

## Glossary

**Abbey:** a monastery of monks or nuns living according to a rule and under the direction of an abbot or abbess.

**Abbey church:** the church belonging to an abbey.

**Abbot/Abbess:** the elected or appointed head of a monastery.

**Archangel:** a more superior angel in the celestial hierarchy.

**Buttresses:** raised pillars projecting from a wall to support it.

**Ossuary:** a room where human bones taken from a cemetery are stored.

**Rule of Saint Benedict:** this rule enacted by Benedict of Nursia in the 6<sup>th</sup> century for his monastery in Monte Cassino, Italy, governed prayer, work and monastery life.

**Transept:** the transverse aisle between the nave and choir of a church.

## Information

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## Saint Michael

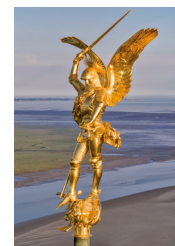
### Fighter of evil, weigher of souls

Saint Michael, leader of the heavenly host, was a very important figure in medieval religious sensibility. In the New Testament, the archangel\* appears in the Book of Revelation, in which he fights and defeats the Devil, represented by a dragon. For medieval man, who lived in expectation and indeed fear of the afterlife, Saint Michael was the one who led the dead and weighed their souls on Judgement Day.

### The cult of Saint Michael

The cult of Saint Michael only appeared in the West in the late 5<sup>th</sup> Century. Devotion to Saint Michael took on a patriotic dimension in France following the Hundred Years' War, in light of the Mount's resistance to the English.

### The iconography of the saint



Saint Michael is often depicted in Christian iconography with a sword and a set of scales. The statue that has dominated the bell tower since 1897 was created by sculptor Emmanuel Frémiet at the request of architect Victor Petitgrand to crown the new spire. The statue was restored in 1987 and regilded in 2016.

\* Explanations overleaf

## Architecture

### A church perched on top of the rock

The Abbey\* of Mont-Saint-Michel is a unique monument. Its medieval master-builders effectively wrapped the buildings around the rock to accommodate the pyramidal shape of the Mont. The abbey church\* located at the top sits on a series of crypts that support an 80m-long church.

### A vertical monastery

*La Merveille* showcases the architectural expertise of 13<sup>th</sup>-century builders, who successfully constructed two three-storey buildings on the northern slope of the rock. Certain technical measures were, of course, required, with the structures being made lighter the higher they rose and buttresses\* used to support the building on the outside.

### Monastic and topographical constraints

In addition to topographical constraints, the key principles of monastic life also influenced the layout of the buildings. The Rule of Saint Benedict\*, which the monks of the Mont obeyed, allowed them to devote their day to prayer and work, and the rooms here were consequently arranged to accommodate these two activities and community life.

\* Explanations overleaf

# Mont Saint Michel Abbey

## Mont Saint Michel

### First, there was a sacred installation...



In 708, Aubert, Bishop of Avranches, had a shrine built on Mont-Tombe in honour of the archangel\*, and the mount soon became a major pilgrimage destination. In the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the Duke of Normandy established a community of Benedictine monks here, while a village developed down below. By the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the latter had expanded to the foot of the rock.

### A multitude of roles

Having served as an impregnable stronghold during the Hundred Years' War, Mont Saint Michel also features militaristic architecture. Its ramparts and fortifications withstood all the attacks by the English, making the Mont a symbolic place of national identity. After the monks were expelled during the French Revolution, the abbey\* was used as a prison until 1863.

### An extraordinary universal asset

It underwent extensive restoration work when it was listed as a historic monument in 1874, and work has continued across the whole site ever since. This has allowed visitors to appreciate the full splendour of the abbey\* that medieval man saw as a representation of the heavenly Jerusalem on Earth, an image of heaven. Mont Saint Michel has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1979.

\* Explanations overleaf

## 1 The Guardroom

This is the fortified entrance to the abbey\*, where pilgrims were greeted. It became a guardroom when a garrison was installed there during the Hundred Years' War.

## 2 The Grand Degré staircase

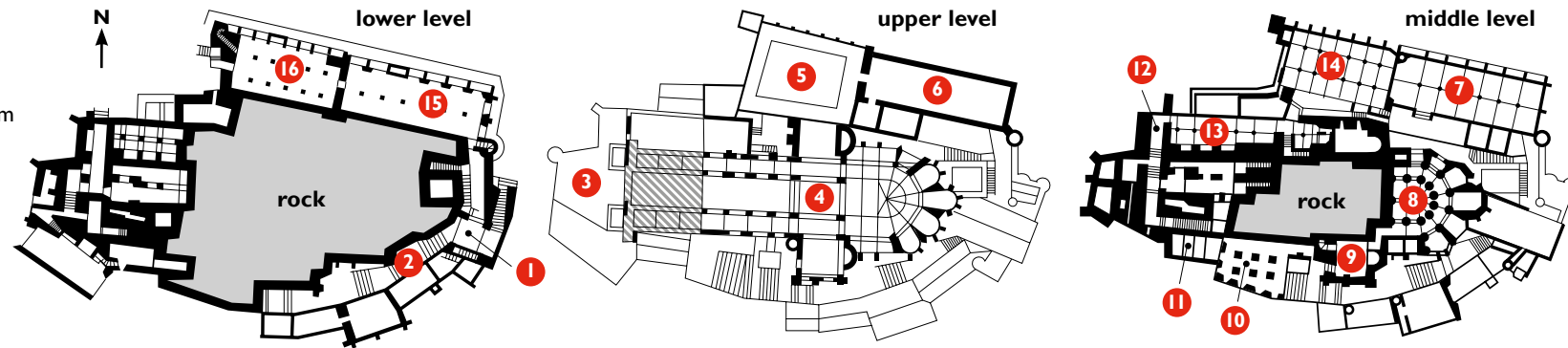
Visitors can climb the Grand Degré staircase to the Saut-Gaultier terrace, walking between the church, on the right-hand side, and the abbey's living quarters\*, on the left, linked by suspended walkways. These living quarters, built between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, were the seigneurial residence of the abbots\* and now house the monument's administrative offices and the monastic communities.

## 3 The West Terrace

The western terrace comprises the original abbey church\* forecourt and the first three bays of the nave, destroyed by fire in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The classical façade was rebuilt in 1784. From here, you get sweeping views across the bay, from the rock of Cancale in the west to the cliffs of Normandy to the east. The granite massifs of Mont-Dol, inland to the west, and the islet of Tombelaine, to the north, can also be seen, as well as the archipelago of the Chausey islands, where the granite used to build the abbey\* came from. The terrace also offers a unique perspective of the neo-Gothic bell tower spire, erected in 1897 and topped with the gilded copper statue of Saint Michael.

## 4 The abbey church\*

Work on the abbey church\* began in 1023. It was built on top of the rock and rests partially on four crypts built into the slope. The Romanesque nave comprises three levels—arcades, galleries and high windows—and has always been topped



by a framework. The Romanesque choir, which collapsed in 1421, was rebuilt in the flamboyant Gothic style following the Hundred Years' War.

## 5 The cloister

The tour continues with the Gothic cloister. These galleries, which allowed people to move between different buildings, were also used for prayer and meditation, and processions were held here to mark religious festivals. The cloister is located at the top of a building known as *La Merveille* (The Marvel), built in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, and provides access to the refectory, the kitchen, the church, the dormitory, the charter room and various staircases. The central bay, to the west, is open to the sea and should have provided access to a chapterhouse that was never actually built. The galleries of the cloister were framed so as to make them lighter, while a double row of slightly offset columns offers ever-changing perspectives.

## 6 The refectory

This impressively bright room was where the monks ate their meals in silence while one of them read from the pulpit on the south wall. The side walls that support the weight of the roof structure in this room are pierced by narrow windows that are invisible from the entrance.

## 7 The Salle des Hôtes

Moving on, the Salle des Hôtes, located directly beneath the refectory, is served by a staircase. This magnificent Gothic room was used for hosting kings and noblemen.

## 8 The Crypt of the Great Pillars

The tour continues with this Gothic crypt, built in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century to support the new choir of the abbey church\*.

## 9 St. Martin's Crypt

This Romanesque crypt was built shortly after the year 1000 as the foundation for the southern arm of the transept\* of the abbey church\*. The vaulted ceiling spans an impressive 9m.

## 10 The Wheel Room

A small passageway leads from St. Martin's Crypt through to the huge wheel that occupies the former monks' ossuary\*. It was installed in 1818 to bring up food for the inmates housed at the abbey\*, which had been converted into a prison, and is a replica of the wheels used on building sites in the Middle Ages.

## 11 The Saint-Étienne chapel

The Saint-Étienne chapel is located between the infirmary, which collapsed in the early-19<sup>th</sup> century, and the monks' ossuary\*. It was used for mortuary cleansing and for the vigil before deceased monks were buried.

## 12 The north-south staircase

Next, take the north-south staircase below the western terrace. This was the main thoroughfare through the Romanesque monastery.

## 13 The monks' promenoir

The staircase leads to the monks' promenoir. This long double-nave hall belonging to the Romanesque monastery is topped with a cross-ribbed vault, an innovation that heralded the birth of Gothic art in the mid-12<sup>th</sup> century.

## 14 The scriptorium

*La Merveille* can be found at the entrance to the scriptorium. Built to support the cloister, this large Gothic room was where the monks would copy and study manuscripts. Two hundred medieval manuscripts from the abbey\* are now being preserved in Avranches.

## 15 The chaplaincy

Next, head down to the chaplaincy, located beneath the Salle des Hôtes on the first level. It was here that the monks would receive the poor, as well as pilgrims from all walks of life.

## 16 The cellar

The tour concludes with the former cellar, where food was stored, to be hoisted up by a large wheel that has since been removed. It now serves as the abbey's\* gift and book shop.