



Lucy Shrimpton visits a utopian village in northern France where the benevolent ethos of its 19th-century creator lives on today

A 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 ▶

WHERE ELSE TO ENJOY FRANCE'S INDUSTRIAL HERITAGE

SALT

Saline Royale, Arc-et-Senans

This Unesco-listed 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 Peugeot-manufactured equipment such as coffee grinders, on display across the 10,000m² of open exhibition space. museepeugeot.com



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

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

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 'Familistériens' 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-head-straight-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 town-centre 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.



Above: Display galleries at the Familistère de Guise



Entering the Familistère de Guise workers' village at the site of the laundry room and pool



Above: The apartment walkways

PHOTOS: LUDOVIC LESUR; GEORGES FESSY / 2016 © FAMILISTÈRE DE GUISE

LAON

A 45-minute drive south of Guise

Let the sky-high gargoyles 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 uber-atmospheric 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



Above: The school room as it was

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.

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 Familistériens still refer to the founder as "Monsieur Godin". ♥

Francofile

TOURIST INFORMATION:

jaimelaisne.com

Département: Aisne (02)



GETTING THERE

eurotunnel.com

Travel 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-du-familistere_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-ducs-de-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

domainevadancourt.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.

