the next load. Ballast stone was used to build the walls of houses and buildings, which are now recognised as remarkable maritime heritage.

9 Rue Achard

This old Gallo-Roman road and main street connecting the hinterland to the port was once called "la grande rue". Its path through the city has not changed since the Middle Ages.



10 Eglise Saint-Gilles

The architecture of this church tells the story of its long history. The first fortified church was built on a rocky outcrop in the 9th century. Only the bell tower and the right side of the nave survived the Wars of Religion. They were listed as Historical Monuments in 1926. The church was rebuilt in 1883 and restored in 1903, then again in 1977. It features a Way of the Cross with 14 paintings and a fresco on lava stone created by local artist Henry Simon in 1979. More information is available inside the church in a work published by Saint-Gilles-Croix-de-Vie town hall.

11 Saint-Gilles-Croix-de-Vie: a double identity

The river Vie is now a link rather than a division, but that was not always the case. Talked about since the French Revolution, the project to merge the two fierce rivals on either side of the river was tumultuous to say the least. Ideological conflict compounded the natural separation represented by the river Vie. Rare exchanges were possible thanks to a ford and boats until 1835 when a suspension bridge linked the two municipalities. After a succession of twists and turns, the two local councils finally sat down to negotiate in 1965. The result was the creation of Saint-Gilles-Croix-de-Vie in 1967. The main bridge is called Pont de la Concorde to symbolise the union.



Starting point: Pont de la Concorde Heritage Outlook Distance: approx. 2 km

Follow the caravels!

They are your guides for this visit.