

## The Château de Chillon

However, none of Vauban's grandiose and forbidding constructions come anywhere close to the fame and beauty of the most celebrated castle of the French-speaking area of the Alps. Built on a narrow promontory of land on the northern side of Lake Geneva, the Château de Chillon is one of the best preserved medieval castles in Europe. In her novel *Hotel du Lac* Anita Brookner describes the place as a "...dour, grim, rebarbative silhouette, a corrective to the dazzle of water"—but it is also a romantic place, seemingly floating on the lake, its turrets shimmering in the mist and framed by the high peaks of the Savoy Alps which rise on the lake's southern shore. There are traces of Bronze Age settlements on this site, but the first fortress built here was a Roman construction, whose purpose was to extract tolls from traders heading along the road that ran along the lake's northern shore up to the Great St. Bernard Pass. In the early Middle Ages the property was in the hands of the wealthy and powerful Bishops of Sion, who passed it on to the rulers of Savoy in 1150. In the thirteenth century Peter II of Savoy turned the place into a princely residence where the nobility of Savoy indulged in lavish entertainment and water-side debauchery. Even so, the castle's defensive role was retained, and this duality of function is still clear today: the dark, dank dungeons and strong walls are still intact, but the rest of the castle features beautifully-decorated rooms with wonderful views over the lake, set around irregular cobbled courtyards and covered wooden walkways that run along the walls. Although many of the palatial rooms were extensively renovated in the sixteenth century, the kitchen still has its original ceiling and pillars dating from Peter's rebuilding of the fort in 1260, and the small, dark, vaulted chapel bears traces of frescoes from the same era.

During the early sixteenth century, when the House of Savoy was squaring up to the ever-growing power of the Habsburgs, the castle took on the role of prison and a garrison centre. The most famous prisoner held here was the scholar François Bonivard, who angered the Savoyards by inciting the people of Geneva to form an alliance with the Swiss confederation against Savoy. His dungeon is really a wide, vaulted passage, gloomy on account of the high, thin windows, and dank through the nearness of the lapping waters; a line of seven sturdy columns hold up the roof vaulting (Bonivard was chained to the fifth). In 1536 the Bernese army took control of the fortress from the Savoyards and released Bonivard, who by that time had been held for six years; the Bernese then used the building as a depot and armoury and a residence for their bailiffs, and in 1798 passed it on to the Canton of Vaud. The turn of the nineteenth century marked the start of the great era of Alpine tourism, and two visitors to the castle at this time were the English poets Byron and Shelley, who were taken round in 1816 and were told the story of Bonivard by a tourist guide; Byron went back to his hotel and retold the tale in his famous poem *The Prisoner of Chillon*. Of the dungeon itself, Shelley wrote that he had never seen "a monument more terrible of cold and inhuman tyranny," while Byron famously carved his name onto one of the pillars.

The poem made Byron, and the Château de Chillon, famous in Europe and America. Mark Twain visited the place in 1880 and put a characteristic tongue-in-cheek twist on the story that Byron had told. "Bonivard's dungeon was a nice, cool roomy place, and I cannot see why he should have been so dissatisfied with it," he remarks sardonically. "It has romantic window-slits that let in generous bars of light, and it has tall, noble columns,

carved apparently from the living rock; and what is more, they are written all over with thousands of names, some of them—like Byron’s and Victor Hugo’s—of the first celebrity. Why didn’t he amuse himself reading these names? I think Bonivard’s sufferings have been overrated.” Twain also commented on the “swarms” of tourists (“what was to hinder Bonivard having a good time with them?”) and to this day the castle is one of the most popular and iconic tourist attractions in the western Alps, with a multitude of foreign tongues echoing around its dingy dungeon and resplendent palatial rooms (the information guide is available in twenty languages, including Catalan and Lithuanian, although most visitors seem to be English or Japanese). The walk to the château from Vevey is particularly pleasant, along the lakefront promenade shaded by verdant tropical foliage. Only up close does the castle disappoint, as it is almost pushed into the lake by the railway and road that squeeze along the narrow ledge between the defensive walls and the mountainside—offering a very different prospect to the one painted by J. M.W. Turner in the early nineteenth century, when the castle was the only building visible on a lake shore otherwise covered by woods and fields.

