



MEDIEVAL ABBEY AND CITY OF
LAGRASSE

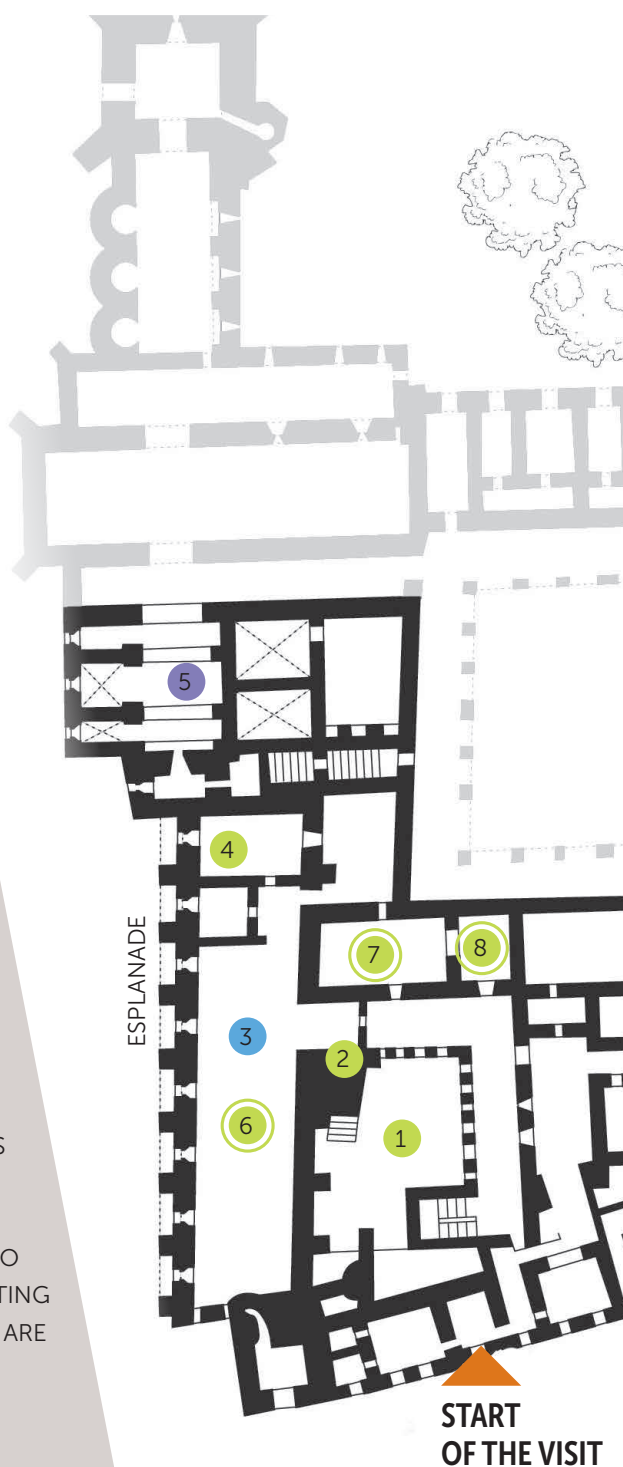
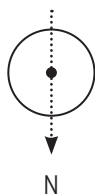
T O U R G U I D E



LAGRASSE ABBAY

WITH THIS FREE GUIDE,
EXPLORE THE BEST OF LAGRASSE:
THE ABBEY, THE VILLAGE AND
THE BEAUTY OF NATURE. IT INCLUDES
ALL OUR FAVOURITE SPOTS...

BUT FOR THE CURIOUS WHO WANT TO
SEE AND SHARE EVEN MORE INTERESTING
FACTS AND FEATURES, OTHER TOOLS ARE
AT YOUR DISPOSAL.



**START
OF THE VISIT**



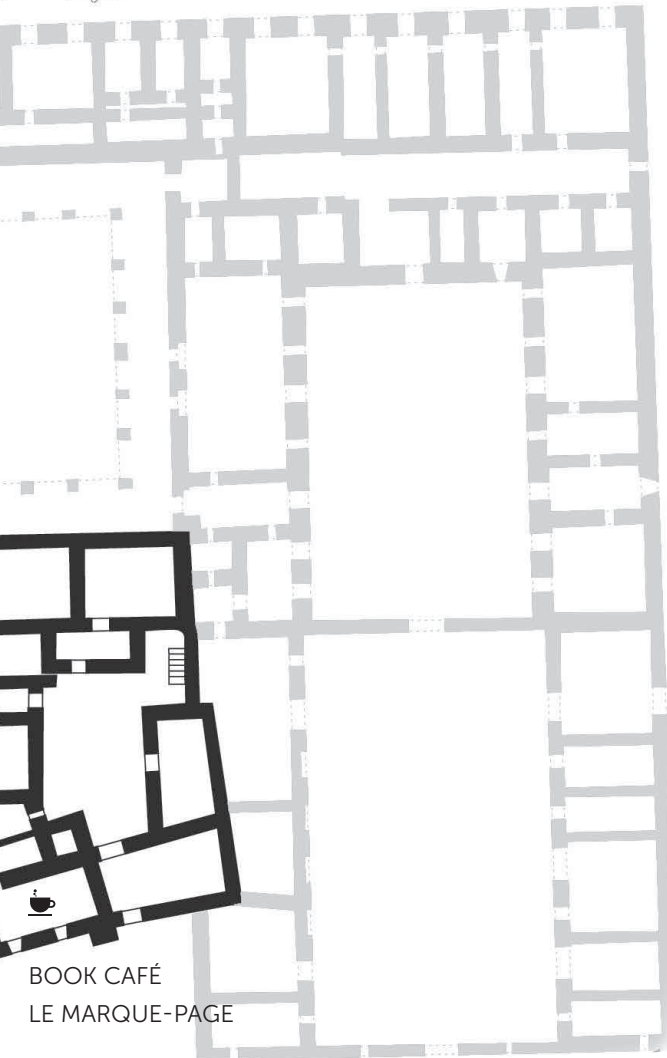
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MOMENTS OF HISTORY

Workers are busy. The fashionable Gothic style demands air, light and elegance. Some old Norman column heads are taken away to be re-used in the courtyard of the new abbey palace. In the abbot's private chapel, the walls and floor are colourfully decorated. There are numerous monks and they are wealthy. They enjoy life's comforts. The prosperous abbey has its own water supply. It works the land and sustains the village, driving its development. Goods arrive over the bridge, craftsmen work at full capacity and the market building is the busy scene of lucrative trade. In the abbey, the voice of ancient times can be heard, vibrantly, often unexpectedly...



BOOK CAFÉ
LE MARQUE-PAGE

0 50 m



① Ground Floor

① Upper Floor



+ DETAILS ON
www.payscathare.org

THE PALACE ¹

Welcome to the Lord Abbot's dwelling.



Living Quarters and Opulence ²



The palace rooms are accessible from the courtyard via galleries which also link it with the service and reception areas, like the

entrance hall at the far end of the first gallery. The lavishly decorated hall near the stables is probably where Abbot Auger received prestigious guests. The door and ceiling are decorated with Abbot Auger's coat of arms... There are 144 on this ceiling alone! The coat of arms can also be seen just about everywhere in the abbey, especially the chapel on the 1st floor.

From the reception area, you arrive not in a cloister, but a palace courtyard. These are the abbot's private quarters. The Abbot of Lagrasse is a powerful lord and many of the monks are wealthy, come from noble families and have their own servants. Lagrasse is the most powerful abbey of medieval Languedoc and a major business which receives donations, helps the village to develop and manages its assets from Catalonia to Albigeois. It is a place for prayer, but also a hive of everyday activity.

+ Comprehension

Many of the objects in the palace courtyard come from other parts of the abbey. Some of the column heads are from the Romanesque era, although the palace was built later, in Gothic times. Before it achieved heritage status, the abbey was a living space which evolved through the centuries to comply with the needs and methods of each era.

The centuries overlap here and every chapter of the abbey's long history is represented. Its division into two sections is another specific feature. You are in the medieval section which has been owned by the département since 2004. The other section, with its 17th- and 18th-century overall architecture, is used by the Canons Regular of the Mother of God. The division happened during the French Revolution when the abbey was sold in two lots.

On the 1st floor of the palace, in the dormitory, a window overlooks the Auger de Gogenx Chapel. This window, like the door that can be seen on the other side of the chapel, opens onto this gem of Gothic art. The outdoor gallery will take you to the entrance hall which is behind that door and, a little further on, there is a stately hall with a superb 16th-century fireplace..

The Chapel 7

The mural visible from the dormitory window depicts the Last Judgement, with the usual notions of heaven and hell, and the weighing of souls... On the wall behind the altar is an oriental-style mural, the Tree of Life, a very original topic for that era. The chapel floor is paved in multicoloured tiles in a carefully designed geometric arrangement of extraordinary beauty.

Entrance Hall 8

A lively spectacle in three colours: ochre, red and black. If you look more closely, patterns appear in the form of lines that undulate all over the hall. It was the discovery of these patterns and the restoration of their bright colours that led to further restoration work being undertaken.

On either side of the door that opens onto the chapel, you will notice two superb human head sculptures, one of which appears to have been carved out of foliage...



+ Comprehension

In the 13th and 14th centuries, it took substantial human and financial resources to execute such decorative work. It is thought that Auger de Gogenx called upon the great craftsmen who were working at the time on Narbonne Cathedral and Carcassonne's Saint-Nazaire Cathedral. The décor also demonstrates an expressive spirituality. Art serves faith, expressing its power and beauty. There are different schools of Christian thought. The Benedictines, for example, seek to glorify the work of God while others, like the Cistercians or Franciscans, advocate a return to the simplicity of origins. In that respect they are close to the Cathar heresy that they are fighting against...

COMMUNAL SITES

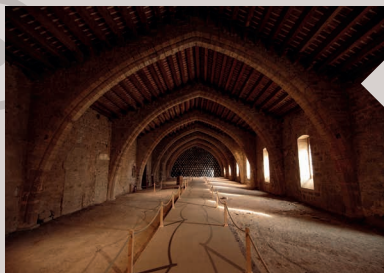
COMFORT AND OPULENCE

The Larder 3

The larder is the abbey's food storeroom. And it is quite impressive. It stores flour, wine, salt and oil, among other items, for an undoubtedly huge population: monks and their servants, passing guests, etc. Feeding them all requires enormous stocks, which arrive from the numerous assets managed by the abbey, or from surrounding estates where watermills and windmills produce flour and oil, from the Orbieu River where monks fish at the foot of the monastery, or from the vegetable gardens along its banks...



The Dormitory 6



This immense dormitory has also spent several decades under a collapsed roof. It is now a magnificent space where calm and comfort reign. Take a moment to listen to the quality of silence here, most unusual for such a vast space...

Communal life knew many exceptions under Benedictine rule. There were some independent dwellings within the abbey walls and, in the dormitory, wooden partitions created private compartments...

Observation

Stand at the entrance to the dormitory and observe the beautiful arches... which are out of alignment! This is deliberate; the walls are not perfectly parallel, to fit better into the environment. This aesthetic choice was typical of Abbot Auger de Gogenx. At the base of the arches lie decorative consoles designed to be seen from below, from what is now the larder! Archaeologists think that the larder and dormitory may have originally formed a single, vast space.

MEALS

Meals were governed by the Rule of St Benedict. There is normally one main meal comprising 3 courses which is taken at the end of the working day. The first dish is composed of pulses, such as beans or lentils. The second is a protein dish of eggs, fish or poultry. The Rule forbids the consumption of beef or the meat of any other quadruped. Finally, dessert with fruit and honey... On top of this main meal, 2 or 3 collations are taken during the day.



The Bakery 4

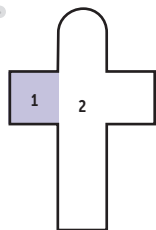
The bakery, or kitchen, was cleverly adjoined to the larder and was used by the monks. There was an oven, the remains of which are still visible in the fireplace and on the other side of the wall, in the courtyard.

+ Comprehension

Archaeologists discovered pipes running throughout the abbey. From the Middle Ages it had a water supply, like all monasteries. Monks dug a small canal, or *béal* in Occitan. Water is tapped 2 km away and a sufficient slope ensures that it reaches the abbey. The canal was created in the public interest and today it is still used in summer to water the village gardens.

ORIGINS ⁵

AT THE TIME OF CHARLEMAGNE




This is the most intriguing and most moving part of the abbey. The arm of the transept, which you can access after the sacristy (1), extends into an entire church on the other side of the wall between us and our neighbours, the canon community (2). Excavations have uncovered the depths of time, as far back as the 8th and 9th centuries and the abbey's foundation.

Observation

The first area, the sacristy, was raised in the 17th century to accommodate a guest house and infirmary. Much of the floor is still covered by 16th century paving slabs. Under the paving, archaeologists discovered a calade from the time of Auger and, underneath, holes and posts dating back to the Carolingian era. All of this was found just under the paving, which means the site has always been used since it was first built.



 "Calade": pebble pavements



The second area is the North arm of the transept of the abbey church. Here lie the abbey's oldest remains, the pre-Norman tower and the church dating back to the very beginning of the Romanesque era in the 11th century.

Comprehension

The foundation of Lagrasse probably dates back to the beginning of the 8th century. Its existence is confirmed by a privilege charter that was given by Charlemagne in 779 to Abbot Nimfridus, the first known abbot of Lagrasse. The document is written in Merovingian and is the oldest document to be held in the département archives. Nimfridus was a friend of Benedict d'Aniane, who was an influential advisor to Charlemagne's son, Louis the Pious. He reformed the Rule of St Benedict, which gave huge momentum to monasticism to the benefit of the Carolingian dynasty.

A LEGEND

In the mid 13th century, the monks of Lagrasse produced an authentic *gest*, an epic story about the foundation of their abbey. The *gest* mentions the heroes of the Song of Roland, Charlemagne, Bishop Turpin, and Christ himself... There are two known versions of this work of propaganda which was intended to further establish the abbey's reputation. One is written in Latin, the other in Occitan. This is characteristic of our region: from very early on, texts were translated into spoken language.

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If you retrace your steps you can take the main staircase up to the dormitory and the beautiful chapel of Auger de Gogenx...

THE VILLAGE OF LAGRASSE

LE PONT VIEUX

VILLAGE ON THE ORBIEU RIVER

The Orbieu River runs between the abbey and Lagrasse village. It is one of the main reasons why the first monks chose to establish themselves here. The river was essential for fertile land, for industry and crafts which needed its driving power, and for the comfort and nourishment of inhabitants. Hence, the monastery developed a booming economy in this "fat valley". And the whole village followed. It emerged in the shadow of the monastery, on the same side of the river. Later, probably in the early 13th century, a new town was established on the opposite bank.



FORTIFIED BRIDGE

Lagrasse was a major trade route intersection. Trade was facilitated by Le Pont Vieux, the bridge over the Orbieu. To cross the bridge in the Middle Ages, a toll had to be paid, as in many places nowadays. The tollgate was an imposing structure. Two crenelated gate towers, rising 18 m above a 40 m deck, monitored traffic and watched over the Orbieu River. Both towers were demolished in the 18th century, as the bridge was collapsing under their weight... But a 1303 seal depicts the toll gate as it must have appeared to travellers at the time, impressive and unavoidable.



THE GARDENS

When they dug the canal to tap water from the Orbieu, the monks created the ideal place to establish gardens, between the canal and the river. This land belonged to the monastery, who rented it to inhabitants. The soils of Horte Mage and Hortete, where men and women cultivated fruit and vegetables, brought monks and laics into contact with one another. A path follows the canal alongside the gardens and up to the dam, known as "La Païssière".



LA HALLE (MARKET HALL) & THE STREETS

Lagrasse market is the biggest market of Basses Corbières. You can find everything here: cereals, fruit, pelts, wine, fish, oil, spices, etc. It is a trading site that is profitable for the monastery which levies taxes, and for the villagers who benefit from this strong economic activity. It is the heart and soul of the town, and a strategic site that is jealously guarded by the abbots.

A RARE WITNESS

In the 14th century, the market had 57 stalls set out under the hall and covers. One of the covers, with fish patterns sculpted in wood, is still visible on one side of the square. From the other side, you can still see the pillars spaced at regular intervals. This preserved hall is an outstanding example of civil architecture of the Middle Ages.



LA MAISON DU VIGUIER

As early as 1287, Lagrasse had a municipality, the "consulate". Consuls were in charge of defending the inhabitants' interests, but the abbot established the rules and granted "customs and liberties". "La Maison du Viguiér", the abbot's representative at Place de la Halle, reminds us of that power.

FAÇADES

The streets, many of which are cobbled, are lined with beautiful façades that bear witness to the prosperity of Lagrasse. The Middle Ages dominate Rue des Deux Ponts, Rue des Tineries, and Rue Mazels where Lagrasse's only half-timbered house stands. On Rue Foy stands Maison Sibra from the Renaissance era, while at Place de la Bouquerie, the Sisters of Charity Nevers Convent brings to mind the Century of Lights.



CHURCH OF SAINT MICHEL

THE BUILDING THAT WAS MOVED

The first parish church stood near the abbey and original village on the other side of the Orbieu River, in what is still the cemetery. In the 1350s, the consuls asked the abbot for permission to move the church to the other bank, where we are now. The request led to long negotiations. In 1359, the abbot finally agreed and chose the village centre as the new location. But placing the church here meant destroying some houses for which the monastery received rent. The villagers paid 500 gold florins as compensation and financed the construction themselves...

LA MAISON DU PATRIMOINE

INTERPRETATIONS

A common artistic feature of Lagrasse is on display at Maison du Patrimoine: the painted ceilings. These ceilings bear witness to astonishing prosperity and the notion of social appearances, and take us into the private lives of the Lagrasse bourgeoisie. This free exhibition provides a fascinating insight into the techniques used, the representations and the challenges involved in producing them.



PAINTED CEILINGS

The ceilings are made of wooden beams, equivalent to floor joists, with painted panels placed in between. There are several that can be admired here, including one from Montpellier which is of outstanding craftsmanship. Shields and knights alternate with grotesque scenes or fantastic animals. In fact, the alternation of pictures can be interpreted in two ways. Depending on which end of the room you start from, the succession of motifs reveals scenes of either heraldry or fantasy. This dual interpretation concept is also found in poetry of the 16th century when such mind games were fashionable...



NEARBY



PLANELS VIEWPOINT

The most beautiful views of the village



NOTRE-DAME DE CARLA

A spectacular 2 to 3 hour walk



As you leave... the abbey boutique



LE PETIT CAFÉ DU MARQUE-PAGE

On your left as you leave the boutique, you will find the Marque-Page café where you can enjoy refreshments or open a book.

The Marque-Page association promotes literature and reading and organises the renowned Banquet du Livre (book banquet), which attracts readers and writers sharing the same passion.

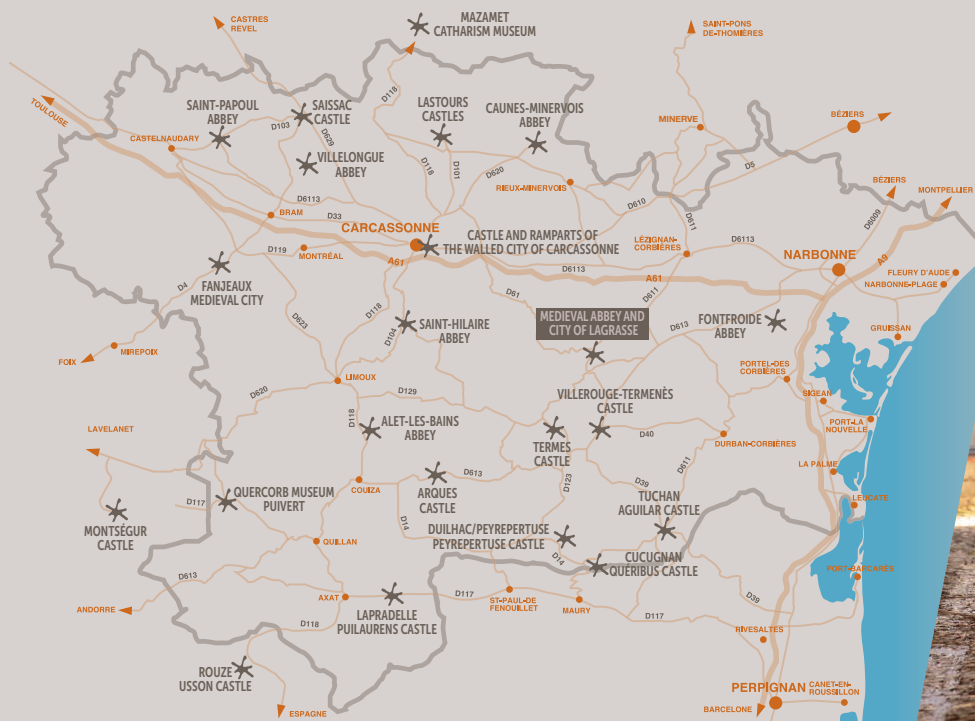
THE ESPLANADE

Before leaving the abbey grounds, go round the right-hand side of the buildings. The longest wall is the wall of the larder and dormitory where you can see some machicolations that were built during the Hundred Years' War. This is indeed a fortified building. Also, the large tower, so characteristic of the abbey, is unusual in that it was both a religious bell tower and a defence structure, with bombards. It was built in the 16th century by Abbot Philippe de Lévis. It was never finished, and this adds to its character.



With your back to the abbey, you can enjoy a beautiful view over Lagrasse village. You can reach the village via the little alley, on the right as you leave, which runs alongside the gardens. Or you can return via the cemetery and reach the village by crossing the Pont Vieux..

PRACTICAL INFORMATION



GOOD PRACTICES



accepted animals

SERVICES



PARKING

Parking restrictions apply. There are 3 paid car parks.



SHOP

Inside the abbey.



TOILETS

Public toilets can be found at 4 points in the village.



CASH WITHDRAWAL

There is a cash distributor at Place de l'Ancole.



POINT OF TOURIST INFORMATION / MAISON DU PATRIMOINE

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