

A writers' residence

New purpose

The former monks' enclosure, which is forbidden to visitors, has been transformed into a residence for writers, translators, scriptwriters, and composers. In order to perpetuate the spirit of the convent, the place is still organised along community lines, with the residents lodged in what were the monks' cells, and a communal kitchen, lounge, bathrooms, and library. The residents report that it is an inspirational place to write.

Writing retreats

The Centre des monuments nationaux gave its backing to this project to encourage artistic creation here since it was a way of bringing the site back to life whilst preserving the feeling of seclusion and contemplation left behind by the Franciscan monks. The monastery of Saorge, whilst still offering a place where writers can retreat, also acts as a forum where writers can meet each other and the local population (with talks and readings, and school and library visits all over the region). The monastery regularly organises cultural events in partnership with the 'Les Fioretti' association, with exhibitions, concerts, public debates and seminars. It also organises writing and translation workshops, and publishes works.

Glossary

Convent: a community of people in a religious order, not to be confused with a monastery (monks' enclosure). Franciscans lived alongside society and as a brotherhood.

Law of 1 July 1901: this law established the regime governing congregations in France, whose existence is subjected to State authorisation. It led to the closure of many communities.

Lunette: the part of a wall between the top of a window and the bottom of a vault.

Recollets: a French branch of Franciscans known as Récollets, meaning withdrawal or contemplation, which developed out of a 15th-century reform of the order.

Saint Claire of Assisi (1194-1253): an Italian noblewoman who renounced her worldly goods to follow Saint Francis. She founded the Clarisse order, modelled on the Franciscans.

Saint Francis of Assisi (1182-1226): a hermit, preacher and founder of the Franciscans; he advocated poverty, work, and preaching to the population.

Stigmata: marks resembling Jesus' crucifixion wounds.

White lead: a white patina finish that brings out the grain of wood.

Practical information

Average length of visit: 45 minutes
Tours suitable for disabled visitors.



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Monastery of Saorge

Old Franciscan convent*

A place for spiritual retreat

The Recollect* Franciscan convent* was founded in 1633. Over the course of the



17th-century engraving

following years, the town of Saorge allowed the community to use Saint Bernard's chapel outside the village, then the adjoining land to build their convent*.

It provided financial support to complete the church. The convent* buildings were completed around 1662.

Now dedicated to creative writing

French soldiers chased out the monks and occupied the convent* in 1794. The buildings were then used as the town hospice before being given back to the Franciscans in 1824, who stayed there until 1903, after the promulgation of the French law on religious congregations*. The monument was then used for various purposes, before finally being bought by the State in 1967 and subsequently restored. Franciscans returned between 1969 and 1988. Since their definitive departure the convent* has been open to visitors, but it is still a retreat, though now for writers.

* Explanations overleaf.

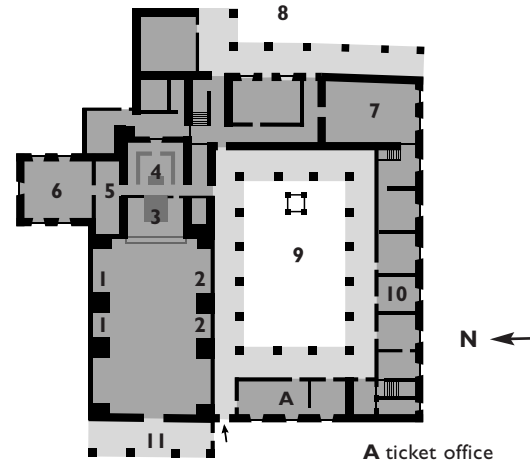
* Explanations overleaf.

Together with the convent* of Cimiez in Nice, Saorge is one of the final examples of Baroque monastic architecture in the region. It has the typical layout of Franciscan buildings of the period in southern Piedmont and Liguria: the church is to the north, with the convent* buildings running around three sides of a rectangular cloister over two storeys.

The Church of Notre-Dame des Miracles

The 17th-century building has a single nave with groined vaults and is flanked by four chapels. Calderari, a master stonemason from Lugano, added painted medallions framed by stucco mouldings between 1760 and 1762, enriching the original, sober decoration.

- 1 The two chapels to the north** have reredoses dedicated to Saint Anthony of Padua and to Saint Joseph.
- 2 The two chapels to the south** have paintings on canvas from the same period, the late 17th century, showing Saint Peter of Alcantara, and Saint Francis* and Saint Claire* of Assisi. The Way of the Cross with 14 stations is the work of Pietro Botta from Piedmont, and dates from 1726. It is considered to be one of the oldest Ways of the Cross in the Nice region to be painted on canvas. A Renaissance-style wooden sculpture of Christ in Chains dates from the early 18th century.
- 3 The reredos of the high altar** is made out of unadorned polished walnut wood, as is the Franciscan tradition. Polychromy is used only for the niches, and gilt only for statues. Our Lady of Miracles (Notre-Dame des Miracles), to whom the church is dedicated, is in the middle, framed by Saint Anthony of Padua and Saint Paschal Baylon. In the upper part is God the Father, between the



- Archangel Gabriel and a Virgin Annunciate. The blazon at the top shows the arms of the Franciscan order. The altar with three wide steps decorated with marquetry is in the Genoese style.
- 4 The choir** is separated from the nave by a reredos, so as to screen the monks from the public during services. It is narrower than the nave and still has its simple stalls in polished walnut.
 - 5 The penance room**, where the monks used to confess, still has its wood panelling and a 17th-century washstand.
 - 6 The sacristy** has white lead* walnut wood on three walls, dating from 1772. The two reliquary busts are 17th-century.

The communal areas

- 7 The refectory** is decorated with 17th-century frescoes. Allegories on the side walls represent the four Franciscan virtues of poverty, chastity, obedience and humility. On the rear wall there is another allegory, of Charity, above a Virgin in Glory with Saint Francis to the left (recognisable by his stigmata*) and Saint Anthony of Padua to the

right. The decoration, and the walnut tables and wood panelling from 1667, are wholly original and have not undergone any restoration work.

- 8 The convent* garden** may be seen from the terrace. The layout is the original one, and it evokes the Franciscan frame of mind with its ponds, wash-houses, orchards, a kitchen garden and pergolas covered in vines, a reminder of the fact that the brothers were self-sufficient.

9 The cloister

The arcades of the gallery rest on thick rectangular pillars. The baroque atmosphere of the cloister is created by the decoration, with frescoes painted around the windows and dating from about 1760. On the south wall there is the blazon of the Franciscans. The sundials are decorated with signs of the zodiac corresponding to the months of the year.

- 10 The monks' cells** on the ground floor give onto this place of meditation.

Most of the 23 frescoes on the lunettes* of the vaults beneath the galleries depict the life of Saint Francis* of Assisi in a naive style.

- 11 The facade** of the church is a baroque composition combining two separate registers one above the other. The entrance is preceded by a porch with a balustraded terrace above it. The upper level has a large, lyre-shaped window and is decorated with stucco mouldings which were added during works in 1760. From the square in front of the church there are views of Saorge, perched above the valley of the river Roya.

* Explanations overleaf.