Mont Saint-Michel, the “Merveille de l’Occident” (Wonder of the West) owes to its original setting and its fine architecture its ranking as one of the major monuments for visitors in France. Around a kilometre in circumference, this rocky islet rises to a height of 80 metres and is linked to the Bay by a bridge. In the 21st century, Mont Saint-Michel has perpetuated its thousand year tradition of accommodating visitors. Twice a month, during the spring tides, the flood tide is a wonderful sight, registering the biggest tides in Europe.
History

Founded, according to tradition, following three dreams St Aubert, bishop of Avranches, had in the year 708, from the outset Mont Saint-Michel was a great pilgrimage centre. The pre-Romanesque church was built before the year one thousand. In the 11th century, the Romanesque abbey church was founded over a set of crypts where the rock comes to an apex, and the first monastery buildings were built up against its north wall. In the 12th century, the Romanesque monastery buildings were extended to the west and south. In the 13th century, a donation by the king of France, Philip Augustus, in the wake of his conquest of Normandy, enabled a start to be made on the Gothic section of the “Merveille”: two three-storey buildings, crowned by the cloister and the refectory. In the 14th century, the Hundred Years War made it necessary to protect the abbey behind a set of military constructions, enabling it to hold out against a siege lasting 30 years. In the 15th century, the Gothic Flamboyant chancel replaced the Romanesque chancel of the abbey church. Finally, work continued up till the 18th century to build the abbey living quarters which make up the south front of the abbey. After being used as a prison during the Revolution and the Second Empire, the abbey was turned over to the Historic Monuments department in 1874, since when it has been open to the public all year round. Since 1969, a monastic community has provided a permanent spiritual presence as well.

The Abbey

At the entrance, through the Bavole Gate, built by Gabriel du Puy in 1590, then following the single street, “Cour de l’Avancée”. On the left, the Burghers’ Guardroom (early 16th century), currently the Tourist Information Office. On the right, the “Michelettes”, English bombards recovered in 1434. The Boulevard Gate (late 15th century). The boulevard or barbican with its embrasures and loopholes. The King’s Gate where the portcullis is visible. Above this gate, the King’s House, today the Town Hall. The arcade house on the right, a pretty timber-framed house. The artichoke house straddling the street. The Siren’s house. The parish church begun during the 11th century and completed in the 17th century with its baptismal fonts, its silver statue of St Michael and its chevet over the street. Lastly begins the Grand Degré stairs, offering a majestic prelude to the “Merveille”, with a view over the vast expanses of sand.

Gastronomy

Mont Saint-Michel is also famous for its hotels and restaurants, with the traditional omelette, leg of lamb, and local specialities of fish and seafood from the Bay.

Souvenirs

In this mediæval town, men and women uphold the tradition of the shopkeepers of the Middle Ages who for over a thousand years have looked after visitors and pilgrims in search of a memento of their stay at the Wonder of the West. Specialities include copperware, pottery and chinaware.

Museums

The museums in the village of Mont Saint-Michel recall the history of the place, with historical re-enactments; old collections (weapons, paintings, sculptures, watches); a unique collection of 250 old model ships; explanation of the tidal phenomenon.