



Welcome to the National Fort

Before beginning the visit, I will like to draw your attention with the safety measures: this monument can present risks of accident from its particular configuration. Its statute of historic building prevents us from putting guardrails all around. I thus thank you for being very careful, for not going up on the parapet and for looking after young people to prevent from any accident.

First stage : in front of the drawbridge

The National Fort was registered as a historic building in 1906 and is a private property since 1927. It was successively named, throughout the centuries, Royal Fort, under the French monarchy, then Fort of Islet, during Revolution and as Imperial Fort, during the Empire.

Until 1689, when the Fort was built, the rock was called Islet. This rocky block seemed, more significant than today. On its top sits a lighthouse, a kind of flare, which, at night, burned resinous material to guide the sailing ships. A similar flare was also burnt at the top of Cape Fréhel which you will be able to see during the visit.

The rock of Islet was also the place where condemned men were to be executed on the order of the seignior of Saint-Malo. Men under sentence were burnt in front of a large cross called the cross of Ardrès or Ardrillés, where they said their last prayers, before expiating their crimes with fire. It is in that same place that rose the gallows for hanging criminals.

At the end of the XVIIth century, Louis XIV became aware of the strategic importance of Saint-Malo and orders the famous Marechal de Vauban, the great military engineer, to activate and intensify the defense of the corsair town. Using the topography, Vauban transformed each small island into a true "advanced sentinel"; 102 pieces of artillery with 1300 gunners and musketeers, prohibited the approach of the walls.

During the year 1682, the rock of Islet was allotted to the field of the State by royal sentence. Then Vauban drew up the plans of defense which were carried out by Siméon de Garangeau, an architect from Saint Malo, who also completed the ramparts and built other historic houses inside and around Saint-Malo. The construction of the Fort started in 1689 and 23 guns were used for the defense of the corsair city. You will be able to see during the visit two types of these guns: they are called «couleuvrines ». Their tanded shooting made it possible to make a waterway in the enemy vessel before drawing on this one a ball from a mortar from a larger gauge to sink it.

As you can see here, Vauban knew remarkably how to adapt the building to the landscape.

Thus it is, that you will see on this wall, the way in which the rock was cut out to ensure the perfect connection between the rock and the masonry. Not only here but all around the ramparts, as you may observe, the rock and the stonewoek have been shaped into one indestructible block.

The oldest preserved draft get back to 1691 and is signed of Garangeau (you can see its reproduction here on the panel). Work was rather advanced in 1704 to let Vauban place mortars. The Fort carried 14 guns the following year. 41 embrasures or crenels are pierced in 1700. The Fort was not modified until 1743. It is composed of a small front, bordered by two half-bastions and a false-braie round in portion of circle towards damping of the pit to the Norman ones.

Covering an area of approximately 4.000 square meters, the fort is as you can see surrounded by this second enclosure, which was built later. It was added in 1849 to protect the Imperial Fort, not only against the attacks from the sea, but also gainst the attacks of the troops of infantry which could be landed by ground. While going along this enclosure, you will notice that the crenels allow defence by rifle of all the entries.

You can see here the bastion which ensures the defense of the Fort. We will enter now the fortress of Vauban. I will explain you at the end of the visit the mechanism of the drawbridge. You will notice while passing the thickness of the door hinges.

Second stage: close to the well

At this place, under our feet, the cisterns of the fort, They can contain more than 50.000 liters, of rainwater collected through a granite gutter which I will show you on other side of the house. Here, the opening of the cisterns. (Trap door located at the South-eastern corner close to the rampart).

By this crenel, you have a particularly picturesque sight of the ramparts of Saint-Malo and the old castle of the Duchess Anne. It is on this beach, that François-René de Châteaubriand (1768-1848) when he was a child was climbing the moles and running in the waves, played with his cousins. He tells in his "Mémoires d'Outre-Tomce" that while playing one day in the rocks he fell in the waves and the nurses had to roll up their cotillions to save the imprudent ones. Chateaubriand is buried in the island of Grand Bé which you can see here on the right. Its grave is a simple stone surmounted by a heavy granite cross.

After these lyric evocations, let us return to some more epic stories about the Fort National.

It is indeed at the foot of the Imperial Fort as it was called at the time, some claim that it might even be on this platform, that the famous privateer Robert Surcouf (1773-1827) fought against 12 Prussian officers, one of the most famous duels of our history. In the year 1815, 12 Prussian officers of the regiment of the occupation of Dinan were in a cabaret of Saint-Malo where Surcouf and its friends were already sat down. These officers were provocative, one of them pronounced even aloud outrageous words for France and the King. Immediately Surcouf stood up and grasp a chair, and broke it on the head of the Prussian officer saying : "I am Surcouf, Sirs, and I am not used to figh with chairs". Surcouf took his sabre and requested his two friends to be his witnesses. The 12 Prussian officer accepted the challenge and went to the Fort. It was a very terrific duel : Surcouf was so brilliant that his first eleven adversaries died each after another.

When it came the twelfth's turn, at the first pass Surcouf cut off his hand and told him «I save you because I need a witness ».

Third stage : onto the mound.

From here, you have a view over the beach of the Sillon which extends for 2 km and over the whole urban area of Saint-Malo : Paramé, Courtoisville, Rochebonne and in the hollow: Rothéneuf. You see also the cape of Varde, formerly military property. Over there, there was also a fort designed by Vauban. In the distance are the Chausey islands from where the granite was taken to build the fort and the ramparts of Saint-Malo, as well as the Mont Saint-Michel.

We shall now visit the parts of the Fort underground, you will need to let your eyes get used to the darkness.

Fourth stage: the ammunition store

Here were stored powder and cartridges. Ventilation is perfect thanks to angled conduits called « chicanes » which pierce the thick rampart. Here the first aperture: lets in air but not light. And here the second one facing east. Walls 3 to 5 meters thick of rock and masonry. Over our head is a granite vault, also approximately 3 meter thick. Notice the dual purpose of these conduits : permanent ventilation, essential for the men and the ammunition and no possibility of intrusion from the outside of any weapon or burning torch. No escape possible. Only one issue : this heavy wrought iron gate decorated with fleur-de-lys, of course locked . finally a big door, the hinges of which you will notice as you leave, you can guess its thickness.

On the exterior there is another decorated gate leading out over the rocks, surely a trap for the enemy who, if he sought to land there, would certainly ground on the reefs.

On the other hand it was possible to hoist goods and ammunition thanks to a hoist.

I will leave you now and will meet again at the top of the stairs to continue the visit.

Fifth stage: in front of the commemorative plaque

Alas, we must now evoke the painful memories of the last war and the tragic hours of August 1944 during which Saint Malo collapsed under the grapeshot and in the fire.

Sunday August 6th, 1944, at the beginning of afternoon, the high openwork arrow of the cathedral which you see from here fall down, when German Kommandantur fearing a rebellion gave the order to lead all the men of Saint-Malo to the Fort National.

August 7th, at dawn, after having left under the constraint women and children, 380 inhabitants of Saint-Malo move in a long file towards the Fort where they were imprisoned by the German troop. Start for them one week of interminable waiting. The Germans draw on the Allies from the Grand Bé and the Island of Cézembre. The internees of the Fort are thus taken between two fires. The shells do not save the Fort:

Wednesday August 9th: a shell bursts on the northern parapet of the platform. 9 men are killed on the bbw, 18 others are wounded. Two other deaths will follow in the night in spite of the vigilant of Doctor Lemarchand and the comfort brought by the priest of Paramé, the abbot Groussard, both interneers at the Fort. Dead men were buried on the spot. On the city, the battle grows in intensity

Friday August 11th. The food ran out. During the Saturday night, a courageous volunteer, Pierre Boué, leaves the Fort to inform the Americans of the situation of the interneers. He will plant a white flag on the dam to indicate to those which remain that he succeeded in crossing.

Sunday August 13th : the prisoners are joined by 150 old women and men. The evacuation is made possible in the evening thanks to a one hour truce. It is the end of the nightmare.

Alas, 18 of them will never come back. Their names are engraved at the place even though in the night from the 9 to August 10, they were mown by the allied shells.

These shells destroyed partially the Fort and the house. The house that you see is only 45 years old. It was rebuilt according to the plans of Vauban.

I now propose you to make a turn of the battlements then I will tell you what is, in my eyes, one of the maritime attacks the most spectacular of our history. Notice while passing the watch tower. A man was held in observation and prevented the others in the event of dangers .

Sixth stage: behind the house, on the quay level

Here you can see the gutter which collects water supplying the well about which you saw before. Watch the bay from this corner : the view embraces the whole horizon. From right to left, you can see the forts and the fortifications of Vauban: the Fort of La Conchée, the Island of Cézembre, Fort Harbour, Petit Bé, Grand Bé, without forgetting the Cape of Varde and the ramparts of Saint-Malo.

The corsair city had natural defenses: the sea, the tides, the reefs, the currents and winds; but also the marshes. In the distance you see the Cape Fréhel where stands the Fort La Latte and the Island of Ebihens.

It is in these surroundings that took place one of the most famous events of Saint-Malo history. Since the disaster of La Hougue in 1692 when the French royal fleet lost 22 ships off Barfleur, the privateers left Dunkirk, Saint-Malo, La Rochelle and Bordeaux to support the King. The rocky town of Saint-Malo, sheltered by its islands and strong ramparts, is the "wasps' nest" that the English fear and that they wanted to destroy. On November 26th, 1693, a fleet of 30 anglo-Dutch ships appears off the Cape Fréhel. After having bombarded the Fort La Latte and the Island of Ebihens, this fleet

moves towards Saint Malo, taking along with it an explosive device intended to blow up the corsair city. For nearly two years, workmen who never left have been working in the Tower of London to design a mysterious vessel under the orders of Prince Guillaume d' Orange. This ship has a 84-foot keel, has got 3 decks, weights 300 tons and bears carries 23 guns. To approach closer the coasts it draws only 7 feet of water. Its sails are black and her sides gorged with gunpowder, bombs and

langrage. All that can wound, kill, propagate the fire and panic is concentrated in this strange ship. On November 29th, 1693, the Fort of La Conchée and the Island of Cézembre fall in the

hands of the enemy. His next target is now to capture the Royal Fort. Whereas the Royal Fort supports the bombardments of the enemy fleet, the infernal ship comes away from the squadron and sails towards Saint-Malo and the Bidouane Tower where were stored ammunition and gunpowder.

But while it was sailing along the line of the rocks which you see and which goes from the Royal Fort to the Fort à la Reine (the square tower on the ramparts) a violent blast of westerly wind falls down on the ship and precipitates it on the reefs.

The occupants had only time to light the gun powder. The ship explodes immediately, shredding them and projecting on the city grapeshot and scrap iron. Fortunately, it exploded before reaching the ramparts. At first light, the wreck dislocated ghost ship lies on the beach as well as the bodies of the 40 sailors of her crew. The veils of the enemy ships disappear from the horizon. No victim in Saint-Malo, except an ordinary cat, known by the legend which gave its name to a street called « la rue du chat qui danse » (the street of the cat which dances). Alarm was hot but the glacis made by the Forts surrounding the citadel proved its utility.

Two years later, on July 14th, 1695, the English came back, this time, the guns of the forts and the ramparts stopped them.

Before finishing the visit, I will explain you the mechanism of the drawbridge.

Seventh stage: in front of the door of the drawbridge

These two heavy vents are closed by three locks. At top, the first now modernized, in the center the second still works.

Its key is a masterpiece of ironwork. At the bottom, the third lock.. In the higher part of the door two iron hooks which make possible to block the door by a mobile cross-bar.

In this broad groove, a heavy harrow sank down being used of against weight for the drawbridge which, turning then on its axis of which you can notice the bronzes kneecaps some was raised outside to block the door and to increase its defense, while, in this movement of rocker the place where we are inserted in the ground, opening a deepest dungeon under our feet.

Works are planned to restore and replace this harrow in its place within two years. It is a system very clever operated by only one man and in a few seconds. The Fort was never taken besides. It was well protected: the bastion, a ditch, the drawbridge, the door, the harrow, the bottom of low pit and in top of the staircase where you are, a hundred armed men who waited.

To finish this visit I will draw your attention to the extent of the work undertaken on this monument, work to which your visits contribute to a large extent. The drawbridge which you will cross is an example of this continuous work: it is a faithful reproduction of the original that you can see downwards on your left. It was built more than three hundred years ago with centenary balls of oak already which moreover required a long period of drying before being output, treated and assembled. The next stage will consist in installing the new harrow. You will be able to also observe the pediment and the bastion which were both dismantled, restored and rejointed with lime according to the artcraft technique as well as many masonries that you have seen during the visit.

Stone by stone, the Fort gets back to its glare of origin.

The visit is now finished. With all my thanks.