

It's a sight like none other and definitely brings us to a standstill. On a rocky outcrop in the midst of rippling waters, rises an abbey. Its sturdy walls and solemn buttress giving it a formidable strength, and its soaring spires seemingly reaching out for the heavens. It takes us a moment, but when we do snap out of our wonderment, we realise that we are indeed in front of one of the most unique places of the world: the magnificent Mont Saint Michel, a UNESCO World Heritage Site that has been towering above its surrounding bay in Normandy for many centuries now.

**THE MONT'S VILLAGE**

The Mont's religious significance and grandness progressively increased from its origins as a small stone chapel in 709 CE, with major expansions between the 11th and 15th centuries. Like pilgrims over the millennium, we also enter the Mont via Porte de l' Avancée, its only gateway, and land on the Grande Rue – the sole street of

# IN PURSUIT OF HEAVEN

EXPLORING THE SECRETS OF MONT SAINT MICHEL OFFERS AN INTERESTING MIX OF HISTORY, THEOLOGY AND ARCHITECTURE.

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS  
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**This page:** The mighty periphery walls of Mont Saint Michel.

Jet Airways operates a daily direct flight from Mumbai to Paris. W.e.f. October 29, 2017, the airline introduces a new direct flight between Chennai and Paris. From here, Mont Saint Michel lies roughly 360 km away.

## HERITAGE

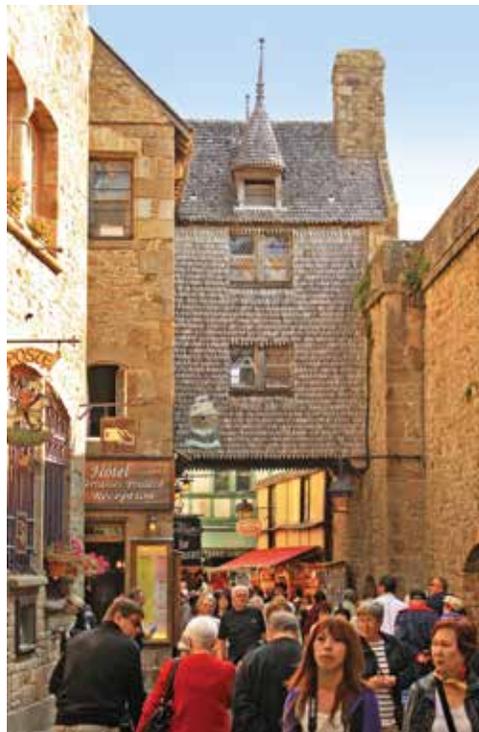


the Mont's village. Once filled with houses of farmers and fishermen, it today bustles with visitors hopping between the petite cafes, a handful of museums and shops selling rather charming French mementos. While exploring the village, be sure to look up every now and then – there are fantastic views of the abbey looming high above. But before heading upwards, we take some time to explore the Mont's periphery and are rewarded with a respite from the crowds and scenes of the tides lashing against the stone walls!

### A LONG WAY UP

Towards the end of the Grande Rue begins the most arduous task of the day – climbing the 900 odd steps to reach the abbey. If the medieval builders wanted to reinforce their concept of the celestial beings above and mere earthlings below, they did a rather good job of it here!

As we climb up the Grand Degré steps, we find ourselves surrounded by three-storey high walls on either side. To the right is the church and to the left are the abbots' living quarters. Quaint bridges connecting the two not only allowed the clergy to get to the church directly, but also served as strategic vantage points to pour down boiling oil should the abbey ever come under attack! We climb further ahead and reach the



**Above:** A bustling village thrives at the foot of Mont Saint Michel abbey.  
**Left:** Grande Rue houses quaint cafes and charming souvenir shops.

west terrace of the abbey. This open square fronts the main church and is a great spot to catch a breath, while appreciating the sweeping views across the bay. Be sure to also peer down at the circular Tour Gabriel, a defence structure; and the rather lonely La Chapelle Saint Aubert on the edge of the Mont.

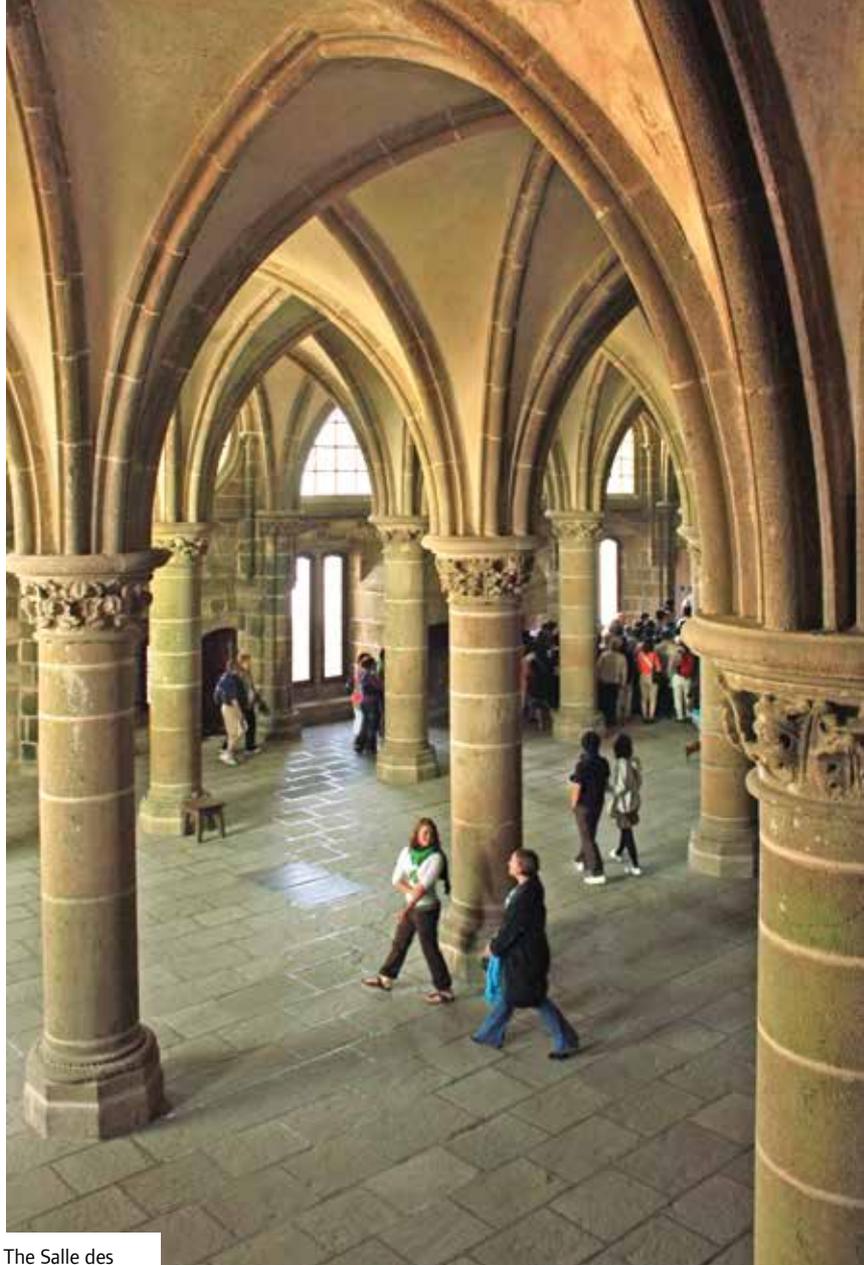
### THE CHURCH AND THE CLOISTER

Turning around, we are right in front of the church's main facade. It looks decidedly restrained, unlike some other flamboyant parts of the structure, because the original facade was lost to fire in 1776 and then rebuilt in the Neoclassical style. Looking further up, we spot the highest part of the abbey: its 19th-century neo-Gothic spire rising from a square base and crowned by a gilded statue of Saint Michel on the very top.

## HERITAGE

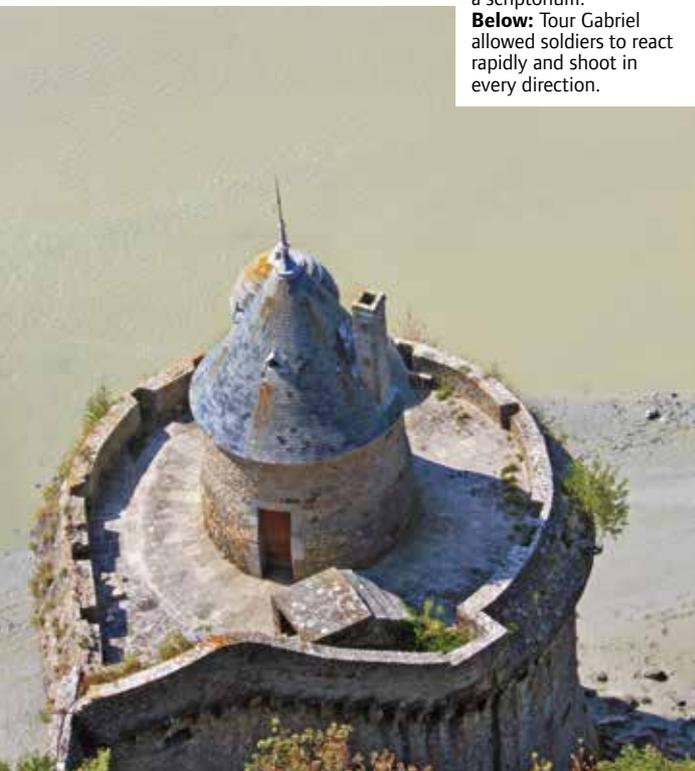
Stepping inside the nave, we admire the wood-panelled barrel vault roof that shelters the voluminous interior, but are soon drawn towards the apsidal end. With intricately carved railings and stained glass windows, this 16th century chancel is characteristically Gothic in style and lets in beautiful natural light. It's a stunning sight and would have had a profoundly moving effect on the faithful who had made their way up the Mont.

Adjoining the church is one of the most magical parts of the abbey – its cloister. Historically, cloisters served as a connecting courtyard between the different buildings of a monastery. At Mont Saint Michel, the monks added a walkway with a double row of columns all around the cloister's central garden, which was open to the skies above and must have been most conducive to contemplation! It doesn't take long for our minds to drift off yet again, this time into a serene medieval setting: there are hymns being sung in the backdrop, devotees worshipping in the church and monks with their swaying robes circumambulating the cloister!



**Above:** The Salle des Chevaliers was used as a scriptorium.

**Below:** Tour Gabriel allowed soldiers to react rapidly and shoot in every direction.

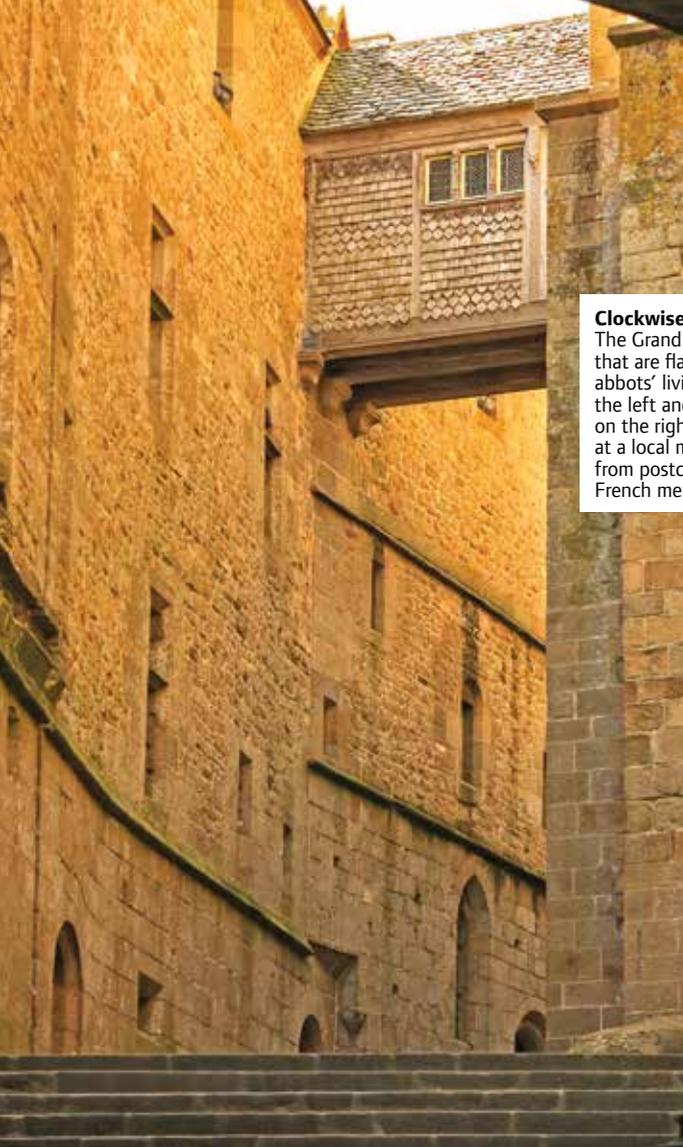


### THE GREAT HALLS

We then head into the refectory, a large hall adjoining another side of the cloister, where a single monk recited from the pulpit while all others ate their meal in silence. This austere practice might be the reason for this room to be devoid of any ornamentation. It does boast of one interesting architectural feature though – windows letting light into the refectory from either side are recessed into the walls in such a manner that they remain invisible on entering the hall!

A flight of steps takes us down to two further halls – the Salle des Hôtes (Chamber of the Guests) and the Salle des Chevaliers (Chamber of the Knights). The former was the venue for the monks to receive their wealthy patrons – kings, lords and other nobles who would be entertained here with lavish feasts and banquets. The latter was used as a scriptorium, to illustrate and copy manuscripts. Both these halls are adorned with vaulted ceilings, fireplaces and decorative capitals.

It's here that we realise another marvel about the abbey's construction. The Mont being pyramidal in



**Clockwise from left:** The Grand Degré steps that are flanked by the abbots' living quarters on the left and the church on the right; Artefacts at a local museum; Pick from postcards and other French mementos.



shape, only a slender portion of the rock rose till the pinnacle. Yet, in an attempt to reach as close to the heavens as possible, the abbey's builders intentionally placed the central portion of the church right on the top. With the rock sloping steeply downwards on all sides, a massive system of supports was then required to bear the weight of the rest of the building. And indeed, this entire level acts as an intermediate support – the Salle des Hôtes has the refectory right above it, while the Salle des Chevaliers holds up the cloister!

**DOWNWARDS AND OUTWARDS**

The sheer weight of the top level becomes even more evident on exploring the crypts. The pillars here are massive in size, and with barely any windows, the crypts are engulfed in mysterious darkness. Perhaps fittingly, right next door is the Chapel of Saint Etienne – the chapel of the dead, complete with a mural depicting a skeleton!

A final flight of steps brings us down to the Almonry. Directly beneath the Chamber of the Guests, it was the hall for the monks to feed ordinary pilgrims. As we walk outwards back to the foot of the Grand Degré steps, we can't help but appreciate how the abbey not only conforms to the restraints of geography but also to the widely prevalent, if rather

jaded, concept of medieval society – god and the clergy on the top, nobility in the middle, and the toiling masses below. Exploring Mont Saint Michel from the base till the pinnacle, might have then just been a journey from the earth to the heavens and back! ■



**Jet Airways now introduces a new direct flight between Chennai and Paris, scheduled w.e.f. October 29, 2017. The airline also operates a daily direct flight to Paris from Mumbai. Mont Saint Michel lies approximately 360 km from Paris.**

**QUICK FACTS**

**ACCOMMODATION**

The Mercure Mont Saint Michel, Les Terrasses Poulard and Auberge Saint Pierre offer rooms with unobstructed views of Mont Saint Michel.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION**

Log on to [www.normandie-tourisme.fr](http://www.normandie-tourisme.fr) and [www.bienvenueaumontsaintmichel.com/en](http://www.bienvenueaumontsaintmichel.com/en)