



# Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire

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Discovering  
heritage



# St-Benoît-sur-Loire, Abbey and Loire landscapes

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*"You, the simple traveller, who loves to relive the past before its monuments, will be told right here of the place occupied, in the history of France and the world, by Fleury Abbey."*

By Max Jacob, *Saint Benoît and Fleury Abbey*.

Archaeology shows that this site has been occupied since prehistoric times. However, it was the founding of Fleury Abbey in the 7th century that sealed its fate. Léodebode, the Abbot of Saint-Aignan in Orleans, founded a monastery circa 650, taking the name of the only hamlet in the area: Fleury. The establishment was placed under the rule of Saint Benoît. Abbot Mommole would send monks to Monte Cassino (Italy) to bring back the remains of this saint some years later. After a long journey, the relics were brought to Fleury and buried in the abbey church. Their presence conferred great prestige on the abbey. With the goodwill of sovereigns and under the authority of illustrious abbots - Theodulfe, Abbon, Gauzlin, Odon - Fleury became a spiritual and cultural centre of the medieval West.



Like a sentinel standing on the banks of the Loire, the abbey church bears witness to this history, as grandiose and tumultuous as the river itself. Erected as a basilica in 1947, it attracts over 50,000 visitors every year.

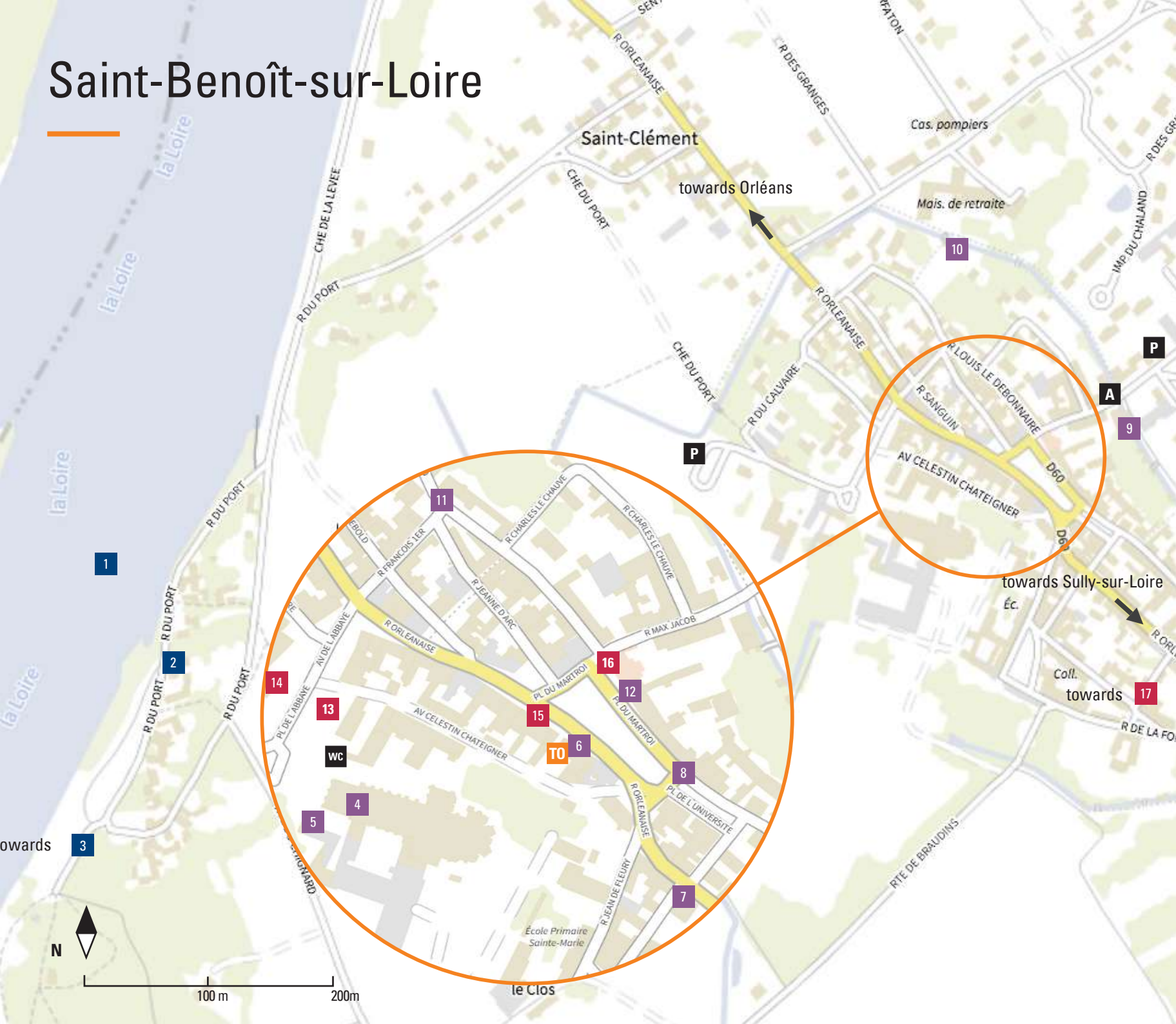
The exceptional quality of the Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire site led public authorities to take the necessary steps to ensure its protection: the classification of the natural site in 2018 by the Ministry of the Environment; and the designation of the village and surrounding area as a Remarkable Heritage Site (SPR) to preserve its architectural quality. In addition, since November 2000, Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire has been included in the Val de Loire area, which, from here to Chalonnes (Maine-et-Loire), features on the UNESCO World Heritage List as a cultural landscape.

So you may now follow in the footsteps of the pilgrims of the past and discover the preserved grace of this Loire town, where the poet Max Jacob chose to retire from 1921 to 1944.

Before continuing on to the Carolingian oratory of Germigny-des-Prés or the Château de Sully, you'll want to discover this charming town with its medieval houses, bourgeois residences and venerable moats; a picturesque port where cyclists on the *Loire à Vélo* route have replaced the bargemen; and beyond, the open landscapes of the Val d'Or, a vast market-garden plain that can be seen from the *Belvédère*, an interactive space open all year round.



# Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire



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1a. Traditional futreau boat on the Loire / 1b. View of the river from *Loire à Vélo* route

## A town on the Loire

**The town's history is closely connected to the Loire, its opportunities and its excesses. Commercial shipping, fishing, milling: the river enabled the development of activities over which the abbey enjoyed rights. To build the tower-porch in the 11th century, ashlar was shipped in from the Nivernais region. Active until the 9th century, the Loire navy has declined, but its memory remains vivid in the port hamlet.**

### 1 The Loire

The stretch between Sully-sur-Loire and Orleans has a unique configuration: the river meanders seven times within a major bed that is around six kilometres wide. Enriched with silt, the Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire plain is called Val d'Or (Golden Valley) because of its fertility. It now supplies 50% of France's red beetroot production.

The proximity of the Loire was also a threat, so settlements were concentrated on slight elevations called montilles. That in the town culminates at 113 metres, a mere five metres above the minor riverbed, which has been sufficient to shelter it from most floods. Despite the construction of levees (dykes) in the Middle Ages, exceptional floods and ice jams have nevertheless affected this area.



2a



2b



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**2a.** The port and its bargemen's boats / **2b.** The port hamlet and its characteristic houses / **3.** Mahyses Island

## **2 The port hamlet**

Just 700 m from the town, the old village port has retained some of its original features: an embankment with a perré (stone wall), steps, a line of bollards... The paved ramp downstream is a drinking trough: it allowed people to dock at any river level and water their horses and cattle. Since at least the 17th century, a ferry has been running to Guilly on the other side of the river.

Built on the levee, the restored bargemen's houses feature flood markers. The record flooding in September-October 1866 was caused by torrential rains. Traditional boats are moored to the shore: the fûtreau, a locally used flat-bottomed boat, and the toue cabanée, for fishing and transport.

## **3 Les Mahyses**

This 90-hectare site is managed by the Nature Conservatory of the Centre-Val de Loire Region. The wild Loire is at its best here, with its sandy beaches, willow- and poplar-wooded banks and elongated islands, home to herons, otters and beavers.

Only accessible during special events, Mahyses Island can be seen all year round from the other side of the rio (water channel).



4a. L'abbatiale vue depuis le Belvédère / 4b. La tour-porche de l'abbatiale / 5. La librairie bénédictine

## The abbey and its village

**Formed around the monastery, the village was described as a market town as early as the 11th century, with the abbot as lord.**

### 4 The abbey church

Several churches have stood on this site since the 7<sup>th</sup> century. The current abbey church allows us to follow several stages of Romanesque art. The tower-porch (before 1020-1032) expresses the ambition of its patron, Abbot Gauzlin, the king's presumed half-brother. Designed by the architect Unbertus, it was one of the first monuments to feature historiated capitals. With its ambulatory and bold vaulting, the chevet (circa 1070-1108) allowed for a new presentation of the relics : pilgrims could access the crypt via the staircases in the aisles without disturbing the sanctuary. An exceptional antique paving imported from Italy by Abbot Gauzlin can be seen in the choir and, in accordance with his wishes, King Philip I was buried here in 1108. The last part to be rebuilt, the nave (circa 1160-1207), marks the transition to the Gothic style. As the only vestige of the medieval abbey, the abbey church was listed as a Historic Monument in 1840.

### 5 The Benedictine bookshop

During the French Revolution, the abbey was nationalised and the monks were expelled. A



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6. The *Belvédère*, an interactive space dedicated to the abbey  
/ 7. 12th-century Romanesque house

speculator from Orleans, Benoît Lebrun, bought the monastery, demolished it and resold the materials. At the behest of Félix Dupanloup, Bishop of Orleans, the community's reformation was entrusted to the Abbey of La Pierre-qui-Vire (Yonne). Built in 1950, the new monastery is not open to the public. Its shop occupies a vestige of the old porter's house. The monks sell books, souvenirs and handicrafts here.

## 6 The Belvédère

This site dedicated to the history of the abbey was inaugurated in 2019. Designed by the CplusD agency, its contemporary architecture evokes the power of the tower-porch and the tranquillity of a cloister. On three levels, the Belvédère offers a tour of the site, complete with models and multimedia tools. The third floor offers panoramic views. The building also houses the Tourist Office and a shop.

## 7 The Romanesque house

Located at 37-39 rue Orléanaise, this is the oldest house in the village : the wood analysis has confirmed that it was built in the 1170s. It was undoubtedly the home of a wealthy merchant, as suggested by the presence of a cellar. Designed for living quarters, the first floor was served by a wooden gallery, as evidenced by several doors and the corbels on the south gable.





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8. La maison gothique, photographie de 1902 / 9. Les fossés du bourg et leur passerelle / 10. Lavoir sur les fossés

## 8 The Gothic house

This house is located on Place de l'Université. Built in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, it has been the subject of various names and stories: Maison de la Croix-Blanche, Maison de l'Université, Maison du Roy, Maison des Templiers... While its history escapes us, it was undoubtedly the property of a nobleman or bourgeois, as attested by its ashlar construction and the rich decoration of the first floor. The first floor has been extensively remodelled and used to house a shop. The façade has been listed as a Historic Monument since 1906 and was restored at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## 9 The moats

Like the abbey, the village was equipped with water moats. In place since the 11th century, these were originally fed by the Bonnée, a small tributary of the Loire that rises in the Orleans forest. The four current bridges were inherited from the town's former entry points. In addition to their defensive function, the moats have multiple uses: watering, watering troughs for animals, hemp retting, sewers, water reserves in case of fire... Local residents were responsible for cleaning and mowing the banks. The course of the Bonnée was altered in the 1960s, and the moats are now fed by a well and rainwater. The duckweed has been reabsorbed by carp, and a pedestrian pathway allows visitors to enjoy the biodiversity.





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11. Château des Chevières / 12. The Chateignier house

### 10 The wash houses

The moats were also used for washing clothes. A number of estates built private wash houses, to which four municipal wash houses were added at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. 22 of them remain today.

### 11 Les Chevières

This elegant building, with its eclectic architecture, was owned by Sébastien-François Sallé, a juriconsult and mayor of Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire from 1876 to 1881. The pediment pierced by an oculus and the windows adorned with mascarons are inspired by Grand Siècle architecture. With their glazed brick lattices and Gothic-style dormers, the two small pavilions are more reminiscent of the late Middle Ages.

### 12 The Chateignier house

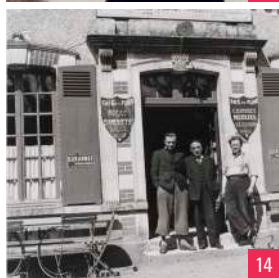
This large house, topped by a belvedere, is striking for its oriental-inspired décor: mantling gives the loggia the shape of a broken horseshoe arch, a motif echoed by the bow window casements, adorned with stained-glass windows. It was the property of Célestin Chateignier (1845-1916), a Parisian entrepreneur who returned to his native Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire circa 1890. As a benefactor, he graced the town with various gifts: land, lampposts, street signs, etc.



13a



13b



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13a. The former presbytery / 13b. Max Jacob in front of the tower-porch / 14. Max Jacob in front of the former Robert Hotel

## Max Jacob

**Born into a Jewish family in Quimper in 1876, Max Jacob moved to Paris to study. Becoming an art critic, he aspired to painting and in 1901 met Pablo Picasso, with whom he moved to Montmartre. A painter, poet, novelist and essayist, Max Jacob took part in all the avant-garde movements.**

**Following visions, he converted to Catholicism in 1915. In 1917 he published his most famous collection of poems : *The dice cone*.**

### 13 The old presbytery

After his conversion, Max Jacob decided to retire to the countryside to work and pray. On 24 June 1921, following a friend's recommendation, he moved in with the village priest, Albert Fleureau. After two months, he moved into the disused building at the rear (now a hotel). Until 1928, he completed several novels, painted gouaches he sold in Paris, and entertained his friends there. He visited the basilica every day, acting as a "cicerone" (guide) for pilgrims.

### 14 Robert Hotel

In 1936, Max Jacob returned permanently to Saint-Benoît and took up residence in this modest hotel. The monks were back, and the poet's fervour became more intense. He kept up a prolific correspondence and forged friendships with local artists.



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15. The Persillard house / 16. Town hall and former hospice /  
17. Max Jacob's tomb

### 15 The Persillard house

Expulsé de son hôtel, Max Jacob loue à partir de 1939 une chambre chez une veuve rentière, Mme Persillard. Le poète assiste à la débâcle de 1940 et fait face à la pénurie. En dépit de sa conversion, il doit se faire recenser comme juif. Interdit de publication, il ne travaille presque plus et est régulièrement contrôlé. A partir de 1942, son veston est cousu de l'étoile jaune.

### 16 The hospice (the current town hall)

On 24 February 1944, Max Jacob attended the 7 a.m. mass in the hospice chapel. After going to the post office, he met a friend at his lodgings. A front-wheel drive pulled up in front of the house : refusing to flee, the poet was arrested by the Gestapo. Taken to Orléans prison, he was transferred to the Drancy camp on 29 February. Admitted to the infirmary, he died there on the night of 5-6 March.

### 17 The cemetery

After his death, Max Jacob was buried in a mass grave in Ivry-sur-Seine. In accordance with his wishes, his remains were finally transferred to the Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire cemetery in 1949. His tomb is adorned with a medallion by the sculptor René Iché. In keeping with Jewish tradition, small pebbles are regularly placed there by visitors.

# Practical info

- **Town Hall**

8 place du Martroi  
45730 Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire  
Tel : 02 38 35 73 28  
[www.saint-benoit-sur-loire.fr](http://www.saint-benoit-sur-loire.fr)  
[accueil@mairie-st-benoit.fr](mailto:accueil@mairie-st-benoit.fr)

- **Tourist Office**

55 rue orléanaise  
45730 Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire  
Tel : 02 38 35 79 00  
[www.tourisme-valdesully.fr](http://www.tourisme-valdesully.fr)  
[tourisme@valdesully.fr](mailto:tourisme@valdesully.fr)

# What to see and do

- **The Belvédère**

55 rue orléanaise  
45730 Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire  
Tél : 02 34 52 02 45  
[www.belvedere-valdesully.fr](http://www.belvedere-valdesully.fr)

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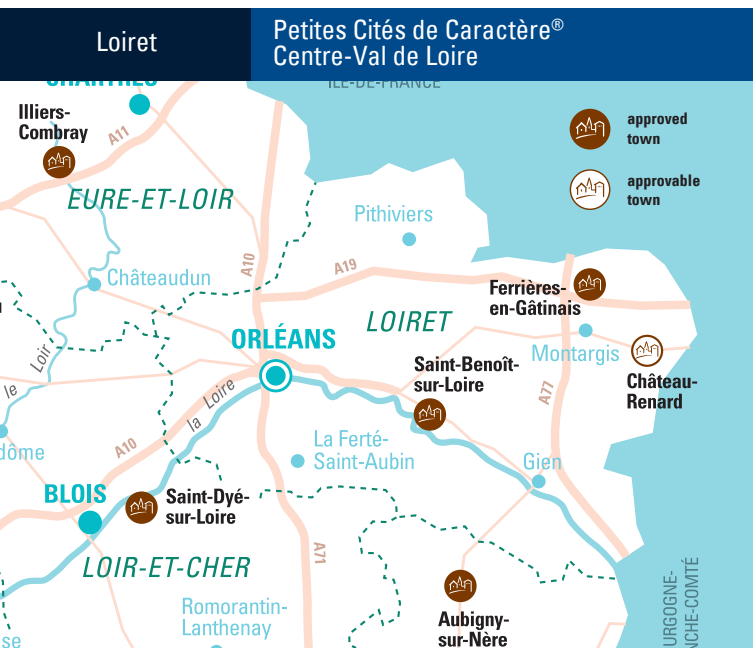
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