

Art, History, and Legend

CHÂTEAU GRUYÈRES DE



Press kit



A Legendary Castle

The Gruyères Castle is a true landmark where, for eight centuries, art, history, and legends have been living side by side. A designated historic site and public museum since 1939, it provides an unforgettable journey from the Middle Ages to today.

An iconic heritage site in the Canton of Fribourg, the Gruyères Castle is classified as a nationally important historic site. Each year, around 180,000 visitors from around the world discover this former medieval fortress, which is the second most visited castle in Switzerland.

Built on a hill in a breathtaking panorama, the castle was first occupied by the counts who built it in the 13th century, then by the Fribourg bailiffs, who gained control over the region in the 16th century. Finally, in the mid-19th century, a family from Geneva made the castle its summer home, hosting an art colony. This castle has thus witnessed a long, singular history, which the public can discover over the course of their visit through its collections. The historic halls from the counts' residence, all furnished, speak to the three main eras in the castle's history, while the items in its collections reflect the day-to-day life of its successive owners.

In line with its tradition of welcoming live artists, which started in the mid-19th century, the Gruyères Castle boasts a wide array of temporary exhibitions on contemporary artists, as well as cultural events highlighting the former fortress's history and rekindling its understanding.



↑ Medallion Room | photo E. Francey
 ↗ Legends' Room | photo E. Francey
 ↓ Knights' Room | photo E. Francey





↑ Kitchen | photo E. Francey
 ↓ Baillifs' Room | photo. E. Francey
 ↘ Garden | photo E. Francey



Eight Centuries of History

The Gruyères Castle was first occupied by the counts who built it, then by the Fribourg bailiffs, then by the Bovy and Balland families from Geneva. In 1938, the Fribourg Government repurchased its former property.

A RESIDENCE FOR THE COUNTS OF GRUYÈRE

Legend has it that seeing a crane (grue in French) fly over the Gruyères hill, the first count, Gruerius I, decided to build his castle there and use the bird as his emblem. In reality, although the Gruyère counts were one of the largest families in Western Switzerland and one of the longest-lived European dynasties in the Middle Ages, very little is known of their origin and history.

Historical sources mention the Gruyères fortress for the first time in 1244, when count Rodolphe III paid a tribute to Peter II of Savoy. Originally, the castle is a carré savoyard (“Savoy square”), a military building modeled after the House of Savoy, to which the Gruyère counts were vassals.

Over the centuries, this stronghold turned into a comfortable, elegant residence. Thanks to the major renovations led by Count Louis in the 15th century and his successors in the 16th century, it became the signorial residence we know today.

While the castle was never attacked, the Gruyère counts participated in famous battles, alongside the King of France during the One Hundred Years’ War or with the Confederates during the Burgundian Wars. While they were successful at the time, their spending habits eventually led them to bankruptcy. In 1554, crippled by debt, Count Michel had to relinquish his property and land to his creditors, the Cities of Bern and Fribourg.

THE FRIBOURG BAILIFFS AT THE CASTLE

From 1555 to 1798, the Fribourg bailiffs occupied the Castle to govern the former Gruyères County. They developed sales of locally made cheese—the now famous Gruyère AOP—and continued to expand Alpine pastureland to increase cheese production and facilitate its export abroad. The wheels of cheese, carried to Lake Geneva, were then taken to Lyon along the Rhône river. France viewed Gruyère cheese as a strategic product, keeping the Royal Navy and the Army stocked while at sea or on a campaign, respectively.

During the Bailiff era, the Castle did not experience any significant changes, instead retaining its general appearance. There are few traces of this era left: wooden galleries, the ceiling in the Medallions Hall, and the murals in the Bailiffs Hall, with its heraldic stained-glass windows and its earthenware stove. Following the Bailiffs, the fortress was occupied by the prefects until 1848, when the seat of the new Gruyère District was established in Bulle. Then, the former Counts’ residence, which was considered a symbol of the olden times and too costly to maintain, was auctioned off.

From a Fortress to an Art Colony

In the mid-19th century, the Gruyères Castle was home to the first art colony in Switzerland. Its owners contributed to making it a legendary place. In 1938, the Fribourg Government bought back its former property and opened it to the public.

AN ART COLONY

In the mid-19th Century, the Bovy family, from Geneva, purchased the Castle. Three brothers, Jean-François (a.k.a. John), Daniel, and Antoine, made it their summer home and hosted Switzerland's first art colony. A student of French painter Jean Auguste-Dominique Ingres, Daniel Bovy invited his artist friends and their disciples to the Castle to paint and rest during the summer. Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot, Barthélémy Menn, and Henri Baron were among the famous guests whose traces are still visible on the Castle's walls.

Daniel Bovy wanted to celebrate the golden age of the Gruyère Counts. With the help of the colony, he set up and decorated the new halls with old furniture found at antique stores. This reaches its culmination in the Knights' Hall, where he interpreted the region's history through a set of paintings, combining major feats in the Counts' history with regional legends. The Castle remained a hotspot for artists for many decades.

The Bovy brothers, followed by Louis-Emile Balland, John's son-in-law, invested their fortune to build the legend and make the Castle a centerpiece of Helvetic imagery. In the late 19th century, the myths surrounding the former medieval fortress were sealed into collective imagination by tales, travel guides, postcards, and popular celebrations.

In 1938, the Fribourg Government bought back its former property from the Balland family. A jewel of cultural heritage, the Castle becomes a nationally important site, visited by an ever-increasing flow of people. In 1993, the Canton Government made the Gruyères Castle Foundation responsible for curating, managing, and organizing events.



↖ Auguste Baud-Bovy, *Berger scrutant l'horizon*, 1866 | photo P. Bosshard
 ↗ Furet Room | photo E. Francey
 ↓ Corot Room | photo E. Francey





↑ Burgundian Room | photo E. Francey
 ↙ Sonia Kacem exhibition | photo A. Wetter
 ↘ Daniela Droz exhibition | photo Daniela&Tonatiuh



Collections and Exhibitions

The collections at the Gruyères Castle are home to masterpieces speaking to its long history. Nowadays, in line with its tradition of welcoming live artists, it features a vast array of temporary exhibitions.

C O L L E C T I O N S

The Gruyères Castle offers a discovery route to explore its three major eras: the Counts, the Bailiffs, and the Art Colony. With its historic halls and collections, the public can travel through eight centuries of art, history, and legends.

The original halls, with their thick walls, highlight the defensive purpose of the original Gruyères fort. As they walk through the Castle, visitors can familiarize themselves with the history of the counts, some of whom shone in the battlefield, especially against Charles the Bold. The Burgundy capes, to be seen in one of the halls, are part of the loot from the 1476 Battle at Morat, retrieved by Confederate troops, with their formidable pikemen and halbardiers.

The journey continues to the Bailiffs Hall, where visitors can discover the Old Regime décor and rare relics from the era, including Master Cuen's murals from 1685-86.

Then, visitors can delve into the life of the art colony, which, in the mid-19th century, began gathering around Daniel Bovy and his family every summer. The region is a wonderful source of inspiration for artists, who readily set up their easels in the surrounding nature. The Corot Salon is a sumptuous illustration of the work of the painters who worked together at the Castle. On the woodwork, Daniel Bovy set a model for the decor and defined a layout for the paintings made by the Colony's artists. Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot (1796 – 1875), considered one of the forefathers of impressionism, painted the four medallions in the salon. Alongside him is Barthélemy Menn (1815 – 1893), a painter from Geneva. In 1857, the two friends painted a number of landscapes as part of an artistic dialog on a common theme.

The tour culminates in the Knights' Hall, featuring a set of paintings celebrating the golden age of the Gruyère Counts. The most famous piece in the castle, it has left a profound mark on many visitors and shaped Gruyères' imagery.

At the end of the tour, visitors still have the Castle's garden to discover. Designed in the French style by its last owners, the garden is open from Easter to October. During the rest of the year, visitors can marvel at it from the Grand Tour Hall or the Castle walls.

TEMPORARY EXHIBITIONS

The tradition of welcoming live artists, started by the Bovy-Balland family, continues to this day at the Gruyères Castle. Each year, temporary exhibitions feature contemporary Swiss and international artists for the public's enjoyment. While some spaces are dedicated specifically to these exhibitions (Arched Room and Former Arsenal), the historical tour also features contemporary artwork. By occupying walls, artists create a dialog between their work and the Castle, its history and its collections, opening up new perspectives. A nationally important heritage site, the Gruyères Castle also showcases tradition and history. Its fourth and latest yearly exhibition focused on the history of Christmas celebrations, their history, rites, and customs, both past and present.

Cultural Events

Each year, the Gruyères Castle lets visitors of all ages discover its fascinating history under new themes as part of must-see cultural events.

ST. JOHN'S DAY MEDIEVAL FESTIVAL

In late June, a bustling Castle invites the public to celebrate St. John's Day Medieval Festival. With over one hundred actors in 15th century wear, this event debunks clichés on the Middle Ages, offering historical reenactments in line with current knowledge, in a warm, festive atmosphere. Through the years, visitors have discovered the universe of knights and combat instructors, medieval games, as well as the architecture and construction techniques of the time. Each year has its own theme so there is always something to discover!

SWISS CASTLE DAY AND MUSEUM NIGHT

The Gruyères Castle is a member of various organizations: ICOM Switzerland (International Council of Museums), Swiss Museums' Association (AMS), Fribourg Canton Museums' Association (AMCF), Musées en Gruyère, Glâne et Pays-d'Enhaut, and Les Châteaux Suisses. Alongside the latter two, the Gruyères Castle participates in two annual events: Swiss Castle Day on the first Sunday of November and Museum Night on the second Saturday of November.

Member institutions always organize these events around a common theme. Visitors to the Gruyères Castle can rediscover the place in a new light and delve into its history thanks to original events.



⚓ Music event by Nørn trio,
 Swiss Castle Day
 photo Gruyères Castle
 ↗ Mapping by Camille Scherrer,
 Gruyères Museum Night
 photo Gruyères Castle
 ↓ St. John's Day Medieval Festival
 photo Gruyères Castle





↑ **Augmented-Reality Audioguide** | photo Daniela&Tonatiuh, design Camille Scherrer
 ↙ **Chalamala Trail** | photo E. Heuberger
 ↘ **Story Telling Tour** | photo Gruyères Castle



See it Your Way!

As a museum, the Gruyères Castle endeavors to help various audiences visit the Castle based on their desires, pace, or curiosity. With the various discovery routes on offer, everyone can get what they need.

DISCOVERY FOR ALL ROUTES AUDIENCES

On the standard route, offered in three languages (French, German, and English) on the information terminals available in the historic halls, visitors can become familiar with the Castle's rich history, the artworks, and the furniture. A paper exhibition guide is also available in twelve other languages. For a captivating, family-friendly visit, two routes are designed specifically for a younger audience. With the "Gruyères Castle Bestiary," children ages six and under can observe the castle with eagle eyes to find the animals hidden in the various halls. On the "Chalamala Route," (in French and German), school-age children can discover local history by following in the footsteps of Gruyères' famous fool. Each time Chalamala appears on an info terminal, young visitors are invited to learn from a text written specifically for them, offering both historical information and fun riddles.

AN INNOVATIVE AUGMENTED- REALITY AUDIOGUIDE

Since 2022, the "Château de Gruyères+" smartphone app has featured an augmented-reality audioguide (available in French, German, and English). Visitors can hear the Castle's Voice as they explore the former Counts' residence and learn its history and secrets. An original, first-of-its-kind creation, the AR experience opens a window into a hidden, poetic universe where many stories are told. The application also lets art and history buffs access detailed information on a selection of artwork, objects, or architectural features.

UNIQUE GUIDED TOURS

Groups may book a variety of guided tours and events at the Gruyères Castle. Following experienced guides, visitors discover the various facets of the castle and, if they choose to include it, the medieval town of Gruyères. Castle staff also offer treasure hunts and storytelling walks for younger audiences.

Groups can also opt for the unique, original experience of an express visit (1 hour) or a musical tour, narrated by a soprano guide interspersing her explanations with musical interludes drawing on the Castle's various occupants.

Facts and Figures

Number of visitors to the Gruyères Castle in 2024

185 921

Origin of visitors in 2024 (en %)

Switzerland

44

Europe

29,5

North America

14

Asia

5

South America

5

Rest of the World

2,5

Exhibitions and Cultural Events in 2024

Temporary Exhibitions

4

Cultural Events

5

Guided Tours and Activities Offered

Guided Tours

4

Activities

3

Miscellaneous

Age of Castle in Centuries

8

Tour Route

6

Spaces Open to Public in m²

4300



Courtyard | photo David Gagnebin-de Bons

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