

## STATION - WELCOME BY BRIGITTE KLINKERT

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Hello, my name is Neil Beardmore and on behalf of Brigitte Klinkert, president of the association that manages this heritage site, which is listed as a historic monument, welcome to The Dominican Convent of Haut-Alsace. The Dominican convent is no longer a place of worship. It is now a cultural centre, certified by the French Culture Ministry as a Subsidised Music Performance Centre.

The Dominican Convent of Haute-Alsace belongs to the Haut-Rhin County Council, and it is one of the most important sites of the Upper Rhine Region, together with Hohlandsbourg Castle, Wesserling Park and the Ecomusée d'Alsace, all three of which are nearby.

Here you are at the Dominican Convent, a place with an extraordinary history where, if time had stood still, friar preachers, fishmongers, textile workers and the great Rostropovich would meet.

To begin this tour, please make your way over to the cloister, which was once a place of prayer and contemplation.

We recommend that you follow the tour in the suggested direction, because you will find markers corresponding to the chapter numbers of your audio-guide.

Be curious, listen carefully and enjoy your tour of the Dominican Convent.

## STATION - CLOISTER

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The sandstone of the Vosges Mountains is whispering... Listen closely and it will tell you seven hundred years of history.

This cloister is part of a former Dominican convent, where friar preachers lived. The mendicant order was composed of friars who lived in cities to preach and who relied on charity to survive. It was founded in Toulouse in the early 13th century by St. Dominic, and had the principal aim of fighting what was called the Cathar Heresy. It developed quickly after it was founded, especially in the Rhine Valley. Present in Strasbourg as early as 1224, it came to Guebwiller in 1294 under the protection of the Abbey of Murbach, a remarkable Romanesque building located six kilometres away.

This establishment was recounted in writing by a friar preacher: "On the Wednesday following Palm Sunday, the reverend Lord Berthold, a count of the Falkenstein line, the abbot and superior of the Murbach chapter, as well as the entire honourable council and the community of Guebwiller, welcomed and accepted the Dominican fathers to the city. As they did not yet have anywhere to build a convent or a church, they were given the customs house and its outbuildings."

Construction began with the church dedicated to St. Peter and St. Paul, in 1306.

In the 15th century, following the transformation of the order the convent was converted, with the aim of re-establishing stricter observance of the ecclesiastical rule. This was when the church's bell turret was built. In 1525, during a popular uprising against the lords and the Church, called the "Revolt of the Rustaids", the convent was pillaged. It was pillaged again a century later by Imperial and Franco-Swedish troops, during the Thirty Years' War.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, the Dominican friar Séraphin Dietler penned a chronicle of the convent, having spent part of his life studying the history of the Dominicans of Guebwiller. He indicated that, before these devastating events, the site featured a library containing precious works that attracted the attention of many researchers.

The convent's situation improved in 1680 when the Kingdom of France annexed the land of Murbach. Various reconstruction and enlargement projects were financed by the Abbot of Murbach, always protective of this community, which was at its most vibrant in 1690, with 27 monks, fathers and lay brothers.

## STATION - NAVE

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In the Gothic style, the church is 57 metres long to the end of the choir, and 20 metres wide. In the 15th century, churches could be built bigger, thanks to the use of an iron structure, and the windows became larger, making churches brighter inside. This church was built in a simple style, to express the ideal of poverty and create an environment favourable to preaching. It is structured in two parts: the choir, where services were held for the friars, and the nave, reserved for the congregation. The two spaces - sacred and secular - are separated by a choir screen.

The Dominican constitution of 1228 specified that the churches of the order must be no more than 30 metres high, and that the ceiling must not be of stone, except for the choir and the sacristy. Thus, this church is 21 metres high, with a wooden ceiling, which is the secret behind its exceptional acoustics.

Many of the original elements no longer exist, such as the original stained-glass windows, given in 1438 by noble families of the region, or the ecclesiastical furniture, sold during the French Revolution as wood for heating.

The Dominican Convent of Guebwiller features the finest collection of murals in the upper Rhine Valley. Recent restorations have revealed a rich mural iconography. The Dominicans preached the faith of Rome and sought to make their murals simple educational tools accessible by the congregation, who were often illiterate. These paintings depict scenes concerning Dominican beliefs, in particular the exemplary nature of the life of Christ, and the life of St. Dominic. All four walls of the church were once covered with murals.

We invite you to discover these paintings by walking towards the back of the nave, on the side of the largest window in Alsace.

## STATION - WEST WALL

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Fully restored in 2004, the west wall, which faces the choir screen, is representative of the iconography of the nave of Guebwiller. You can observe the three periods during which the paintings were created: a first painting from the Middle Ages, a second from the end of the Renaissance and a third painting dating from the Baroque period. The difficulty of restoring the paintings lies in deciding which period to choose, because paintings from different periods are often layered one over the other. Revealing the medieval period sometimes means eliminating the two later layers. This is a true dilemma that requires great expertise.

The medieval period is characterised by two large formats on either side of the large window, representing Saints Christopher and Oswald.

St. Christopher, wearing a long robe with lobed scales, is carrying the infant Jesus on his left arm. Invoked as an intercessor in case of sudden death, he was greatly venerated in the Middle Ages, especially by pilgrims. As for St. Oswald, he is the patron saint of the harvest; wheat grain was stored in the loft above the ceiling.

Donors are represented at the feet of the saints. The act of donation was a very common practice in the Middle Ages. Donations were celebrated in public ceremonies, creating a genuine symbolic ritual

expressed through speech, gestures and iconography. This is why donors are shown on the murals, alongside the saints. Donations were an act of redeeming grace, through which donors hoped to secure their place in heaven. This was because donations required the senior clergy, who were beholden to the donors, to bear witness to the donors' good works at the Last Judgement.

The floral wreath, adorned with little angels, which runs around the edge of the upper part of the bay, dates from the 18th century. It is typical of the Baroque style. The same type of ornamentation can be found around certain high windows in the nave. The same holds true for the illustration of the theme of the Annunciation, which is situated in the choir, above the choir screen, which you can see by turning around.

The Annunciation symbolises the conception of Jesus. It was painted in 1711 in the Baroque style, characterised by the use of warm, bright colours ranging from pink to blue to white. Its composition presents two worlds: the visible, earthly one of Mary, and the invisible, celestial one of God, incarnated by Gabriel, who tells his message to Mary. The drawings of the chancel arch are trompe-l'œil, imitating marble. They heighten the sense of elevation.

Now, go stand under the choir screen to discover how the religious phase of the Dominican Convent of Guebwiller came to an end.

## STATION - UNDER THE CHOIR SCREEN

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The choir screen is this centrepiece separating the nave, which was reserved for the congregation, from the choir, which was reserved for the friars. On one hand, it enables the laypeople to see images telling the story of certain scenes of the life of Christ, thanks to its rich paintings; and on the other hand, it prevents them from seeing the communion. At the lowest point of the bay furthest to the left, you can see a crucifixion of Christ dating back to the 14th century. Above this crucifixion is a series of others: those of St. Andrew and St. Peter, head down, as well as the persecution of St. John, naked in a vat, the beheading of St. James, the persecution of St. Bartholomew, who was skinned alive, and the beheading of St. Paul.

In the last bay is another crucifixion of Christ surrounded by the Virgin, St. John, the Four Church Fathers and great founders of monastic orders in the Middle Ages. You can also see St. Nicholas giving to three poor girls, St. Dominic receiving the staff of St. Peter, and St. Martin sharing his coat.

These paintings, the oldest of the church, were restored for the first time during the Second World War by the Germans. The Third Reich sent specialists to take an inventory of the treasures of the newly conquered territories. In this way the first catalog were establish in 1941, currently kept in the county archives in Colmar.

Life at the convent in Guebwiller was not without obstacles: five centuries of community life, marked by the vagaries of history, came to an end with the French Revolution, which signalled the end for the Dominicans, only 15 of whom still lived in the convent.

As they were popular with the townsfolk, they were not affected by the pillaging that occurred in July 1789. But that November, all religious assets became national property, and in early 1790, the religious orders were eliminated. The friars were ordered to leave the convent. Some of them went to the convent of the Capuchins of Belfort, and others went back to their families. The Dominicans of the neighbouring St. Michael's Convent, which was founded shortly after the Dominican Convent, met the same fate and the convent no longer exists today. A Silbermann organ, which had been installed in 1745 on the choir

screen, was acquired by the shared church of Wasselonne. The church and the convent were sold at auction.

And in this way, the convent's religious life came to an end. But another, equally exciting era began: the musical era. To find out more about it, it's time to go up: take the large red staircase situated behind the central door of the choir screen, leading to the upper choir.

## STATION - UPPER CHOIR

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We are at the beginning of the 19th century, on the cusp of a new society and the age of the Industrial Revolution. Factories and offices began to take over many religious buildings, where only the slightest glimmer of past times could be seen. The majestic staircase with the red carpet had no other purpose than to lead the new middle classes to knowledge and the arts.

The new owner of the premises, Jean-Jacques Bourcart, was a major industrialist and philanthropist convinced of the necessity of music. He had a mezzanine level built half-way between the floor and the ceiling, in the church's choir. The downstairs area became the rehearsal space for the workers, who were given musical instruction, which was deemed necessary for their emancipation. On the top floor, the archway was closed off by a wooden wall, and a heating system was installed. A year-round concert hall was created: and thus began the musical adventure of the Dominican Convent. The creation had a decidedly feminine touch: from three women with an exceptional destiny.

The first was Margarethe Schmuck, born in 1803 in Guebwiller. She became one of the most famous divas of Europe, already a permanent fixture in the royal courts at the young age of 26. She married the German harpist Franz Stockhausen and had two children, whom she wished to introduce to her hometown, which she visited frequently.

This was the time when Jean-Jacques Bourcart began cycles of concerts in the upper choir: the concert that inaugurated this new concert hall was held on November 22, 1838, conducted by Sigismund Neukomm, a student of Joseph Haydn. He opened the concert with "The Magic Flute" by Mozart.

During a business trip to Austria, Jean-Jacques Bourcart met the composer Karl Kientzl, whom he established in Guebwiller for several decades. Kientzl went on to found many ensembles here, including a highly renowned symphony orchestra and several choirs.

And it was thanks to Margarethe Stockhausen's son Jules, a famous baritone specialising in performing German Lieder, that the second woman who influenced this musical period came into the picture: Clara Schumann. The wife of the famous composer, Robert Schumann, often accompanied Jules Stockhausen on the piano, and this is how she happened to give a concert at the Dominican Convent on January 30, 1858. She came back three times after that.

The 1850s marked the beginning of a musical era in Guebwiller, which is cited in musicology books as an important musical centre, on a par with Cologne and Basel. This unique adventure experienced an exceptional revival a century later, starting in 1959, spurred on by another industrialist from Guebwiller, Alphonse Mader. At that point, the concerts were no longer held in the upper choir, which became the Florival Museum, but rather in the nave, with its incomparable acoustics. The greatest international performers have played here: Rostropovich, Petrucciani, Sviatoslav Richter, Jordi Savall and Barbara Hendricks, as well as first-rate orchestras and vocal groups.

## STATION - SACRISTY

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Jean-Jacques Bourcart redesigned the convent's layout, changing the way the space was used. Next to the newly designed concert hall and rehearsal hall, the nave was used successively as a warehouse, stables and a covered market. The convent buildings were assigned to his wife, Climène, the third woman to leave a mark on the Dominican Convent. She turned the Convent into a hospice.

Born into a family of Protestant industrialists, she had the vaulted sacristy of the former convent converted into a Protestant place of worship, in 1836. This woman, who raised her 13 children while her husband travelled across Europe on business, had a short life: she died at the age of 36.

The sacristy, or Protestant chapel, features four ribbed vaults. The sculpted keystones feature the heraldry of important local noble families, including the Count of Andlau. The paintings are by Emile Bourcart, the son of Climène and a childhood friend of Jules Stockhausen, who studied art in Paris and Rome. The fact that the painter was Protestant explains why only scenes of the life of Christ are represented, and none concerning the saints. In particular, you can see the Adoration of the Shepherds.

Nonetheless, the Catholic residents of the hospice were not neglected: they also had a chapel, situated right next door.

## STATION - NEO-GOTHIC CHAPEL

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Built at the same time as the Protestant chapel, the neo-gothic Catholic chapel occupies part of the former chapter house, where the Dominican friars used to meet: it features a hanging keystone arch that is solely decorative, an altar and a large number of statues.

It opens onto the cloister, which will lead you to the garden, at the entrance of the Dominicans. The musical ambiance in this medieval garden is provided by Vincent Villuis, the composer in residence. Here, music is master: from classical to jazz, from medieval songs to the latest electronic trends. The Dominican Convent of Haute Alsace is also open to the digital arts, capable of fashioning a new kind of spirituality, which, if no longer mystical, reflects the spirituality that has surrounded this place since its beginnings.