



Walking tour #1

Essential Bordeaux

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The rich tapestry of spectacular sights and impressive landmarks to enjoy in Bordeaux have earned the city UNESCO world heritage status. Sharing tales that range from history to architecture and general culture, this city-centre walk will provide you with a close-up look at some of the best-known landmarks in Bordeaux, giving you the full story behind each of these essential postcard-friendly sights!

Sights

1. **Grand Théâtre**
2. **Rue Sainte-Catherine**
3. **Place du Parlement & Rue Fernand-Philippart**
4. **Place de la Bourse**
5. **Miroir d'Eau**
6. **Porte Cailhau**
7. **Porte and Église Saint-Éloi & Grosse Cloche**
8. **Musée d'Aquitaine**
9. **Tour Pey-Berland & Cathédrale Saint-André**
10. **Palais Rohan (Hôtel de Ville)**
11. **Place Gambetta & Porte Dijeaux**
12. **Cours de l'Intendance**
13. **Place des Grands Hommes**
14. **Place Tourny**
15. **Esplanade des Quinconces & Monument aux Girondins**

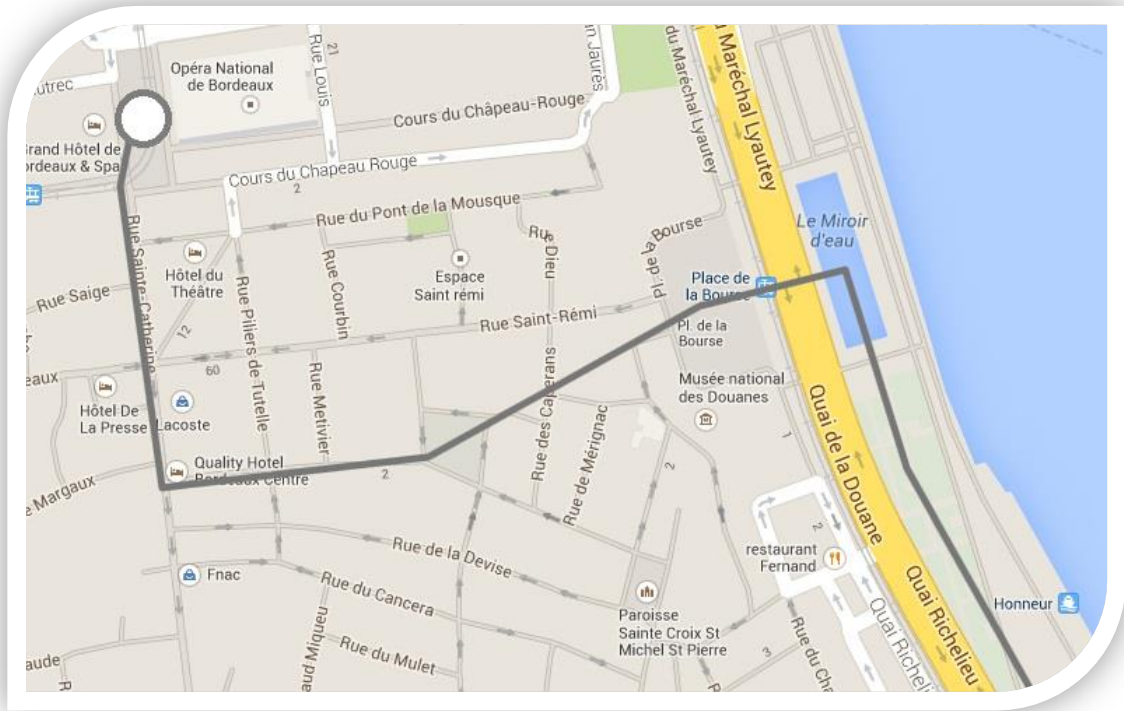
Itinerary

Start: Place de la Comédie (Tram Line B, Grand-Théâtre stop)

Distance: 4 kilometres



Sight #1: Grand Théâtre



This monumental building was the work of the architect Victor Louis and was erected between 1773 and 1780. Watching over proceedings at all times are twelve statues, each perched in line with a Corinthian column. They represent the nine muses and the goddesses Juno, Venus and Minerva.

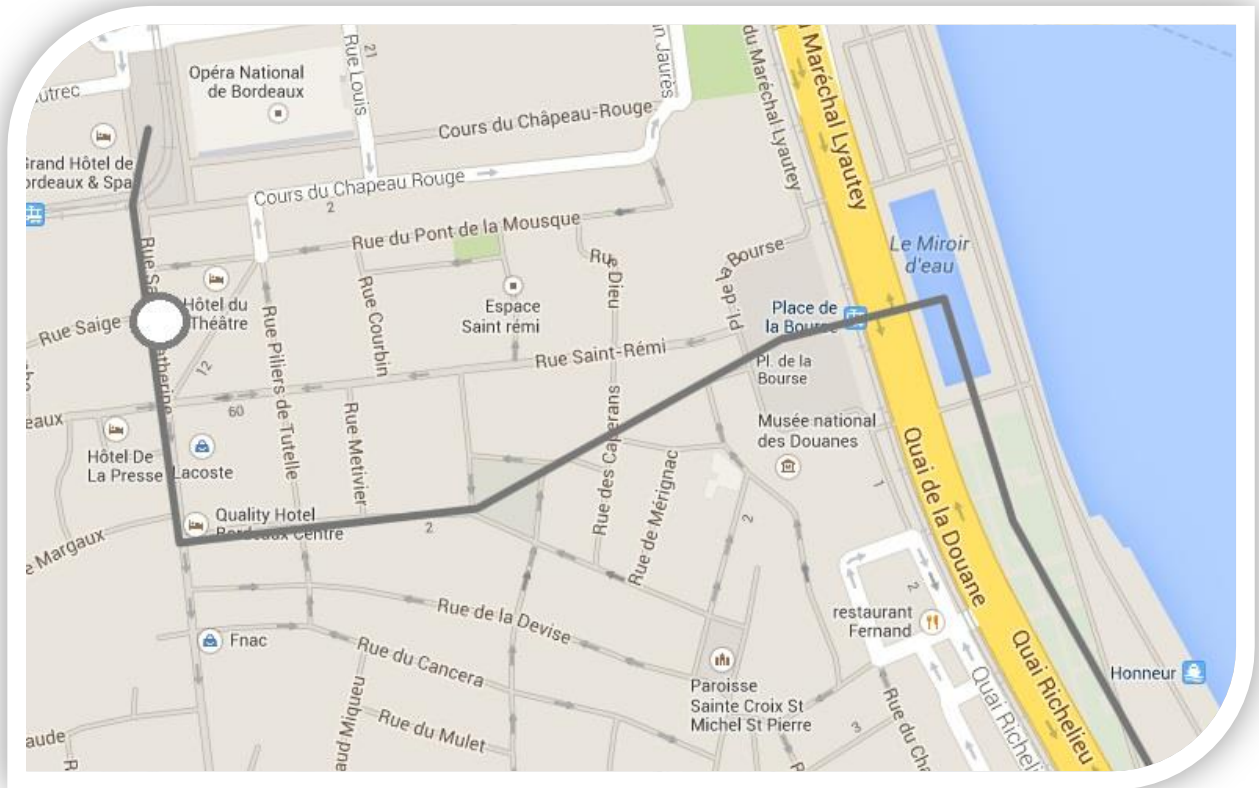


The theatre has not always been as prominent as it is today. Its immediate surroundings were actually lowered in the mid-18th century. Until then, the square at the front was level with the bottom of the columns and horse-drawn carriages used to regularly collide with the structure! This is less likely to happen now that the theatre appears to have risen from ground level with the addition of the steps... not to mention the transformation of the square into a pedestrian area in the early years of the 21st century.

The inside of the building, which can only be viewed when on a guided tour organised by the Office de Tourisme or when attending a show, is equally impressive, with grand stone staircases leading to the five tiers of seating in the main performance hall, which is topped off by a painted ceiling and an elaborate chandelier. The staircases were a great inspiration to Charles Garnier, who designed the opera house in Paris which opened in 1875.

Opposite the theatre is the luxurious Grand Hotel, the rooftop terrace of which boasts one of the finest views of the Bordeaux skyline!

Sight #2: Rue Sainte-Catherine



This 1,250-metre-long street, which runs from Place de la Comédie to Porte d'Aquitaine on Place de la Victoire, is the vibrant commercial heart of the city. It is often referred to as the longest shopping street in Europe, and there are more than 250 shops to choose from.

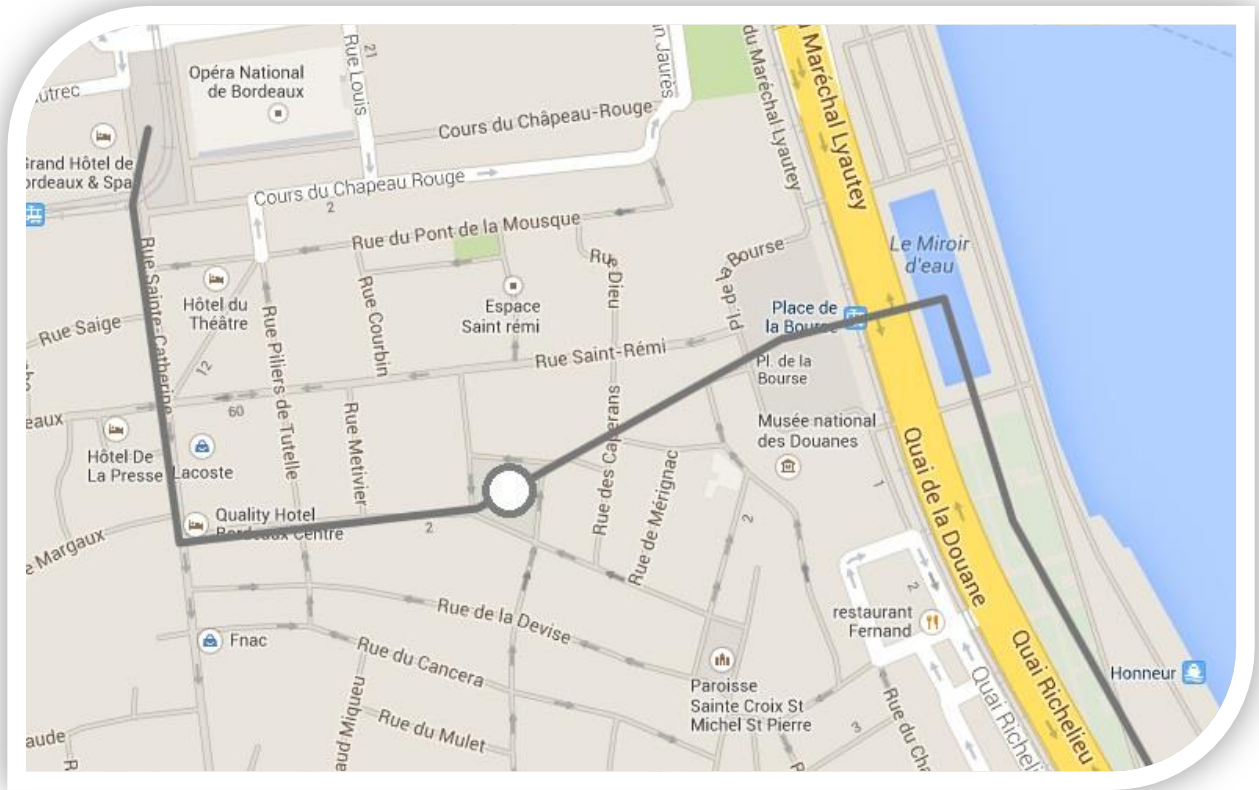
The street has been fully pedestrianised since 1984 and was fully overhauled between 2000 and 2003, under the guidance of urban architect Jean-Michel Wilmotte. The street's name is in reference to a chapel which stood until 1835 on the spot where a FNAC store can now be found.



Initially, the name solely designated a short section that runs between Rue Porte-Dijéaux and Place Saint-Projet, one of several segments that joined up to form a meandering channel from the bourgeois northern quarters to the more popular southern districts. In the 19th century, the streets were aligned and merged to become the single Rue Sainte-Catherine.

In amongst the familiar logos and brands, look out for the ornate barometer on one corner of the Galeries Lafayette department store, and the occasional silhouette of a scallop shell on the ground and on street-signs, designed to guide St James' Way pilgrims as they walk through the city on their way to (or back from) Santiago de Compostela in Galicia, north-western Spain. Later in the walk we will come across other emblematic sights for the pilgrims.

Sight #3: Place du Parlement



It is in the 1760s that Place du Parlement was remodelled as part of the urban designs of the Marquis de Tourny, more of which later. At the time it was known as Place du Marché Royal, and traces of its former name can still be seen on some walls.



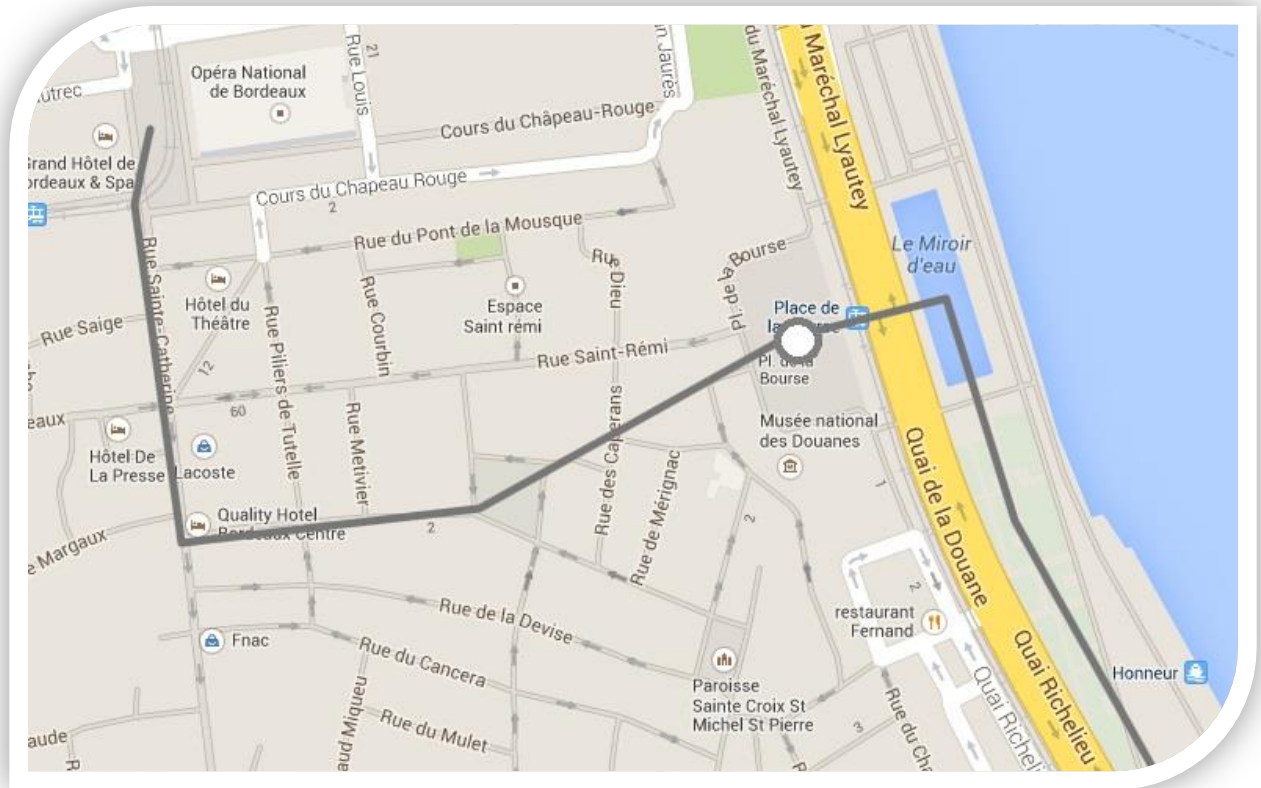
Around the time of the French Revolution it became Place du Marché de la Liberté, ahead of being given its current name in the 19th century, in reference to the law courts situated within the Palais de l’Ombrière (again, more of which later).

The square’s beauty lies in the harmonious nature of its flanks, with the exception of a single building which stands taller than the others. The fountain in the middle of the square was designed by Louis Garros (1833-1911) and has been in position since 1865.

The fountain’s water is delivered by a number of sculpted masks, or “mascarons” (from the Italian “mascherone”), arguably one of the most distinguishing features of the city. Look around the façades of the square and you will see countless mascarons staring back from above each window. Each and every one seems to have its own unique personality!

As we continue our walk, mascarons will be with us much of the way, starting with Rue Fernand-Philippart where they are an ever-present feature, except perhaps at number 16, where you can admire an impressive curved building and its first-floor balcony!

Sight #4: Place de la Bourse



Until the 18th century, this part of the city was very much hemmed in by medieval ramparts. This square took shape between 1730 and 1755 to the designs of the architect Ange-Jacques Gabriel, whose CV also includes the Château de Compiègne in northern France, the Petit Trianon in Versailles, and Place de la Concorde and the École Militaire in Paris!

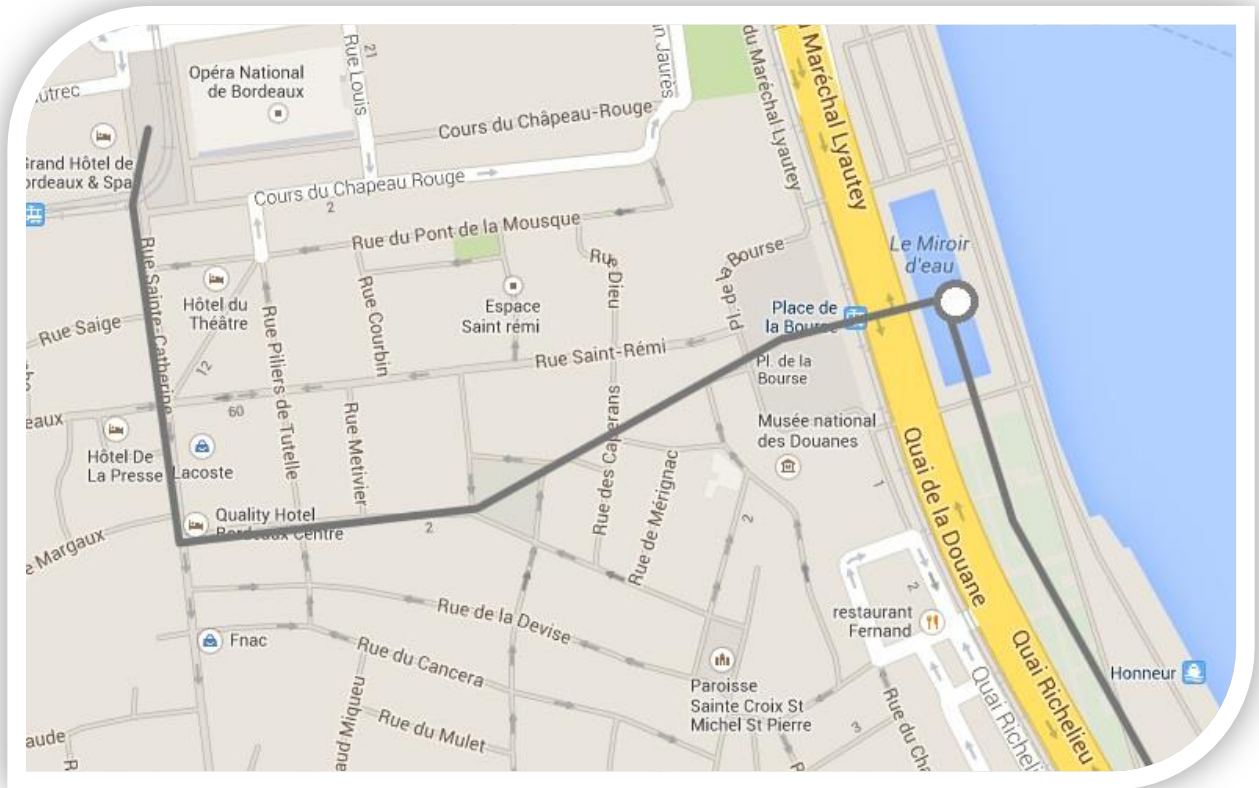


A statue of Louis XV on horseback stood in the centre of the square, first known as Place Royale, until 1792. Since 1869, the Fountain of the Three Graces has been the focal point of Place de la Bourse. It represents the three daughters of the god Zeus and Euronyme: the goddesses of Grace, Beauty and Mirth (Aglia, Euphrosyne and Thaleia). The statue was the design of the architect Louis Visconti and executed by Charles Gumery and Amédée Jouandot.

The building on the northern flank of the square first housed the Palais de la Bourse commodities exchange and is now home to the Bordeaux chamber of trade and industry. The southern flank was the Hôtel des Fermes customs and excise bureau. Customs and duties offices are still located there, as well as the national Customs museum.

The mascaron spotting can continue all around Place de la Bourse: there are carnival figures, angels and the faces of African women, in reference to the city's triangular slave trade links: between 1672 and 1837, 508 triangular voyages departed from Bordeaux resulting in 150,000 Africans being deported to the Americas.

Sight #5: Miroir d'Eau



The complex computerised water circuits of the Miroir d'Eau, the water mirror, were switched on for the first time in October 2006.

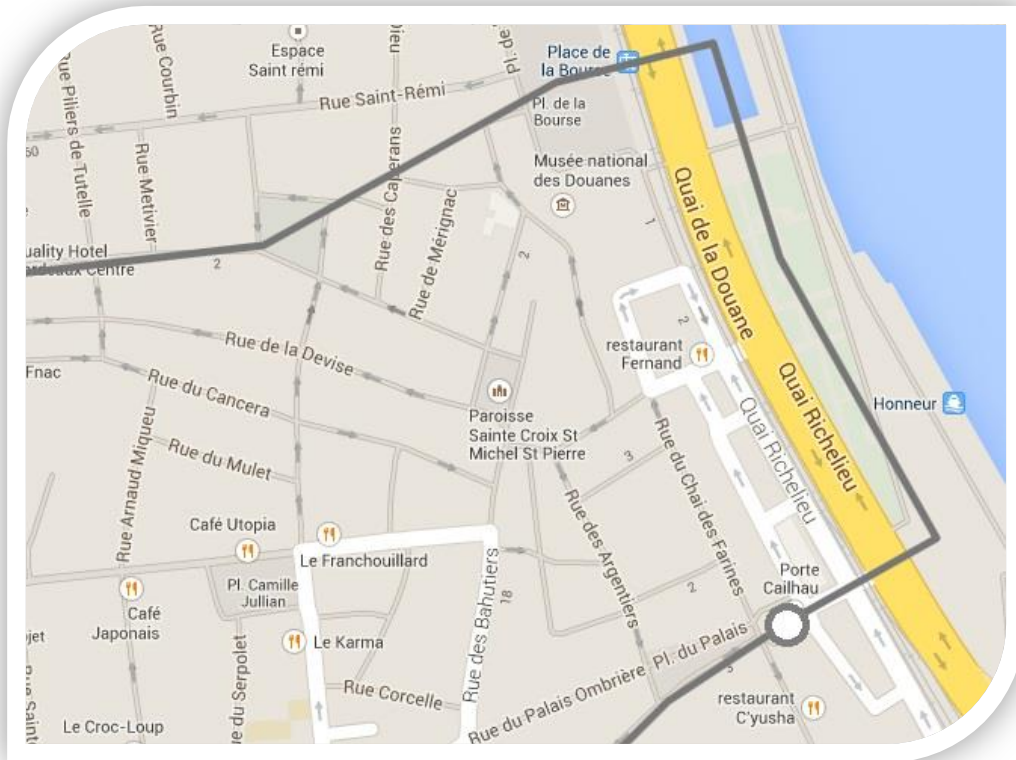
The design of this surprising attraction was the work of the landscape architect Michel Corajoud and the water technician Jean-Max Llorca. The concept was inspired by visions of a waterlogged Piazza San Marco in Venice.



The full feature is 130 metres long and 42 metres wide. Winter periods aside, 3,450 square metres of granite slabs are covered with water that moves and almost breathes according to a pre-defined sequence, switching from a 2-centimetre deep paddling pool to a sea of spray and mist... to the joy of children and adults alike! The 900 injectors are fed by an 800 cubic-metre underground tank.

This location is also an excellent vantage point to take in a host of the city's sights. These include the St Michel belfry (which tops out at 114 metres), the Pont de Pierre bridge (the city's first means of crossing the river, completed in 1822), the far more angular Benauges fire station and the former Gare d'Orléans railway station (now a multiplex cinema). The curve of the river Garonne is also clear to see: the shape has earned Bordeaux the nickname of "Port de la Lune" (port of the moon) and has inspired the crescent shape that forms the emblem of the city.

Sight #6: Porte Cailhau



This fortified gate into the medieval incarnation of Bordeaux was erected in 1495 and its sculptures pay tribute to King Charles VIII, who had recently conquered the kingdom of Naples in the company of Cardinal d'Eprenay, Archbishop of Bordeaux.



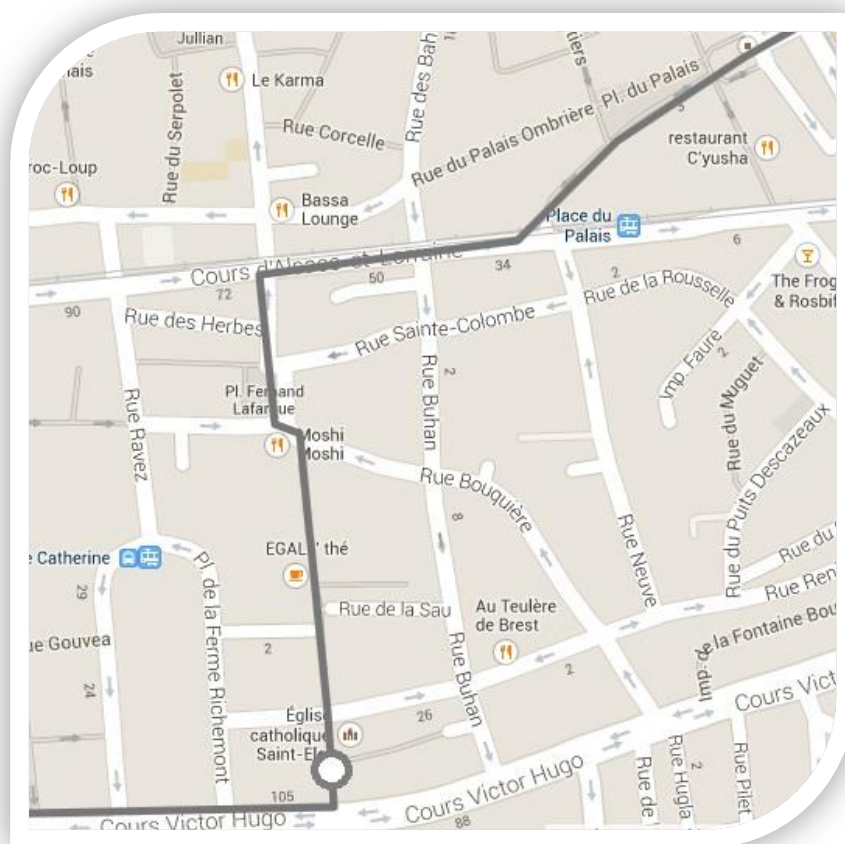
When the gate was built, the river bank stretched all the way up to the fortifications of the city. The walls may no longer be there but the rough edges on either side of the gate serve as a reminder of where they used to be, as do the paving stones inserted in between the cobbles on the ground.

There are many interesting details to spot, such as the slot where a sliding portcullis used to be, the machicolations through which weapons could be dropped on attackers, and the lookout tower which served to patrol the river – the view was not obscured by other buildings at the time!

From the end of the 9th century until 1800, the Ombrière Palace was an imposing presence on the neighbouring Place du Palais. No traces remain of it today. It was the residence of the dukes of Aquitaine and the seat of the Guyenne regional parliament and law courts during the 15th-century reign of Louis XI. At the time of the French Revolution, it continued to function as a law court and prison.

Finally, Porte Cailhau was often a welcome sight for St James' Way pilgrims – for many it was their means of entry into Bordeaux en route to Santiago de Compostela.

Sight #7: Porte and Église Saint-Éloi & Grosse Cloche



The 13th-century Porte Saint-Éloi was one of the gates to the heart of the city and a natural extension to the existing Saint-Éloi church. It was also known as Porte Saint-James as it, too, welcomed a steady stream of St. James' Way pilgrims.

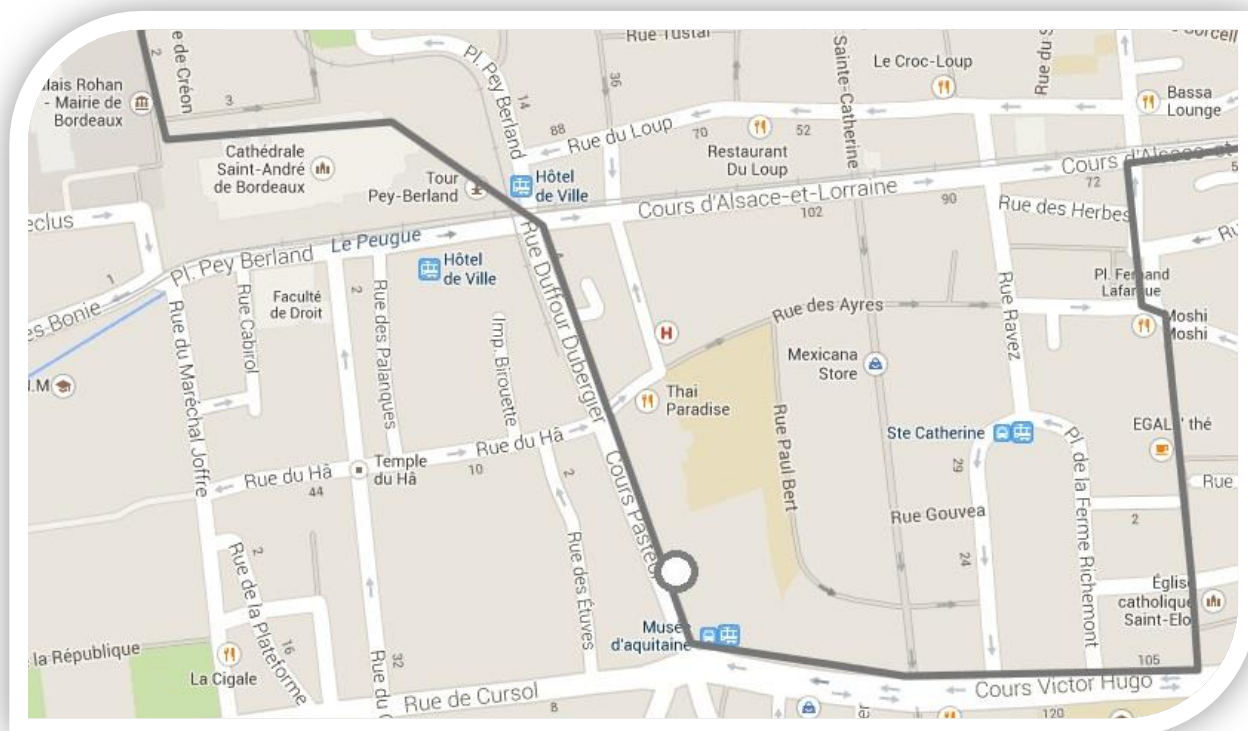
The Grosse Cloche (Great Bell) belfry was added in the 15th century and has become one of the best-known landmarks in Bordeaux, visible on the city’s coat of arms. Distinguishing features include its two surviving towers, its gold-plated copper weather vane in the shape of a leopard (harking back to the period when Bordeaux was under English rule), and its clock, the south face of which boasts a solar equation dial.



Positioned adjacent to the old city hall, of which no traces remain, the bell would toll to mark events such as the start of the grape-picking season or whenever a fire broke out. The current bell was installed in the 18th century. Cast in 1775, it weighs 7,800 kilograms and is two metres tall and wide. It now rings out only once a year, to commemorate Armistice Day every November.

Saint-Éloi church was originally built in the 12th century, although the gothic construction which can still be seen today was completed in 1245. It fell into disuse in the 1980s and even became a squat. A Catholic non-profit association set about renovating the church in the early years of the 21st century, and in 2007 it became a working church once again.

Sight #8: Musée d'Aquitaine



The Musée d'Aquitaine provides an authoritative guide to the history of Bordeaux and its surrounding area, from prehistoric times to the present day. Since 1963, the museum has brought together the exhibits of what used to be a number of individual museums. It has been located here, in the former faculty of literature and science of Bordeaux University, since 1987.

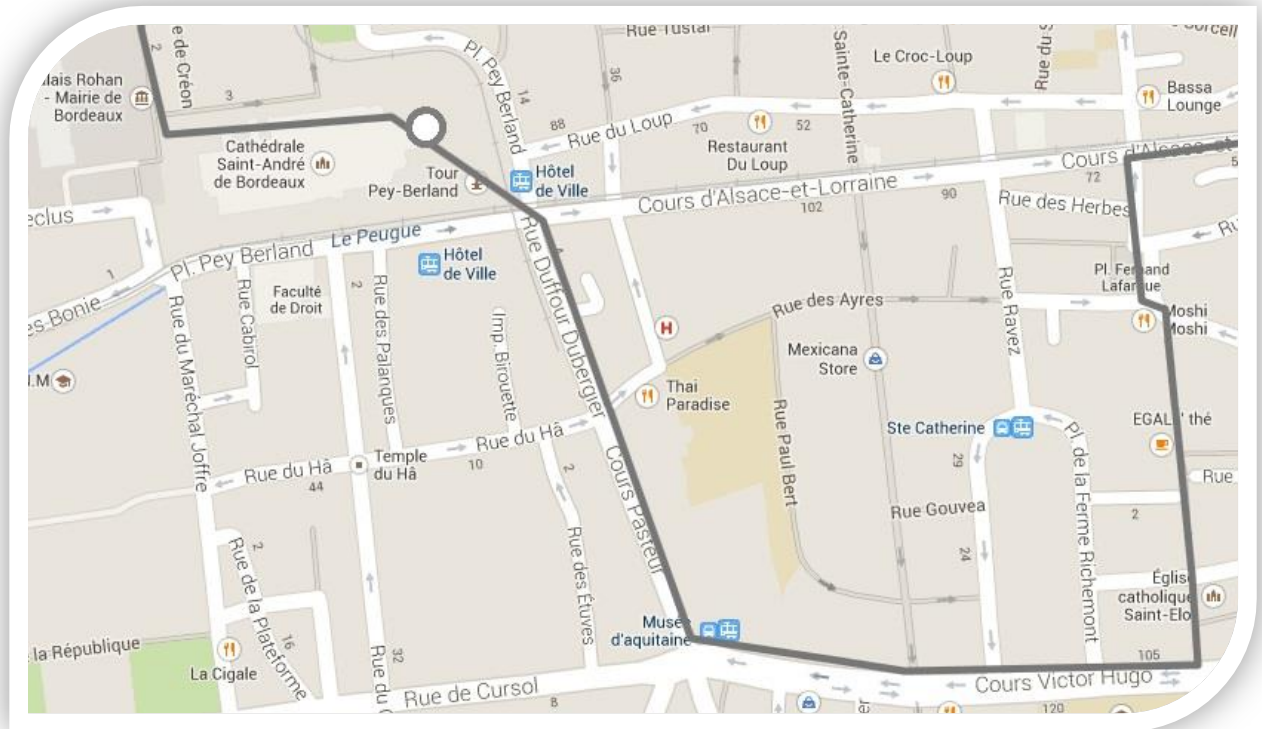


The building, a masterpiece of 19th-century architecture, was designed by the architect Pierre-Charles Durand and completed in 1886. It was built on land where a convent previously stood. The plot had been ear-marked for a synagogue in 1874 but the town council revised its decision and the synagogue was built in nearby Rue Labirat. The main façade boasts an impressive haut-relief by the local sculptor Louis de Coëffard de Mazerolles that features figures including Homer, Moses, Plato, Aristotle and Dante. The wonders continue inside with the main concourse, the inner courtyards and, of course, the exhibits themselves.

There are around 70,000 items on display throughout the 8,000 square metres of exhibition space, focusing on archaeology, history and ethnography. In 2009, a major new section entirely given over to the slave trade past of Bordeaux was opened. The museum's library comprises some 27,000 works, including many university research papers and an extensive collection of periodicals.

The museum is open from 11AM until 6PM every day except Mondays and public holidays, and admission to the permanent exhibits is free of charge.

Sight #9: Tour Pey-Berland & Cathédrale Saint-André



From the top of the 66-metre-tall Pey-Berland belfry, visitors can take in one of the best views of the “Port de la Lune”, as well as getting a closer look at the virgin mother and child, who are facing the direction of the Médoc wine-growing region and the birthplace of the 15th-century Archbishop of Bordeaux, Pey Berland.

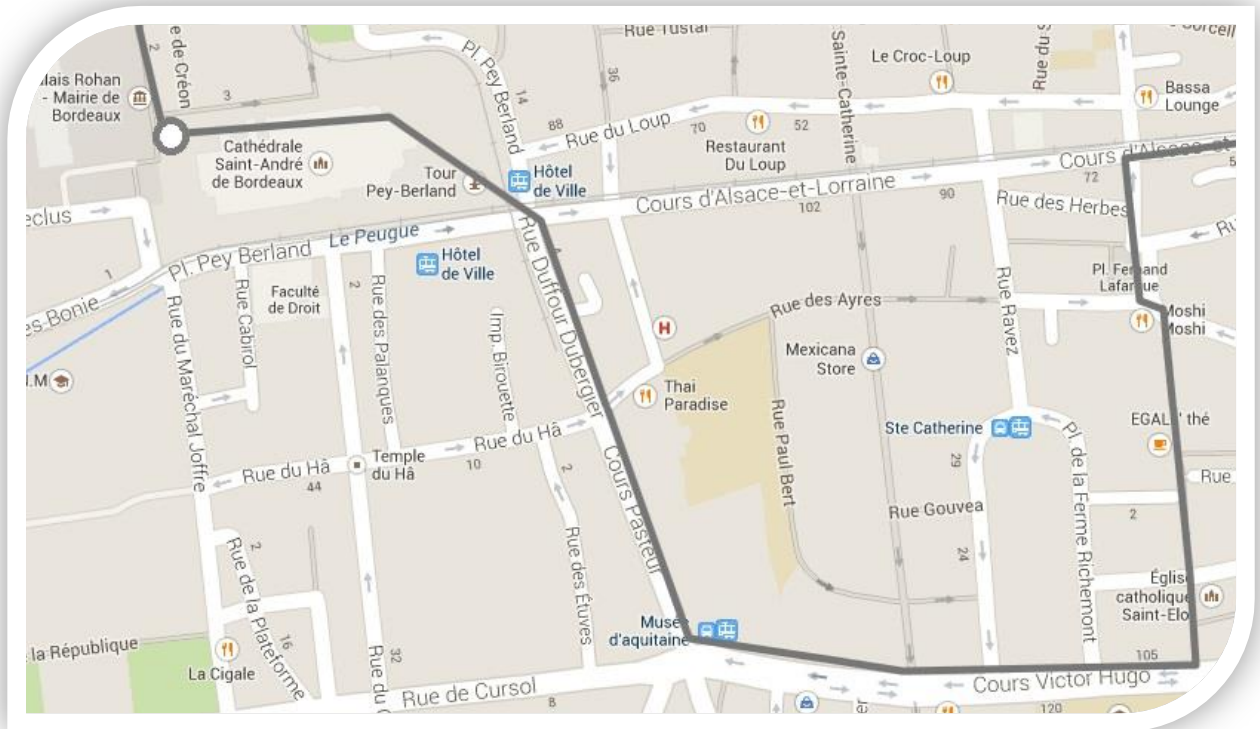


Pey Berland was an influential figure in Medieval Bordeaux, and much of what he instigated continues to live on today. This belfry, the construction of which began under his authority in 1440 (it was completed in 1500), is the lasting landmark which is most naturally associated with him, but he is also responsible for the founding of the original University of Bordeaux (in 1441), Saint-André hospital and a number of secondary schools.

Neighbouring Saint-André cathedral and its twin spires were built between the 12th and 16th centuries and formed the backdrop to two royal weddings: that of Aliénor d’Aquitaine and the future king Louis VII in 1137, and that of Louis XIII and Anne of Austria in 1615. The scale of the church is awe-inspiring, with a 23-metre-tall nave that stretches over 124 metres. Remarkable features include the carvings above the northern door, no less than seven chapels and carved wooden stalls that have been in position since 1690.

Since 1998, the church has enjoyed UNESCO world heritage status. Pey-Berland Tower is open morning and afternoons every day, closed Mondays between October and May. Admission costs 5 euros.

Sight #10: Palais Rohan (Hôtel de Ville)



This elegant building is the Bordeaux city hall. Prior to that, the city's successive archbishops had lived there since Medieval times. The building which still stands today was commissioned by the 18th-century Archbishop Ferdinand-Maximilien Mériadek de Rohan.

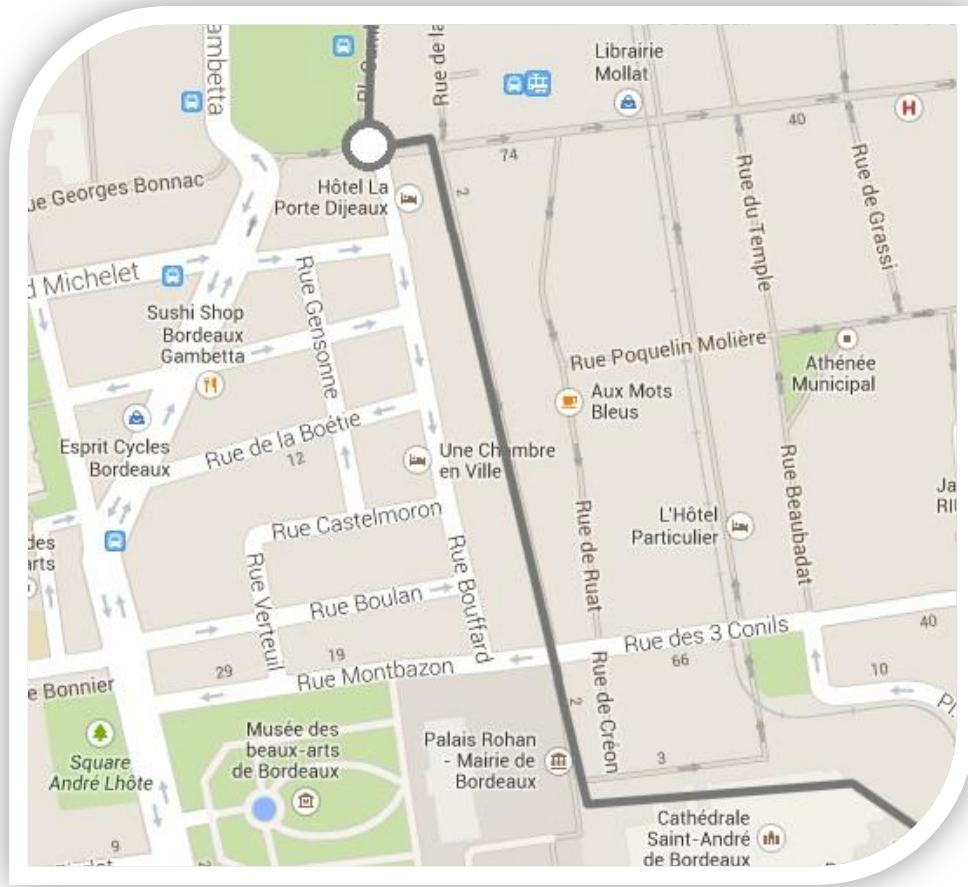


The building, initially conceived by the Parisian architect Joseph Étienne and completed by Richard-François Bonfin, is generally known as Palais Rohan. Much of the funding came from the sale of plots in the vicinity, a part of the city which has also been given part of the Archbishop's name: Mériadek (with the added "k"). Palais Rohan was the Archbishops' residence until the French Revolution. Over a short period its primary function then regularly changed: it was the law court of Revolutionaries (1791), an imperial palace under Napoleon I (1808), then a royal castle under Louis XVIII (1815), ahead of becoming the city hall in 1835.

Every Wednesday, guided tours organised by the Office de Tourisme provide a behind-the-scenes look at the Palais, which includes an impressive monumental staircase and Louis XVI-period wood-panelled salons. To the rear of the Palais, an elegant jardin à l'anglaise park is a case study in symmetry. Since 1820, it has been flanked by the Musée des Beaux-Arts, a fine art museum which boasts an extensive collection of works by European and American artists ranging from the 16th to the 20th centuries.

The museum is open from 11AM until 6PM every day except Tuesdays and admission to the permanent exhibits is free of charge.

Sight #11: Place Gambetta & Porte Dijeaux



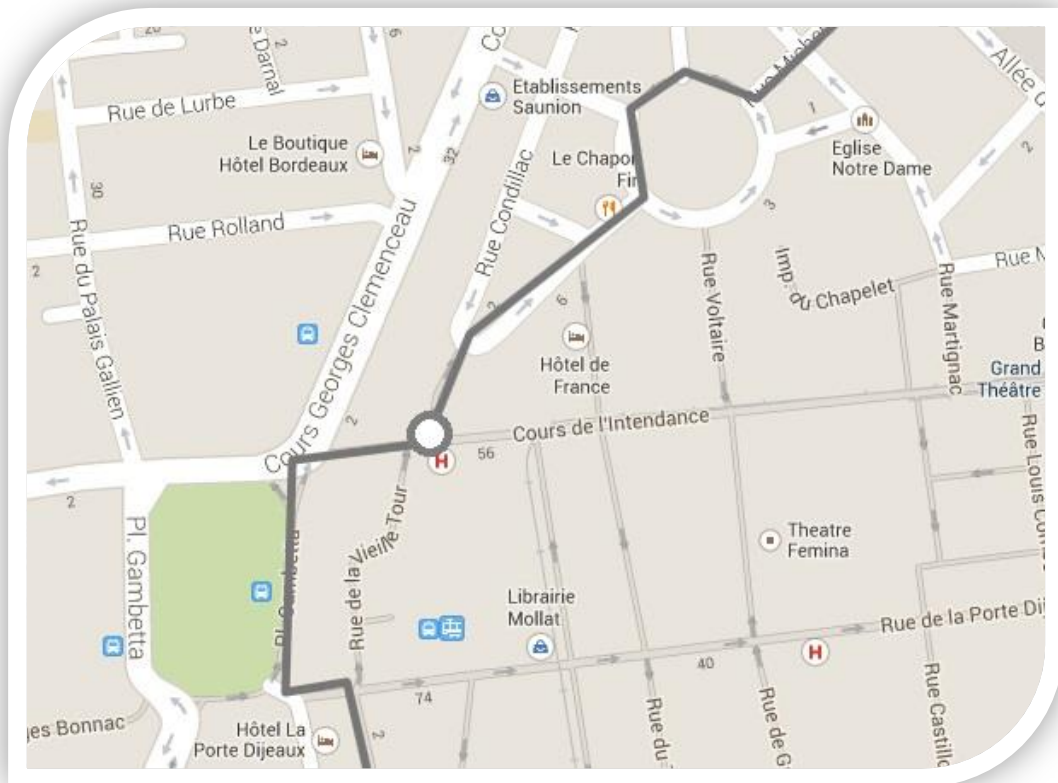
While all roads lead to Rome, it may feel like all bus routes lead to Place Gambetta: it is a key public transport hub and a preferred meeting point for many in Bordeaux. It has undergone many name changes.



When the space was first cleared in 1770, as another part of the grand town-planning master plan of the Marquis de Tourny, it started out as Place Dauphine, in homage to the King's son, the "dauphin". It became Place Nationale shortly after the French Revolution before reverting back to its previous name until 1883 and its switch to Place Gambetta, as a tribute to the 19th-century politician Léon Gambetta. The central part of the square provides some welcome greenery. But, between October 1793 and July 1794, it is here that the city of Bordeaux installed its guillotine – around 250 public executions took place.

Porte Dijeaux is a decorative gate into the heart of the city that was erected in 1748 to the designs of Nicolas Portier on the spot where one of the Roman-period gates once stood. The stone used is from a quarry in Frontenac, to the south-east of Bordeaux. This dense and robust type of stone is usually used for the foundations of buildings in the area. The city's coat of arms features on one side of the arch, just above the sculpted face of Neptune, looking down towards the river Garonne. Royal emblems are depicted on the other side.

Sight #12: Cours de l'Intendance



Cours de l'Intendance forms the southern flank of the affluent so-called Triangle d'Or quarter (the golden triangle). In past centuries, the mansion houses of many of the city's richest families were on this street.

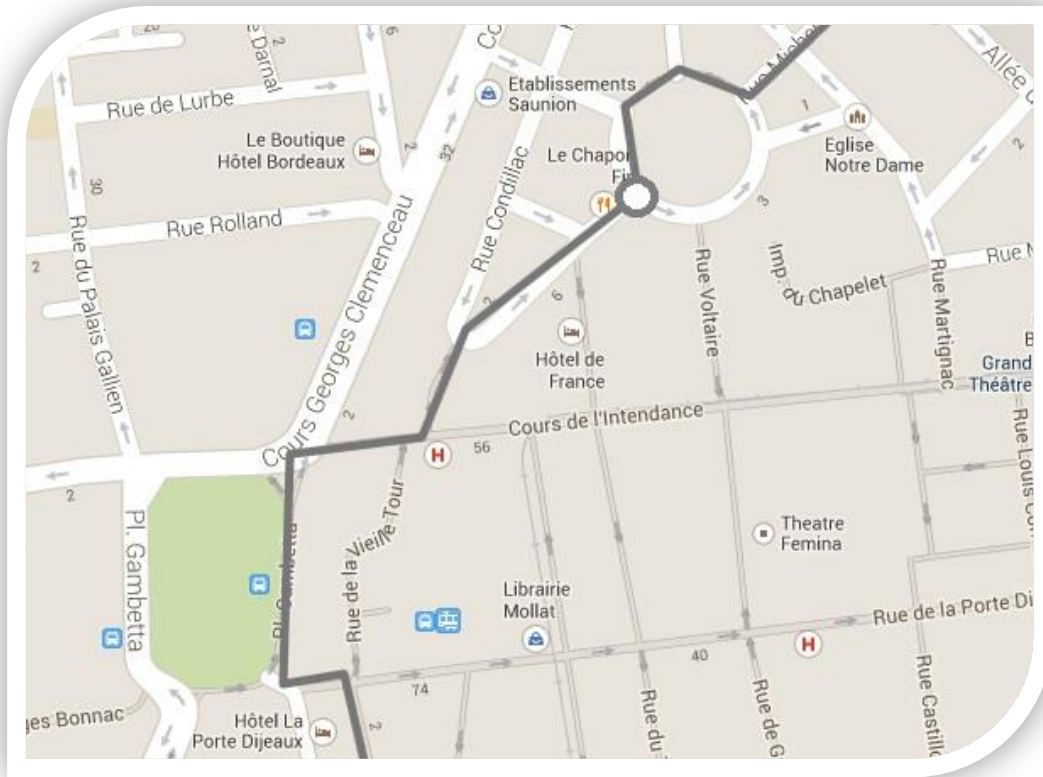


At number 57, now the Cervantes Institute Spanish cultural centre, the Spanish artist Francisco Goya spent the last four years of his life. Having fled Spain on the grounds of ill-health – but mainly for political reasons –, while here Goya produced pieces including the painting “The Milkmaid of Bordeaux” and a series of four large lithographic prints depicting scenes of bullfighting known as the “Bulls of Bordeaux”.

Goya died in 1828 at the age of 82. His funeral took place at nearby Notre-Dame church and he was buried in a tomb in the Chartreuse cemetery in central Bordeaux alongside his compatriot Martin Goicochea, former mayor of Madrid. In 1899, both bodies were exhumed to be transferred back to Spain. Neither body could be formally identified so they were transported in a single coffin and buried with others in a joint mausoleum in Madrid and later Zaragoza.

Goya's presence lives on in Bordeaux: there is a street named after him, a statue on Place du Chapelet and a monument in the cemetery which was his resting place for 71 years. And, for almost 20 years, a bullring in the suburb of Floirac was known as Plaza de Goya. Apartments have now been built in its place but the name lives on. The building is called Résidence Plaza de Goya.

Sight #13: Place des Grands Hommes



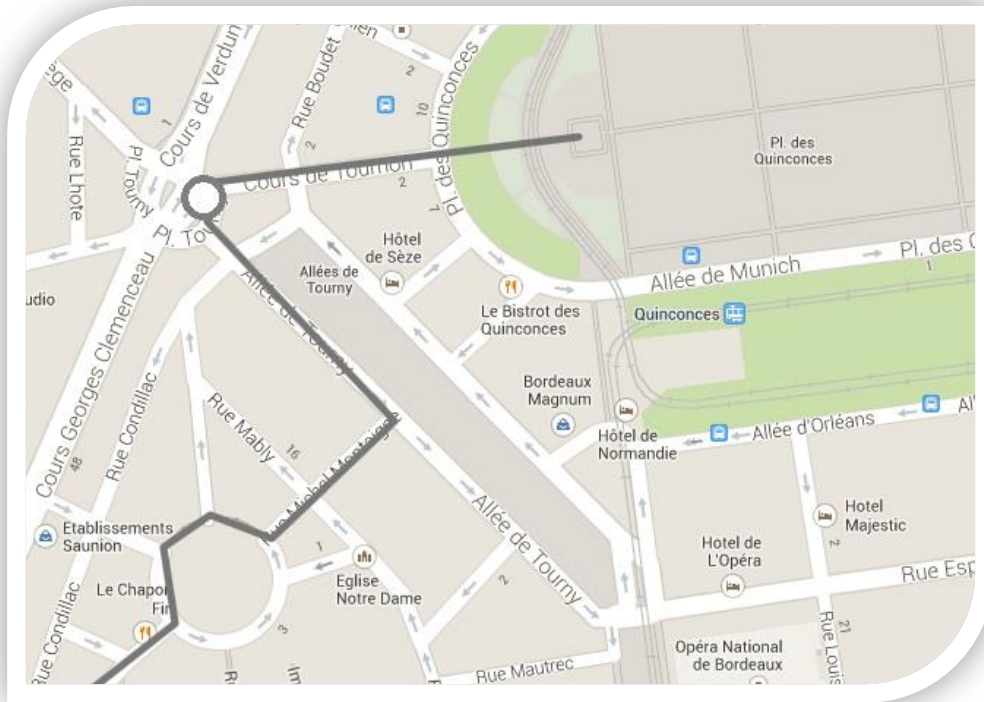
Place des Grands Hommes is at the heart of the Triangle d'Or, the three sides of which are formed by Cours de l'Intendance, as we have just seen, Cours Clémenceau and Allées de Tourny. This wealthy quarter is a showcase for luxury shops and elegant architecture.



Until the 18th century, the area was dotted not with shops but with convents! But church property was repossessed around the time of the French Revolution and the city suddenly found itself with a lot of available space on its hands. In 1790, the architect Chalifour dreamt up the structure which exists to date, in other words the circular central section from which a number of roads lead, each of which has been given the name of one of the thinkers whose writings inspired the Revolution: Montesquieu, Rousseau and Voltaire... all great men or, indeed, “grands hommes”.

A traditional covered food market was the focal point of Place des Grands Hommes for many years. In 1958, the market hall (which was similar in shape and scale to what can be seen today) was torn down and replaced by a concrete structure. Thirty years passed and it was time for another change, and this glass-and-metal arcade was officially opened by the then mayor Jacques Chaban-Delmas in 1991. The atmosphere inside is a far cry from the food market of yesteryear, although foodstuffs can still be purchased in a shop at basement level! Most of the outlets though are those of luxury fashionwear brands.

Sight #14: Place Tourny



Place Tourny celebrates the man behind many of the splendid squares, elegant boulevards and decorative gates of Bordeaux: Louis-Urbain-Aubert de Tourny, or simply Marquis de Tourny.

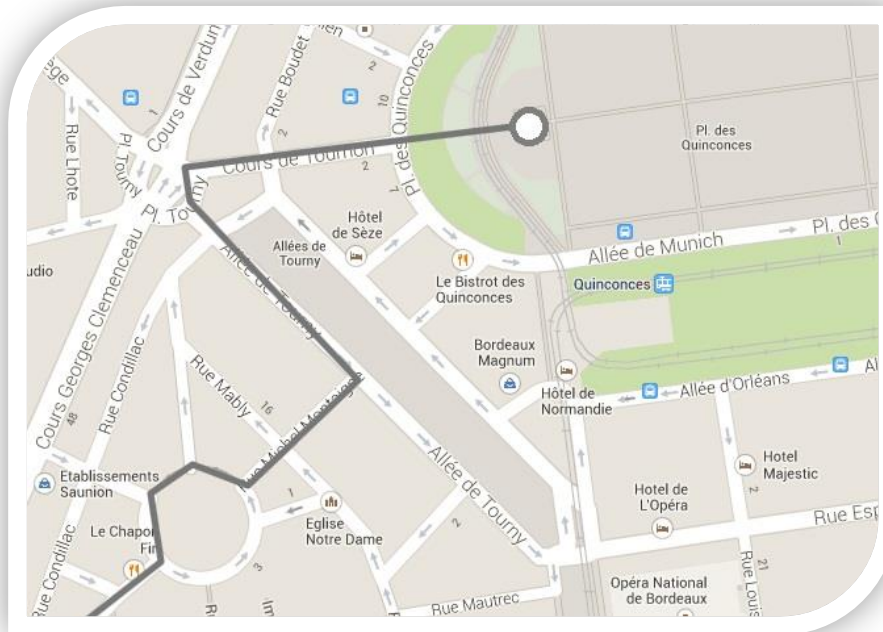


Marquis de Tourny was the second of the three emblematic 18th-century “intendants”, the king’s representative in the province of Aquitaine, who, as chief town planners, changed the face of Bordeaux. The others were Claude Boucher (intendant between 1720 and 1743), and Nicolas-Dupré de Saint-Maur (1776-1785).

In 1746, three years into his tenure in Bordeaux, which would last until 1757, De Tourny declared “J’en ferai la plus belle ville du Royaume” (I’ll make it the kingdom’s most beautiful city). To achieve this he went about opening up wide, tree-lined avenues, creating pleasant promenades, harmonising architectural endeavours throughout the city, and commissioning a formal garden on what used to be marshland. This became known as le Jardin Public and remains the centerpiece of the elegant northern quarters of the city.

The statue of the Marquis, which presides over proceedings in the middle of this busy junction where, amongst others, Cours Clémenceau and Allées de Tourny meet, is the work of the sculptor Gaston Leroux and has been in position since 1900. It replaced a previous statue which had been erected in 1825 but which many considered to be too small. This second effort has also met with criticism as it is often reported that De Tourny’s face, whether viewed from the front or side, “looks nothing like the authentic portraits” of the Marquis!

Sight #15: Esplanade des Quinconces & Monument aux Girondins



The Esplanade des Quinconces, named after the sequences in which the trees on either side were originally planted (four trees forming a square with a fifth in the middle), is often the scene of funfairs, circuses, specialist markets and concerts.

The square only took its present form in the 19th century. Until its demolition in 1818 it was here that a fortified castle, Château Trompette, had kept watch over the city for more than 300 years.



At the far end of the square, overlooking the Garonne river, are two 21-metre-high rostral columns which were erected in 1829. They respectively symbolise trade and navigation. At the near end is the spectacular “Monument aux Girondins”, which pays homage to the Girondins political group who were overpowered and executed by their rivals the Jacobins in the slipstream of the French Revolution.

The creator, Alphonse Dumilâtre, spent eight years designing the monument, which was completed in 1902. Its centerpiece is a 43-metre column which is topped off by a winged lady made out of bronze. She symbolises freedom: note the broken chain in her right hand. During the Second World War, much of the monument disappeared from view and it was thought it had been melted down to be turned into weaponry. However, when the war was over, it was found in Angers, central France. It was returned to its original spot in 1986.

And that is where our tour among the essential landmarks of Bordeaux comes to an end!



Website Invisible Bordeaux offers an online guide to some of the sights, stories, curios and lesser-known landmarks to be enjoyed in and around Bordeaux, France. The site, which first went live in December 2011, aims to scratch through the surface of the city and its surrounding area, enabling visitors and residents alike to get beyond the traditional postcard-friendly sights... which aren't so bad either!

The website is fed by Tim Pike, an Englishman in France who works in the communications department of a leading aviation electronics company. When not writing he can often be spotted riding a vintage yellow bicycle or strumming a guitar.

The Invisible City concept was first developed by Adam Roberts at Invisible Paris and has also been rolled out by Jan Liebelt at Invisible Lyon. If you too would like to join our small but perfectly-formed network, get in touch!

These walks are also available as interactive guided tours for iPhones via GPSmyCity.com. Recommended real-world guided tours include those provided by the Bordeaux Office de Tourisme and Bordeaux Walking Tours (www.bordeauxwalkingtours.com).



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