

Heritage tours of the submarine base

The submarine base

A guided tour to discover the construction, use and history of this strategic place, access to KIII bunker included.

Meeting point: Cité de la Voile Eric Tabarly

Information: Architecture and Cultural Heritage Office - 02 97 02 23 29

Submarine S645 Flore

Visit the Flore submarine, fifth in the series of high performance Daphne type submarines, and its interactive museum.

Information: 02 97 65 52 87

Submarine museum of the Region of Lorient

Opened in 1999, the first museum space at Keroman tells stories of submarine wrecks, some of them near the bay of Lorient. It also houses one of the oldest rescue simulators for submariners. Inaugurated in 1942, it is the only one open to the public in Europe.

Information: 02 97 37 27 99

Extend your visit to the city

The air-raid shelter

Located under the place Alsace-Lorraine in the heart of the city, this shelter housed 400 people, both civilians and German occupiers during the bombings. Preserved in its original condition, it is a testimony to the torments suffered by Lorient's population during the war.

Access by guided tour only
Information: Architecture and Cultural Heritage Office – 02 97 02 23 29

Discover the story of Lorient, a Town of Art and History...
...with a guide appointed by the ministry of culture and communication.

The guide knows all the facets of Lorient and provides the key details of each place, so that you can better understand the development of the city and its districts. Don't hesitate to ask him any questions you may have.

The Architecture and Cultural Heritage Office, which coordinates the initiatives of Lorient, Town of Art and History has designed this information brochure. It offers various tours and projects throughout the year.

Groups

Lorient, Town of Art and History, offers guided tours for groups by reservation throughout the year.

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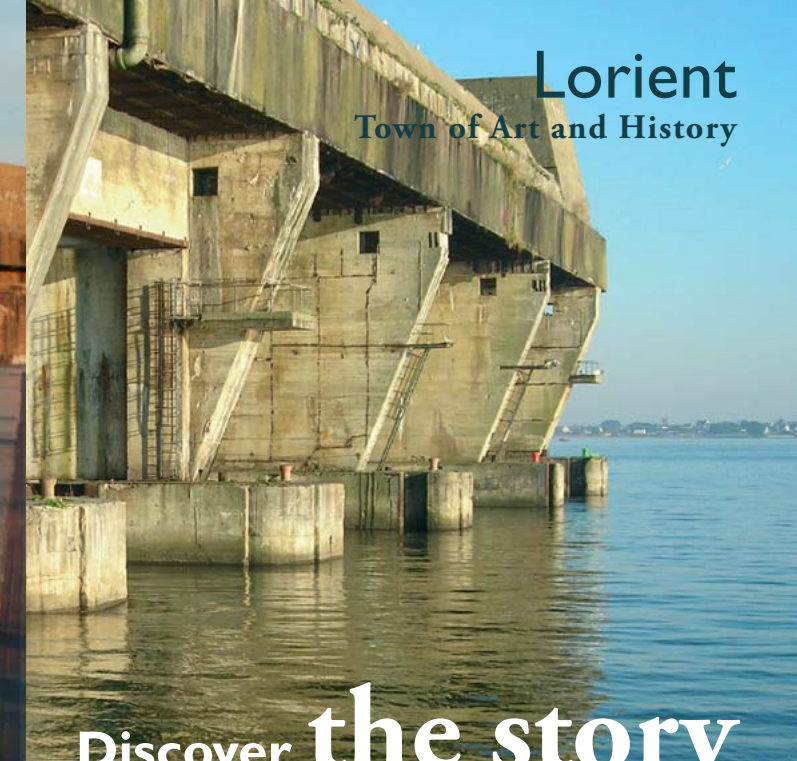
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Photos courtesy of : Paul Le Bozec, Chloé Blandin, Dominique Richard, Sébastien Defrade - Text: Claire Le Peltier - Architecture and Cultural Heritage Office – City of Lorient - Translation: Gwenaëlle Riou - August 2015
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“The only thing that ever really frightened me during the war was the U-boat peril”

Quotation from the memoirs of Sir Winston Churchill



Lorient
Town of Art and History

Discover **the story**
of the
submarine base

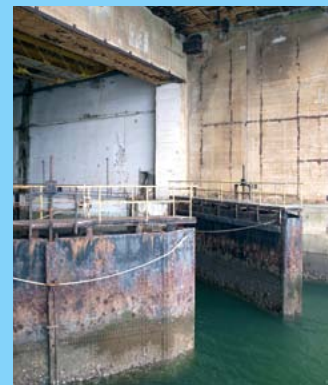


LORIENT
LA BASE

Lorient at the heart of the Battle of the Atlantic

When France surrendered to Germany in June 1940, Vice-admiral Karl Dönitz, commander in chief of the German submarine fleet, decided to build one of the five Atlantic coast submarine bases in Lorient. The first U-boats arrived in the Lorient dockyard in July 1940, but the biggest complex of buildings constructed in France by the Todt Organisation during World War II would be located on the Keroman peninsula. Dönitz' headquarters were established at Kernével point at the entrance to the bay, facing the submarine base under construction on the opposite side. Dönitz fought the Battle of the Atlantic from Lorient. His strategy was to cut off the United Kingdom by preventing supplies from reaching the island.

It wasn't long before the allied forces retaliated. The British Royal Air Force attacked the dockyard on 2nd September 1940 and dropped explosive and incendiary bombs on the city on 27th September. This was only the beginning of a long series of bombings. In December 1942, Churchill's War Cabinet decided to destroy Lorient. Between mid-January and mid-February 1943,



eight deadly bombings devastated the city centre. The allied forces focused on disrupting supply networks and weakening the civil workforce based in Lorient to counter the German strategy during the Battle of the Atlantic.

Against this background, Lorient developed its passive defence. From February 1941, the bombing alert and surveillance network was improved and six underground concrete shelters were built on the orders of the German authorities. The air-raid shelter at the place Alsace Lorraine remains, testament to the defensive system protecting the civilians as well as the German occupiers from the bombings.



Early infrastructures: the Scorff base and the dombunkers

The German High Command quickly decided that the dockyard facilities on the Scorff river quay were not suitable for conducting the Battle of the Atlantic and protecting submarines against air raids.

Fritz Todt, the 3rd Reich's fortification engineer, first designed the small Scorff submarine base. From September 1941, its pens could house two type II or type VII U-boats at high tide.

Meanwhile, **two dombunkers** were built, one on either side of the slipway ramp in the fishing harbour. Covered by pointed barrel vaults and served by a rail system, these huge spaces served as careening areas for submarines.

The Keroman base

In Lorient, little did people know about the scale of the upcoming projects. In December 1940, the tip of the Keroman peninsula was requisitioned. All of the buildings were destroyed to make space for the largest submarine base in French territory.

Between February 1941 and January 1943, 15,000 workers built three concrete bunkers successively, representing a total reinforced concrete volume of 1 Mn cubic

metres. The new Keroman submarine base could withstand the most powerful bombs of the time and house more than twenty-five submarines.



A new system for a dry base: the slipway

Built during 1941, the **KI and KII bunkers** face each other and are connected by a 285 feet wide central apron for manoeuvring submarines. This dry base used an unprecedented system allowing the submarines to be lifted clear of the water, **the slipway**, and

a **mobile trolley** that moved sideways to serve the 12 pens of the KI and KII bunkers. The submarine, anchored to its cradle, was then manoeuvred into the chosen pen by one of two specially designed **trucks**.

Keroman I

- > Date of construction: February to September 1941
- > Length: 394 feet
- > Width: 279 feet
- > Height: 59 feet
- > Roof thickness: 12 feet

KI is divided into five pens closed by armoured doors, plus one wet pen (the slipway pen) and a space designed for its hoist winch.

Keroman II

- > Date of construction: May to December 1941
- > Length: 394 feet
- > Width: 453 feet
- > Height: 59 feet
- > Roof thickness: 12 feet

KII is divided into seven pens plus one garage housing the mobile trolley and the two trucks (currently the Flore museum).

A town under concrete

As construction work progressed and new developments allowed its autonomy, the base became a true "town" under the concrete. An electrical and thermal power station and a tower where submariners trained for emergency exits in the event of a shipwreck were built at KI. Equipped with a protected transformer, KII bunker also includes a barracks that could house up to 1,000 submariners and numerous storage tanks and

spaces. KIII is surrounded by reinforced warehouses on the landward side on three levels. A tunnel links the three bunkers and provides them with the fluids needed to carry out their activities.

The base, and especially KIII bunker, housed men and equipment during the siege of the pocket of Lorient that lasted until 10th May 1945.

Keroman III, a wet pen bunker

- > Date of construction: October 1941 to January 1943
- > Length: 453 feet
- > Width: 558 feet
- > Height: 67 feet
- > Roof thickness: 25 feet

The KIII bunker wasn't built for the same purpose as the two other bunkers. With seven wet docks capable of housing 13 submarines, this bunker has a more classical shape and is quite similar to the other submarine bases of the Atlantic wall (Saint-Nazaire, Bordeaux...). It features a roof that is 25 feet thick (and even up to 30 feet in some areas), a thickness linked to the growing weight of bombs dropped by the allied forces.

Keroman IV, the unfinished project

Intended to house 24 submarines, two additional bunkers extending the dry base until the fishing harbour remained incomplete in April 1944, due to a shortage of materials and the imminence of D-Day. The side wall of the future train station bordering the two tracks of KIII's railway can still be seen today.



The French base

The Keroman site was used by the French navy from 1945 as the concrete shelters were never seriously damaged during the war.

On 6th July 1946, the Keroman base was named after general engineer Jacques Strosskopf. Former head of the new construction section at the Lorient dockyard, he provided valuable information about the base's strategic activities to a resistance network during the German occupation. He was eventually deported to the Struthof concentration camp and executed by the Nazis on 1st September 1944.

Upon liberation, these facilities allowed for an immediate restart of the dockyard's operations and boosted investments during the reconstruction period. In 1995, the Ministry of Defence unveiled a restructuring plan which included the withdrawal from use of the site, which was not suitable for the new generation of nuclear powered submarines. In February

1997, the departure for Toulon of the "Sirene", the last submarine based in Keroman, marked the end of the military presence at the point of Keroman.

The Keroman submarine base represents a major concern for public finances and a challenge for entrepreneurship. In the late nineties, various regeneration projects were considered, leading to the development of a nautical hub highlighting the cultural and tourism assets of the site. The Atlantic Wall, stretching across Europe from Norway to the border between France and Spain, has a major international heritage dimension and is of primary interest in understanding twentieth century history.

