



French Gothic

The great cathedrals of northern France

6–12 July 2026 (MM 108)

7 days • £2,890

Lecturer: Dr Jana Gajdošová

The cradle of Gothic, northern Europe's most significant contribution to world architecture.

Nearly all the most important buildings in the development of Early and High Gothic, with an entire day at Chartres.

Unparalleled examples of stained glass, sculpture and metalwork.

Gothic was the only architectural style which had its origins in northern Europe. It was in the north of France that the first Gothic buildings arose, it was here that the style attained its classic maturity, and it is here that its greatest manifestations still stand.

From the middle of the 12th century the region was the scene of unparalleled building activity, with dozens of cathedrals, churches and abbeys under construction. Architects stretched their imaginations and masons extended their skills to devise more daring ways of enclosing greater volumes of space, with increasingly slender structural supports, and larger areas of window.

But Gothic is not only an architectural phenomenon. Windows were filled with brilliant coloured glass. Sculpture, more life-like than for nearly a thousand years yet increasingly integrated with its architectural setting, was abundant. The art of metalwork thrived, and paint was everywhere. All the arts were coordinated to interpret and present elaborate theological programmes to congregations which included both the illiterate lay people and sophisticated clerics.

Nearly all the most important buildings in the development of the Early and High phases of Gothic are included, and the order of visits even follows this development chronologically, as far as geography allows. A whole day is dedicated to the cathedral at Chartres, the premier site of the building arts of the medieval world.

Itinerary

Day 1. Travel by Eurostar at c. 11.30am from St Pancras to Paris. Continue by coach to Laon and the hotel, in an attractive lakeside setting. First of three nights near Laon.



Chartres Cathedral, south portal, lithograph c. 1860

Day 2: Noyon, Laon. One of the earliest Gothic cathedrals (c. 1150), Noyon's four-storey internal elevation marks the transition from the thick-walled architecture of the Romanesque to the thin-walled verticality of Gothic. Laon is spectacularly sited on a rock outcrop. Begun c. 1160, the cathedral is the most complete of Early-Gothic churches and one of the most impressive, with five soaring towers.

Day 3: Soissons, Reims. Soissons Cathedral is a fine example of the rapid changes which took place in architecture at the end of the 12th century. Reims Cathedral, the coronation church of the French monarchy, begun 1211, is a landmark in the development of High Gothic with the first appearance of bar tracery and classicising portal sculpture. At the church of St Rémi the heavy Romanesque nave contrasts with the light early-Gothic choir.

Day 4: St-Denis. On the outskirts of Paris, the burial place of French kings, St-Denis was an abbey of the highest significance in politics and in the history of architecture. In the 1140s the choir was rebuilt, and the pointed arches, rib vaulting and skeletal structure warrant the claim that this was the first Gothic building. 100 years later the new nave inaugurated the

Rayonnant style of Gothic with windows occupying the maximum possible area. First of two nights in Chartres.

Day 5: Chartres. The cathedral at Chartres, begun in 1145 and recommenced in 1195 after a fire, is the finest synthesis of Gothic art and architecture. Sculpture and stained glass are incorporated into an elaborate theological programme. A full day here provides time for unhurried exploration of the building and space to reflect and absorb. See also the church of St Pierre.

Day 6: Mantes-la-Jolie, Beauvais, Amiens. Visit the 12th-century collegiate church at Mantes-la-Jolie. Beauvais Cathedral, begun 1225, was, with a vault height in the choir of 157 feet, the climax in France of upwardly aspiring Gothic architecture and the highest vault of medieval Europe. Overnight Amiens.

Day 7: Amiens. The cathedral in Amiens is the classic High-Gothic structure, its thrilling verticality balanced by measured horizontal movement. Drive to Lille for the Eurostar to London St Pancras, arriving c. 7.00pm.

French Gothic
continued

Lecturer

Dr Jana Gajdošová. A medieval art specialist at Sam Fogg Limited, Jana teaches on a variety of courses for the Bartlett School of Architecture and the Victoria & Albert Museum. Since completing her PhD in 2015, she has published in Gesta, The Burlington Magazine, the JBAA, Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte, and Speculum on various topics including experimentation in medieval buildings, Gothic sculpture, memory and architecture, and medieval bridges. She is the newly appointed director of the British Archaeological Association and a fellow of the Society of Antiquaries.

Practicalities

Price, per person. Two sharing: £2,890 or £2,710 without Eurostar. **Single occupancy:** £3,240 or £3,060 without Eurostar.

Included: train travel by Eurostar (Eurostar Plus); coach travel; hotel accommodation; breakfasts and 5 dinners with wine, water, coffee; all admissions; all tips; all taxes; the services of the lecturer and tour manager.

Accommodation. Hôtel du Golf de l'Ailette, Chamouille (ailette.fr): comfortable 4-star located a short drive from Laon in an attractive position by a lake. **Hotel Le Grand Monarque, Chartres** (grand-monarque.com): centrally located 4-star hotel. **Hotel Mercure Amiens** (all.accor.com): modern 4-star hotel near the cathedral. *Single rooms are doubles for sole use throughout.*

How strenuous? There is a fair amount of walking and standing around, as well as some long coach journeys. You should be able to lift your luggage on and off the train and wheel it within the station. Average distance by coach per day: 89 miles.

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.