

A photograph of the Château d'Azay-le-Rideau, a Renaissance chateau in France, reflected in a body of water. The chateau features a prominent central tower with a dark, conical roof and several smaller towers with similar roofs. The facade is light-colored with numerous windows, some with red shutters. The scene is framed by trees and a clear sky.

CHÂTEAU *A Renaissance Marvel* D'AZAY-LE-RIDEAU

For 150 years, books on history and travel have talked of Azay-le-Rideau as one of the most beautiful Renaissance architectural marvels along the Loire Valley. Built at the beginning of the 16th century by Gilles Berthelot and Philippe Lesbahy, it skilfully combines French architecture with Italian and Flemish influences. Successive owners have taken care to respect and enhance their work.

In the 17th century, Henri-François de Vassé built a glorious and monumental entrance at the axis of the Grand Staircase. He gave the impression of perspective by creating a half-moon courtyard with two service quarters to the south.

In the 19th century, three generations of Marquis de Biencourt focused the restoration “on an ideal which would elevate Azay to the rank of national treasure.”

They thus brought it to its complete architectural perfection and its admirable appearance, turning imagination into reality. This dream, followed up by the French government since 1905, has contributed to making the Château d'Azay-le-Rideau an iconic symbol of the Renaissance.

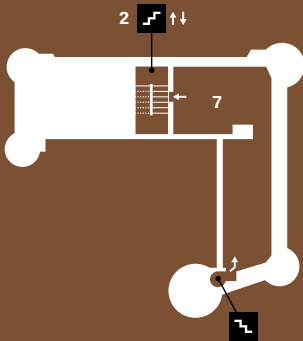
Domain

- A** Château
- B** Secret Garden
- C** Priory Garden
- D** Île de la Rémonière
- E** Courtyard
- F** Service quarters
- G** Half-Moon Courtyard
- H** Seigneurial Chapel
- I** Wine Press
- J** Ticket desk
Gift and book shop
- K** Restaurant area
- L** Toilets
- Cultural circuit

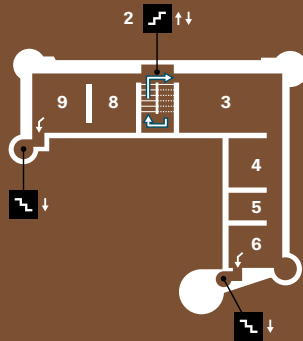


Château

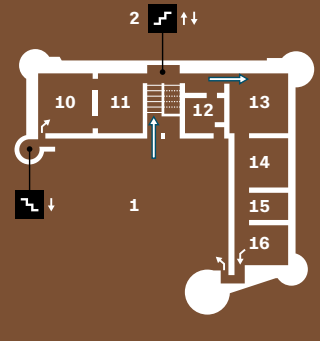
Follow the numbering on the map for your visit. Use this numbering together with the audio guide.



Second floor



First floor



Ground floor

A The château and its domain

The existence of a château at Azay-le-Rideau has been attested since the 11th century. Acquired in 1511 by Gilles Berthelot - Francis I's financier - and his wife Philippe Lesbahy, the gauntlet was thrown down in 1518 to erect a new edifice exemplifying the art of building in the Loire Valley at the beginning of the 16th century. Its architecture and decoration, typical of the Early Renaissance, harmoniously combine the French tradition with influences from Italy. Although successive owners sought to modernise the château while respecting the heritage of the past, the current stylistic unity of the building was not achieved until the mid-19th century. It results from a series of developments carried out by the successive Marquis de Biencourt over four generations.

B Secret Garden

In the 19th century, the Secret Garden was a large vegetable plot. Today it is a conservatory garden planted with heirloom vegetables of the Centre-Val-de-Loire Region. Flowers and aromatic herbs are also grown, arranged in squares as in the Renaissance.

C Priory Garden

This garden owes its name to the priory garden that once stood here. It was transformed by Charles de Biencourt into "an exquisite English garden".



Ceiling of the Grand Staircase.

Exteriors

Main Courtyard *Cour d'honneur*

01

The Main Courtyard is framed by an L-shaped *corps de logis*. The two façades of the courtyard are finished in tuffeau, a calcareous stone of the Loire Valley. The vertical effect obtained by the superimposition of mullioned windows is subtly counterbalanced by the play of horizontal lines in the mouldings.

The Grand Staircase is one of the most remarkable Renaissance creations in the Loire Valley. Its façade is composed of four tiers of bays that are staggered in relation to the other windows of the *corps de logis*. A veritable lacework in stone, its decoration was produced by the best sculptors of the period. The initials and emblems - salamander and ermine - of Francis I and Claude de France occupy the place of honour: a homage rendered by the owners Gilles Berthelot and Philippe Lesbahy to their sovereigns. Their initials, G and P, echo the royal dedications on the capitals of the pilasters at the entrance.

Grand Staircase *Escalier d'honneur*

02

The Grand Staircase is built on a model borrowed from Italy: that of the straight staircase, also called a 'dog-leg staircase'. Very modern in 16th century France, it was built at the centre of the main building rather than housed in an adjoining tower in spiral form, as in the Middle Ages. The landings and a handrail sculpted into the wall attest to the quest for comfort in its conception. The remarkable coffered tunnel vaults are decorated with antique medallions representing kings and queens of France, other figures and fantastical animals. Keys hanging from the delicate decorations of leaves and fruits add to the refinement of the staircase.

The landings, opening onto loggias, allowing people to look out while also being seen, are covered by quite different vaults, the arches of which are decorated with ermines, salamanders and *putti* (cherubs).

Interiors / Second Floor

Large attic Grand comble

↷ 7

The steep-pitched attic space is given extra height by the fact that the walls supporting the trusses are raised above floor level. This arrangement frees more interior space and masks the differences in height between the wing and the Great Hall. The original framework is oak, which was cut on the authority of Francis I in 1517 in the Forest of Chinon.

First floor

Renaissance Chamber

Chambre Renaissance

↷ 6

During the Renaissance, the chamber was a living space in its own right. People slept there, received guests, worked, ate... The woven rush mats that cover the walls were used to keep out the cold.

The arrangement of this chamber reflects the refinement of 16th century interiors. The bed is the centrepiece of the decor. The richness of the silk fabrics embellished with embroidery and trimmings of gold and silver thread, as well as the shimmering colours, were designed to reflect the prestige of the owner. On the wall facing the bed is an oil on wood painting dating from the second half of the 16th century after a famous work by Primaticcio. *Andromache fainting on hearing of the death of Hector*, attributed to Cornelis van Haarlem, recounts an episode in the Trojan War.

Wardrobe Garde-robe

↷ 5

This little room was probably a wardrobe during the Renaissance period. A chest, equipped with solid handles to make it easy to move, served to store clothes.

Psyche's Chamber Chambre de Psyché

↷ 4

Situated just before the Great Hall, this room was used as a chamber during the Renaissance. It owes its name today to the exceptional tapestries woven in wool and silk which cover its walls. They are arranged as a narrative and tell the story of Psyche, a mythological theme very much in vogue during the Renaissance. Five scenes are depicted, with a central triptyque. From right to left: *Psyche's feast in Cupid's palace*, the triptyque of *Psyche visited by her sisters*, *Psyche Discovering the Sleeping Cupid*, *the Flight of Love* and finally, *Psyche and Cerberus in the underworld*. The central tapestry shows the key moment in the story of Psyche: persuaded by her sisters, the young girl tries to discover the identity of Cupid and glimpses his face by the light of an oil lamp. A drop of burning oil falls on the god, who at once flees, abandoning her.



Psyche Discovering the Sleeping Cupid (detail), tapestry, Brussels, 1562-1578.

1518

Gilles Berthelot and Philippe Lesbahy begin construction of the château.

Reign of Francis I
1515-1547

1603

Antoinette Raffin builds a seigneurial chapel abutting the Church of Saint-Symphorien.

Reign of Henry IV
1589-1610

1619

Françoise de Souvré receives Louis XIII at the château.

Reign of Louis XIII
1610-1643

1638

Françoise de Souvré is named governess to Louis XIV.



Four-poster bed in the Renaissance Chamber (detail).



Francis I, French School, late 16th - early 17th century.

Great Hall *Grande salle*

↷ 3

At the time of Gilles Berthelot and his wife Philippe Lesbahy, the Great Hall in its majestic proportions hosted festivities and balls. The monumental fireplace, the tapestries adorning the walls, and the various wooden furnishings created a sober yet refined and warm decor. The coffers in bas-relief with sculptured panels are typical of the great halls of the Renaissance. Regularly used to transport their owners' effects, they were ideal for the itinerant nature of the court while also showing off its splendour.

Antechamber *Antichambre*

↷ 8

The antechamber served as a waiting room for people whom the lord wished to receive into his private apartments, and those he did not wish to receive... Portraits of kings hang on the walls, from the Renaissance to the 16th and 17th centuries, attesting to the rich collection of the 19th century owners.

Louis XII can be seen to the left of the fireplace, then, moving to the right, a series of 16th century portraits representing Francis I, Henry II and Henry III. Facing the fireplace are a series of 17th century portraits of Henry IV, Louis XIII and Louis XIV shown standing.

King's Chamber *Chambre du roi*

↷ 9

Louis XIII spent two nights in this chamber in 1619. The small cabinet to the left of the fireplace is made from darkened pearwood to give an ebony hue. Its drawers are decorated with ivory and bone plaques, while their motifs represent the macabre episodes of the Thirty Years' War which devastated Europe during the reign of Louis XIII. This gravity contrasts with the galant scene engraved on the door of the central niche, which reproduces an engraving of *The Four Ages of Man* by Abraham Bosse, born in Tours in 1602. The walls are adorned with remarkable 17th century tapestries after the cartoons

1670

The Marquis de Vassé has the Half-Moon Courtyard and the service quarters installed.

Reign of Louis XIV
1643-1715

1791

The Marquis Charles de Biencourt purchases the château.

French Revolution
1789

1810

Initial preparation for the landscaped park.

First Empire
1804-1814

1825

Armand Marie Antoine, second Marquis de Biencourt, begins restoration of the château.

by Simon Vouet illustrating two episodes from *Jerusalem Delivered*, an epic by Torquato Tasso, a celebrated Italian Renaissance poet.

Ground floor

Biencourt salon Salon Biencourt

10

The Biencourt salon reveals the pronounced eclectic taste of the Marquis. As a state room, its furnishings are of the highest quality, inviting distinguished guests to relax. Its plush atmosphere is emphasised by elegant fabrics and its layout worthy of the finest aristocratic residences of the 19th century.

An equestrian statue of Louis XII in gilded bronze and fine porcelain from the Compagnie des Indes are evidence of the Marquis' taste for the arts. They amassed a priceless collection of around 300 16th and 17th century paintings, in particular portraits of great figures of the history of France.



Diane of Poitiers after Jean Clouet, second half of the 16th century.



Bust of King Henry IV, 19th century.

These paintings have contributed to the fame of the château among artists and art lovers since the mid-19th century. The portraits that frame the fireplace illustrate this rich collection.

Billiards room Salle de billard

11

In the 19th century, the drawing room and the billiards room formed a single space for the purpose of relaxation among friends. Reflecting the grand bourgeoisie's way of life, the billiard table was an essential item of furniture. Portraits from the 16th and 17th centuries once belonging to the Biencourt family decorate the room: Erasmus of Rotterdam, the poet Racan of Tours, Cinq-Mars, a favourite of Louis XIII... reflecting the Marquis' desire to bring together within the château political, literary and artistic history within a unique collection. Opposite the fireplace, a remarkable 16th century work by the Flemish artist Jan Massys represents Psyche bringing Proserpine's vase to Venus.

1830

Planting of a large vegetable garden to replace the Secret Garden.

1850

Armand Marie Antoine, third Marquis de Biencourt, opens the château to visitors.

1855

Creation of a reflecting pool in front of the château's south façade.

1882

Charles Marie Christian, fourth Marquis de Biencourt, is forced to sell the château.

Second Empire
1852-1870

War
1870-1871

3rd Republic
1871



Table in the Dining Room, Saint Louis glasses and carafes, 19th century.

At the far end of the room is a remarkable bust in white marble and bronze of Henry IV in his robes.

Storeroom *Dépense*

📍 12

Also used as a larder, the storeroom was an important room in the château. Tableware and linen for daily use were stored there, as well as the food items necessary for preparing meals. So as to convey its purpose, its layout has been restored here according to Dame Guillet's inventory, the housekeeper who served the Biencourts in 1809.

Kitchen *Cuisine*

📍 13

The kitchen is attached to the storeroom, which together constituted the château's larder. The kitchen has been considerably modified over the course of time. As with the storeroom, its ground level was raised in the 19th century:

the fireplace and wells were just over a metre below the current level when they were installed in the 16th century. Today, its furnishings allow us to see the Biencourts' way of life.

Dining Room *Salle à manger*

📍 14

The table is set according to the customs of the 19th century with the Biencourts' porcelain table service made by Perier et Feuillet. It is completed by a table service in a Louis XV thread and shell pattern by Maison Odiot. This arrangement is accompanied by a set of Trianon glasses from the Saint-Louis glassworks after a design created in 1830. The serving dishes are made of Chinese porcelain from the Compagnie des Indes in the 18th century.

Corridor *Passage*

📍 15

In the 16th century, this narrow vaulted space opened onto the Main Courtyard via an elegant arcade with semicircular arches. It led across the west wing to the gardens which unfolded on the site of the current reflecting pool. One of the arches bears the monogram of the property's owner during the Renaissance, Gilles Berthelot, delicately drawn within the curves of foliage.

Salon-library *Salon-bibliothèque*

📍 16

This room is arranged according to the furniture inventory drawn up in 1854. The intimate and plush atmosphere of this room is accompanied by furniture designed for entertainment. Gaming tables, musical boxes and books are combined with comfortable Louis-Philippe sofas, bergères and armchairs, ideal for relaxation and conversation. In the evening, this congenial room was lit with candelabras and bronze chandeliers.

1905-1907

The château passes to the French government. First major restoration campaign in 1907.

1914

Château listed as a historic monument.

First World War
1914-1918

1955

Removal of the cannon embankment around the château.

Second World War
1939-1945

2014-2017

Restoration of the grounds and château.

The château and its collections

Bare of all furniture in 1905 at the time it was acquired by the French government, the Château d'Azay-le-Rideau was initially refurnished thanks to loans from public collections, notably the Musée du Louvre and the Musée national du Moyen-Âge. Since 2015, a special partnership between the Centre des monuments nationaux and the Mobilier national has allowed for the restoration of a coherent ensemble of around 100 pieces of furniture, carpets, objects and works of art on the ground floor that incarnate the art of living in the mid-19th century. In order to complete this ensemble, the Centre des monuments nationaux continues to acquire collections once belonging to the Marquis de Biencourt.

Thus the restorations of the interiors retrace life in a château over the centuries. The sparsely furnished 16th century rooms reflect the itinerant nature of the Renaissance court. The furniture - chests, sideboards, four-poster beds - and the tapestries and rush mats that decorate the walls, testify to the refinement of these rooms at this time. On the first floor, the antechamber and the King's Chamber demonstrate the change in taste in the 17th century. The rooms on the ground floor meanwhile are richly furnished and decorated, and illustrate the artistic tastes and the concern for comfort of wealthy householders, who both appreciated and collected art in the mid-19th century.



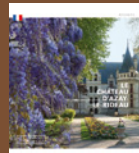
Biencourt salon.



Billiards room - detail of a tassel.

Gift and book shop

The gift and book shop has a wide variety of items on the château and the Renaissance, including the guide published in the 'Regards...' collection, available in French and English.



Couverture : Château d'Azay-le-Rideau, façade est,
© Éric Sander / CMN. Photographies intérieures :
© Philippe Berthé, David Bordes, Patrick Cadet, Patrick Müller,
Éric Sander, Léonard de Serres / CMN.
Textes : Nathalie Muratet, château d'Azay-le-Rideau et
Anne Bourdais / Conception graphique : Emmanuel Labard
et Thanh-Phong Lê, L'Atelier collectif / Traduction : Traducteo /
Impression : imprimé en France, 2022 / Centre des monuments
nationaux.

Centre des monuments nationaux
Château d'Azay-le-Rideau
37190 Azay-le-Rideau
Tél. 02 47 45 42 04
Fax 02 47 45 26 61
www.monuments-nationaux.fr

CENTRE DES MONUMENTS NATIONAUX