

A The château and its estate

There is evidence of a château at Azay-le-Rideau since the 11th century. Acquired in 1511 by Gilles Berthelot, Treasurer to François I, and his wife Philippe Lesbahy, it was razed to the ground in 1518, to build a new château that embodies the art of construction in the Val de Loire in the early 16th century. Its early Renaissance architecture and décor harmoniously combine Italian influence with French tradition. Although successive owners sought to modernise the château while respecting its past heritage, the unity of the building's current architecture was not completed until the mid-19th century. This is the result of successive refurbishments carried out by the various Marquis de Biencourt over four generations.

B Secret Garden

In the 19th century, the Secret Garden was a large kitchen garden. It is now a garden where ancient vegetables from the Centre-Val de Loire region are grown. Flowers and aromatic herbs arranged in squares, as in the Renaissance era, are also cultivated.

C Priory Garden

This garden gets its name from the old priory which formerly stood on this site. It was transformed by Charles de Biencourt into a "delicious English garden".



Ceiling of the grand staircase

Exterior

Main courtyard *Cour d'honneur*

01

The main courtyard is framed by an L-shaped building. The two façades overlooking the courtyard are made from tufa, a limestone from the Val de Loire region. The effect of verticality obtained by the superimposition of mullioned windows is subtly counterbalanced by the horizontal lines of the mouldings.

The main staircase is one of the most remarkable Renaissance creations in the Val de Loire region. Its façade has four levels of bay windows that are not aligned with the other windows on the main building. The stone lacework was carved by the best sculptors of the time. The initials and emblems – salamander and ermine – of François I and Claude de France have a privileged place, a tribute 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 main staircase is built on a model borrowed from Italy: a straight staircase, known as a "dogleg staircase". A very modern concept in 16th century France, it is built in the centre of the main building, not in an adjoining tower in a spiral, as in the Middle Ages. Landings – or resting places – and a sculpted handrail directly next to the wall are evidence of the comfort integrated in its design. The remarkable flat, coffered vaults are decorated with antique medallions representing the Kings and Queens of France, fantastical characters and animals. Dropped keystones with delicate foliage or fruit decoration add to the elegance of the staircase. The landings are constructed as loggias, to be able to see outside as well as be seen, and are covered with contrasting vaults whose arches feature ermines, salamanders and *putti* (young, naked boys representing Love).

Exhibition

Les enchantements d'Azay

Installations by Piet.sO and Peter Keene
Upon invitation from the Centre des monuments nationaux, the artists Piet.sO and Peter Keene have installed works on the first floor of the château that explore the imagination of the Renaissance.

Les enchantements d'Azay offers a dreamlike journey, inspired by the figures of the magician Armide and Psyche, both represented in the château's tapestries: *Jerusalem Delivered* and *The Story of Psyche*. In reference to the Renaissance artists who were invited to transform châteaux into enchanted palaces, Piet.sO and Peter Keene have drawn on the artifices of theatrical arts from the period to create six installations animated by fantastical objects.

Miniature worlds, automatons, a banquet full of mobile creatures, immense dresses, animated theatre, secret furniture and a book of chimerical shadows are some of the "joyful surprises" imagined by the artists.



L'entrée ouverte au palais fermé du roi, Piet.sO & Peter Keene, 2015



Le petit palais d'Armide, Piet.sO & Peter Keene, 2017

The artistic worlds of Piet.sO and Peter Keene come together around the concept of memory, which they fashion into their individual works in their own way: Piet.sO, by re-appropriating tales and myths, in a half-melancholic, half-mischievous game, peopled with a wedding dress and vanitas. Peter Keene, by exploring the utopia of the history of science through mechanical and sound installations. Since they met in 2001, they have merged their artistic sensitivities to work as a pair.

Gift and book shop

The gift and book shop provides a varied selection on the château and the Renaissance, including the book from the "Regards..." collection, available in French and English.



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CENTRE DES MONUMENTS NATIONAUX

EN

Estate

- A Château
- B Secret Garden
- C Priory Garden
- D Island of La Rémonière
- E Outer courtyard
- F Outhouses
- G Semi-circular courtyard
- H Seigneurial Chapel

- I Pressoir
- J Ticket office - Gift shop
- K Restaurant area
- L Toilets
- Cultural route

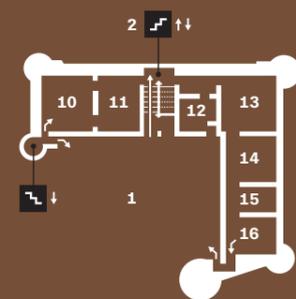


CHÂTEAU *The Dream Renaissance* D'AZAY-LE-RIDEAU

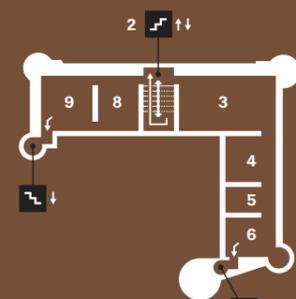
For 150 years, history and travel books have cited the Château d'Azay-le-Rideau as one of the most beautiful Renaissance buildings in the Val de Loire. Built in the early 16th century by Gilles Berthelot and Philippe Lesbahy, it skilfully combines the art of French construction with Italian and Flemish influences. Successive owners sought to respect and complete their work. In the 17th century, Henri-François de Vassé built a prestigious, monumental entrance in line with the grand staircase. He accentuated the perspective by creating a semi-circular courtyard, bordered on the south by two outhouses. In the 19th century, three generations of Marquis de Biencourt directed the restorations "towards an ideal that would elevate Azay to the rank of national treasure", completing its full architectural perfection and remarkable image, both real and imaginary. This dream, continued by the State since 1905, is what makes the Château d'Azay-le-Rideau a true symbol of the "dream Renaissance".

Château

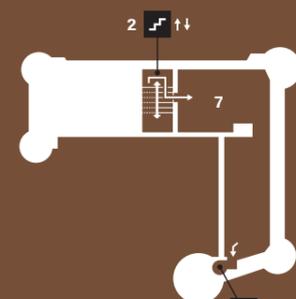
Audioguide numbers.



Ground floor



First floor



Second floor

Interior / First floor

The Great Hall Grande salle

↷ 3

In the time of Gilles Berthelot and his wife Philippe Lesbahy, the majestic Great Hall hosted feasts and balls. The monumental fireplace, tapestries on the walls and wooden furniture created a sober setting that was also warm and elegant. The chests with their bas-relief and sculpted panels are very representative of a Renaissance-style great hall. Often used to transport their owners' belongings, they met the needs of the itinerant Court whilst expressing its magnificence.

Psyche's Room Chambre de Psyché

↷ 4

Located just after the Great Hall, this room is a typical Renaissance bedroom. It owes its current name to the exceptional wool and silk tapestries that cover the walls. They narrate the story of Psyche, a very popular mythological theme during the Renaissance. Five scenes are depicted here, including a central triptych. From left to right, we can see *Psyche sits down to eat at Cupid's Palace*, the triptych *Psyche's Sisters Visit Her*, *Psyche Discovering Sleeping Cupid*, *Cupid Fleeing* and finally *Psyche and Cerberus in Hell*. The central tapestry illustrates a key moment in Psyche's story: pushed by her sisters, the young girl seeks to find out the identity of Cupid, uncovering his face by the light of an oil lamp. A drop of burning oil falls on the god, who immediately flees, abandoning her.

Garderobe Garde-robe

↷ 5

During the Renaissance, this small room was probably a garderobe. A chest, equipped with solid handles to make it easier to move, was used for storing clothes.

Renaissance Chamber

Chambre Renaissance

↷ 6

In Renaissance times, the chamber was a living space in its own right. People slept there, received guests, worked, ate... The woven rush mats covering the walls were used to insulate rooms from the cold.

The arrangement of this room reflects the elegance of 16th century interiors. The bed is the key piece in the décor. The richness of the silk fabrics adorned with gold and silver embroidery and trimmings, and the shimmering colours, reflected the prestige of the owner.

On the wall opposite the bed is an oil on wood painting dating from the second half of the 16th century, painted after a famous composition by Primaticcio.

Andromaque fainting on hearing of the death of Hector, attributed to Cornelis van Haarlem, relates an episode from the Trojan Wars.



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



Four-poster bed from the Renaissance chamber (detail).



François I, French school, late 16th - early 17th century.

Antechamber Antichambre

↷ 8

The antechamber was used as a waiting room for guests, while the nobleman decided who he wanted to receive in his private apartments, and more specifically who he did not want to receive. The walls feature portraits of Kings from the Renaissance to the 16th and 17th centuries, evidence of the owners' rich 19th century collection.

To the left of the fireplace we can recognise Louis XII then, to the right, a series of portraits from the 16th century representing François I, Henri II and Henri III. Depicted standing, opposite the fireplace, are portraits of Henri IV, Louis XIII and Louis XIV.

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 pear-wood, imitating ebony. Its drawers are decorated with

plaques of ivory and bone. Their motifs depict macabre episodes from the Thirty Years War, which devastated Europe during the reign of Louis XIII. This gravity contrasts with the gallant scene on the door of the central niche, showing an engraving of The Four Ages of Man by Abraham Bosse, an engraver born in Tours in 1602.

On the walls, remarkable 17th century tapestries woven after sketches by Simon Vouet illustrate two episodes from Jerusalem Delivered, an epic poem by Tasso, a famous Italian Renaissance poet.

Ground floor

Biencourt Salon Salon Biencourt

↷ 10

The salon of the Marquis de Biencourt illustrates their markedly eclectic taste. A ceremonial room, it contains high quality furniture, designed to allow guests of note to relax. The comfortable ambience is enlivened with elegant textiles. The salon is typical of a

splendid aristocratic 19th century residence.

An equestrian statue of Louis XII in gilded bronze and fine porcelain dishes from the Compagnie des Indes reveal the Marquis' taste for the arts. They built up a priceless collection of around 300 paintings from the 16th and 17th centuries, in particular portraits of major figures in the history of France. These pictures contributed to the château's reputation among artists and art lovers in the mid-19th century. The portraits around the fireplace are examples of this very rich collection.

Billiards Room Salle de billard

↷ 11

In the 19th century, the salon and billiards room formed one single space designed for relaxing with friends. Reflecting the lifestyle of the upper bourgeoisie, the billiards table was an essential item of furniture. 16th and 17th century portraits



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

belonging to the Biencourts decorate the room: Erasmus of Rotterdam, the Touraine poet Racan, Cinq-Mars, a favourite of Louis XIII, etc. They demonstrate the Marquis' wish to bestow a political, literary and artistic heritage on the château through this unique collection. Opposite the fireplace, a remarkable 16th century work by the Flemish artist Jan Massys represents Psyche bringing Venus the vase of Proserpina. At the back of the room is an exceptional bust in white marble and bronze of Henri IV in ceremonial dress.

Outhouse Dépense

↷ 12

Also designed as a larder, the outhouse was an essential part of the château. Everyday crockery and laundry were stored here, as well as foodstuffs essential for preparing meals. To give an idea of how it was used, the layout here has been reconstructed from an inventory by Dame Guillet, housekeeper to the Biencourts in 1809.



Bust of Henri IV, 19th century.



Dining room table, Saint-Louis glasses and carafes, 19th century.

Kitchen Cuisine

↷ 13

The kitchen adjoins the outhouse, which together formed the château's pantries during the Renaissance. The kitchen has been considerably altered over time. Like the outhouse, its floor was raised in the 19th century: the fireplace and well installed in the 16th century were then just over one metre below their current level. Today, its reconstructed furnishings evoke the lifestyle of the Biencourts.

Dining room Salle à manger

↷ 14

The table is laid according to 19th century customs, with the Marquis de Biencourt's Paris porcelain table service from the Perier et Feuillet Manufactory. This is complemented by "thread and shell" pattern cutlery in the Louis XV style, made by the Maison Odiot. The set is accompanied by Trianon-style glasses from the Saint-Louis glassworks, after a model created in 1830. The serving dishes are in 18th century China porcelain from the Compagnie des Indes.

Corridor Passage

↷ 15

In the 16th century, this narrow vaulted space opened up into the main courtyard via an elegant semi-circular arch. It led across the West wing into the gardens that were on the site before the water mirror was created. One of its vaults displays the monogram of the Renaissance owner, Gilles Berthelot, delicately sculpted into the winding foliage.

Salon-library Salon-bibliothèque

↷ 16

This room has been reconstructed according to the furniture inventory drawn up in 1854. The intimate, cosy atmosphere of the salon is complemented by furniture used for entertainment. Gaming tables, music cases and a library are combined with comfortable sofas, wing chairs and armchairs from the Empire or Louis-Philippe period, designed for relaxation and discussion. In the evening, this convivial setting was lit by candelabras and bronze light sconces.

Second floor

Large attic Grand comble

↷ 7

The château's attic has an ashlering wall, meaning that the peripheral walls which support the framework rise above the floor. This created more interior space and concealed the differences in level between the wing and the great hall. The original framework is in oak, which François I authorised to be cut from the Forest of Chinon in 1517.

1518

Gilles Berthelot and Philippe Lesbahy began construction of the château.

Reign of François I
1515–1547

1603

Antoinette Raffin built a seigneurial chapel adjoining Saint-Symphorien church.

Reign of Henri IV
1589–1610

1619

Françoise de Souvré welcomed Louis XIII to the château.

Reign of Louis XIII
1610–1643

1638

Françoise de Souvré was appointed governor of Louis XV.

1670

The Marquis de Vassé built the semi-circular courtyard and outhouses.

Reign of Louis XIV
1643–1715

1791

The Marquis Charles de Biencourt purchased the château.

French Revolution
1789

1810

Initial landscaping of the grounds.

First Empire
1804–1814

1825

Armand François Marie, second Marquis de Biencourt, undertook the restoration of the château.

1830

Landscaping of a large kitchen garden on the site of the Secret garden.

1850

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

Second Empire
1852–1870

1855

Creation of a water mirror in front of the château's Southern façade.

War of
1870–1871

1882

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

Third Republic
1871

1905–1907

In 1905, ownership of the château passed to the State. First major restoration work in 1907.

1914

The château became a listed historical monument.

First World War
1914–1918

1955

Removal of the cannon boulevard around the château.

Second World War
1939–1945

2014–2017

Restoration of the grounds and château.