



# ALET-LES-BAINS

ABBNEY

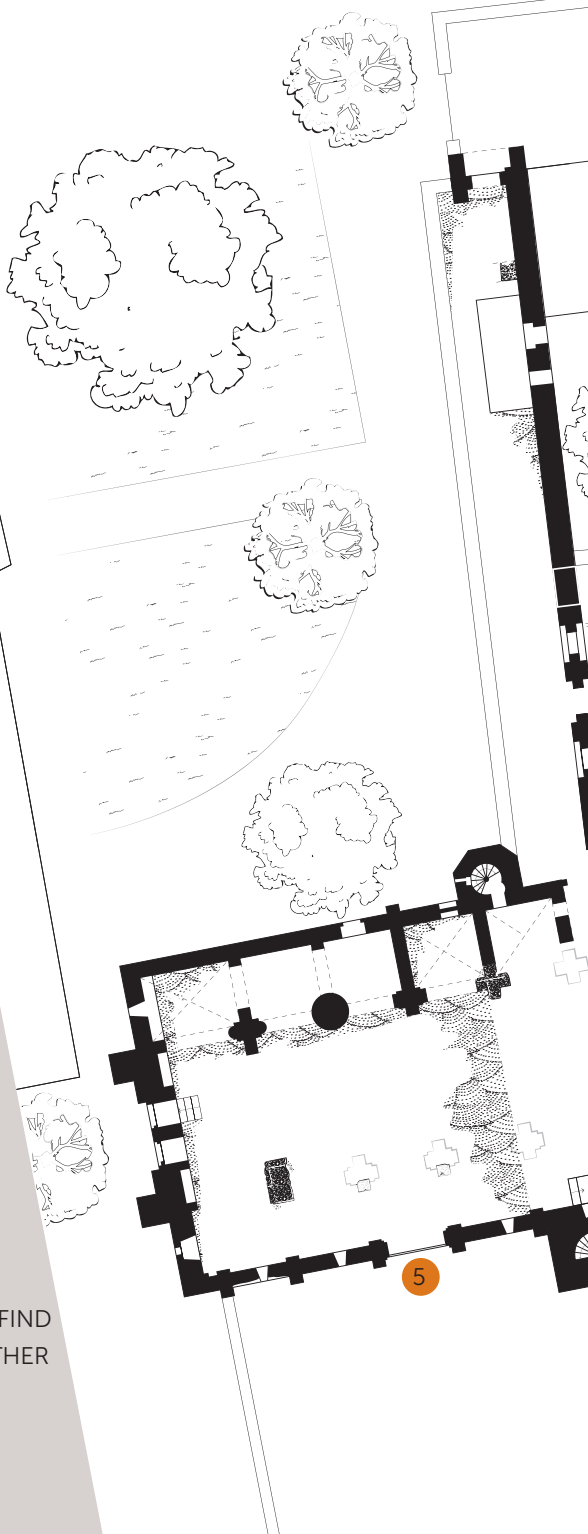
T O U R   G U I D E



# ALET-LES-BAINS ABBEY

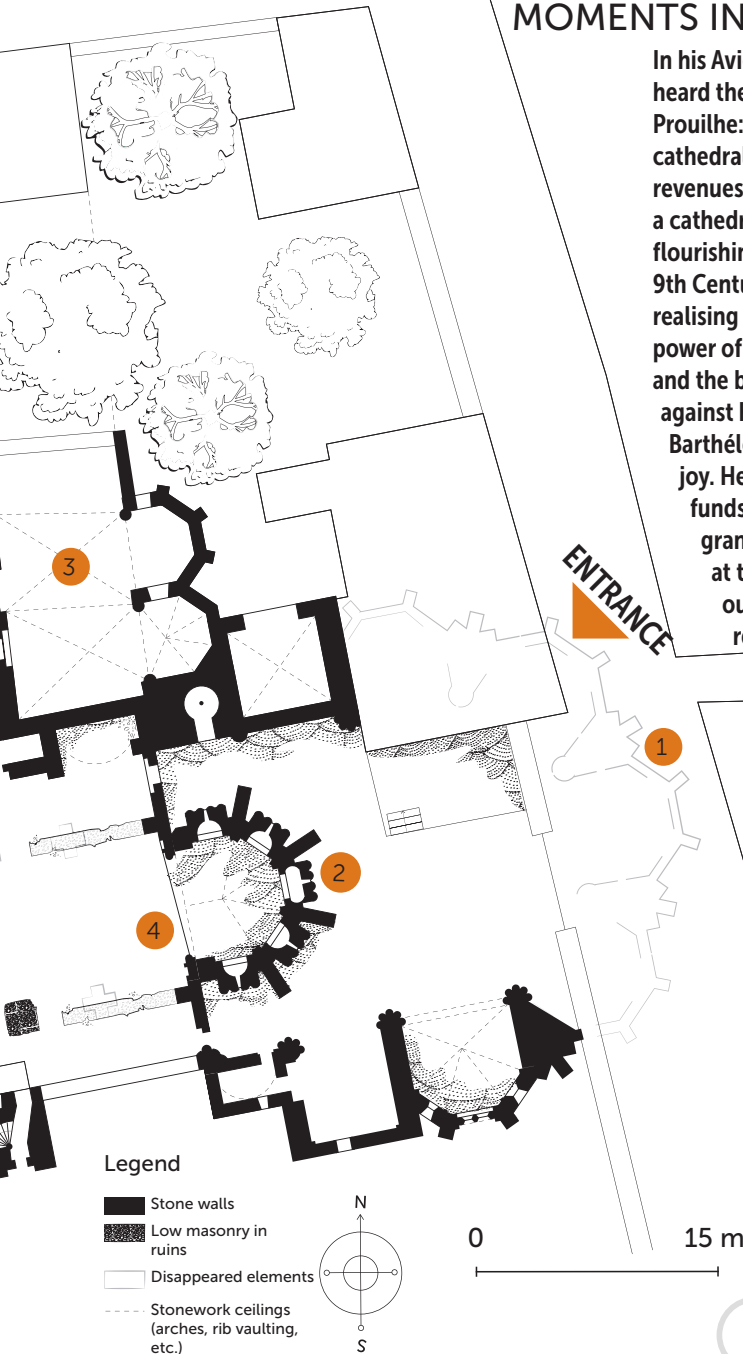
THIS VISITOR COMPANION HAS BEEN DESIGNED TO HELP YOU EXPLORE THE SITE AT ALET-LES-BAINS: THE ABBEY ITSELF, THE VILLAGE AND ALSO SOME NATURAL BEAUTY SPOTS. IT WILL SHOW YOU ALL OF THE MOST BEAUTIFUL AND INTERESTING SPOTS...

AND FOR THOSE CURIOUS TO SEE AND FIND OUT MORE, YOU WILL FIND VARIOUS OTHER TOOLS AT YOUR DISPOSAL.



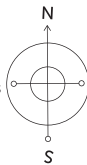
## MOMENTS IN HISTORY

In his Avignon palace, Pope Jean XXII heard the grievances of the nuns of Prouilhe: if Limoux were to become a cathedral town, they would lose vital revenues. Therefore he chose to establish a cathedral at the old abbey at Alet. This flourishing abbey, dating back to the 9th Century, was the perfect vehicle for realising his vision: for countering the power of the archbishop of Narbonne, and the bishop of Toulouse, and to fight against heresy. In Alet, the abbot of Barthélemy welcomed this news with joy. He would become bishop. Church funds would increase. A beautiful and grandiose cathedral would be built at the site. The Romanesque abbey, outdated yet attractive, would remain, and be bathed in a new Gothic light...



### Legend

- Stone walls
- Low masonry in ruins
- Disappeared elements
- Stonework ceilings (arches, rib vaulting, etc.)



0 15 m



# ALET ABBEY AND CATHEDRAL



In the year 970, the abbot of Benoît, who was also the abbot of Saint-Hilaire and of Lézat, looked after the small collective of Benedictine nuns that lived at Alet-les-Bains. These nuns, according to their rules, needed various buildings: a convent, a refectory, a chapter house... and a church that could be called an "abbey". The abbey became a cathedral in 1318, during the creation of the diocese of Alet. It was at that time that the Gothic quire, from which you entered the church, was built.

## A building of impressive proportions <sup>1</sup>

The Romanesque abbey, whose remains date back to the 11th and 12th Centuries, comprises a main central aisle, and two secondary aisles, narrower in width that run parallel with the main aisle on both sides. On the left, the pillars along the main aisle are still standing; those opposite have been razed to the ground, and only the bases remain. And right at the end, you can see the Romanesque quire. You have to imagine the vaulted ceiling, walls and dim lighting. The enormous Gothic quire, from which you entered the building, wasn't visible until the 14th Century aisle was built. You had to walk along a secondary aisle to get to it, to find the light of its stained-glass windows, and to see the Romanesque alcove also bathed in light.



### Further information

The dimensions of the Romanesque abbey are by everyday standards extraordinary. It is the same width as Saint-Sernin at Toulouse give or take 40 centimetres. Its height is quite easy to imagine when looking at the rose window that dominates the bottom of the nave. Following its lines, you can also imagine the suspended gables and finally the vault. Another feature is the size of the pulpit visible on the left side: with its unusual and immense opening...



### More to see

The Romanesque architecture of Sainte-Marie-d'Alet is exceptional. Its sheer size begs the question: Why build a monument of this size in such a remote place? The pulpit for example is of comparable size with the religious buildings of the Aragon royals...

### THE POPE'S DETOUR

1096. Pope Urban II, on his return from Toulouse, where he had been to bless the beginning of the works at Saint-Sernin, did not take the road to Rome. Instead of leaving for Narbonne and then Marseille, he turned back and came here to Alet, where the construction site was much less advanced than that of Toulouse. Why? A Sainte Croix relic had been kept here since 1054... is this sufficient reason for him to have committed to taking a much less practical route?



# EXCEPTIONAL DÉCOR <sup>2</sup>

As well as its remarkable dimensions, Sainte-Marie-d'Alet possesses many unique decorative features, that international researchers have come to study. Even Saint-Sernin doesn't possess ornaments of this quality...

## Further information

The thing that most surprised Mérimée (the first inspector general of historic monuments in 1834) at the point at which he called for national heritage listing of the remains, was the quality of the ornamentation in the Romanesque quire. There you can see a column crown of exceptional craftsmanship: a perfect example, in its precision as well as its execution, of a Corinthian column. At one time, you could also see painted stucco ornamentation in blue, red and green. Today it has been taken down for conservation reasons, but it is a rare example of Medieval stucco remains. The Romanesque abbey also possesses many other decorative features of different styles. It would seem that several sculptors executed their work here. Of particular note are the shape of the rosettes and windows, and the coin and ball shapes that punctuate the walls...



## More to see

For build a place of such high quality, considerable funds would have been needed. Financial means but also political will. These were the abbays that set the tone, expressed their power and their style. During the 12th Century, Pons Amiel came to the fore and managed the abbey during the height of his career. After his death, his body was exhumed by the Lord of Saissac as an example to the monks in the election of a new abbot because he did not agree with their choice.



## TALENTED SCULPTORS

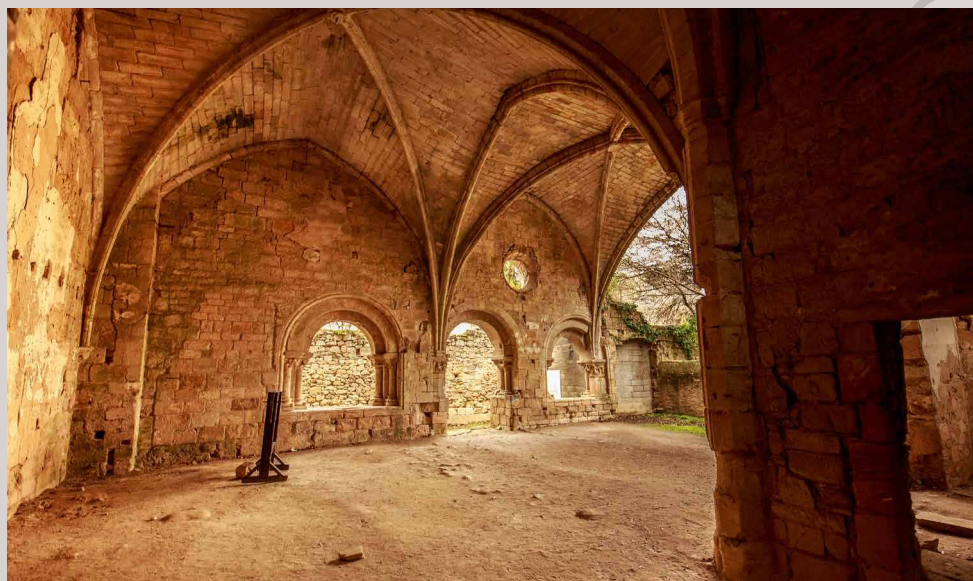
To find examples in the Roman style of the quality found at Alet, you have to go to Arles or to Saint-Gilles du Gard. Who were these sculptors?

What nationality were they, and where did they learn their skill?

How is it that between here and Catalonia, and also Provence, the masters working at this level have left no traces about themselves?

Unlike the master of Cabestany for example, whose work can be traced throughout the region.

Did they come here especially?



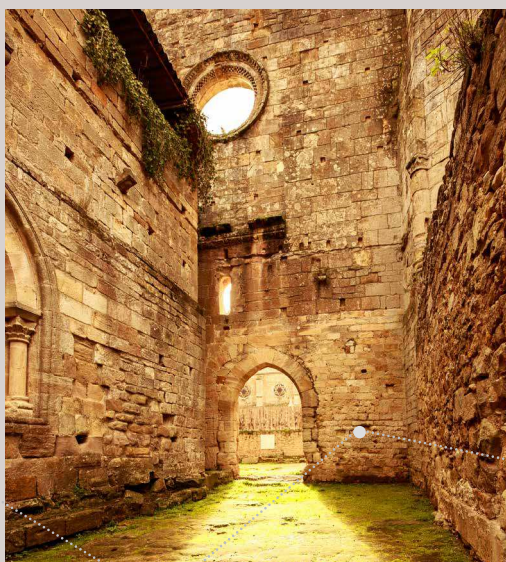
## IMPRESSIVE REMAINS <sup>3</sup>

### THE CHAPTER HOUSE

This beautiful vaulted chamber of diagonal beams boasts magnificent bays adorned with column crowns that are decorated for narrative purpose. The workmanship here is also fine and carefully executed. The stones however hold the memories of the passage from the era of the abbey to the episcopal era, and the few cases where our ancestors had built earlier constructions. One only has to look to the left of the entrance, at how the Gothic arch leans on the Romanesque arch without respect for the latter!

#### **+** More to see

As with all monasteries, the entrance to the chapter house is located within the gallery of the cloister. The wall that ran alongside it no longer exists. In the extension to the chapter house can be found the refectory and dormitory, no doubt on the first floor. By following the wall to its end, you will reach a strong and lavishly decorated door: the entrance reserved for the abbot and notable guests...



# THE GOTHIC QUIRE 4



The quire itself is also large in scale and of exceptional craftsmanship. It comprises 5 high chapels which extend over the street and the houses that run alongside the building. Its style is once again unexpected, being that of the Ile-de-France. It is similar to that found at Narbonne or Carcassonne, but is unlike other provincial areas, whose buildings were in the "Languedocian" style up to the 16th Century. This fact is deeply telling of a political message.

## + More to see

The Gothic quire surrounds the Romanesque alcove. Was this a deliberate choice? We will never know. Usually on a Middle Age construction site of this kind, the first task would be to demolish the Romanesque alcove to replace it with a Gothic quire before continuing with construction. But this isn't what happened here. The 14th Century works were not seen to completion. The Hundred Years War began, and the region was ravaged by the Black Prince, as well as the plague. Such as it was, in light of this fact, the Romanesque abbey appears to us as being enclosed in a reliquary.

# A GRAND ENTRANCE 5



Leave the abbey, and follow the road round to the right into the cemetery. An unmissable part of your visit: this is the most-photographed view of the abbey, and that which gives the

best impression of the scale and beauty of these magnificent ruins. The remains of the Romanesque entrance appear majestic from this perspective. A winged lion, or perhaps a centaur, floral motifs, a small window with a hint of Oriental style... the glimmering sandstone highlights the subtlety of these ornaments. From this angle, one can begin to understand how the Gothic quire was attached not here, but behind the Romanesque building.



## THE DESTRUCTION OF THE ABBEY

During the French Wars of Religion, Alet was besieged several times. Sometimes at the hands of Catholics, and sometimes at the hands of Protestants. The abbey and cathedral, with its tall towers, was a strategic vantage point, which had to be taken and destroyed. Bombarded over the years by both parties, Sainte Marie-d'Alet finally collapsed.

# THE VILLAGE OF ALET-LES-BAINS



The village of Alet-les-Bains boasts 21 buildings classed as historic monuments. From the Roman era up to the 17th Century, the power of the abbey and cathedral was evident. Alet-les-Bains also possesses a naturally-occurring source of wealth, namely its spring water source, one of the oldest in France, which has been tapped since the 19th Century.

## THE STREETS

### AN ABBEY TOWN

Alet was developed and grew at the same time as the abbey. Today it appears separate to the monument by virtue of the road that passes through the village. This road was built in 1776, destroying the quire of the Gothic cathedral in the process. Until that point the village was literally clinging to its monument. It was developed on the inside with fortified ramparts in the 14th Century, with two gates. The Cadène gate, on the north side (close to the swimming pool) went over a ditch and had a portcullis. The Calvière gate, to the south (by the town hall), was a simple tower gate opening onto the Romanesque ramparts. The principal roads span from this point in a star formation.

### ARCHITECTURE INDICATIVE OF WEALTH

#### RUE CADÈNE SINCE THE CADÈNE GATE

The Rue Cadène is lined with beautiful buildings with walls of corbelled construction. A very narrow passage opens to the right; at the end of which you will find the remains of the Maison des Régentes, founded by Nicolas Pavillon in the 17th Century for the education of poor girls.

You can see the passage of time in the last house on the Rue Cadène: the foundations of a 15th to 16th Century house, a frame wall still standing showing three different sides, rare Renaissance fluted shapes carved in wood, and the date 1743 inscribed on the door.



### THE RUE DE LA JUIVERIE

The Rue de la Juiverie crosses over the Rue Cadène. The very existence of this road bears witness to the presence of a powerful religious power. This community that was scourged during the Middle Ages, was never better protected than by the highest religious authorities...



### ... RUE CALVIERE SINCE THE CALVIERE GATE

There is a sharp bend in the Rue Calvière which descends down to the square where a magnificent house is located on the same level. Its façade bears the same coin-shaped motifs that adorn the abbey, and are as finely crafted. Additions from the centuries that followed are of an equally high quality. This must have been the house of a wealthy cloth merchant who would have installed his shop in the lower level of the building, his living quarters in the middle, with the top floors reserved for holding stock and drying broadcloth. A grand late-16th Century house is located opposite. It bears an amusing inscription: "Long live I, the master", a jibe without doubt addressed to his neighbour...



#### A CHARMING PASSAGEWAY

Behind the Romanesque house, a covered passageway dares you to enter within. Follow it to find yourself among the gardens...



### ... THE PLACE DE LA REPUBLIQUE

The Place de la République, a former marketplace, is surrounded by magnificent 17th Century canopies. There you can hear the trickle of a fountain, where in times gone by one could drink the water. The orange hues of the massacan fired bricks blend beautifully with the wood and stone. At canopy level, facing the Rue Cadène, is the consul house, and below it are the gates of the old prison. Right next to it is a house with wide bay

windows, doubtless belonging to a shop. Here, as can be found elsewhere in the village, are beautiful carved stones, carefully constructed, and fine ornamentation, giving the impression of opulence. This is a far cry from the contemptuous nickname "mud-covered diocese" used by the French Ancien Régime to label Alet and Saint-Papoul!



### ... RUE DU SEMINAIRE SINCE LA PLACE DE LA REPUBLIQUE

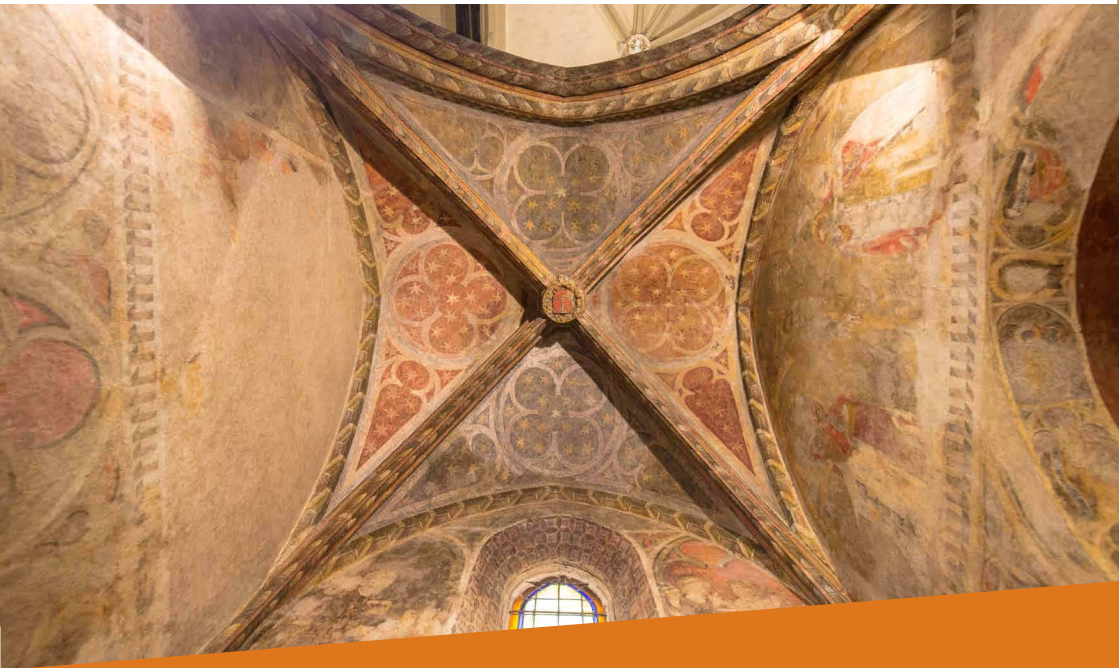
You will first come to a very attractive door in the Mannerist style. Then a little further along, you will see a series of exceptional arches. These arches are of a quality usually only seen in monuments, châteaux or abbeys. They are perfect luxurious examples of three-point Gothic arches. This building carries the mark of ecclesiastical power.

#### NICOLAS PAVILLON

Nicolas Pavillon, originally from Paris and schooled by saint Vincent de Paul, became bishop of Alet in 1637. His actions in the name of the church were admirable. He strove tirelessly for the education of his clergy and of the poor, and went without hesitation into the Capcir, a mountainous region in the far south of his diocese, to defend three women accused of witchcraft. He was a simple yet active man. He commissioned a hospital-hospice whose courtyard opened onto the Rue de l'Ancienne Mairie, not far from the main square. He also left behind in Alet a vital piece of infrastructure, in the shape of the bridge that crosses the River Aude and still exists today.

# CHURCH OF SAINT-ANDRE

Parish church, built in the 14th Century. Even here, Alet displays its surprising wealth. In the depths of the chapel of Saint-Benoît on the left-hand side, a rare treasure exists: the remains of 14th Century frescos whose bright colours are still strong. On the other side, within a room, can be found two precious virgin statues. One of them, made from wood, dates back to the 12th Century. The other, much coveted by the Louvre museum, is made from ivory. This 16th Century ivory statue was a present from Francois I to thank the people of Alet for helping to pay the ransom for his release from incarceration at Pavie.



## THE WASHHOUSE AND SWIMMING POOL

The water at Alet is more than just a history, it is a tradition. The spring is full of life, and its waters have been drunk for centuries. Even today, people visit the washhouse to fill bottles and enjoy the mineral water that flows freely. You can also dip your feet in the water at this popular place, just as did the washerwomen of old. Water from Alet is also used in the swimming pool, built in the 1950s, which is well worth a look...



## NEARBY



### JUST ABOVE THE VILLAGE

A path takes you over the hill to a point above the village. A short family-friendly walk for views over the village and abbey from the same location.



### SAINT-SALVAYRE

A hamlet just above Alet. A 17th Century chapel with architectural elements that come from the Romanesque abbey, and unforgettable panoramic views.



# PRACTICAL INFORMATION



## GOOD PRACTICES



accepted animals

## SERVICES



### TOILETS

Place de la République, under the arcades.



### PARKING

Free parking

Promenade des Platanes, Allée des Thermes.



### SHOP

Within the abbey grounds



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