



Walking tour #2
Secret Sights Tour

Secret Sights Tour of Bordeaux

Bordeaux is a city that works on many levels. While many of its spectacular landmarks are ever-present on postcards and in guidebooks, some of the most fascinating features of Bordeaux are well-kept secrets that are barely noticed by locals, let alone by visitors. This oddball tour around central Bordeaux reveals these charming secrets and will enable you to see the invisible...

Sights

1. **Borne du kilomètre zéro**
2. **Former Apollo-Théâtre**
3. **Former Théâtre Français**
4. **Cour Mably**
5. **Passage Sarget**
6. **Place Saint-Projet**
7. **Place Camille-Jullian & Utopia cinema**
8. **Place Fernand-Lafargue**
9. **Grosse Cloche clock and solar equation dial**
10. **Hôtel Saint-François**
11. **Impasse de Rue Neuve**
12. **Maisons des Bahutiers**
13. **Place Saint-Pierre**
14. **Place Georges de Porto-Riche & Église Saint-Rémi**
15. **Galérie Bordelaise**

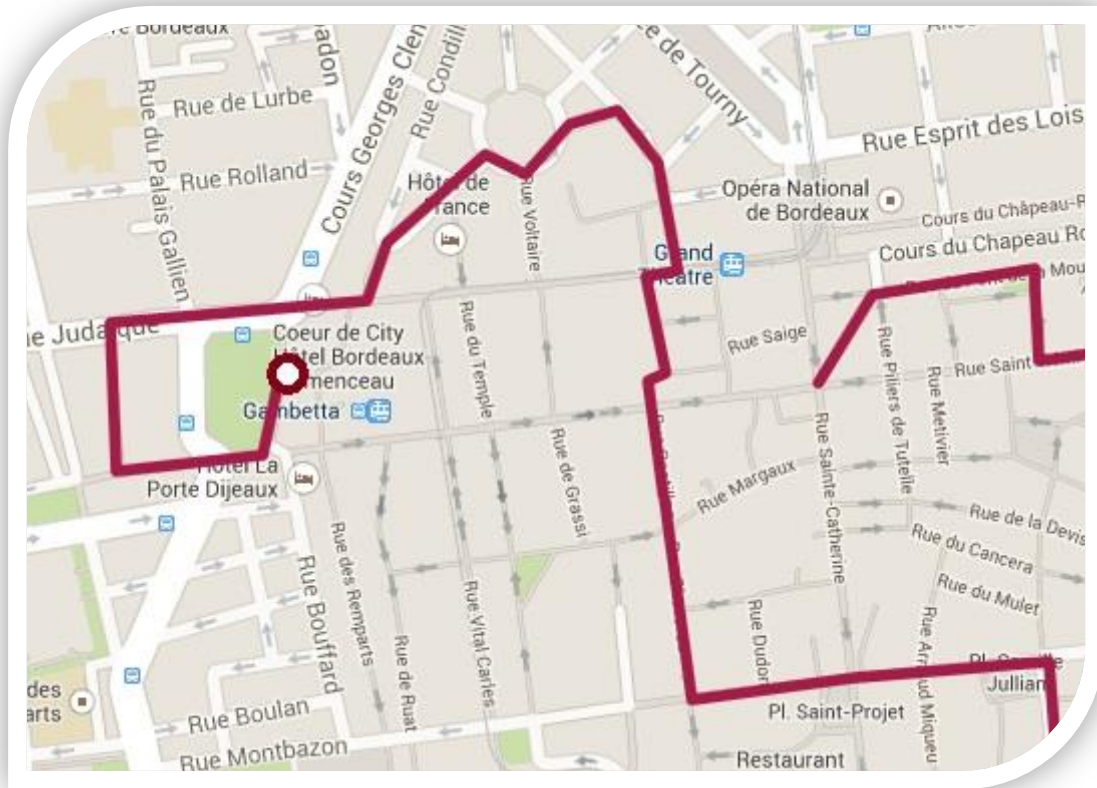
Itinerary

Start: Place Gambetta (Tram line B, “Gambetta” stop)

Distance: 4 kilometres



Sight #1: Borne du kilomètre zéro



At number 10 Place Gambetta, camouflaged by the 1859 building that encases it, is the milestone that originally marked the geographical centre of the city and designated the spot from which distances to and from other places were measured.

Today, as is now customary in all French towns and cities, the Bordeaux “kilometre zero” is the city hall, the *Hôtel de Ville*. But this milestone, still known locally as “*la borne du kilomètre zéro*” (kilometre zero marker), was positioned on Place Gambetta sometime in the mid-19th century.



The wear and tear of the passing years is clear to see; even the text is almost illegible. It reads “*Origine du bornage*”... although the letters n, a, g and e have long since given up the fight! The milestone itself though should survive a little longer: it and the adjoining building are now jointly registered as part of France’s national heritage in the “*Inventaire supplémentaire des monuments historiques*”.

And the status of the location as the spiritual heart of the city does continue to live on: just opposite the *borne*, on the square, a multiple signpost has been erected to display the direction and distance to all of the cities around the world that are twinned with Bordeaux!

Sight #3: Former Théâtre Français



One of the staples of the affluent so-called Triangle d'Or quarter (the golden triangle, surrounded on its three sides by Cours de l'Intendance, Cours Clémenceau and Allées de Tourny) is this neo-classical structure built in 1800: the former Théâtre Français.

At the time, the theatre was designed to replace the nearby Théâtre des Variétés, which was demolished in 1792 when the circular Place des Grands-Hommes was completely overhauled. Architect Jean-Baptiste Dufart's principal challenge was that of fitting a working theatre into a triangular space! He thus opted for the design with the narrow, convex main entrance which still exists today.



In 1893, the venue became known as the Olympia, but in 1899 resorted to its previous name, focusing on light opera and comedy shows. In 1908, the theatre began putting on films, with a full Pathé programme of weekly newsreels and documentaries ahead of an interval and the main attraction. From 1920 onwards, the venue traded solely as a cinema and since the 1980s, it has been the twelve-screen Circuit Georges Raymond or CGR complex that we can see today. The building was recently fully restored.

Sight #6: Place Saint-Projet



There's a fair chance that on Place Saint-Projet you will be in the company of shoppers and *flâneurs* who are out enjoying the atmosphere of the café terraces and the street entertainers. And yet this square, which is one of the oldest in the city, used to be cemetery!

Going way back to the 4th century, it is where you could find the "forum", or main general meeting place, after the previous forum ended up outside the city's fortifications. The church and cemetery which were built around the 8th or 9th century were dedicated to a bishop from Auvergne, in central France, who died in 674: Praiectus.



There are records of the parish church up until 1173, ahead of the square becoming a marketplace around the end of the 14th century, with a market-hall being built and a well being dug where the cemetery used to stand. In 1738, the well was replaced by a fountain which can still be viewed today.

From 1392 onwards, an imposing cross stood in the centre of the square. Although this cross was removed around the time of the French Revolution, it was retrieved and restored in 1803. Since 1977, the cross and its sculpted figures have been back in the location where they can still be seen today.

Sight #7: Place Camille-Jullian & Utopia cinema



This square, which only took its present shape after buildings were demolished in 1935, is named after Camille Jullian (1859-1933), an historian and researcher from Marseille who taught at the University of Bordeaux and did much to uncover the history of his adopted city. The monument in his memory, erected in 1938, is comprised of Gallo-Roman ruins.



Arguably the most interesting feature of the square is the Utopia art house cinema, the modern-day incarnation of a church building which dates back to the fifteenth century, named Saint-Siméon because of its proximity to a sanctuary that housed relics of the Syrian Saint Simeon Stylites.

At the time of the French Revolution, the building became a “*salpêtrière*” (a saltpeter storage depot) and later a boarding establishment founded by two ex-naval officers: *l'École Navale des Mousses*. The institution aimed to educate and train youths and set them on the path to becoming sailors.

In 1863, the premises were taken over by Charles Teyssonneau, who set up a factory that produced tinned food. While there, Teyssonneau invented an ingenious key-like device to open sardine cans, and which was patented and went on to be used the world over for many decades thereafter.

The building later became a bicycle shop and subsequently a garage before being turned, come 1999, into the five-screen art house cinema we know today, which is part of the Utopia network of independent movie theatres.

Sight #8: Place Fernand-Lafargue



Before being given the name of the 19th-century writer Jean Fernand-Lafargue, this square was known as Place du Vieux Marché – it was the main marketplace and one of the focal points of Bordeaux life throughout much of the Middle Ages. It was first documented as “*Lou Mercat*” (Gascon for “the marketplace”) in an account of a battle which took place in 1248.



Throughout latter-Medieval times it was a place where merchants and students mingled with St James’ Way pilgrims; the square was one of the last sights in the city before the pilgrims departed through the nearby Porte Saint-Éloi. The marketplace was a veritable hive of activity what with the crowds, the animals, the public criers... and the public pillory: a ten-metre-tall hexagonal tower in the centre of the square where offenders were displayed and humiliated in front of all-comers as penalty for the acts they had committed.

Merchandise arrived over land but also by boat: the square was on the right bank of the river Peugue, which flows from the western limits of the suburb of Pessac to the Garonne. In this part of Bordeaux, it probably wasn't the most pleasant of sights, used by butchers and tanners to dispose of their liquid refuse. The river is still there - it has just been driven underground and, since the 19th century, has run below Cours d'Alsace Lorraine through a channel that is five metres wide and three metres high!

Sight #9: Grosse Cloche clock and solar equation dial



The *Grosse Cloche* belfry is one of the best-known landmarks in Bordeaux and features on the city's coat of arms. Its timepiece was originally built in the 1750s to the designs of the mathematician and astronomer Paul Larroque. It replaced a previous model installed in 1567. The mechanics were overhauled by local clockmaker Gaston Guignan in 1912 and the clock was recently fully restored.



The semi-circular dial indicates the difference in minutes between the apparent solar time (as indicated by the shadow of a sun-dial) and the mean solar time (as displayed by our watches). Solar time is based on the idea that when the sun reaches its highest point, it is noon. The following day, when the sun crosses the meridian, it is noon once again. But what has elapsed can be more or less than our 24-hour units.

Positive values on the solar equation dial indicate that the apparent solar time is ahead of the mean solar time. This can be by as much as 16 minutes and 33 seconds around November 3rd. Negative values indicate that the apparent solar time is behind the mean solar time, "peaking" at 14 minutes 6 seconds around February 12th. The dial indicates zero around April 16th, June 15th, September 1st and December 25th.

Meanwhile, on the north flank of the belfry, the sister clock face displays the different phases of the moon during the lunar month.

Sight #10: Hôtel Saint-François



The building on the corner is best-known locally as **Hôtel Saint-François**. This "*immeuble de rapport*" (residential rental property) was completed in 1855 by the entrepreneur Antoine-Théodore Audubert (1819-1893). It was first called **Hôtel de la Perle**.

The five-storey, 70-window building featured many architectural and technical innovations: train rails were used as support beams, a restaurant-bar was located on the ground floor, there was running water on all floors, gas lighting in the staircase, electric doorbells (an 1831 invention), a phonic communication system to be able to liaise with the *concierge* at all times and a rooftop terrace with its own communal washhouse!



Amongst the many wonders to behold on the two façades of the building are the headless sculpture of a builder, positioned in such a way that he is propping up a second-floor balcony. Below his feet, the square-and-compasses symbol of Freemasonry can be spotted on the first-floor balcony railings (the building was the meeting point of an influential local Masonic lodge). Above the main entrance are a couple of statues: the male figure on the left clearly senses there is too much distance between him and the female figure so, to be able to take in the view of her exposed features, he is brandishing a telescope...

The curiosities continue inside the building: the staircase banister features a *bas-relief* retracing nothing less than the history of architecture from prehistoric dolmens to 19th-century housing!

Sight #11: Impasse de Rue Neuve



Just before the archway on Impasse de Rue Neuve is the city's oldest house (built in the 14th or 15th century). All that remains of the original structure is a single wall and its Gothic-style twin arched windows. The ground-floor carriage entrance has long-since been bricked up. It is thought the house once belonged to the locally powerful Soler family.



On the other side of the archway lies a courtyard and a 16th-century mansion house which first belonged to Jean de Carle, president of the *Parlement de Bordeaux* court of justice, but went on to be owned by the wealthy De Lartigue family, whose daughter Jeanne went on to marry the celebrated political thinker, writer and philosopher Montesquieu.

Although they mostly lived in a château in Montesquieu's birthplace La Brède, to the south of Bordeaux, Jeanne continued to oversee this family home and died here in 1770.

Above the ground-level shelter for horses and carriages, the living quarters extend over two storeys. The top floor is fronted by an ornate wooden walk-way/balcony while, on the stone wall of the first floor, the sculptures of two muscular male and female figures in Roman-style attire can be seen. It is thought that they represent the original owners of the premises, Mr and Mrs de Carle. Given the levels of illiteracy at the time, these sculptures could be regarded as the house's nameplate.

Sight #12: Maisons des Bahutiers



In Medieval Bordeaux, as elsewhere, craftsmen would set up shop alongside fellows of the same trade. This road was home to “bahutiers”, who made “bahuts”, wooden chests or trunks.

Trunk-makers were not the street’s first residents; pre-18th-century names include Rue deu Putz (Well Street in Gascon) and Rue deus Judius (Jew Street in Gascon), the latter in reference to the Jewish money-lenders who operated there.



The *bahutier* shops at numbers 47 and 49, pre-date the name change: number 49 (on the left) dates from the 15th century, while number 47 was built in the 17th. Both feature arched doorways which gave onto the *bahutier*’s shop and workshop.

Let’s work our way upwards at number 49: Behind the large first-floor window were the living quarters of the *bahutier* and relatives. Mullion and transom bars split the window into quarters, enabling plenty of daylight to enter without the whole building collapsing! The smaller window on the second floor was the communal sleeping quarters while the diminutive window at the top shows where the apprentice or maid would sleep.

Its steep sloping roof was known as “*à la guise de France*” (in the style of France). The 30% slope of its younger stone-façaded neighbour was known as “*à la guise de Bordeaux*”.

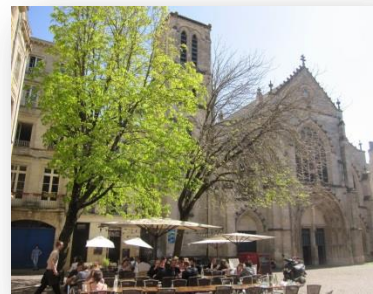
The two buildings now share a single entrance and are residential. They were restored in 1985, an endeavour which is quietly celebrated by an inscription just below the roof of number 49.

Sight #13: Place Saint-Pierre



In ancient times, this area was one of the liveliest parts of Bordeaux, a far cry from its peaceful atmosphere today. To begin with, this wasn't even dry land: Saint-Pierre church was built on the spot where the entrance to the city's earliest port was located, with an expanse of water between the parallel roads Rue du Cancera and Rue de la Devise.

The port, which remained here until the 12th century, was fed on one side by the Devèze, a stream which takes its source in the suburb of Mérignac. Like the Peugue, the water is still flowing today, but it too has been driven underground. In 1832, there was an interesting discovery in a sewer channel nearby: a bronze statue of Hercules which was one of the centrepieces of the ancient port. The statue is now on display at the Musée d'Aquitaine.



The flamboyant gothic-style St Pierre church, registered as an historic monument in 1908, was originally built in the 14th and 15th centuries. The St Pierre parish itself goes back to the 12th century, and it is thought that as early as the 6th century there was a sanctuary dedicated to St Peter, the patron saint of fishermen, in this area. The church has undergone many restorations, most notably in the 19th century, with new additions including some modern stained glass windows. Other features include ornate arches and an interesting wooden depiction of the Virgin Mary mourning over the dead body of Jesus (or "pietà").

Sight #14: Place Georges de Porto-Riche & Église Saint-Rémi



The haven of tranquility that is Place Georges de Porto-Riche is one of the city's best-kept secrets.

The square is named after a playwright and novelist who was born in Bordeaux in 1849 and spent much of his life in Paris. De Porto-Riche was elected to become one of the forty so-called "immortal" members of the Académie Française, the prestigious body that serves as the ultimate authority on the French language. In the speech he gave upon his election, he disrespectfully skimmed over the career of the person whose place he'd inherited, Ernest Lavisse. This went down badly with the Académie, who never officially welcomed him into the institution - he died seven years later in 1930.



The square is a place to rest, reflect and possibly even drink from the Wallace fountain, one of the six of these cast-iron public drinking fountains to be found in Bordeaux and named after Sir Richard Wallace, the philanthropist who funded their creation in Paris in the late 19th century.

Saint-Rémi church, over to one corner of the square, was originally built between the 11th and 12th centuries on the spot where a pagan temple used to be. Over the years, the church has gradually been transformed, and it was recently converted into art and cultural centre, which boasts a rich programme of exhibitions. While most churches in Bordeaux have plenty of room to breathe, this one is very much landlocked on most sides, as was so often the case in Medieval times.

Sight #15: Galérie Bordelaise



This charming shopping arcade, which forms an unusual diagonal channel through the middle of its surrounding buildings, was the work of the architect Gabriel-Joseph Durand and opened for the first time in April 1834. It had initially been funded by four rich South-American traders who had fled war in Mexico.

It was here that, in 1896, a young man called Albert Mollat took over a small bookshop that had previously belonged to his cousin. He adopted an ambitious pricing strategy, branched out into publishing itself and by 1928 the shop had outgrown its premises. It moved to a new location, taking over the final Bordeaux living quarters of Montesquieu on the nearby Rue Porte-Dijeaux. The shop, which is still called Mollat, is part of the genetic makeup of anyone who lives in Bordeaux. It has continued to flourish and expand, and today ranks as the biggest independent bookshop in France.



Possibly the most timeless of the thirteen stores in the arcade is the Verdeun scale model and toy shop. As well as its arcade-side entrance, do make sure you see the roadside shopfront of this store, which was founded in 1948 by Maurice Verdeun, a successful track cyclist who won a world championship title in 1950!

And this is where our stroll through the secret sights of Bordeaux comes to an end. By exiting the Galérie Bordelaise through its main entrance you will be instantly transported back to the hustle, bustle, trials and tribulations of the 21st century... so brace yourself!



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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