

Coulommiers

Discover the mysterious, violent history of the Templars, as well as the charm of a provincial market town



The Commanderie des Templiers

The Grand Morin river runs through the old market town of Coulommiers, which is in the heart of the Brie region and produces a famous Brie cheese of the same name. The town is picturesque, still predominantly agricultural, and you are unlikely to meet many foreign visitors. On market days its narrow streets are crowded with local people displaying none of the impatience you find in Paris, and it still has several family-run cafés and restaurants.

On a plateau above the town, set back from a modern social housing estate, you will discover an astonishing survival from the Middle Ages, the ‘Commanderie des Templiers’, a monastery established around 1172 by the Knights Templar. It is one of the best-preserved in northern France and the main reason for the visit. You can return to town by a semi-rural downhill footpath and a walk through the beautiful Parc des Capucins to the station.

The rise and fall of the Templars

Coulommiers dates from Roman times. The name is derived from ‘Columbier’ (dovecote) and it reached the height of its prosperity in the Middle Ages, because of the tanning industry which developed along the banks of the Grand Morin river. As Coulommiers was on the pilgrim route to the Holy Land, the Templars built a Commanderie surrounded by extensive farmland on a plateau above the town near the old Roman road, which gave them control of the main access routes.

The Knights Templar were a pioneering order of warrior-monks, founded in 1118 by a handful of French crusaders to protect Jerusalem and the pilgrim routes to the Holy Land. Their headquarters were near the site of Solomon’s Temple in Jerusalem, from which the order took its name and its knights wore the famous white surcoat, stamped with a red cross, over their armour. Their ‘rule’ was written by St Bernard of Clairvaux, combining the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience with the Cistercian ideal of uniting the divided Christian kingdoms of Europe under an élite international peace-keeping force, dedicated to the protection of Jews and Moslems as well as Christians, and deriving its authority from God

alone. In 1139 the Pope confirmed the new Order in its privileges and exemption from the ecclesiastical courts.

However, although dedicated to poverty, the Templars showed a genius for financial management. They grew rich, not only on donations from the faithful but on the proceeds of the credit system they invented. Pilgrims could avoid the dangers of travelling with cash by depositing their money at any Commanderie in Europe – there were around 9000 by 1307 – and withdrawing it at any other, minus a percentage. The Templars invested the money in farming technology and grew so wealthy that only they and the Jews were able to under-write the war debts of Europe's rulers. Their wealth and independence effectively made them 'a state within the State' and contained the seeds of their sudden and brutal downfall.

It was precipitated by the fall of Acre in 1291, which removed the original reason for their existence, leaving an élite military force established in Europe without a battle ground. On Friday 13 October 1307 the French king, Philippe le Bel, who owed the Templars vast sums, had them all arrested overnight on charges of heresy. He forced the Pope to abolish the order in 1312. In 1314 the last Grand Master, who had retracted a confession extracted under torture, was burnt at the stake in Paris, reputedly cursing both King and Pope. The King and Pope duly died within the year. The Templars' monasteries, including Coulommiers, were transferred to the Order of St John of Jerusalem, later known as the Knights of Malta, but most of their immense fortune, which the king had hoped to seize, was never found.

When to go

Choose a Wednesday or a Sunday, when there is a market and the Commanderie is open. Mild sunny weather is preferable for the walk.



Place du Marché

Suggested visit to Coulommiers

Leave the **station** and go straight on through the car-park. Take the little street opposite, the Rue de la Gare, which leads to a roundabout. Take the second road on the left, signed 'Centre Ville'. This is the main road into town, adorned with a clock on the left, which crosses two canals and the Grand Morin river

After the first canal bridge, a little further on the right at the corner of the Rue des Capucins you will see **L'Ours** (The Bear), a former coaching inn, now a Logis de France hotel/restaurant. The décor is provincial and solidly traditional, as are its prices, ambience, cooking (the *frites* are home-made) and its clientèle. A little further, on the left at the bridge over the Grand Morin, is **Atmosphère**, a popular brasserie offering more modish cooking and a more varied choice than L'Ours, although the prices work out at about the same for a three-course lunch and I found the cooking less authentic. But it has an attractive flower-bedecked terrace with an unrivalled **view** over the river. I would choose L'Ours for a traditional French lunch and Atmosphère if the weather is sunny enough to eat outside. Of course, you could have the best of both worlds by having an apéritif on the terrace at Atmosphère and lunch at L'Ours.

Continue up the main street, now called Rue de la Pêcherie, and then turn left down a little cobblestoned cul de sac called Impasse de l'Autruche. The old building at the end was one of the first in Coulommiers to be given to the Templars and was used as a tax collection point in the Middle Ages. It was later used as a studio by the local artist Anatole Dauvergne, who died in 1870, according to the plaque on the right, at the corner of the quiet little Rue du Proconsul. Turn into this street and then left into the pedestrianised Rue Beaurepaire which leads to the lively **Place du Marché**, lined with old houses and shops.

The best place to stop for a drink is the **Café de l'Union** to the right of the fountain, a little shabby inside, but with a terrace commanding an excellent view of the market, always full of good-humoured local shoppers even when it is raining. The market is a good place to buy Coulommiers cheese or 'Brie Noir', a specially aged brownish Brie which I had never seen before. If you decide to buy sandwiches for a picnic lunch it is worth joining the queue at the excellent *boulangerie* next door to the café, open until 1 pm every day except Monday.

1½ km uphill walk to the Commanderie des Templiers

With your back to the Café de l'Union, leave the marketplace by turning left into the Rue du Marché and continue uphill towards the **church** spire of St Denys, a useful landmark. It was built in 1911 to replace an 11th century church, finally demolished in 1968.

Continue into the Place Pasteur and cross it diagonally to the right towards the church. Cross the road (Cours Gambetta) at the pedestrian crossing and go up the steps in front of you, turning left uphill into the Rue Lafayette, with the church behind you. Continue to a roundabout, with the Gendarmerie opposite. Turn right, past the Gendarmerie and up Avenue de la République. Take the first left uphill, the residential Rue des Caillets. This is the most tedious part of the walk but the road does eventually flatten out into a plateau. Continue, past a social housing estate, much improved since my first visit several years ago, eventually passing 'La Poste' on your right. You will see three circular concrete **water towers** in the distance on the right, a useful landmark.

The road ends in a roundabout, with an old stone building propped up with wooden supports visible straight ahead. This is actually the outside of the Commanderie, which is far more imposing when seen from the inside. Ignore the sign to the right for the Commanderie, which is for cars, and take a short-cut by crossing the road to the right of the roundabout and going

straight on towards the Commanderie through a little park. Go round the Commanderie on your left onto the small road ahead, the Avenue Foch, which leads to the entrance, on the left.

Now owned by the town of Coulommiers, the **Commanderie** has been in continuous use since the 12th century and the converted stables were being used as a polling station when I visited it one Sunday. In 1964 it was saved from demolition by a local group of volunteers, who run it today on limited funds. You can join the guided visit in French or ask for the useful factsheet in English and wander round on your own. There are some helpful notices about the history of the Templars (in French) but for me the most memorable part of the visit was the bare whitewashed Chapelle Sainte Anne with the light from its three high windows falling onto the stone floor, green with moss.

As soon as you enter the quiet massive courtyard of what feels like a fortress you are in a different world. The austere atmosphere, of work and prayer with an undertone of violence, is not dispelled by the few visitors. The striking ensemble of barracks-like buildings surrounding you consists of the stone Chapelle Sainte Anne next to the brick tower which lodged the Commander, a circular tower housing a dovecote on the right, a huge tithe barn opposite the Commander's tower and the former stables to the left of the entrance. They housed three horses for each warrior-monk, a charger for battle, a palfrey for travelling and a packhorse for transport. There is a rather creepy underground cellar, en route to the rambling garden at the back, which is being restored by volunteers to its medieval state. We and other visitors were offered walnuts, of which there was a surplus, to take home, and cordially invited to help ourselves to the delicious little apples in the orchard.

3 km country walk to the station

Turn right on leaving the Commanderie. At the roundabout go straight over and stay on the right of the road ahead, the Avenue Joffre, passing the **water towers** on your right. Keep going downhill, eventually passing a *calvaire* (roadside cross) on your left, and continue across the Avenue du Maréchal du Lattre de Tassigny. Take the first road on the right a little further on, the Rue des Ouches which has the red and white GR sign.

Turn left at the end of this little road and then take the first road left, the Rue Verte downhill, marked with the GR sign. When you are almost at the end of this road look for **no. 5** on the right-hand side and turn right into the narrow footpath next to it, where the GR sign is painted on the ground. This is the most rural part of the walk, with blackberries and a plum tree in the woodland on your right and the back gardens of houses on your left, with butterflies flitting across the narrow path in front of you.

After about five minutes you will see a GR left turn sign, indicating a downhill path immediately to your left. Take this path, turn right at the end and continue straight on, following the GR signs. The narrow path eventually turns into an asphalt walk, with walls on both sides. Turn left at the end and take the steps down into the main road, with the **church** on your right. Cross the road towards the church and follow the tree-lined GR path just before it on your left, downhill. Turn left and then immediately right, across a bridge into the peaceful **Parc des Capucins**.

Continue straight on, past a children's playground on your left. Follow the GR signs, with a canal on either side of the path, until you come to a gate, with the **view** of a low white building reflected in the water on your left. It is the 17th century **Couvent des Capucins** which now houses the local **museum**. The contents of the museum are less interesting than the building itself which is in a beautiful setting overlooking what was once the moat around a vanished château.

Go through the gate and turn left towards the museum, then take the first left across a footbridge to discover the romantic remains of the **château**. It replaced an earlier fortified

castle and was designed for the Duchesse de Longueville in 1613, who was the inspiration for Mme de Lafayette's famous novel, *La Princesse de Clèves*. The duchess insisted on using the original damp site, against the advice of her architect. After constant repairs to the stonework the château was finally demolished in 1736. Continue right round the ruins to the right, past the moat on your left, to return to the bridge and the main path.

Turn left, passing the museum entrance on your left and follow the GR signs diagonally across the grass to the right, leading to a gate. Go through the gate and across a bridge over the canal, turning right into the Rue Marcel Clavier. Continue until you come to the roundabout, cross the Rue Bertrand Flornoy on your right, the main road into town you took on arrival, and retrace your steps to the **station**.

Distance from Paris: 60 km (37 miles)

Depart: Gare de l'Est

Arrive: Coulommiers

Journey time: 61 minutes

Length of visit: Full day

Navigo Zone: 5

Single ticket: 9.45€

Distance from Coulommiers church to Commanderie: 1½ km (1 mile)

Distance from Commanderie to station via GR path and park: 3 km (2 miles)

Population: 14,725

Getting there

SNCF trains to Coulommiers (terminus) leave Gare de l'Est (*Ile de France*) hourly, returning hourly up to 10.30 pm.

Car: A4, exit Crécy la Chapelle and D934.

Useful information

Office de tourisme, 7 rue du Général de Gaulle, 77120 Coulommiers, tel 01 64 03 88 09, <http://tourisme.coulommiers.fr/> Open Monday-Saturday 9.30 am -12.30 pm and 2.30-6 pm (5.30 pm in winter), Sunday in summer only, 10 am-12.30 pm.

Commanderie des Templiers, Avenue Foch, Coulommiers, tel 06 23 58 56 11, ampcoulommiers@gmail.com, <http://tourisme.coulommiers.fr/patrimoine/la-commanderie-des-templiers/> Open 1 March-15 December, Wednesday and Friday 2-5 pm, weekends 11 am-5 pm. Admission 4€, children 3€.

Couvent des Capucins (Museum), Parc des Capucins, tel 01 64 65 11 31, <http://tourisme.coulommiers.fr/patrimoine/le-musee-municipal/> Open in summer Wednesday, Friday and weekends, 2-6 pm; in winter Wednesday and weekends 2-5.30 pm. Admission 3€, free if under 18.

Cafés and restaurants

L'Ours hotel-restaurant, 35 rue Bertrand Flornoy, tel 01 64 03 32 11, www.hotel-ours.com Closed Wednesday lunchtime and Friday and Sunday evening. Main courses around 20 €, menus from 13.50- 36€.

Atmosphère, 1 Rue Pêcherie, tel 01 64 20 96 42. Closed Tuesdays and Sunday evening. Main courses 13-25€, menus 15-18€ on weekdays.