

# France's Sacred Sites

## CHARTRES CATHEDRAL

The Cathedral of Chartres is located in the medieval town of Chartres, about 90 km South of Paris on the way to the GIC conference center. Not only is Chartres Cathedral one of the greatest achievements in the history of architecture, it is almost perfectly preserved in its original design and details. Chartres' extensive cycle of portal sculpture remains fully intact and its glowing stained-glass windows are all originals. Chartres is thus the only cathedral that conveys an almost perfect image of how it looked when it was built. You can also still see the labyrinth of almost 13m in diameter that pilgrims used to walk on their knees.

In addition to its architectural splendor, Chartres Cathedral has been a major pilgrimage destination since the early Middle Ages, continuing a much older pagan tradition, as the cathedral was built on top of a major pagan cult site. Its venerable history, exquisitely preserved architecture, and centuries of fervent devotion make for an atmosphere of awe and holiness that impresses even the most nonreligious of visitors.



<http://www.sacred-destinations.com/france/chartres-cathedral>



The French village of Vézelay, one of the most visited pilgrimage sites of the Medieval Age, is located in an area of significant pre-Christian sanctity. The village is 227 km South East of Paris. Though the date of the area's original settlement is unknown, its Les Fontaines Salées mineral springs have been favored for their therapeutic qualities since at least the 3rd millennium BC. Celtic presence is evident from the 6th century BC and by the 2nd century BC the Romans had constructed temples and thermal baths.

Vézelay's Christian history began in 860 AD, when the site was donated by the Carolingian count, Gerard of Roussillon for the purpose of building a Benedictine monastery. Shortly after its foundation, a monk named Baudillon brought relics (said to be the bones) of Mary Magdalene to Vézelay from Saint-Maximin-la-Sainte-Baume. In 1058 the Pope declared the relics to be authentic and a cult of Mary Magdalene began to develop at Vézelay (the presence of a Black Madonna statue contributed to this cult development). Soon thereafter it became an important place of pilgrimage, and it was also a major starting point for pilgrims walking to the shrine of Santiago de Compostela in Spain, one of the most important of all medieval pilgrimage centers.

In addition to its fame as a pilgrimage site, Vézelay has other important historical associations. St Bernard preached the Second Crusade at Vézelay in 1146; in 1166 Bishop Thomas Becket of Canterbury threatened to excommunicate the English King Henry II; in 1190 Richard the Lion-Hearted and Philip II Augustus met there to leave for the Third Crusade; and in 1217 St. Francis of Assisi founded the first French community of Friars Minor.

The beginning of the decline of Vézelay coincided with the well-publicized discovery in 1279 of the body of Mary Magdalene at Saint-Maximin-la-Sainte-Baume in Provence, given regal patronage by Charles II, the Angevine king of Sicily. When Charles erected a Dominican convent at La Sainte-Baume, the shrine was marvelously found intact, even with an explanatory inscription stating why the relics had been hidden. The local Dominican monks soon compiled an account of miracles supposedly caused that the relics. This discovery seriously undermined Vézelay's position as the main shrine of Magdalene in Europe. Vézelay, however, remained an important place of pilgrimage for the Catholic faithful, though the Protestant Huguenots burned the actual relics in the 16th century.



Cathedral of Notre Dame Le Puy, France

Crowning the summit of Mount Corneille in the Auvergne region of central France, the cathedral of Notre Dame in Le Puy is one of Europe's oldest, most famous and most beautiful pilgrimage shrines. Much visited during medieval times by pilgrims on their way to Santiago de Compostela and highly venerated for its Black Madonna statue, Mount Corneille's use as a sacred place has its roots in prehistoric times. Prior to the arrival of Christianity an enormous dolmen, or single standing stone, stood atop the sacred hill. Nothing is known of the people who erected this stone nor of the manner in which it was used, yet the mysterious stone was to play a decisive role in the development of Le Puy as a Christian pilgrimage site.

Sometime between the 3rd and 4th centuries AD, a local woman suffering from an incurable disease had visions of Mary. In her visions she received instructions to climb Mt. Corneille, where she would be cured by the simple act of sitting on the great stone. Following this advice, the woman was miraculously cured of her ailment. Appearing to the woman a second time, Mary gave instructions that the local bishop should be contacted and told to build a church on the hill. According to legend, when the bishop climbed the hill, he found the ground covered in deep snow even though it was the middle of July. A lone deer walked through the snow, tracing the ground plan of the cathedral that

was to be built. Convinced by these miracles of the authenticity of Mary's wishes, the bishop completed construction of the church by AD 430. Despite ecclesiastical pressures, which sought to combat the survival of pagan religious practices, the great dolmen was left standing in the center of the Christian sanctuary and was consecrated as the Throne of Mary. By the eighth century, however, the pagan stone, popularly known as the "stone of visions," was taken down and broken up. Its pieces were incorporated into the floor of a particular section of the church that came to be called the *Chambre Angélique*, or the "angels chamber." Most of these early structures disappeared and were replaced by the current basilica, a composite construction dating from the 5th to 12th centuries AD. While primarily an example of Romanesque architecture, the massive cathedral of Notre Dame shows strong Byzantine and Arabic influences in both its construction and decoration.

The city of Le Puy has an additional pilgrimage shrine that was much visited during medieval times. Perched high atop an eighty-meter needle of steep volcanic rock, the Chapel of St. Michael marks another site known to have had pre-Christian sanctity.

## MONT SAINT-MICHEL



Mont Saint-Michel, France

Rising out of the mists and fog often cloaking the coasts of Normandy, Mont Saint-Michel seems a fairy-tale castle from an ethereal realm. Known today primarily as a Christian holy place, the remarkable granite mount has been a sacred site of other cultures for thousands of years. The Celts are known to have worshipped their god Belenus here, the Romans built a shrine to Jove, and hermits occupied the craggy mount until the late seventh century. Additionally, the mount is located along the archaic Apollo-Athena line that links sacred places from Ireland to Greece, including St. Michael's Mount in Cornwall, England.

The mount first became a site of Christian importance in 708 AD, when Bishop Aubert of Avranches had a vision of the Archangel Michael telling him to build a shrine atop the mount. A community of Benedictine monks settled on the rock in 966 and soon thereafter a pre-Romanesque church and the first monastery walls were built. From that time the mount had a checkered history, cycling through periods of prosperity and decline and prosperity again, ultimately becoming one of the most favored pilgrimage sites in all of Europe. What is notable about constructions dating from the medieval period is that the steep-sided mount required builders to place the church at the peak, with the monastic buildings below, and the defensive walls and the village still further below.

In the 13th century the king of France, Philip Augustus, donated funds to the monastic institution at the mount, thereby enabling the beginning of its Gothic period constructions. La Merveille, the beautiful 13th century Gothic abbey towering 500 feet above sea level, is crowned by a statue of St.

Michael in the act of killing the devil in the form of a dragon. The centuries at the mount were not always peaceful for the monks, however. In the 14th century, the Hundred Years War made it necessary to protect the abbey behind walls and military constructions, enabling it to resist a siege lasting thirty years. While Mont Saint-Michel was never taken in battle, this almost occurred in 1425 when only 125 French knights valiantly held off more than eight thousand English troops. Centuries later, during the French Revolution, the abbey was secularized, and the mount was used as a prison until 1863. In 1966, in celebration of the thousandth anniversary of the monastery, the French government permitted the restoration of monastic life on the mount. A group of monks and nuns began living in parts of the abbey and now give tours to pilgrims and tourists. And most recently in 1979, UNESCO included Mont Saint-Michel on its list of World Heritage Sites. Today the mount has more than three million visitors a year, making it the second most visited place in France. Perhaps the most crowded time of the entire year is the feast day of St. Michael on the last Sunday in September.

A particularly interesting matter about Mont Saint-Michel is that the rock upon which it sits is separated from the mainland by a narrow strip of sand, which in former times was submerged beneath the tides for several hours each day. A causeway now links the rock and the mainland but it is still fascinating to observe the tides, which rise and fall as much as 45 feet (14 meters) per day, rushing at speeds of 210 feet (63 meters) a minute. The best time to visit the mount is thirty-six hours after the full or new moon, when the waves of the tides are among the most dramatic scenes along the entire Atlantic coast of France.



Mont Saint-Michel Aerial View

[\*Additional information on Mont Saint-Michel at Ancient-Wisdom.\*](#)

## CARNAC STONES

The Carnac Stones, a system of more than 3,000 prehistoric standing stones, were hewn from local rock and erected by the pre-Celtic people of Brittany. The village of Carnac is situated in the South of Brittany in the West of France.

The megaliths were erected during the Neolithic period which lasted from 4500 BC until 2000 BC. The precise date of the stones is difficult to ascertain as little dateable material has been found beneath them.

About 3300 BC is the date most commonly estimated for the site's main phase of activity, but some megaliths may date to as early as 4500 BC.

One interpretation of the site is that successive generations visited the site to erect stones in honor of their ancestors.



<http://www.sacred-destinations.com/france/carnac-stones>

## [Lourdes](#)

This French town in the Pyrenees mountains is the most famous Catholic healing shrine in the world and one of the most-visited of all pilgrimage sites.

When a young servant girl named Bernadette Soubirous claimed to see a radiant vision of a woman in white on February 11, 1858, Lourdes was a small market town virtually unknown to the larger world. Over the next five months the lady would appear 17 more times to Bernadette, visions that the Roman Catholic Church (though initially skeptical) would declare authentic appearances of the Virgin Mary. Miraculous cures have been associated with Lourdes ever since, and today the town welcomes more than five million pilgrims a year.

[About Sacred Sites in Paris, please read our Paris section](#)