



St Malo at night

Founded by a sixth-century Welsh monk; built up between the 12th and 18th centuries on the profits of sea trade and privateering; 80% destroyed during the second world war; and then lovingly restored to its former glory, St Malo is a town of whispers from voices of the past.

Its rich history has furnished every doorway, window, passageway, nook and cranny with a story that can sometimes be glimpsed for just a tantalising moment, before the door to the past creaks shut once again.

It's easy to see, therefore, why writers and artists might feel inspired to create their own stories to fill the town's streets, ramparts and towering buildings.

For author Anthony Doerr, a visit to St Malo to speak at its annual Étonnants Voyageurs literary festival (etonnants-voyageurs.com) unlocked an idea that had been at the back of his mind for several years. While exploring the streets and fortifications, he conceived the parallel stories of a German boy, Werner, who is groomed for the Hitler Youth, and a visually impaired French girl, Marie-Laure. Their paths finally cross in St Malo at the devastating crescendo of the second world war.

When the novel was published, *All the Light We Cannot See* captured the imaginations and emotions of readers to such an extent that large

Fiction & fact

In **St Malo's** old town, Louise Hoffman traces the footsteps of characters from Anthony Doerr's award-winning novel, *All the Light We Cannot See*



groups of tourists began to arrive at the Office de Tourisme in St Malo, eager to walk in the footsteps of the characters they had grown to love through the pages of the book.

And so the *All the Light We Cannot See* themed walk was launched for the scores of visitors who make this literary pilgrimage.

Just download the tourist office's PDF guide on to your mobile phone or to a computer to be printed out, and you're away – treading a path between fiction and reality through the streets of St Malo's old town.

It's a curiously spine-tingling experience for those, such as I, who have read and loved the book – which is a testament to Doerr's descriptive powers.

For instance, even though it's a modern reconstructed building rather than the "derelict bird's nest of a house" described in the novel, number 4 Rue Vauborel, where Marie-Laure lives with her eccentric great-uncle Etienne, has a certain haunting quality to it. Standing in its shadow in the quiet, narrow street, close →

Feeling inspired?

You can download the *All the Light We Cannot See* themed walk information from saint-malo-tourisme.co.uk. Just pick the 'Sightseeing in St Malo' option from the 'Visit St Malo' menu. Alternatively, pop into the tourist office near the harbour on Esplanade Saint-Vincent to find out more. Further information about St Malo can also be found at brittanytourism.com

to the ramparts, with memories of the story alive in your mind, there's a real sense of emptiness – that a person who inhabited that space and made it her own is no longer there.

Walking from the house to the Rue d'Estrées, then through the archway in the town wall and down the sandy steps on to the Plage du Môle, you find yourself hit by the same "twenty thousand sounds of the ocean (that) engulf" Marie-Laure on her excursions to the beach. Take a stroll along the tide line, and you'll see examples of the very pebbles, shells and pieces of seaglass that fill her bedroom.

Then, climbing up to the Bastion de la Hollande and looking out across the ramparts of this fortified town, there is a panorama of evidence of German occupation and Allied liberation, much of which is referenced in the novel.

To the south, in a commanding headland position by the harbour entrance, sits the 18th-century Fort de la Cité d'Alet, which was used as a base by the Nazis. Meanwhile, out to sea, the surrounding islands still bear the scars of war – the remains of German defences are visible to this day and certain areas are, even now, closed off to the public due to the threat of unexploded devices.

Perched atop one of these islands, Petit Bé, is Fort National, which was designed by King Louis XIV's famous military architect Vauban in the 17th century and came to be used as a prison by the German occupiers during the war. In the novel, rumours begin to spread that "every man of fighting age, anyone who could be taking part in the resistance, will be imprisoned at Fort National".



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It's at the foot of the steep, narrow steps at the back of the Bastion where perhaps the most intriguing location is concealed, however. The gated archway, "shaped like a loaf of bread", is unmistakably reminiscent of the grotto that provides Marie-Laure with a seaside refuge, but in reality it was once used to house 24 terrifying watchdogs that were released at night to guard the town moat. The bells are still rung at 10pm, as they once were centuries ago to warn residents that the dogs had begun their prowl.

And so it is that while modern-day life goes on around you in this vibrant town, you can be drawn into any number of other times and worlds – both of the past and of the imagination. 🏰

Above: Fort National was used as a prison during the second world war
Below: Historic buildings in the streets of St Malo



Eat

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restaurant-absinthe.fr

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