

Victor Hugo and Notre-Dame

The setting for a novel

Victor Hugo's famous novel, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, first published in 1831, was a huge success as soon as it was published. It coincided with a general revival of interest in the Middle Ages and medieval monuments at the time. Hugo set a melodramatic plot in a historical setting made even more enthralling by the novelist's imagination. He set his reconstruction of the bustling life of 15th-century Paris around the cathedral*.

A large part of the novel's action takes place in the towers, with pride of place being given to the bells and their famous bell ringer, Quasimodo.

A defender of the country's heritage

The towers are a very special part of Notre-Dame. They were described by Victor Hugo as "beautifully balanced parts of a magnificent whole". The author's Romantic and picturesque eloquence drew attention to the cathedral's* profoundly dilapidated state in the early 19th century.

Convinced that "great buildings, like great mountains, are the work of centuries", he took part in a widespread campaign which resulted in restoration work being carried out on Notre-Dame from 1845. From this arose greater concern for the country's heritage and the beginnings of a policy in favour of restoring monuments.

* Explanations overleaf.

Glossary

Belfry: framework holding up the bells.

Chimera: depiction of a monster or mythical being. Ornamental sculpture not to be confused with gargoyles, which are protruding features designed to drain rainwater.

Finial: ornament inspired by flowers.

Great bell: the largest bell with the deepest sound.

Parvis: the square in front of a church.

Rib vaulting: an arch strengthening a vault and spreading the load to the angles.

Stryga: translation of a Greek term meaning "bird of the night". In eastern legend, a nocturnal and evil spirit.

Practical information

Visit takes on average: 50 minutes.

Visitors may ascend the towers in groups of 20 every 10 minutes or so

No toilet facilities. 400 steps, no lifts.

Special tours for disabled people.



This visit is not recommended for pregnant women, or people suffering from vertigo or a cardiac complaint.

The Centre des monuments nationaux publishes a collection of guidebooks about French monuments, translated into several languages. Éditions du patrimoine publications are on sale in the bookshop-giftshop.

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Towers of Notre-Dame

The symbol of medieval Paris

The full glory of Gothic architecture



In 1163, Bishop Maurice de Sully laid the first stone of Notre-Dame de Paris, an ambitious project which was to take almost 200 years to complete, on the site of the Merovingian cathedral*.

Its huge size would not be matched until the Cathedrals* of Amiens and Rheims were built in the 1230s; its towers are 69 metres high. Notre-Dame de Paris was to be the largest religious building in western Europe until the mid-13th century. Its layout was very modern, with its five-aisle nave, no projecting transept, and a choir with double ambulatory. In the years 1220-1230, the upper parts were redesigned in the new High Gothic style to bring more light to the choir.

19th-century restoration work

The statuary was damaged during the Revolution. From 1845, the architects Viollet-le-Duc and Lassus were commissioned to carry out restoration work on Notre-Dame and to reconstruct its sculpted decoration. Since 1991, the Cathedral* has received Unesco World Heritage listing as part of the 'Paris, Banks of the Seine' site.

* Explanations overleaf.



Introduction to the visit

1 The upper room of the north tower is at the same level as the organ gallery. It has an eight section rib-vaulted* ceiling whose keystone is 14 metres above the ground. To the back of the room is a remarkable spiral staircase in an openwork turret.

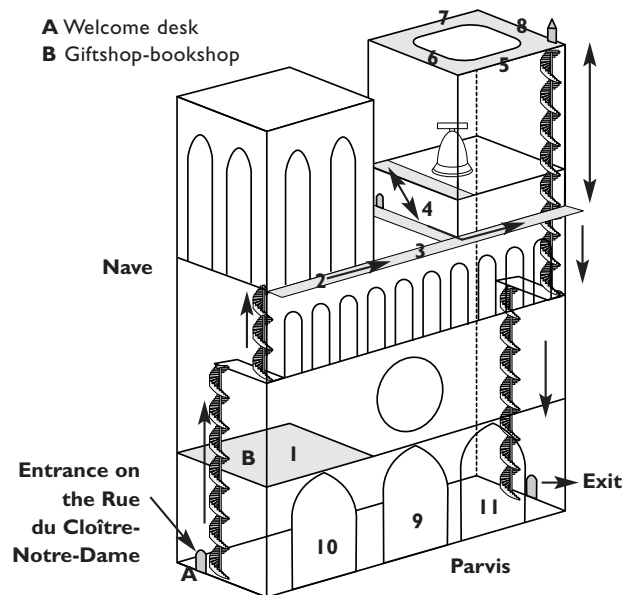
High up

2 The Chimera gallery*, 46 metres above the ground, gets its name from the statues adorning the corners of the balustrade. These creatures, designed by Viollet-le-Duc in the 19th century, are fantastic birds, hybrid beasts and mythical monsters perching on the towers. The most famous of the chimeras, the stryga*·a·, on the right as you arrive, seems to gaze out at the ever-changing capital city. The sculpted decoration visible from the gallery is very rich, and includes finials*, gargoyles, grimacing heads and crockets. The colonnaded gallery supporting the chimera gallery shows highly sophisticated arcatures and decorations.

3 The Place du Parvis* bears the mark from which the distances between Paris and other towns are measured. Paving shows part of the outline of the previous cathedral*, and the line of what was once Rue Neuve-Notre-Dame -is marked by large paving slabs. This parvis is the result of the urban development work carried out by Haussmann in the years 1860-1870.

The south tower belfry*. Here you can see the

4 Cathedral's* largest bell, the 17th-century great bell* known as "Emmanuel" which itself weighs more than 13 tons, and its clapper 500 kilos. This bell is only rung on major Catholic feast days, whereas four other bells in the north tower peal out several times a day.



The top of the south tower

From here you can look out over the whole of Paris and enjoy a lovely view over the Seine and its bridges.

5 To the west, on the Ile-de-la-Cité, you can see the Sainte-Chapelle, the Hôtel-Dieu and the Palais de Justice, and further away, the Louvre and the Arc de Triomphe, echoed by the Grande Arche de La Défense.

6 To the north the Saint-Jacques Tower and Sacré-Coeur rise up over Montmartre.

7 To the east, you can make out the Ile Saint-Louis and the Bibliothèque Nationale (France's national library).

Looking over the roof of the nave, you will see the spire of the transept crossing, built by Viollet-le-Duc to replace the smaller one torn down during the Revolution. Four groups of three apostles, alongside allegorical depictions

of the evangelists, descend on all sides of the spire.

In the group of John the Evangelist, symbolized by an eagle, Saint Thomas is portrayed with the features of Viollet-le-Duc and is facing the spire as if in admiration of his creation.

8 Looking south, on the left bank, you can see the maze of streets containing the oldest houses in the Latin district as well as the Church of Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre. On top of Sainte-Geneviève Mount stands the Pantheon. Turning westwards, the towers of Saint-Sulpice Church and the gilded cupola of Les Invalides can be seen.

The west facade seen from the parvis

The balance seen in the facade has been achieved through the skilled use of vertical and horizontal features.

The verticality of the four buttresses, towers and spire is offset by the horizontal line of the Gallery of Kings of Israel and Judah and, above, by the great colonnaded gallery. The three portals in the lower part are richly carved. In the centre you can see the Last Judgement portal (9) with, in the tympanum, Christ the Judge, and on the lintel, the weighing of souls. The Virgin portal (10) depicts the crowning of the Virgin on the tympanum to the left, while to the right, the tympanum of the older Saint Anne's portal (11) bears a Virgin with Child in the sacred Romanesque style.

An exploration of the crypt and the cathedral's* masterpieces are an ideal way to round off your visit.