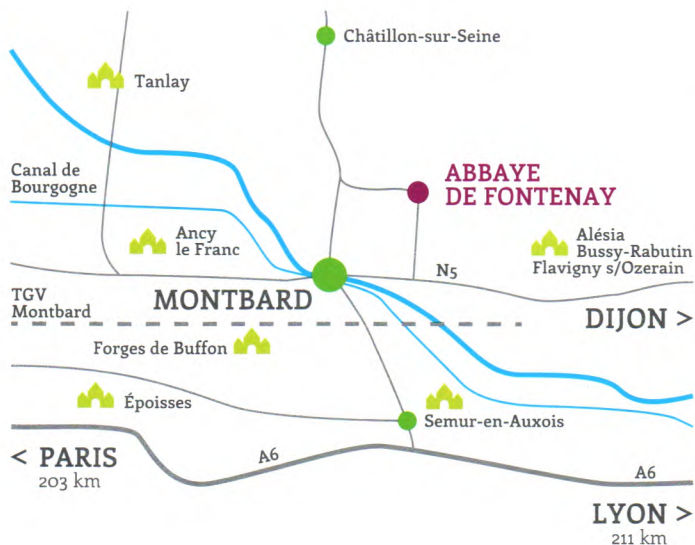




Visiting hours

The Abbey of Fontenay is open every day of the year. From Palm Sunday weekend until All Saints, from 10am to 6pm. The rest of the year, it is open from 10am to 12pm, and then from 2pm to 5pm.

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FONTENAY ABBEY

Unesco World Heritage

English

The Abbey of Fontenay was founded by Saint Bernard in 1118. It is one of the oldest Cistercian abbeys depending on the Cistercian order founded in 1098 in Cîteaux.

The Cistercians wished to reform monastic life, and to apply correctly the rule of St Benedict (6th century), which prescribes a life of poverty, based on self-sufficiency and solitude. Before building Fontenay, the monks carried out considerable works to clear and dry the land flooded by swamps. Indeed, Fontenay's latin name, "Fontanetum", means "which swims onto springs".

The abbey was very wealthy from the 12th century to the 15th century with a community of more than two hundred monks. The monks led a life of utter self-sufficiency, and owned a large estate which they cultivated, farming livestock and creating an innovative forge. The Abbey went into decline in the 16th century as the commendam system was introduced; the

abbots were no longer elected by the monks themselves, but appointed by the King.

At the time of the French Revolution, there were about twelve monks left in Fontenay. Sold as a state property in 1790, the Abbey was bought up in 1820, by Elie de Montgolfier, a descendant of the inventors of the hot-air balloon. Then he transformed the property into a paper-mill.

In 1906, Edouard Aynard, a rich banker of Lyon, who was also a famous art collector, bought the Abbey back from his father-in-law, Raymond de Montgolfier. He undertook massive restoration works which aimed at "extracting Fontenay from its industrial coating". All the buildings of the paper-mill that had disfigured the site were demolished.

Today, the Abbey of Fontenay still belongs to the Aynard family and is classefied as a Unesco World Heritage site.

n°

Indoor and outdoor
visits of this building

n°

No indoor visits
of this building



monks in the 18th century.

4. The chapter house

The eastern gallery of the cloister displays a beautiful curved archway which opens onto a large room, covered by crossed ribbed vaults : the chapter house. Every day, the monks met in this room, along with the Father Abbot. They read and commented a chapter (or an extract) of the Rule of Saint Benedict and here, too, they discussed the everyday business of the community. Two little annexes flank the chapter house; the first, on the church side, would have served as a sacristy, and the second, to the right, as a visiting room.

5. The monk's room

This large room roofed with twelve ribbed vaults, which leads on from the chapter house, was adapted for various tasks. The first of its sections was no doubt reserved for the copyist monks, who would have recopied and illuminated manuscripts.

6. The calefactorium

A little door built into the wall to the right of the monk's room opens out into a little room that was heated. One's eye is caught by the two

chimney-pieces in this little room, which was the only one (along with the kitchens and the infirmary) in which it was permitted to build a fire.

In one corner, a door leads out to a staircase that communicates with the dormitory. In this way, owing to the circulation of hot air, the dormitory and the monk's room were thus kept at a relatively pleasant temperature.

7. The infirmary

As one steps out into the garden by the door that stands between the chapter house and the monk's room, one may see the infirmary with its terrace, which was built in the 17th century, although its walls date back to the foundation of the Abbey. The monks would have grown medicinal plants next to this building, where the sick were cared for, separated from the rest of the community.

8. The forge

This large building [53 meters long] was built by the monks towards the end of the 12th century, and was used in particular as a forge. The iron ore was mined on a hill that overlooks the Abbey, 500 meters west

of the Abbey. Thanks to the water power generated by the stream of Fontenay that had been diverted by the monks and that runs along the southern wall of the forge, the hydraulic hammer activated by the water wheel could work and beat iron. The innovative industrial plant produced bars, tools... that were sold in more or less close areas.

While getting out of the forge, trout are to be seen. They recall us that every abbey had its own fish farming. Fontenay trout were very famous and appreciated at different times.

9. "L'enfermerie"

Isolated right at the very end of the dormitory, this little building, which dates back to the 16th century, is often considered as having formerly been a prison. It is true that the abbots could enforce justice within the lands belonging to the Abbey. Others, however, prefer to see that building as a place where the monks preserved ("locked up") the Abbey's most precious possessions, such as books or objects of devotion.

10. The Seguin gallery

Dating back to 1850, this building, which stands on the site of the old refectory and kitchens, was built by Marc Seguin, the son-in-law of Elie de Montgolfier. A famous 19th century French man of science, Marc Seguin is also notable as the man who built the first railways in France.

11. The lodgings of the commendatory abbots

Leading away from the Seguin gallery, this elegant building, constructed in the first half of the 18th century, served as the lodgings of the commendatory Abbots, the new Abbots nominated by the king when Fontenay passed into the hands of the Commendatum in 1574.

12. The dovecote and the kennels

To the left of the abbatial palace, the dovecote is situated on the edge of the path that leads to the church. The walls of its tower are more than a meter thick and its construction certainly dates back the 13th century. On the other side of the path, two sculptures of dogs remind us that kennels formerly stood on this site. The dogs belonging to the Dukes of Burgundy, who hunted in the forest, were kept here.

13. The layman's chapel and the bakery

The large building occupied today by the book shop and the Abbey's lapidary museum dates back to the 13th century. At the time, it would have been the "layman's chapel" as people from the outside world allowed to enter within the confine of the monastery. The bakery, right at the northern end, still keeps its original cylindrical chimney.

14. The gate keeper's house and the hostelry

The gate keeper's house is surmounted by a further storey which was reconstructed in the 15th century. On the right of the staircase, one can discover the dog's kennel and the hole in the wall out of which he would have stuck his head. To the left of the gate keeper's house (as one leaves the Abbey), the hostelry dedicated to the visitors and travelers before.

1. The abbey church

The building of the church of Fontenay was started in 1139, and was consecrated in 1147 by Pope Eugène III. As is customary, it faces the east. Its façade is stripped bare, and the original vestibule was destroyed in the 18th century. The church is conceived in the shape of a latin cross, and is 66 meters long and 16,70 meters high. The church's nave is flanked by two aisles, with a transept and a flat chevet. In terms of style, it is pure Romanesque, with pointed barrel vaults.

In accordance with the wishes of Saint Bernard, the capitals of the columns are very simply sculpted (water leaf), in order that nothing might distract the eye or the mind from prayer. The statue of Our Lady of Fontenay (late 13th century), which has its place in the northern wing of the transept, is one of the finest examples of the statuary in Burgundy. Behind this sculpture, "the door of the dead" opened onto the monk's cemetery. The sanctuary of the church is paved with enamelled tiles (13th century) which doubtless also used to pave a section of the nave.

Various tombstones have been reassembled in the sanctuary, including that of Bishop Ebrard of Norwich. Depicted with his crosier, he was one of the abbey's patrons, overseeing its construction. This English bishop had fled persecution in his own country in order to find peace and repose at Fontenay. Leaning against the wall of the chevet stands the old altarpiece, which almost certainly adorned the altar in former days. Sadly damaged, it depicts various scenes from the Gospel, including the Nativity. In the southern part of the transept lies a large tomb which contains the remains of the Knight Mello d'Epoisses and his wife, a noble family of Burgundy.

2. The dormitory

In the southern wing of the transept, a staircase leads to the monk's dormitory. This very spacious room has a magnificent oaken framework which dates back to the latter half of the 15th century and is reminiscent of the upside-down hull of a ship. The rule of St Benedict stipulated that all the monks should sleep in the same room. They slept on simple pallets laid directly on the floor, which were separated by low partitions.

3. The cloister

To the right, at the bottom of the dormitory staircase, a door opens out onto the cloisters. This very splendid section of the Abbey forms the very heart of the monastery, and is the place where the monks read and carried out their practical tasks. Just to the left of the door is the "armorium claustrum", where all the books were been kept – one can still discover the grooves of the shelves. The four galleries which enclose the interior courtyard make up a rectangle of 36 meters by 38 meters. Here, the architecture expresses the same sobrieties as that seen in the church, but the capitals of the little columns are very varied; on these capitals, simple in the extreme, one may recognize the familiar botanical motifs. When one stands in the very middle of the cloister, one can see the abbey's very modestly proportioned bell-tower, as well as the chimneys of the calefactorium, which are 12th century. The paving in the southern gallery is the oldest in the monastery. In this same gallery, one can discover the old refectory door, a building of the Abbey which has since disappeared, having been demolished by the