

## CASTLE OF FÉNIS

Unlike the other castles built for war and defence, Fénis is not situated on top of a rise but on a slight hillock. In apparent contrast with its defensive equipment, it was designed principally to serve as the prestigious residence of the Challant family.

Blending together in a surprisingly harmonious overall architectural effect, the castle's numerous towers were added in the middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> century by Aimone of Challant to the existing keep, the customary residence of the Viscount Gottfried II a century before.

The castle itself is of pentagonal design, while its corners are provided with projecting round-shaped towers. Exceptions are the south-west corner which has a massive tower and the south corner where the tower is square-shaped.

The building is enclosed in a double circle of walls, with guard lookout towers at intervals linked together by a rampart walkway. Access to the inner castle is through a square tower, formerly provided with a portcullis to seal off the entrance in case of attack.

The inner courtyard, with its *semicircular staircase* and *wooden balconies*, is adorned with valuable frescos depicting St George slaying the dragon and a group of sages and prophets bearing parchments and scrolls on which proverbs and maxims written in ancient French can be read. On the east wall are the Annunciation and St Christopher.

The paintings in Fénis castle are generally attributed to a painter of the Jaquerio school and date back to 1425-30.

On the **ground floor**, rooms that can be visited are the *salle d'armes*, the *dining-room*, the *pantry*, the *kitchen*, the *study* and the *tax collection room*.

Rooms worthy of mention on the **first floor**, are the *chapel* with adjoining *reception room* and the *counts' chambers*.

The castle belonged to the Fénis branch of the Challant family until 1716, when it was made over to Count Baldassarre Castellar of Saluzzo Paesana. There followed a period of abandonment in which the keep was changed into a farmhouse, the ground floor rooms were used as cattle sheds and the first floor as a hayloft. It was purchased in 1895 by Alfredo d'Andrade, who began restoration work subsequently completed by Mesturino.

Today the castle is owned by the Regional Authorities.

## CASTLE OF ISSOGNE

Formerly owned by the bishops of Aosta before restoration work was commissioned by Ibleto of Challant around 1400, the castle of Issogne took on its definitive appearance between the years 1490 and 1510 when George of Challant, Protonotary Apostolic and Prior of St Orso, restored it and converted it into a sumptuous residence for his cousin Marguerite de la Chambre and her son Philibert. Issogne is no longer a medieval castle but rather a Renaissance residence without any external signs of ostentation, its corner towers being only slightly higher than the roof of the building.

Inside, the entrance and portico are adorned with frescos in the lunettes of the arches, representing scenes of everyday life - the tailor's shop, the apothecary's shop, the baker and butcher's shop, the guardroom, the fruit and vegetable market, the cheesemonger and pork-butcher can all be distinguished.

In the centre of the courtyard, the façades of which are entirely decorated with the nuptial coats of arms of the Challant family, is the famous wrought-iron *pomegranate fountain*.

The castle has about 50 rooms. Open to visitors on the **ground floor** is the *dining-room*, where the only means of communication with the *kitchen* is an opening made for plates under the hood. The kitchen comprises three large fireplaces and is divided in two by a double vault, one part reserved for the nobility and the other for the servants. In the *baron's hall*, apart from its beautiful stone fireplace with hood bearing the Challant coat of arms between a lion and a griffin, also to be admired are the paintings on the wooden ceiling beams and the frescos on the walls depicting landscapes, hunting scenes and Paris' decision.

On the **first floor** is the *chapel* with its finely decorated pointed vaults, frescoed walls and Gothic style altar of engraved, gilded wood adorned with a Flemish school triptych. Wooden railings separate the area reserved for the nobility from that of the servants. The *Countess's bedroom* with adjoining *oratory* adorned with paintings and *Count René's bedroom* are also on this floor.

On the **second floor** is the *room of the King of France* with coffered ceiling and fireplace bearing the royal coat of arms with background of gilded lilies and the motto "Vive le Roi". Also on this floor is a room known as the *room of the Knights of St Maurice*, with its beautiful coffered ceiling on which the cross of this order has been painted.

The castle passed from the hands of the Challant family to the Madruzzo family and back again to the Challant family after a legal battle for succession which lasted more than a century. Various other changes of ownership then followed before the castle was bought in 1872 by the painter Vittorio Avondo, who restored it and donated it to the State in 1907. Today the castle belongs to the Regional Authorities.

## CASTLE OF VERRÈS

The castle was built in 1390 by Ibleto of Challant, Captain General of Piedmont, who wanted to have a residence worthy of his rank. The external fortifications with cannon positions were added in 1536 by Count René of Challant. At the point of death, in 1565, René had no sons and went against the usage of the dukedom to leave the feudal inheritance to male children only drawing up a testament in favour of his daughters.

The castle was then requisitioned by the Duke of Savoy and became the seat of a garrison. Towards the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, it was abandoned for over two hundred years until 1894, when it was purchased by the State and declared a national monument.

The castle is a splendid example of a stronghold built with admirable architectural prowess. Shaped like a giant cube with a side of 30 metres, it dominates the town of Verrès at the entrance of the Ayas valley. The walls are 2.5 metres thick, surmounted by wide machicolations.

Large mullioned windows with two lights open out on all sides, engraved with various decorative motifs. In the centre of the courtyard is a cistern collecting rainwater from the roofs. Originally the interior was simply decorated, the only two colour shades being the green of the stone and the white of the walls. The rooms are impressive on account of their sheer size, as also is the structure of the vaults, the coats of arms carved in stone, the huge fireplaces, among the largest in castles anywhere and, most particularly, the magnificent flying-arch staircase leading to the upper floors.

The three **ground floor** rooms are the *reception room*, the *salle d'armes* and a *kitchen*.

On the **first floor** are the *dining-room*, the main *kitchen* and the *bedrooms of the lords of the castle*. The second floor was originally the quarters of the soldiers and servants. The doors and windows have carved stone jambs, lintels and archivolts. In front of the west wall is the prison building, joined to the castle by the surrounding walls. This building also housed the guards and was built on the walls of the previous fortress, which Ibleto restored and preserved. The prison cells were underground.

Verrès castle opens its doors each year to the local Carnival, a traditional commemoration of the pomp of the Challant family.

## CASTLE OF SAINT-PIERRE

Looking as though straight out of a fairy tale, the castle of Saint-Pierre is completely unlike any other in the Valley. Taken together with the church directly below, with its beautiful Romanesque bell-tower, it forms a very picturesque whole. Set on the pinnacle of a rocky eminence overlooking the left bank of the Dora Baltea river and the township of Saint-Pierre, the castle, possibly built in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, is mentioned in the Charter of the Franchises of 1191, the document which governed tax and excise legislation for the Aosta Valley.

Over the years, the castle's role changed many times and new parts were added. A close examination of the styles shows building to have been a continuous process, conducted as the castle changed hands. The process continued right into the 17<sup>th</sup> century when Baron Pierre-Léonard Roncas, the first secretary of the State of Savoy, bought and extended the castle.

He was succeeded in 1873 by Baron Emmanuel Bollati, who commissioned the architect Camillo Boggio to make the final changes and add the four corner towers to the keep. In 1952 the castle became the property of the Commune of Saint-Pierre.

From 1975, it has been the home of the Natural History Museum under the patronage of the "Société de la Flore Valdôtaine", founded in 1905. In 1985 it became the **Natural Science Museum**.

The museum is open to the public from the middle of March to the middle of October and includes *eight rooms* in which visitors are introduced to the natural habitat of the Aosta Valley in its numerous aspects.

## SAVOY CASTLE

Designed by Emilio Stramucci, the leading architect of the Royal Family, work started on the Savoy Castle in 1899 with the foundation stone being laid in the presence of the King and Queen. The castle was completed in 1904. Queen Margherita, who had been widowed in the meantime after her husband Umberto I was assassinated in Monza, spent numerous summers at the castle until 1925, the year before her death. The castle comprises three floors. On the **ground floor** are the drawing-rooms, living-room and dining hall. The **first floor** has the quarters of the Queen and her suite, while the **top floor** is reserved for the servants. In detached buildings nearby are the guest quarters and kitchen, the latter being connected to the castle by a small Decauville railway for the transport of food between kitchen and castle. The castle's unique shape is provided by its five pointed towers.

Worthy of note inside are the decorative murals of Carlo Cussetti, a portrait of the Queen by the Turin painter Bertini and, most particularly, the wooden staircase that divides in two after the first flight and leads to the first floor apartments.

Bought by the Autonomous Region of the Aosta Valley in 1981, the castle today is the frequent venue of summer concerts and exhibitions.

In 1990, a **botanical garden** was inaugurated inside the park of the castle, with numerous rock and flower beds where plants and flowers typical of the Alps and mountain regions worldwide are cultivated.

## CASTLE OF SARRE

It is located on a promontory which dominates the plain of Aosta and the road to the Mont Blanc, just after the junction with the Cogne road. The present construction is made up of a longitudinal main body and a square tower located in the central part of the building. It was built in 1710 by Giovanni Francesco Ferrod of Arvier on the ruins of a fortified mansion from 1242. Following a succession of owners the castle was bought by the king of Italy, Victor Emmanuel II, in 1869 and transformed into a country seat for his hunting parties; Humbert I introduced further decorative changes. Afterwards, the Princes of Piedmont, Humbert and Maria José, spent their holidays in the castle. Furnished with various objects and works from different places, it was sold by the members of the Savoy family to the "Società Moriana" of Aosta in 1972 and opened to the public as a museum of the dynastic mementoes.

The Aosta Valley Region purchased the building in 1989 and started restoration work. Now, completely restored, the castle has been reopened to the public and appears today in its definitive layout. The restoration has preserved the castle's dual identity in the course of history: alpine residence and Museum of the Savoy presence in Aosta Valley.

In the Valley

On the **ground floor** which can be visited free of charge, in the halls are arranged as "educational sections", introducing the visitor to the guided tour (every half hour) to the upper floors. Besides the iconography of the House of Savoy ("Reception Room" and "*Cabinets des Gravures*") you can find pictures of the royal hunts in the Alps (*Salles Chasse*) and the history of the castle.

On the upper floors, the rooms are arranged following the *1890 Inventory*, with some of the furnishings found in the castle. You can visit *the Royal Apartment (first floor)* including the Large Games Room and the Gallery of the hunting trophies, the private and servants' quarters, which have never been open before. The rooms on the second floor present the history of the Savoy dynasty during the XXth century: from Victor Emmanuel III and the Queen Helen of Montenegro, to Humbert II and Maria José, who was particularly attached to Aosta Valley.

