

3. 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 any foreign visitors. On market days its narrow streets, hung with old-fashioned shop signs, 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 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 the best-preserved one in the north of 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

The name ‘Coulommiers’ is derived from ‘Columbier’ (dovecote) and the settlement dates from Roman times. As it 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. Coulommiers 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.

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 jurisdiction of 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 battleground. On Friday 13 October 1307 the French king, Philippe le Bel, who owed the Templars vast sums, had them all suddenly 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 died within the year, giving rise to the later legend which inspired ‘Les rois maudits’ (the Cursed Kings), a series of novels written between 1955 and 1977, later a tv series and the major inspiration for ‘Game of Thrones’. 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 in spring, summer or autumn, when there is a market and the Commanderie is open. Mild sunny weather is preferable for the walk.



Café l'Atmosphère overlooking the Grand Morin

Suggested visit to Coulommiers

From the **station** go straight ahead through the car-park to 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, the Rue Bertrand Flornoy, adorned with a clock on the left, which crosses two little canals and the Grand Morin river

After the first canal bridge, a little further on the right above the corner of the Rue des Capucins you will see the striking old sign for L'Ours (The Bear), a 17th century coaching inn, now a hotel. A little further on, overlooking the bridge over the Grand Morin on the left, is **Atmosphère**, a popular brasserie. I find the cooking rather pretentious but its quiet flower-bedecked terrace has an unrivalled **view** over the river and is the perfect place for coffee or an aperitif.

Continue up the main street, now called Rue de la Pêcheurie, and then turn left down a little cobblestoned cul de sac called Impasse de l'Autruche. The old building at the end, now converted into flats, 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 Beurepaire which leads to the lively **Place du Marché**. It is lined with old houses and shops, many of which still have painted signs hanging outside. This seems to be a particular tradition in Coulommiers as even a shop selling jeans has one, displaying a pair of jeans and a pair of scissors.

The best place to stop for a drink here 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. The market is a good place to buy Coulommiers cheese or 'Brie Noir', a specially-aged Brie with a brownish crust which I have never seen anywhere else, direct from the producer.

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, past the small bar-brasserie **L'incontournable** on the left. The dining room is upstairs. This is the best place in Coulommiers to have lunch. Run by a French couple, it offers very reasonably priced good home cooking, although the wine is at Paris prices. I have tried their tender yet crispy *poulet churrasco*, grilled chicken with lemon and garlic, served with an optional chili oil sauce, home-made *frites* and salad.

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 after teetering on the verge of collapse over several centuries. Cross the Place Pasteur 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 into the Rue Lafayette, with the church behind you. Continue to a roundabout, with the **Gendarmerie** opposite, another useful landmark. 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, eventually passing 'La Poste' on your right. You will see three circular concrete **silos** in the distance on the right, another useful landmark.

The road ends at 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 keeping it on your left and 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.

As soon as you enter its quiet massive courtyard 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 tithing 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.

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 silent whitewashed Chapelle Sainte Anne with the light from its three high windows falling onto the bare stone floor. It is the only building in the complex which dates from the original construction and has not been modified in the succeeding centuries.

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 **silos** 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. The GR sign is painted on an iron post set into the wall on your right. 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**, a monastery built by the pious owner of a vanished château, which now houses a small museum in a beautiful setting overlooking what was once the château moat.

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. It is worth a visit to see the *Trésor*, an astonishing collection of Roman coins found under a local merchant's house, the deliberately vandalised 17th century seashell grotto and the decapitated statues of saints, destroyed during the Revolution. The original monks' cells upstairs have been converted into offices for the museum and you may be able to persuade the kindly curator to let you visit them, as you are likely to be the only visitors. From the museum 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 via the Rue de la Gare to the **station**.

Distance from Paris: 60 km (37 miles)

Depart: Gare de l'Est

Arrive: Coulommiers

Journey time: 62 minutes

Length of visit: Full day

Navigo Zone: 5

Single ticket: 2.50€

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: 15,116

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, www.coulommierspaysdebrie.fr/fiche/4773423/espace-coulommiers-tourisme/ Open Tuesday 2-6 pm, Wednesday-Saturday 9.30 am -12.30 pm and 2-6 pm (5.30 pm in winter), Sunday in summer only, 9.30 am-12.30 pm.

Commanderie des Templiers, Avenue Foch, Coulommiers, tel 06 23 58 56 11, ampcoulommiers@gmail.com <https://www.coulommiers.fr/loisirs/patrimoine/la-commanderie-des-templiers> Open March-October, 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 75 80 00, <https://www.coulommiers.fr/loisirs/patrimoine/le-musee/>

Open in summer Wednesday, Friday and weekends, 2-6 pm; in winter Wednesday and weekends 2-5.30 pm. Closed December-February. Admission 3€, free if under 18.

Cafés and restaurants

L'Incontournable bar-brasserie, 4 Rue du Marché, tel 01 64 03 01 67. Open daily except Monday, closes 3 pm Sunday. *Plats du jour* 13.50€ on weekdays, from 15.50€ on Sundays. 50 cl *pichet* of Gamay, Brouilly or Chardonnay 14€ or 22€ bottle.

Atmosphère bar-brasserie, 1 Rue Pêcheurie, tel 01 64 20 96 23. Open for lunch until 2 pm daily except Monday. Main courses 15-20€, *planche mixte* (platter of cheese and charcuterie to share) 16€, wine from 5.80€ a glass.

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