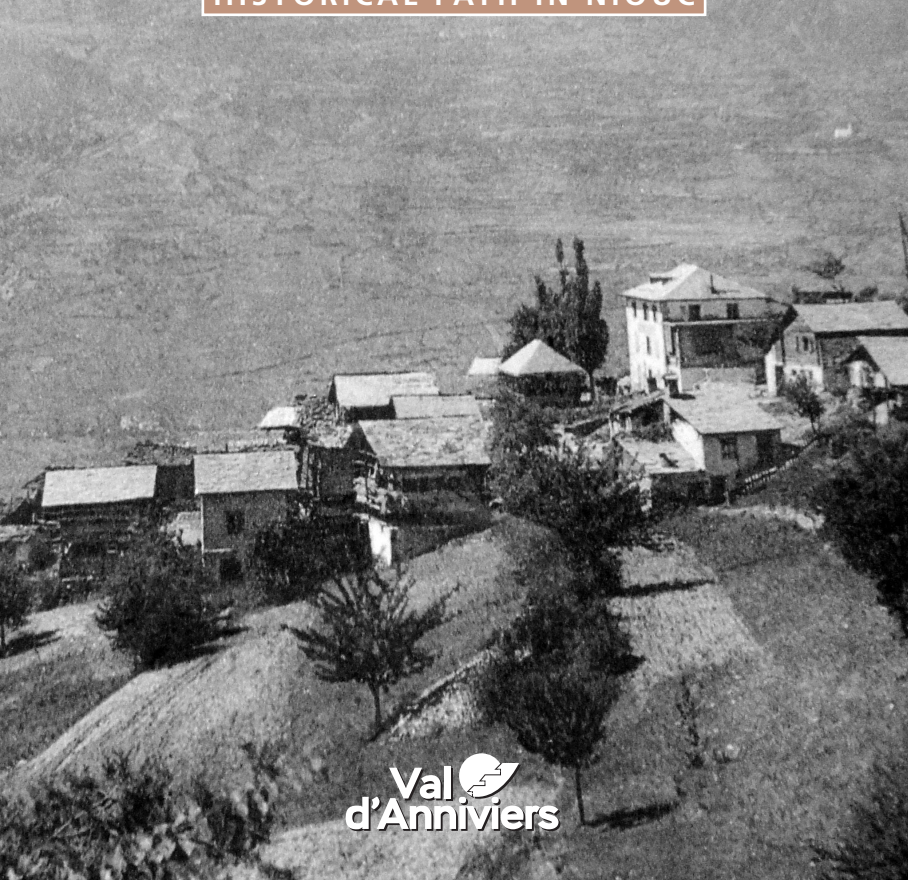
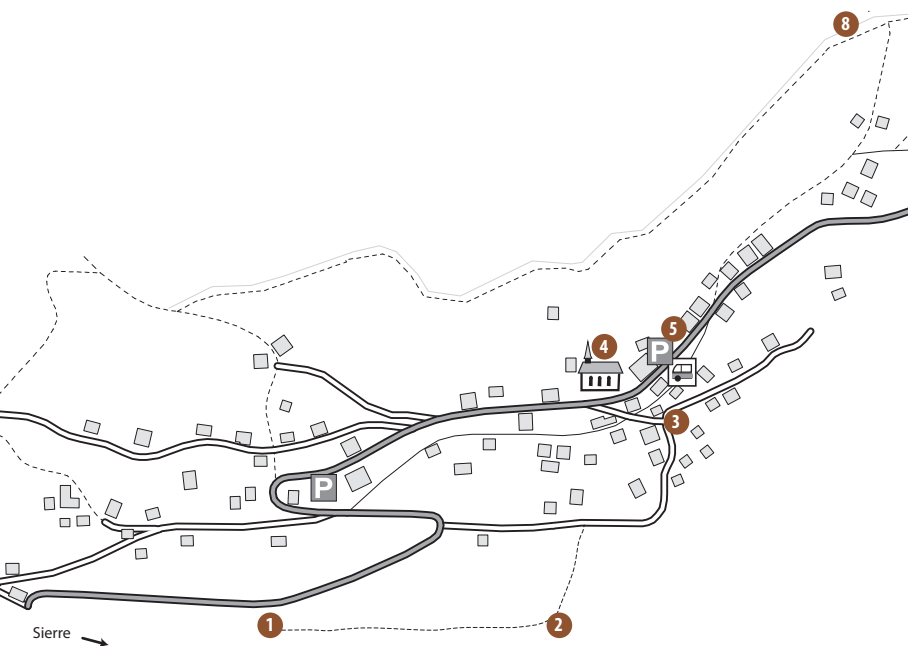


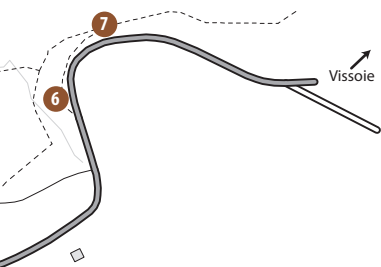
# NIOUC

HISTORICAL PATH IN NIOUC



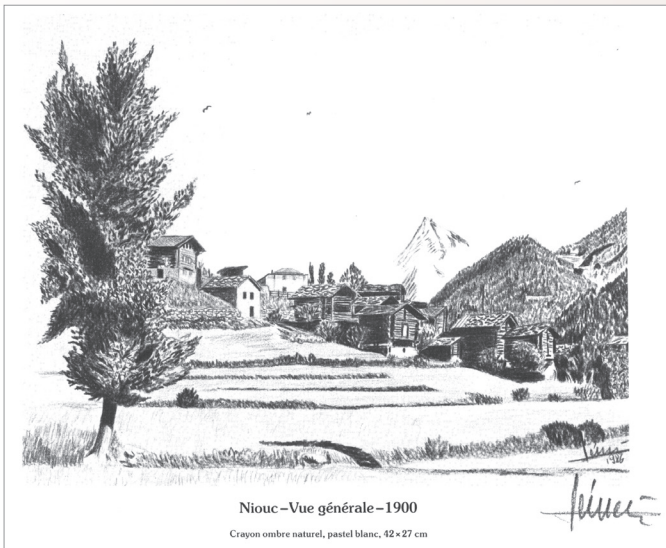


# Map of Niouc



- 1 Six Poplars
- 2 Source / Spring Water\*
- 3 Barn District
- 4 Chapel of Sainte-Anne
- 5 Old School
- 6 Old Road of Anniviers
- 7 Ruins of the Old Oratory
- 8 Irrigation canals / Bisses\*

*\* In winter, items 2 and 8 may not be accessible depending on snow conditions.*



Niouc, in 1900



Niouc, around 1960

# Introduction to Niouc

The village of Niouc is located on the right bank of the Val d'Anniviers, at an altitude of 902 m.

This gate to the valley has always enjoyed a privileged position. In 1097, the feudal lords of Anniviers had already built a castle here. It is said that formerly in the village, there was a gold mine.

In the local dialect, known as Patois, Niouc or "Gniouc" means "cloud." As its name suggests, this place is ideal for observing the changing weather: *"Our ancestors had an almost infallible barometer. Suppose, that on a dark night, there were several rain showers accompanied by violent thunder. The next morning, if there was a long line of fog extending from Nax, Loye, up to Briey and the fog dissipates above Niouc, then this meant that good weather was coming. If, on the other hand the fog did not dissipate but instead touched the rocks of Coukello (Beauregard), and the forest of Sierre it was considered a clear sign that there would be more rain and thunderstorms.*

**"It is said that formerly in the village, there was a gold mine. "**

*This natural barometer provides valuable services even today for informed observers, especially the farmers, in the time of haymaking, for vineyard treatments and other work."*

Today, the village has about 120 inhabitants who live in the town all year.

# Niouc, between the Castle and the Factory



Reconstruction of Beauregard Castle

A symbol of feudal power, the castle of Beauregard, located above Niouc, was burned during revolts of 1415. The castle enjoyed breath-taking views of the Rhone Valley. *"There, about 600 years ago, it overlooked the Val d'Anniviers from the top of a rocky outcrop . Today its ruins have been excavated in order to restore this old fortress to its proper role in local history. Poorly documented, the history of this castle is in fact somewhat enigmatic. Indeed, if for some it was built in 1097, its architecture may place its construction date in the twelfth century. (...) Several assumptions can be made about the reasons for its presence here. Located just outside the valley, it could have been an excellent vantage point over the plain of the Rhone, a relay for communications using lights or a shelter of last resort for the families of the lords of the plain."* Quote from [www.chateaubeauregard.ch](http://www.chateaubeauregard.ch)-Château de Beauregard Foundation.



The Niouc road between the existing café and an old refreshment stand

Between 1466 and 1798, the Val d'Anniviers was not subservient to a lord, but to the Church.

During the nineteenth century Niouc was a community that marked a stopover for the people of Saint-Luc and Chandolin on their way to Muraz near Sierre, for work in the vineyards. This explains why the village consisted essentially of small houses.

In the 1940s, following the progressive abandonment of agriculture, land was sold to people of the upper part of Valais, who worked for the aluminium factory at Chippis.

The traditional alpage association (Consortage) of Niouc played an important role in the establishment of current rights on hydraulic concessions. The Consortage represented Niouc land owners and defended their water rights, which have profoundly changed

the lives of the hamlet. The founding date of the Consortage is not known because the archives were stored in the tower of the church of Saint-Luc which burned in 1845. To be a party to these agreements it was necessary to be a member of the Bourgeoisie of Saint-Luc or Chandolin and to have at least 200 toises (1 toise = 3.8 m2) of irrigable land below the upper irrigation canal (bisse) of Niouc (130 toises as of 1997).

In 1906, during the construction of the gallery designed to bring water from Vissoie to Beauregard at the Plan de Niouc, a small infirmary was built to treat the wounded.

Early in the last century, a protracted legal battle opposed the towns of Saint-Luc and Chippis due to a municipal boundary disputed by Chippis. This boundary was very important for the distribution of royalties from the waters of the Navisence, collected in Vissoie. The judge from Sierre convoked the councillors of each town as well as former goatherds, reputed to be sure of the communal territorial limits. Once there one of them put down his bag and sat down pretending to be ill, while his companions vainly sought the limit. They left without having reached an agreement. But a wily old man who lived in the village knew the tricks of the goatherd. He went with the judge on the disputed territory and found the marker in the ground, at the precise spot where the joker had dropped his bag. As his punishment, he was deprived of attendance fees and publicly blamed at the assembly of the bourgeoisie.

**“The Consortage represented Niouc land owners and defended their water rights, which have profoundly changed the lives of the hamlet.”**

# 1. Six Poplars



Planting poplars in 1980

➤ To reach the first point of the historical route of Niouc, park your car at the entrance to the village, on the side of Sierre, in the parking lot near the playground. Go down the stairs and walk along the main road on the left side of the Bisse, up to the poplars.

The six poplars, located at the entrance of Niouc and the Val d'Anniviers, represented the former municipalities of the valley. In about 1912, Candide Antille planted them in this location, so that they would be visible from Sierre.

When in 1957, the owner decided to cut down the trees to sell the wood, the « Société de développement » of Sierre concluded an agreement with the owners of the land to save the trees and protect the site. The Association agreed to pay the amount of CHF 10 per year per poplar to the owners to prevent the trees from being cut down.

In 1980, the trees were replaced by Henri Salamin (then President of Saint-Luc), André Salamin (former forest guard in Saint-Luc), Luke Antille and Elie Zufferey from Niouc.



The half-timbered house and white house, as they are seen today

Before you go to the next stop on the route, take note of the half-timbered house in front of the road towards Sierre. Its unique style is probably due to the workers from Zurich employed at the factory in Chippis. This house and the white house were built in about 1905 and 1910, during the construction work of the penstock for the aluminum plant in Chippis. The white house, was first used as a canteen and housing for the workers, and later was occupied by a coffee shop. It probably became a first stop on the old mule track leading from Sierre to the villages of the valley. In 1946, the former owner bought the houses from the factory in Chippis.

➤ Downstream from the poplars, is the northern access road to the spring. In winter, this path may not be usable depending on snow conditions.

## 2. Source / Spring Water



Exit point of the spring water today

➤ The path to the spring is very narrow. Formerly, cows were led to water down the path on the south side and came up the north side where the poplars are. Today, the path takes one down the reverse course.

The spring is fed by a stream of water coming out of the mountain at 100 m below the village at the temperature of 14 °C. Seven granite basins were filled gradually to allow watering of the herd.

The basins were transported on carts pulled by cattle to Niouc. The spring is located on land owned by the *Consortage* of Niouc.



Exit point of the spring water today

In 1858, following the second fire in Saint-Luc, through the Gazette du Valais newspaper, a request was made to the Council of State to build an aqueduct to bring water from the Navisence to Niouc. The aqueduct would have allowed the inhabitants of Saint-Luc to make use of and develop their land located in Niouc.

Before the construction of the supply gallery bringing water from Vissoie to the Chippis plant in 1908, Niouc had only this spring of water and rain for its water supply. Rainwater was collected through numerous wells dug near the homes.

In 1905, the agreement signed by the municipality of Saint-Luc and the water company of the Navisence, included the provision of a maximum of fifty litres per minute for households.

In 1908, a reservoir supplying water to six stone basins, spread throughout the village, was built at the edge of the forest. The people could stock up at the basin nearest their home.

Drinking water reached Niouc in 1960. At first drawn at the foot of the Bella-Tola, it now comes from the Soussillon reservoir, which is fed by a spring located close to Chandolin.

The people of Niouc have endless anecdotes about water. To draw water from the area of the Bella-Tola, the commune of Saint-Luc had run a pipe through the territory of the town of Chandolin via Soussillon. One day, a person from Soussillon, upset to see the pipe, severed it. Later, Saint-Luc and Chandolin established an agreement providing that water could be taken directly from the reservoir at Soussillon for an annual fee of 2500 francs.

It is also said that in 1975 during excavation work for a sewer pipe, a completely charred tree trunk was discovered about four meters underground near the bottom of the village. This leads to the supposition that there were lime kilns at this location in the past..

**"Before the construction of the water supply gallery between Vissoie and the Chippis factory, in 1908, Niouc had only this spring of water and rain for its water supply."**

➤ Go back up the path on the south side and continue on the right until the area of the barns. "*raccards*".

### 3. Barn District

The street of the old village of Niouc, located below the main road is lined with several old farm buildings. The barns (*raccards*) are constructions in wood and masonry, on two levels, the second based on round stones supported by wooden stilts (*ilotis*).

These buildings were used to store grain. After drying on balconies, wheat sheaves were beaten to separate the grain inside the *raccards*.

Well adapted to dry land, wheat and oat crops were predominant in Niouc. As these are not crops that can be grown at altitude, they could be planted only in Sierre and Niouc.

When an irrigation system was put in place, pastures gradually replaced the grain crops. Therefore, the mill and the bread oven in Muraz (Sierre) were abandoned and several barns in Niouc were converted into stable barns.



An alley in about 1960

Until the 1950s, the owners cut the grass slope with sickles and brought weeds removed from the vineyards of Muraz to feed the cows.

One of these barns was known by the villagers as the bear's barn. The door was damaged by a bear trying to release a cub that had been locked inside by the owner of the *raccard*.



Peasant carrying wood between 1920 and 1940. Photo, Charles Krebsner

➤ Now go back to the main road to get to the chapel.

## 4. Chapel of Sainte-Anne



The Chapel of Niouc today

The Chapel of Niouc, which was built in 1953, is dedicated to Sainte-Anne. Its construction was rendered possible by an exceptional fundraising effort. According to old people in the village, the idea to build a chapel in Niouc had already been discussed between 1910 and 1920.

In 1924, an account for the Chapel of Niouc was opened with a capital of 2000 francs, but it was not until 1947 and the arrival of the priest Adrien Bonvin that the project was restarted. The committee put great energy into convincing the municipal council of Saint-Luc to go forward with the project. The *Consortage* of Niouc

offered wood for the frame of the building and the stained glass window representing Saint-Luc. Many volunteers helped to build the Chapel, completed in 1952. It is thanks to this popular momentum that the chapel was completed and then blessed in 1953. The sacristy was beautifully equipped, almost entirely through donations from the Sisters of G ronde and the Sion Hospital. The mural at the entrance porch, the stained glass and the painting representing Saint-Anne, protector of the valley, were executed by Alfredo Cini from Sierre in 1951-1952. The Baroque altar dates from 1753 and comes from the Ayer Chapel dismantled during the creation of the square near the *Maison bourgeoisiale*. When the person who had acquired the altar learned that the inhabitants of Niouc planned the construction of a chapel, she donated it to the town of Saint-Luc, so that it could remain in Anniviers.

➤ Walk along the road past the *café*, and stop near the former school building.



Class of Niouc at the foot of the cross, circa 1935 – 1936

## 5. Old School

This house, bought by the town of Saint-Luc, was the last to accommodate the school of Niouc in 1941-1942.

The building was constructed by the six sons of Jérôme Favre, in the years 1927 to 1928. A vine planted at that time, lived until 2004, when it was replaced by a rose bush.

The school of Niouc changed locations several times. At first, in 1933, it was in a house situated below the road (near the café). Then, in a building opposite the current shelter, and afterwards in the former home of Jean Vocat at the bottom of the village.

Students attended school six months a year. Once a week, they followed catechism classes given by the priest. From the age of twelve, the students were in charge of the school's heating, feeding the stove, and each of them swept up in the evening once a week. By way of compensation, each year, the town organised an outing. Luc Antille remembers visiting the Borromean Islands

(Lake Maggiore), which was truly amazing for the time because the people he knew never travelled. In the 1950's the three teachers who succeeded each other lived on the floor above the classroom. When the last teacher was giving lessons in the classroom, his wife taught reading to little ones, in their apartment.



The building of the last school in Niouc

The school closed its doors in Niouc in the mid 1960s when children were obliged to go to Sierre, until the opening of the



The entrance to Niouc from Vissoie (school house, 2nd right), before 1940.

Vissoie School Center in 1973. In 2004 the school was again based in Niouc for one month following the closure of the Niouc-Vissoie road for repairs. Children in primary classes, grouped in a single class, were able to sample the atmosphere of an old school.

In 1969, the sale of the garden and the stable barn located above the coffee shop, to the commune of Saint-Luc, allowed for the creation of the current parking spaces.

➤ Follow the road towards Vissoie and take the Ricard path, 50 m after the old school building.

## 6. Old Road of Anniviers



Niouc, old Anniviers road, at the time of a *remuage* in 1924. Photo Charles Krebser

This path is a section of the old Anniviers road. Following recent developments of the main road and houses, only parts of the old road still exist.

The stretch of road between Sierre and Niouc was once called "*Zounir*" in dialect, meaning "*Way of the Black Forest*." At the time before the first Beauregard fire, the pine forest was very dense, dark and gloomy. Even if the path was located on the territory of the municipalities of Chippis and Sierre, it was the inhabitants of Saint-Luc who took care of its maintenance, on their way back to Muraz.

➤ Continuing along this path, you come across a dirt road that you follow to the main road. Continue along the main road for 50 meters and take the small dirt path that goes up on the left and leads to the covered picnic area of Niouc. Here you are again on the old Anniviers road.

## 7. Ruins of the Old Oratory



Ruins overlooking the valley

This oratory was built at this location to allow people who were coming up the mountain to be under divine protection, before crossing the Petits Pontis, and for those that came down to ask to be spared from the attacks of robbers in Finges.

It is not clear to which saint the oratory was originally dedicated. Saint-Thomas Aquinas is cited as a possibility, but also, according to the old inhabitants of Niouc, Saint-Lou or Saint Leu, Bishop of Troyes.

Abandoned in the early twentieth century, the oratory gradually fell into disrepair. In 1935, the owner of the land used the building to tie up his cattle. The oratory still had its walls, and a roof, that was not original, made of simple logs covered with sheet metal. In the 1950s, the roof was removed and the walls deteriorated more and more, because of the weather.



Ruins of the old oratory today

As you approach the fence at the edge of the field, you see the suspension bridge, described in the "Suggested Visits."

➤ To reach the last location of the historical visit of Niouc, go back along the paved road to Beauregard, until the passage of the *bisse* (irrigation canal) under the road and take the dirt road on the left that leads to the drinking water *reservoirs*. Follow the road another 100 meters and then take the path on the left to reach the *bisse* (plenum). In winter, this route may not be accessible depending on snow conditions.

## 8. Irrigation Canals / Bisses

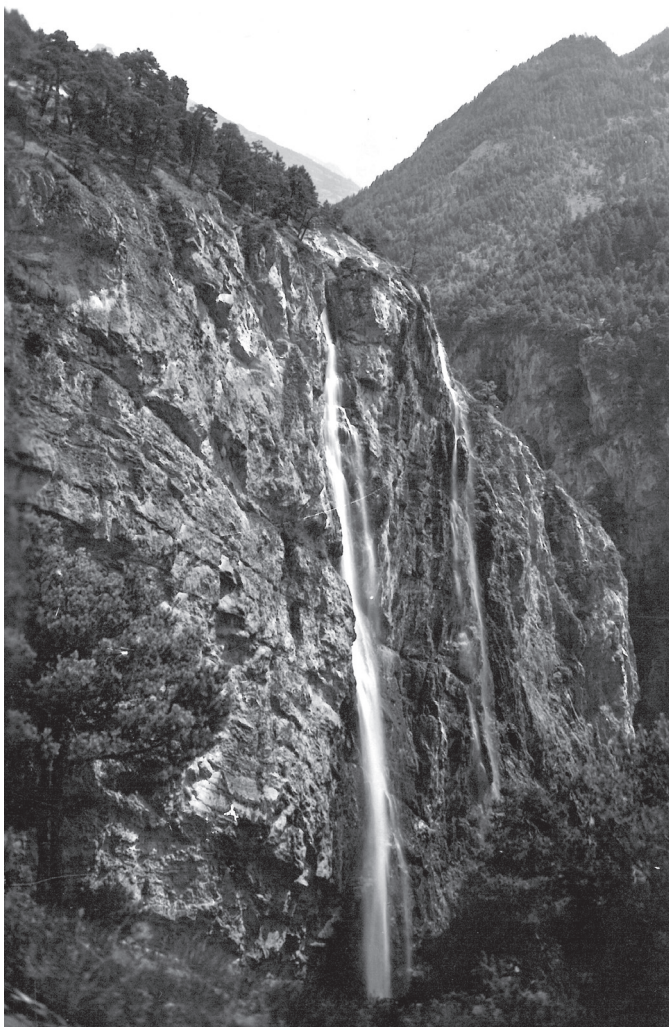
➤ Follow the *bisse* for 20 minutes (first part with water, the second part dry) to the wide path that goes down to the village. Then, at the end of the visit, follow the paved road of Irette to return to the parking lot off the main road.

These irrigation canals were built to irrigate the fields and crops in Niouc around 1908. The town of Saint-Luc hired Italian workers for the task.

In the past, all owners were allowed to water their plots, twice a month. The schedule provided for fourteen turns divided amongst the landowners each day. Watering was regulated from 5 am to 7 pm, with the watering forbidden at night and Sunday, except for potato fields that require a small amount of water. If water was stolen, the problem was usually settled very quickly and not always in a friendly manner. A flow rate of about 25 litres per second was maintained to develop the irrigation channels.



The path of the *bisse* today



Waterfall of the evacuation canal in the past

In 1905, the *Consortage* of Niouc agreed to grant rights to the water company of the Navisence. The Municipality of Saint-Luc signed an agreement that established the water rights of the *Consortage* of Niouc for irrigation and households for a period of 99 years. The water could be drawn from April 15 to September 15 and should not exceed 120 litres per second.

In 1907, the Chippis aluminium plant and the *Consortage* of Niouc decided to build a water intake on the canal to supply Niouc.

Since 1908, the waters of the Navisence are used by the hydroelectric power station at Chippis for the aluminium plant. This layout, with a water intake at Vissoie and a free flowing gallery, was expanded several times and can now absorb a 8.5 cubic metres a second with a drop of 590 metres.

**"Since 1908, the waters of the Navisence are used by the hydroelectric power station at Chippis for the aluminium plant."**

In 2004, the concession was renewed, and in 2008, a new agreement was established between Gougria SA and the *Consortage* of Niouc to create a pressurized irrigation system which allowed a reduction of water consumption by more than 50%.

When the hydroelectric power station at Chippis stops the turbine, the return of water in the canal that feeds the irrigation canals through an underground pipe, causes a substantial outpouring at the top of the cliff, near the suspension bridge (see photo).

# Suggested Visits

## Old castle of Beauregard

➤ Returning from the irrigation canals you can access the ruins of the old castle down the road of Irette and following the Tsaté road up to the waste disposal area where the path to the site begins. A gateway provides access to the last rock bastion where the ruins are located.

After the excavation and the work carried out by the « Fondation du château de Beauregard », the Commune d'Anniviers created this path. The castle of Beauregard, which once dominated the Rhone valley and the access to the Val d'Anniviers, was destroyed by fire in 1415.

## Chapel of the « Saints-Innocents »

➤ After the ruins of the old oratory, go down along the asphalt road. The chapel is located about 200 metres further on.

The Chapel of the Holy Innocents was built by André, Josiane and Didier Antille in memory of the child victims of M.P. called the "Sadist of Romont." and, in particular, in memory of their son and brother, Cedric. It was inaugurated and blessed on May 16, 1996. Several people volunteered to build it. The chapel has received donations from many individuals and businesses.

The drawings displayed there were made by students of the Centre Scolaire of Vissoie who expressed their feelings after this tragedy. Above the entrance doors, the stain glass windows are based on two student drawings. The two lateral windows display lilies, a flower chosen by the mother of Cedric that symbolizes innocence.

## Pontis Irrigation Canal

➤ After the ruins of the Old Oratory, follow the paved road direction number 8 on the map. At about 200m, a path goes up to the right. It takes about 20 minutes to go up and down.

The canal, is part of the watering system of Niouc. It was used to water the fields near the suspended bridge up to the cliffs of the Pontis. A very pleasant path in the forest takes you along it to the waterfall and back. A bit of water still runs through it.

## Suspended Bridge

➤ Follow the road, direction Vissoie. After the exit of the village, you will see a sign indicating Bungyjumping. Follow the road that leads down to the right.

The suspended bridge in Niouc hangs 190m above the Navisence River, measuring 200m long .It was built in 1922 to bring water to the hamlet of Briey, facing Niouc. It was also used by people and goats to cross from one side to the other.

In 1907, the Aluminium plant in Chippis decided with the *consortage* of Niouc, to build a water supply gallery off the canal. Until 1922, the first part of the supply gallery belonged to the consortage of Niouc, then to that of Briey. Having remained closed for a long time due to bad conditions, it was renovated in 1996. Today, its access is only for those that do bungyjumping, ([www.bungyniouc.com](http://www.bungyniouc.com)) abseiling or zipline. These activities are organized by the guide Stéphane Albasini (tour of the 3 bisses) ([www.montagne-evasion.ch](http://www.montagne-evasion.ch)).

## Relais des Pontis

➤ After the suspended bridge, continue direction Vissoie and past the cliffs of Les Pontis. On your right you will see the Relais.

In 1906, 300 Italian workers participated in digging a water gallery in order to bring the water from Vissoie to Beauregard, above Niouc, point of departure of the penstock leading towards Chip-pis. The workers' canteen was situated in the same place of today's café.

In 1921, the building was turned into a café, becoming a stopover for those going by foot or mule to Sierre. In 1954, a new Relais was built and managed independently, existing until 2001 when it was completely destroyed by a fire. It was rebuilt once again in today's existing structure.

From the Relais des Pontis there is a path that leads to the cliffs and the Pontis bridge. It passes below Barmes, continuing along the Navisence until the STEP, below Fang, and finally rising up to the Village of Fang.

## Oratory of Notre-Dame-des-Pontis

➤ After the Relais des Pontis continue direction Vissoie. The Oratory is on the right, at the entrance of the tunnel. You can park on the right, facing the road of Sousillon.

The Oratory was built in 1947 by the communes, the parishes and drivers of the valley, asking for the Virgin's protection. The Oratory is dedicated to the Virgin Sainte-Notre-Dame des Pontis.

---

"Accompany me on the road that leads me to my close ones, safely, and that I may always find all the paths that lead to You. " *Accompagne-moi sur le chemin qui me conduit auprès des miens sans accidents et fais que je trouve toujours toutes les routes qui mènent à Toi* "(quote from the prayer to Notre-Dame-des-Pontis).

The little road that leads to the Oratory is part of the former old road of Anniviers. In 1955, a new road was built with the tunnel, whereas the road that led to the Oratory had the stations of the Cross.



The Anniviers Road, before Niouc

Cover Photograph: Niouc, in the past

Back cover: After the bends below Niouc, towards 1920-1925. Photo Charles Krebs

## Texts

Dominique Rion with the collaboration of Luc Antille, Josiane and André Antille, Christiane and Jean-Louis Favre, Marie-Jeanne Serventi.

## Bibliography

Willy Theler. Un village en feu. Ed. Monographic. Sierre, 2008; Yvonne Jollien Berclaz. Les Pontis. 4 Saisons. Anniviers, Octobre 2011; Gaëtan Cassina. Chapelle Sainte-Anne. Paroisses vivantes. Sierre-Anniviers, 1995.

**Images and photos:** Collection of old postcards of Marco Epiney; photos of Charles Krebs, Médiathèque Valais – Martigny (011ph); archives E. Crettaz-Stürzel, Zinal, reproductions of the « Maison Rurale Valaisanne », Brigue/Sion; recent photos by Adriana Tenda Claude.

## Religious Heritage

Elisabeth Crettaz-Stürzel, art historian.

## Built Heritage

Norbert Jungsten, former director of MHV (Historical Monuments of Valais).

## Translation

Alexandra and Philip Jodidio.

## Concept and coordination

Anniviers Tourism/Adriana Tenda Claude and Simon Wiget.

The Historical Paths are based on written and oral information. We welcome any comments or suggestions.

## Contact

Anniviers Tourisme +41 (0)27 476 16 00 – [info@anniviers.ch](mailto:info@anniviers.ch) – [www.anniviers.ch](http://www.anniviers.ch)

The 14 Historical Paths are available at the Tourist Offices and Editions Monographic. They are grouped together in a book titled « Parcours historiques d'Anniviers »

Sponsors:



A black and white photograph showing a horse-drawn cart moving along a dirt path. Two men are seated in the cart; the one in front wears a hat and a light-colored shirt, while the one behind wears a dark suit and a bowler hat. A goat with large, curved horns is visible in the cart. The cart is pulled by a horse. To the right of the path is a long, low stone wall with decorative balustrades. The background is a hazy, mountainous landscape.