

curious sound drifts upwards from beneath me. Standing almost alone in a vast courtyard of tiered balconies, my ear tilts a fraction in pure puzzlement as I try to both place it and figure out its source.

"It's an instrument created especially for us," smiles my guide Amélie knowingly, "70 speakers hidden in cellars. They pipe random sounds like this one of factory machines clanking, plus every hour you'll hear a big scene playing, such as the community getting together to watch Roland-Garros - or sing the national anthem."

Reflecting on echoes of life as bounced around these very walls, generation after generation, I'm at the Familistère de Guise halfway between Lille and Reims, a utopian village built from 1859 by the French industrialist Jean-Baptiste André Godin for the workers of his stove factory.

Stood here in its 'Palais Social', the single thing that's stopping me in my tracks is that while in most historical museum settings you have to exercise some degree of imagination to conjure the former dwellers,

here, with people still calling these apartments home, factory workers still clocking in, children still attending the school, the Familistère de Guise still lives and breathes its original raison d'être: provide humans not just with job security but with good living conditions, and you can create a society that's big on fairness, happiness and productivity.

### Social experiment

Close to the driving route of many a Francophile destination - ski resorts and champagne plains included - you may have almost passed the town of Guise (pronounced Gweez) umpteen times before. But way before the A26 was A Thing, this part of rural Aisne was home to the modest Godin family, whose son's early travels in France's grandes villes convinced him that the average man's working conditions (10 people living per room, no water, no light, punishingly long hours) was no way to nurture a workforce.

Instead, young Godin's observations shaped him into becoming a social innovator whose name - also the name of his brand of cast-iron goods was synonymous with a radical



Above: Familistère de Guise's Palais Social in full fête swing

### WHERE ELSE TO ENJOY FRANCE'S **INDUSTRIAL HERITAGE**

Saline Royale, Arc-et-Senans This Unescolisted heritage site in Doubs



is renowned for its striking architecture, designed by Claude-Nicolas Ledoux. The historical Franche-Comté region had subterranean seams of rock salt which saw saltworks spring up in the area, including at Montmorot and Salins-les-Bains. Today the centre hosts concerts, exhibitions and even a Christmas market. salineroyale.com

### COAL

Centre Historique Minier, Lewarde There's nowhere better than



France's largest mining museum to see the industry's impact on French society. In the coal-mining heartlands of Hauts-de-France, this excellent museum and culture centre contains a recreation of the miners' underground world so visitors can experience it for themselves. French speakers can even meet a former miner to hear first-hand about life underground. chm-lewarde.com

### CARS

Musée Peugeot, Sochaux

Over the road from one of



France's biggest car plants, Stellantis Sochaux, is this fascinating museum dedicated to Armand Peugeot's car manufacturer business that began life making bicycles. There are around 130 cars, plus various bikes and other Peugeotmanufactured equipment such as coffee grinders, on display across the 10,000m<sup>2</sup> of open exhibition space.

museepeugeot.com

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way to conceive industrial living: facilitating workers' lives with a theatre, laundry room, shops, restaurant, swimming pool, gardens and crèche – plus a chance to benefit from the profits. The more the factory thrived, the wealthier the workers.

And the Familistère de Guise proves to be a visit that demands a slow digestion, with the easy-to-miss details somehow the most significant. "Everything about the design was intrinsic to Godin's ethos," interjects Amélie, after I comment that sunshine-yellow walls aren't what one normally associates with industrial life, "and when he could find no architect to adequately interpret his vision, he took on the role of architect himself." Godin's hand is indeed visible at every turn: a secret passageway from the school directly to the theatre stage enabling the

young 'Familistèriens' to gain confidence by public speaking; modular apartment layouts so that a family could add a room to their living quarters as it grew; balcony walkways ('streets') wide enough for neighbours to chat without blocking the path of others.

Happily, for social history geeks like me, anecdotes are on tap. I smile when I'm told that because pay day was shorthand for let's-headstraight-to-the-pub, savvy Godin remunerated workers on different days of the week to ensure that just a fraction of the workforce would be under the influence at any one time. There were compulsory weekly swim sessions for workers too: to prevent drownings in the nearby Oise, yes, but also because Godin sought to have hygienic workers, their 1850s predecessors having only bathed - quelle horreur - once a month. ▶





Above: Musée Antoine Lecuyer

## Also in Aisne...

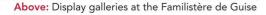
## SAINT-QUENTIN A 30-minute drive west of Guise

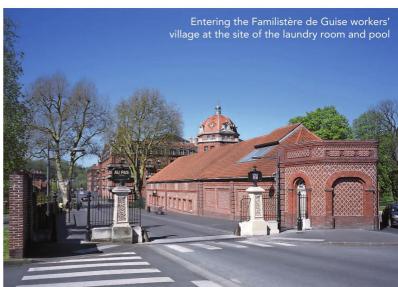
Saint Quentin's ability to replace World War I devastation with magnificent Art Deco facades is testament to man's ability to fill a void with beauty. A main square café terrace is your chance to observe daily life before you head to your choice of:
Musée Antoine Lecuyer
(works by Maurice
Quentin de la Tour,
Louis XV's portraitist and
face of the old 50 franc
banknote); a vast towncentre lake (with its own
beach); the basilica (for
tower views, floor maze
thought to rid you of sin,
and some of poor Saint
Quentin's appendages);

the Hôtel-de-Ville (173 carved sculptures in the facades and the grandest of municipal rooms inside); and the Art Deco Monument Historique Buffet de la Gare – like a 1920s film set where it's easy to conjure lunchtime buzz and the roar of a train summoning passengers through the revolving door.

### FAMILISTÈRE DE GUISE









Above: The apartment walkways

### LAON

## A 45-minute drive south of Guise

Let the sky-high gargoyle of a struggling man carrying limestone to this hill's summit be some indication of how backbreaking building majestic Laon cathedral must have been almost 900 years ago. Walk its light-filled interior balconies, looking out for

evidence of the Revolution and German occupation on your way to the dazzling rose window. Emerge to orbit town via the ramparts, looking across to one of World War I's key battlefield lines: the Chemin des Dames. Then, enter the warren of uberatmospheric underground tunnels at Henri IV's citadel, the best way to partake in a spot of time

travelling since they've been used over the centuries as quarry, prison, gunpowder store and air raid shelter. Afterwards, shop in Rues Châtelaine and Saint Jean, stopping at one of Laon's eateries for lunch: you'll be hard pushed to find something not coated in Maroilles – the decidedly pongy but sublime local cheese. tourisme-paysdelaon.com



### Against the grain

Benevolent boss outlooks aren't so unusual by today's standards - plenty nowadays have laudable ethics - but in its historical context, Godin's ethos was extraordinarily progressive. That's not to say there weren't bumps in the road, for there were mountains. He wasn't popular with the State (his positive practices shone torchlight directly onto their more brutal ones); the Church was equally hostile (irreligious Godin had chosen not to have a place of worship on-site); initially, workers had to be persuaded to live there (they were certain that there must be some kind of catch).

There was also an unhealthy spirit of 'them and us' from townsfolk on the other side of the gate, as gallery photographs comparing Godin's factory to the nearby Cau Mill's neatly



demonstrate – a spot the difference game, if you will. You won't see child labour in the Godin pictures for one thing, the children's attentions focused instead at his on-site school. Education was the key to social mobility, opined Godin, which should be there for the taking if young people wanted it – an opportunity fully grasped by the daughter of one worker who became one of France's first female doctors.

Above: The school room as it was

Still today, Godin's legacy is all around. Project by project, current management continue to honour his wish that the place carries on serving its socialist purpose after his death, currently restoring the right wing into a housing development open to every type of household. His legacy extends way beyond the gates too; what he achieved here inspired a similar project in Columbia for example, rescuing children from communities where drugs prevail.

And besides tangible tributes to Godin – the statue he was too modest to want erected in his lifetime or the mausoleum in which he's buried – there's a real sense that he's here in spirit too. As if doffing caps in person, incumbent Familistèriens still refer to the founder as "Monsieur Godin".

# Francofile

### TOURIST INFORMATION:

jaimelaisne.com Département: Aisne (02)



### **GETTING THERE**

ravel with Eurotunnel from Folkestone to Calais. Guise is an onward car journey of two hours 15 minutes.



### VISITING

familistere.com
Information panels are
in English throughout
and guided tours
in English may be
possible if booked in
advance. Highlights:
displays of Godin
stoves; a photographic
portrait gallery of
former workers; four
apartments furnished in
different eras; Godin's

own apartment (the 'man of the people' was in number 265); the boutique selling Godin cast iron cookwares ("like Le Creuset," I eavesdrop, "only better"). Look out for 'Visites Nocturnes' and temporary exhibitions. Certain areas, such as the factory, are not open to visitors.



## WHERE TO STAY Gîte du

### Familistère

Guise
Tel: (FR) 6 48 65 48 93
gites.fr/gites\_le-gite-dufamilistere\_guise\_45009.htm
Enjoy vintage vibes at this
gîte, sleeping four, with

views over the Familistère itself. €75-85 per night.

### Gîte des Ducs de Guise

Guise gites.fr/gites\_gite-des-ducsde-guise\_guise\_h4690297.htm For a boutiquey stay for 10 people, look no further than this stylish four-bedroom gîte.

### Domaine de Vadancourt

Maissemy
Tel: (FR) 3 23 66 51 41
domainedevadancourt.fr
Near Saint-Quentin,
try this idyllic chambre
d'hôte (and ask the owner
to share its emotive WWI
history with you, involving
lifting a tablecloth).



## WHERE TO EAT La Taverne du

### Chateau

Tel: (FR) 3 23 61 25 00 taverne-chateau-guise.fr For traditional French food done well, you can't go wrong here. Menus from €30.

