

The *Fabrique de la flèche*: reconstruction of the basilica's north tower and spire

Saint-Denis is the birthplace of Gothic art. This architectural model would inspire the great cathedrals* of France, first and foremost Notre-Dame de Paris. The basilica's* spire once stood almost 90 metres tall, crowning the building's north tower and dominating the region's skyline from the late 12th century. Battered by heavy storms, the tower and its spire were dismantled in the mid-19th century. Today, this vanished masterpiece is being brought back to life. Led by *Suivez la flèche*, one of Europe's largest heritage worksites is opening its doors to the public. Discover a unique project, the *Fabrique de la flèche*, where history unfolds before your very eyes and where tangible and intangible heritage coexist.

Unlock the builders' secrets

- 23** The stonemasons' lodge where you can watch the artisans at work.
- 24** The live transmission screens showing the stones being laid at the summit.
- 25** The quarry lodge. Follow the stone's journey from quarry to worksite and explore the world of craftsmanship. Discover training opportunities and the profiles of the artisans keeping this traditional know-how alive.
- 26** The medieval-style garden.
- 27** The blacksmiths' lodge. Watch how the metal is worked and learn the secrets of this art from the blacksmiths themselves.
- 28** The stonecutters' lodge. Discover ancestral stonecutting techniques as our artisans explain their work.
- 29** The miniature worksite. An educational space designed for young visitors, where learning is fun.



Embark on the spire odyssey

- 30** The immersive cinema. This spectacular 360° projection takes visitors on a journey back to the spire's heyday through images and audio. A dreamlike creation giving you front-row seats to the monument's metamorphosis.
- 31** A spire for Saint-Denis: this interactive exhibition presents the history of the basilica* and its missing spire, along with the construction techniques used in the Middle Ages.
- 32** Journey back in time thanks to virtual reality and become a master-builder: oversee your artisans, overcome challenges on the worksite and leave your mark on the construction! (Reservation required).



* see glossary.

GLOSSARY



Abbey: monastery or convent under the governance of an abbot or abbess.
Basilica: a term applied as of the 4th century to churches built on the tombs of saints and boasting marble columns and wooden ceilings, in the style of Roman civic buildings. The designation "basilica"* is also granted by the Pope to churches connected with important pilgrimages.

Cathedral: the principal church of a diocese that contains the *cathedra* (Greek for 'seat') of a bishop.

Cenotaph: a monument to someone buried elsewhere.

Priant or orant: a funerary statue representing a praying figure.

Recumbent effigy: a funerary statue representing a person lying down, their eyes often open.

Rose window: a large round stained-glass window.

Treasury: place in a church, cathedral* or monastery where the most precious treasures of Church liturgy - relics, liturgical vestments, precious metals, liturgical books, etc. - are kept in order to display and conserve them.

Useful information

Self-guided tour with guide booklet.
Audio-guided tour of the necropolis (additional charge).
Lecture tour subject to booking.

Centre des monuments nationaux
Share your views and win free entry tickets.
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2025
appearance



Projected
2030
appearance

Basilica Cathedral of Saint-Denis

From royal necropolis to the spire's reconstruction.

Necropolis of the kings and queens of France and the *Fabrique de la flèche* project

The visitor circuit includes a tour of the royal necropolis followed by the *Fabrique de la flèche*, an immersive project on the basilica's* north tower and spire, under reconstruction since 14 March 2025.

A Gothic royal basilica*

The Basilica* Cathedral* of Saint-Denis was a major royal abbey* up until 1792. It was built on the tomb of Saint Denis, considered the first bishop of Paris and martyred around 250 AD. Pilgrims flocked to his tomb, hence

a first construction was built here in the 5th century, which grew to be one of the most powerful Benedictine abbeys* of the Middle Ages. The monument is a masterpiece of Gothic architecture, a style inspired by Abbot Suger as part of the site's reconstruction and which flourished between 1135 and 1280. As of the 4th century, aristocrats chose to be buried near the saint in the hope of gaining entry to heaven. In total, 40 kings, 27 queens, 63 princes and princesses and 10 high-ranking members of the nobility, from Dagobert in 639 to Louis XVIII in 1824, were interred in the basilica*. Today the necropolis holds over 70 recumbent effigies*, the only collection of its kind in Europe.

VISIT THE BASILICA CATHEDRAL

The southern arm of the transept

1 In 1263, Louis IX, the future Saint Louis, commissioned 16 recumbent effigies* in limestone, their feet placed on a base as if they were standing. By doing so, the king, whose own gilded silver tomb was melted down during the Hundred Years' War, sought to affirm the unity of the Merovingian, Carolingian and Capetian dynasties. The recumbent effigies* were depicted eyes wide open, facing east (towards the rising sun), awaiting the Resurrection. They were originally entirely painted, while those in marble were enhanced with colour. In the late 13th century, lions - a symbol of strength, courage and of Christ -, and dogs - symbolising loyalty and faith in the sovereign or God - appeared at the foot of the sculptures. Today the recumbent effigies* and tombs are empty, the bodies they contained having been exhumed in 1793 to recover the lead from the coffins.

2 The recumbent effigy* of Charles V, commissioned in 1364 when he was just 26 years old, is considered the first sculpted funeral portrait of a king. Recumbent effigies* were becoming increasingly realistic at the time, and more accurate in terms of size.

Around 80% of the basilica's* recumbent effigies* were conserved during the French Revolution, despite most of their bases being destroyed. Displayed at the Museum of French Monuments in Paris from 1795 to 1816, they were later returned to their original locations within the basilica* by architect Eugène Viollet-le-Duc.

3 In the 16th century, two-storey monumental tombs were built, such as that of Francis I, his wife Claude of France and three of their children. In the form of a triumphal arch, the tomb celebrates the king's victory at the Battle of Marignano in 1515. In the lower section, the sovereigns are represented nude and dead. In the upper section, they are at prayer, devoid of their crowns and portrayed in humility.

The crypt

4 The Bourbon Chapel contains cenotaphs* produced in the 19th century in honour of the Bourbons, as well as the heart of Louis XVII, authenticated in 2004.

5 The crypt contains several 12th-century capitals devoted to the life of Saint Benedict.

6 The archaeological crypt houses the remains of the first churches built on the site. Medieval sarcophagi were once assembled around the tomb of Saint Denis, but today only an empty grave remains. In 1959, archaeologists unearthed the tomb of Queen Aregund in this spot. The daughter-in-law of Clovis I, she was the first queen buried at Saint-Denis in around 580, i.e. sixty years before her great-grandson Dagobert.



7 The Bourbon vault contains the bodies of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, transferred from La Madeleine cemetery in Paris in 1815. All the Bourbons from Henry IV to Louis XV were buried here in this vault but no sculpted representations accompanied their tombs. The influence of Saint-Denis Abbey* had begun to wane by then, hence the kings preferred instead to have depictions of themselves erected in public squares.

8 The ossuary houses the royal bones deposited in two mass graves by the revolutionaries in 1793 and recovered in 1817 by Louis XVIII.

The northern arm of the transept

9 Most of the basilica* was built between 1230 and 1280, when Gothic architecture was at its peak. The slender columns guide the gaze upwards towards the vaulted ceilings reaching a height of 29 metres. Known as the "Lantern", it is one of the most radiant examples of Gothic architecture. The rose windows* served as models for Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris. The stained-glass windows date from the 19th century and are inspired by medieval iconography.

10 Louis XII and Anne of Brittany are represented transfixed and gaunt in death in the lower section and kneeling in prayer above. The twelve apostles are depicted under the arches, along with the cardinal virtues at each corner: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude and Temperance.

11 The tomb of Henry II and Catherine de' Medici was designed by Francesco Primaticcio and sculpted by Germain Pilon. It was originally placed in the Valois rotunda, a masterpiece of French Renaissance architecture, which was torn down in 1719.

12 The tomb of King Dagobert was built in the 13th century and installed in the choir, near the original tomb of Saint Denis.

The chevet

13 Abbot Suger's chevet, as it is known, was consecrated on 11 June 1144 and is a unique piece, considered the first example of Gothic art. It is slightly higher than the nave so that the relics of Saint Denis, placed on the altar, can be seen from the entrance. The absence of walls between the chapels and the large stained-glass windows create an exceptional, uninterrupted diffusion of light.

14 The recumbent effigies* of Clovis, the first Christian Frankish king, his son Childebert, and Queen Fredegund were brought here from other Parisian churches in the 19th century.

15 Two recumbent effigies* of children of Saint Louis are among the few metal tombs preserved to this day.

16 The stained-glass windows commissioned by Abbot Suger are famous for their novel use of cobalt blue, a very costly ore at the time. Copies of the original stained-glass windows, produced in 2023, have been installed alongside the 19th-century creations. In the axis chapel, the first stained-glass depiction of a Tree of Jesse retraces the ancestors of Christ according to the Bible. If you look closely at the left-hand panel, you can see Abbot Suger represented in prayer at the foot of the Virgin of the Annunciation!

17 The banner is a reproduction of the standard borne by the royal armies in wartime.

18 The priants* of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette were commissioned by Louis XVIII in 1815.

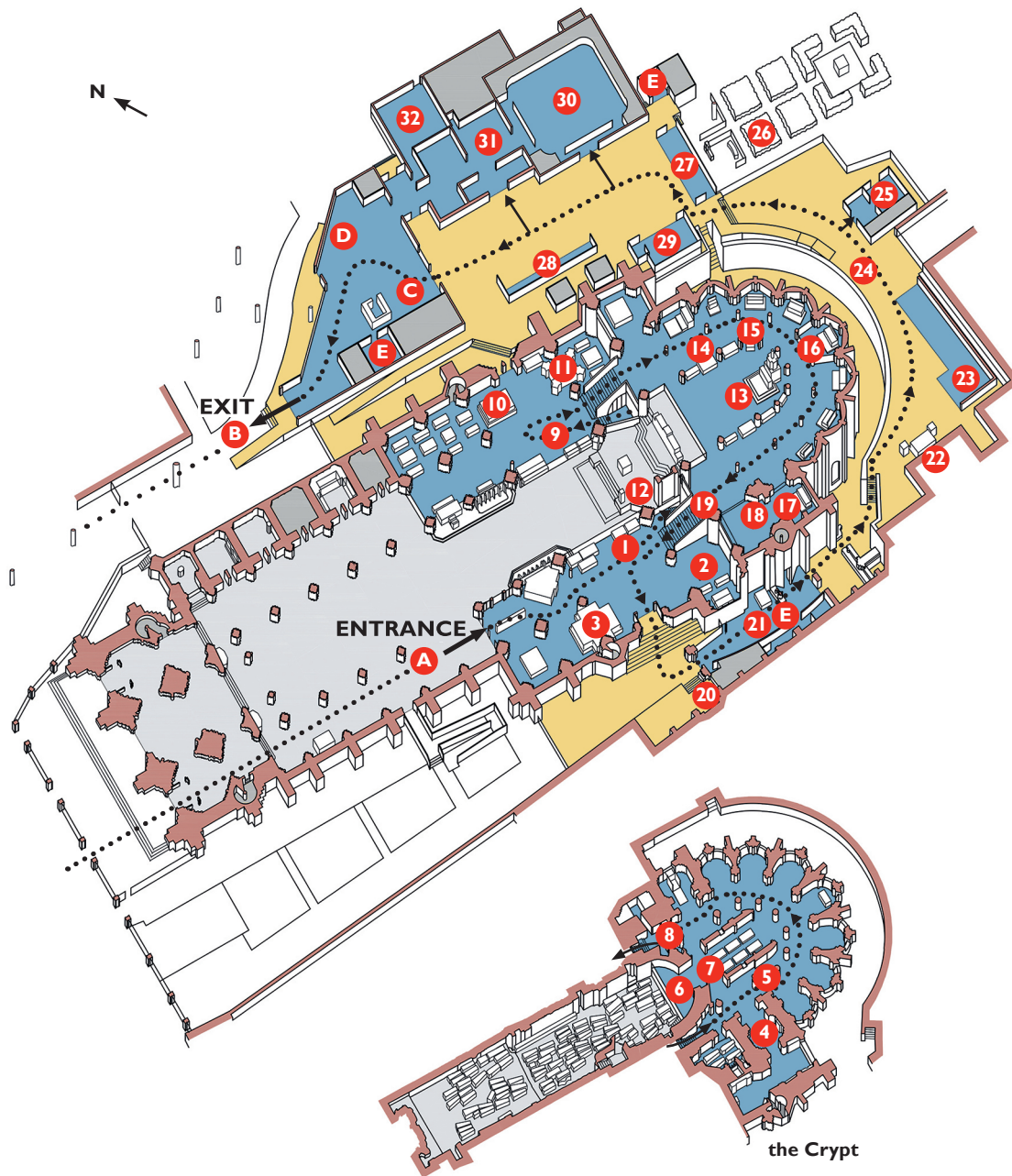
19 From the top of the grand staircase, we can see a stained-glass window depicting King Louis-Philippe, wearing a bicorne hat and a cockade held in place with yellow braiding. Accompanied by his family, he visited the building work at Saint-Denis on 24 July 1837, one month after the north spire was struck by lightning.

The exterior spaces

20 This doorway opens onto the cloister built in the 18th century by Robert de Cotte. Napoleon set up the *Maison d'Education* school of the Legion of Honour in the abbey* buildings in 1805.

21 The interpretation space notably focuses on Saint-Denis's famous treasury* and the preparation of the royal bodies before burial, as well as presenting a model of Saint-Denis's town centre as it was around 1600.

22 The memorial to the Duke of Berry, son of Charles X, assassinated in 1820.



- A** Entrance
- B** Exit
- C** Gift and book shop
- D** Café
- E** Toilets