

The routes of Santiago de Compostela

An ideal stopover in the midst of abbey life

The pilgrimage to Santiago was one of the three main Christian pilgrimages undertaken during the Middle Ages, along with those of Rome and Jerusalem.

The success of the abbey's establishment was linked to this huge religious undertaking. Before crossing the inhospitable Landes region of France, this stopping point was a godsend for God's walkers, where they could find care, food and rest in the infirmary and hospice. Pierced shells found in a sarcophagus cleared in the north chapel in 1960 indicate that others chose La Sauve as the final point in their earthly journey.

A minor route

The network of Compostela routes is far denser than the four main routes recorded in the 12th century in "The Santiago de Compostela



The abbey, from the Langoiran road.

Pilgrim's Guide" might have us assume. Once they reached La Sauve, the pilgrims walked on to Langoiran to cross the River Garonne at Le Tourne and joined

the road from Tours to Belin-Beliet. On their way back, some expressed their gratitude by making donations and bequests.

Glossary

Apse: semi-circular end of the church.

Consecration medallions: depictions of the apostles placed inside the church during the ceremony preceding its opening (1231).

Half-domed: semi-circular vault.

In commendam: when the management of an abbey is handed over to an ecclesiastic or layman.

Gironde primary teacher training college: built at the end of the 19th century on the spot where the monastic buildings stood and destroyed by fire in 1910.

Maurists: members of the Benedictine Congregation of Saint-Maur, founded in Paris in 1618 and dissolved during the Revolution.

Modillion: bracket used in series under a cornice.
Monasticon Gallicanum: a collection of engraved plates depicting cavalier perspectives (oblique aerial views) of the abbeys of the Congregation of Saint-Maur.

Sauveté: area free from any secular jurisdiction.

Practical information

Average length of visit: 1 hour

Visits adapted to disabled visitors.



Gift and book shop

The guide for this monument can be found in the *Itinéraires* collection and is available in the gift and book shop.

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La Sauve-Majeure Abbey

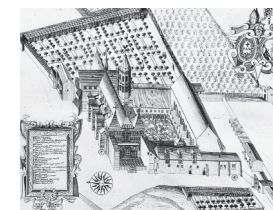
At the heart of Romanesque Art

Powerful and independent

In 1079, a Benedictine abbot, the future Saint Gérard de Corbie, founded Notre-Dame-de-la-Sauve-Majeure in the vast Entre-Deux-Mers forest between the Garonne and Dordogne rivers, an undertaking helped by support from the Dukes of Aquitaine and the nearby Santiago de Compostela pilgrim route. In the 12th century, the Abbey stood at the head of 70 priories stretching from England to Aragon. At that time, within the *sauveté**, it harboured an important monastic town.

Decline and renewal

La Sauve's future was jeopardised by the upheavals following the Hundred Years' War, then at the end of the 15th century, when it was



The Abbey in 1679.

given *in commendam**.

In 1660, although the monastery was in a neglected state, the Maurists* revived its monastic life. After the Revolution, the

buildings were used as a stone quarry and the church was little more than a grandiose ruin. Listed as a historic monument in 1840 and acquired by the State in 1960, the Abbey was listed in 1998 as a UNESCO World Heritage Site under the Routes of Santiago de Compostela in France.

* Explanations overleaf.

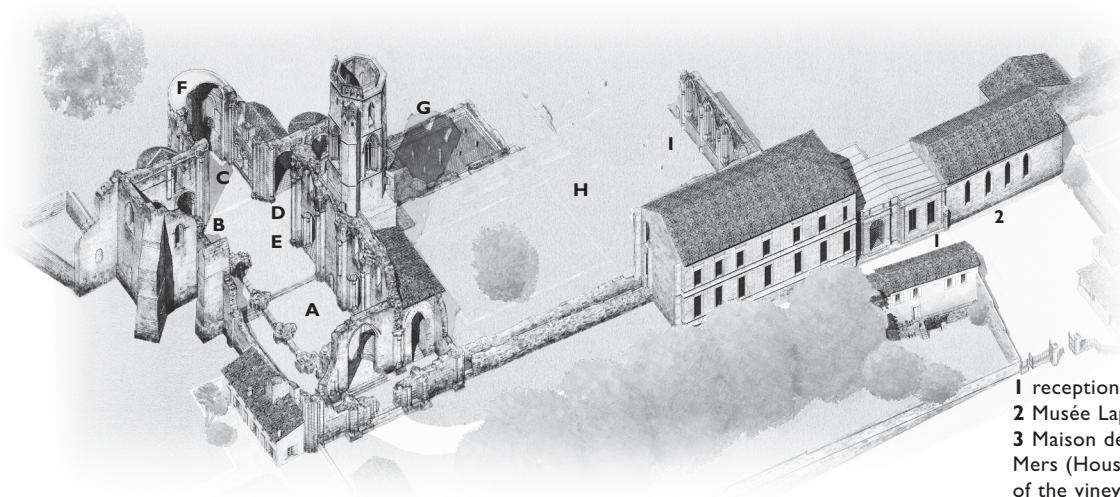
The abbey church

Built in the shape of a Latin Cross, the abbey church consists of a five-bay nave flanked by side aisles, a transept opening on to the chancel and ever smaller lateral chapels. Few parts remain of the church's portal, whose main lines are known thanks to the oblique aerial view of the abbey in the *Monasticon Gallicanum**.

A The nave starts at once on the reverse side of the façade. In the first bay, a well and a niche form an enigmatic liturgical arrangement. In the 17th century, two huge stonework blocks outlining a kind of oval tambour were built to hold an organ gallery. Set in the wall, six consecration medallions* depicting the apostles can be seen. The partially ruined nave had a ribbed vault.

The south side aisle, on the right as you come in, bears witness to several building campaigns. The Gothic cross-ribbed vaults of the second and third bays date back to the 13th century, as does the octagonal bell tower, with its large twin bays on the second floor. The fifth bay has a 12th-century coated groin vault in the Romanesque style.

The chevet, dating back to the very early 12th century, is the oldest and most complete part of the church. It includes the chancel and adjoining chapels which still have their rounded arch barrel vaults. The chancel, lit by three large windows and topped by a half-domed vault* used to house the "most sacred sacrament", the crafted bronze tomb of the founding saint and other precious relics for the faithful to revere.



- 1 reception-gift and book shop
- 2 Musée Lapidaire (Stone museum)
- 3 Maison des vins de l'Entre-Deux-Mers (House displaying the history of the vineyard and wine growing)

The sculpted decor

B to E On the capitals, biblical depictions are shown next to monsters from the Far East and the depths of time. Among the **story-telling scenes**, we can make out "The Original Sin", "Daniel in the Lion's Den", "The Temptation of Christ", "The Life of Samson" and "The Decapitation of John the Baptist". The sculptors have created a mythical bestiary world to depict vices. Asps, basilisks, centaurs and griffins confront one another. There are also numerous capitals with **plant decor** (acanthus, fern and pine). The so-called "Vine" capital, symbol of the resurrection and life, is set opposite the capital with the fabulous combats. This split between the left and right of the chancel illustrates the contrast between good and evil.

F Outside the chevet, **the apse*** is a harmonious blend of windows and small blind arcades decorated with delicately sculpted capitals. Four-legged beasts, beard- and hair-pullers, bird-women, etc. can be seen. Running throughout is a cornice with sculpted modillions*, some of which are exhibited in The Cloisters Museum, New York.

The monastic buildings

- G The chapter house** was where the monks assembled under the authority of the abbot to listen to the reading of a chapter of the rule (*capitulum*), whence its name. Here, they would hold discussions, make important decisions and confess their faults. All that remains of it today is an area outlined by low pillars and modern tiling.
- H The cloister**, an enclosure separating monks from laymen, was closed off by four covered galleries surrounding a garden, a place of prayer and meditation.
- The scriptorium** was the continuation of the chapter house, and was reserved for monks who copied out and illuminated texts. The dormitory was on the upper floor. Few vestiges remain.
- I Of the refectory**, a place for equal and fraternal relations between all monks, only one wall, with 13th century Gothic windows, remains. It was rediscovered in 1963 when the ruins of the Gironde primary teachers' training college* were cleared.

* Explanations overleaf.