

Brno's Špilberk Castle, founded in the second half of the 13th century, has undergone many changes over the centuries. The castle's transformation from the Gothic castle of Bohemian kings and the seat of Moravian margraves into a massive Baroque fortress began in the mid-17th century. In the mid-18th century, together with the equally fortified town of Brno, it formed the most important fortress system in Moravia. The CASEMATES, finished in 1742, were part of the fortification system of the Špilberk citadel, which was partly designed by the prominent fortress builder Colonel engineer Pierre Philippe Bechade de Rochepine.

- According to military terminology, casemates are spaces safe from shelling, usually vaulted, located in underground and above-ground fortress structures. At Špilberk, they were used as a storage and they also functioned as a shelter for the local reinforced garrison in case of a threat to the fortress.
- In 1783, as part of the reforms of the Austrian prison system, Emperor Joseph II decided to establish a prison for the most dangerous criminals at the Špilberk fortress. In addition to the older prison building, located in the rear moat, he ordered the upper floor of the northern casemates to be rebuilt for prison purposes (the so-called Josephian tract). After the completion of this conversion, the first prisoners were placed here in June 1784. Half a year later—in December 1784—another order of the Emperor was carried out to put criminals sentenced to life imprisonment in the lower floor, „the deepest and worst casemates“. For this purpose, 29 individual cells were gradually constructed, made of thick planks and beams, to which the prisoners were chained permanently. During 1785, the upper floor of the southern casemates was also converted into a prison but it was not used until the time of Joseph's successor Leopold II. („Leopoldian tract“). In May 1790, Leopold abolished the imprisonment of life convicts in the lower casemates, including the punishment of chaining to the wooden planks, and introduced other alleviations for convicts. However, the upper floors of the casemates served as a prison until the early 1830s.
- Only „ordinary“ criminals, mainly murderers, robbers and arsonists, were imprisoned in the mass cells (depending on their size, designed for 12 to 50 people), sentenced both to life imprisonment and to longer, more severe types of imprisonment. In terms of its purpose and character, the Špilberk casemates were the harshest prison in the entire Austrian monarchy. People of higher status and the so-called state prisoners were not held in these premises. The rooms on the upper floor of the old prison building in the rear moat were originally intended for them, and later also part of the barracks buildings, especially the northern wing. The originally ground-floor building was converted into prison cells (each cell for two people) and increased to one-floor building in 1800. It then contained „arrests“ for state prisoners, where Italian Carbonari and other fighters against Habsburg absolutism were held against their wills.
- Špilberk military fortress with the growing prison, which had been under civilian administration since the reform of Joseph II in 1783, brought many problems and mutual disagreements. After the destruction of

important parts of the Špilberk fortress system by the departing French army of Emperor Napoleon in 1809, the fortress lost its military significance and was closed in 1820. The entire Špilberk castle became a civilian prison and extensive reconstructions in the 1830s and 1840s completely changed its character. At the beginning of the 1830s, the new prison premises and the advancing humanisation of the prison system brought about the end of casemate prisons.

- With the last modifications in 1833, some of the large cells were changed into smaller correction cells, which were then still used for a while, although rarely, for short-term punishments for serious offences against the prison regulations. The prison at Špilberk was abolished by the Emperor Franz Joseph I in 1855 and the castle buildings served military needs again for more than 100 years as barracks and military prison.
- The CASEMATES as a former famous prison were first opened to the public in 1880 after two years of modifications thanks to Anton Costa-Rossetti, the then director of military buildings in Brno. For more than 100 years, they enjoyed great interest among visitors and became one of the biggest tourist attractions of Brno and Moravia. Already when they were opened, they were shrouded in a number of romantic and, above all, terrifying myths and legends, that, however, greatly contradicted the historical reality. For years, these myths and legends grew ➔ and permeated the general awareness and literature, including tourist guides. The original appearance of the casemates has also changed considerably. This was mainly due to the German army's modifications at the very end of World War II, when an air-raid shelter for the garrison at Špilberk was being built in the northern casemates.
- The extensive reconstruction of the casemates in 1987-92, caused by their nearly dilapidated condition, attempted to return them to their original form from the late 18th or early 19th century, from the time of their transformation from a fortress building into the worst prison of the Josephine era. This period is also commemorated by the current installation of some of the interior spaces of the casemates, which is an attempt to bring contemporary visitors closer to the actual appearance of the local prison in the times of Joseph II. Other uses of Špilberk, also known as the „Prison of Nations“— imprisoning supporters of the French Revolution, Hungarian Jacobins, Italian patriots, Polish revolutionaries, serving as prison during and after World War I, especially during the Nazi occupation—are commemorated by the exhibition in the authentic rooms on the ground floor of the north wing of the castle.
- The current presentation of the casemates as a unique exhibition of Baroque fortress architecture and the prison system of the Josephine era is based on the study of original plans, written documents and contemporary artefacts and is the joint work of historians of the Brno City Museum, Brno architects and builders.

spilberk.cz ↗

➔ Popular myths and legends

Rat drain (site 2)

Allegedly, defiant criminals were to be chained by the legs to the bottom of the drain and then left at the mercy of the hungry rats. This is how Rossetti describes one of the punishments in his guide-book, but he does not forget to point out that this rumour is not confirmed and is only given as an interesting titbit.

Torture chamber (site 5)

The installation of torture devices gave rise to one of the false legends about the Špilberk torture chambers. These devices were first installed here in 1880 and laid the foundation for this legend. In reality, there was never a „torture chamber“ at Špilberk. The so-called torture justice was used until the 1870s in judicial interrogation. The replicas of the torture devices are based on engravings from the Criminal Code and museum originals.

Wet Beds (site 9)

Unfaithful women were to be walled up alive in niches in the wall. Ice cold water dripped from the holes in the vault onto their heads until they went mad. This kind of barbaric punishment did not exist in our territory at the end of the 18th century. It is very likely that these niches in the wall were created after 1880 with the intention of presenting them as „Wet Beds“.

Hunger dungeon (site 19)

This was the alleged location of the hunger dungeon. However, it is a legend from a later time. There used to be a hunger dungeon at Špilberk, but in different times and different part of the castle.

Gas chambers, guillotine room (site 27)

After the end of World War II, visitors to the casemates could learn that the Nazis had planned to build gas chambers and a guillotine room in these premises. However, there is no proof of this.

Emperor Joseph II. (site 28)

According to one of the stories, the Emperor Joseph II was supposed to lock himself in one of these cells for an hour and then declare that no one should be imprisoned there anymore. The truth is that it was Joseph II who introduced this cruel form of punishment.

Cells of famous Špilberk prisoners

In 1880, cells with portraits of famous Špilberk prisoners were installed on the first floor of the northern barracks to make tours more impressive. These were, for example, Václav Babinský (site 17), Silvio Pellico (site 21) or Franz Trenck (site 25). In reality none of these people were imprisoned in the casemates.

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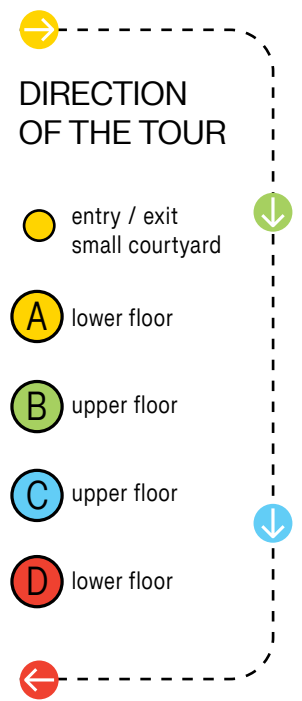
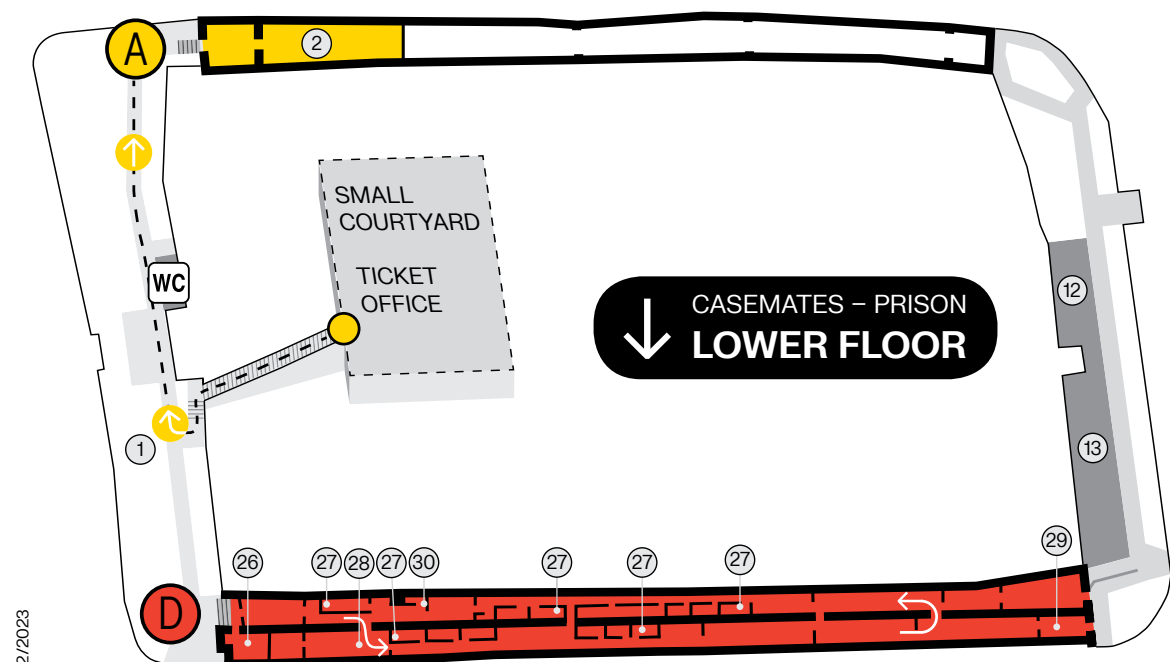
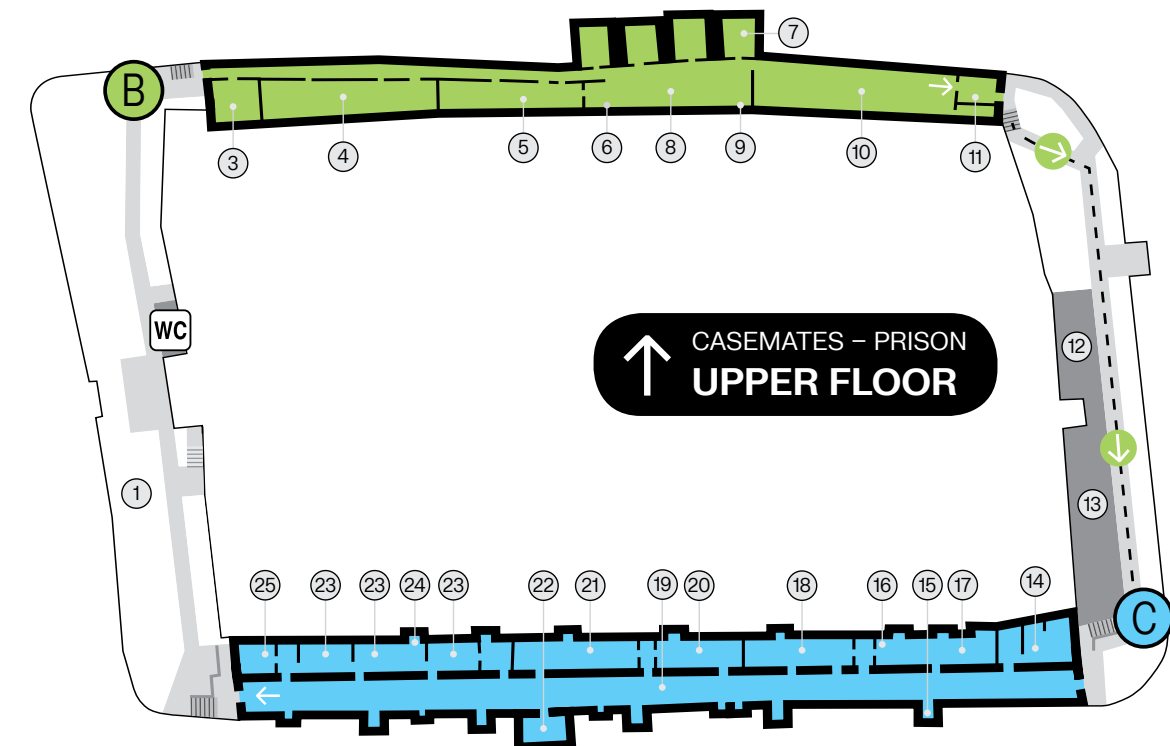
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SCALE
10 meter

FRONT MOAT

1 Plan of the moats and casemates - conversion to a prison (1784)

A B SOUTHERN CASEMATES / (the so-called Leopoldian tract)

A LOWER FLOOR (1742) – not used for prison purposes

2 The remains of a drainage gutter from the rear moat, connected to a drainage shaft under the southern wall of the front moat.

B UPPER FLOOR – converted into a prison in 1785, used since approx. 1790

3 Room for prison guards (1785) – installation

4 Cell for 29 prisoners (1798) – installation

The tiled stove was heated from the preserved hearths in the corridor

5 Cell for 23 prisoners

6 The upper casemates were partially illuminated by daylight coming through the skylight shafts during the day, and by five oil lamps in the corridor at night

7 Bread ovens (1745), later demolished and their chimneys extended into ventilation shafts (1805)

8 Cell for 27 prisoners (1798) – the damaged wall of the corridor was mostly removed in 1980. In 1785–90 there were 31 wooden cells for life convicts here and in the previous two cells.

9 A reminder of one of the most famous Špilberk legends. The carved brickwork in the wall (built in 1785) served to create the nonsensical legend of walled-up unfaithful women with water dripping on their heads. The idea and its installation were created at the beginning of the 20th century.

10 The cell for 50 prisoners (1798) – the largest one at Špilberk – still spans the full width of the casemate corridor even after the modifications to the prison. Plank beds were located on both long sides, the stove in the back corner was heated together with the stove of the guards from the adjacent chamber.

11 Room for guards – entrance to the rear moat (1785)

REAR MOAT

12 Remains of a ground-floor prison building (built in October 1783). Cell for 8 prisoners, an anteroom with a hearth and a room for two guards

13 The foundations of a two-floor prison building (1st half of the 18th century)

On the ground floor: cells for 16, 22 and 8 prisoners, a room for

two guards and two anterooms with hearths (1783–84). The first and second floors were originally intended for the so-called state prisoners and people of higher status. In 1783, the second floor housed the apartment of the chief prevost (prison warden), a room for guards and three rooms for state prisoners, two of which were converted into a shoemaker's and tailor's workshop in 1785. On the first floor, in addition to the room for the subprevost and two guards, there were also four cells for a total of 28 prisoners (1783), that were converted into a prison hospital in June 1784. The change of its functions reduced the capacity of the building from 80 prisoners (1783) to 45 (1785). Most of the famous prisoners from before 1783 were probably imprisoned on the upper floor of this building, including Baron Trenck, the colonel of the Pandurs, who died at Špilberk in 1749.

The building was rebuilt in the 1st half of the 19th century; after 1850 it was demolished and the moat was filled up to the floor level of the upper floor of the casemates. During an archaeological survey, the foundations of the building were discovered and the moat was lowered to its original level (1991).

C D NORTHERN CASEMATES / (the so-called Josephian tract)

C UPPER FLOOR – rebuilt as a prison in 1784, restored in 1992.

The prison corridor conserved its original form from 1742, the second corridor was divided by walls into guards' rooms, cells and anterooms with a hearth

14 Guards' room with an anteroom.

15 Skylights – they were bricked up before 1880 and the above-ground part was demolished. Partially restored to its original form (1992).

16 The tiled stove was heated from the hearths in the hallways, using beech wood.

17 Cell for 21 prisoners (1784)

18 Cell for 18 prisoners

19 The opening between the upper and lower floors may originally have been used for transporting stored material. It was not used at the time of the prison's existence and was probably bricked up. Restored in 1880.

20 Cell for 12 prisoners – installation

21 Cell for 22 prisoners – installation

22 Prison kitchen (1784)

A corresponding area of the night watchtower (walled entrance)

was destroyed in 1809 when part of the Špilberk fortification was blown up by French troops by the orders of the Emperor Napoleon.

23 Cell for 33 prisoners – the largest one. Later modifications have been conserved here, i.e., the cross-walls from 1833, where only corrections were made from the original cells for short-term harsh punishment, and the additionally created passages for visitors. Evidence of the structural changes (1833, 1880, after 1921, 1945, etc.), that the casemates went through.

24 The staircase connecting the casemates with the north wing of the castle was built for visitors between 1939–1941 in the place of the skylight.

25 Room for guards (1784)

D LOWER FLOOR – reconstruction of the Josephian cells (1784–90), German army modifications into an air-raid shelter (1945)

26 Room for guards (1785), later used as a mortuary.

27 Structural modifications of the German army into air-raid shelters for the Špilberk garrison from the end of World War II (winter 1944–45).

28 The so-called Josephian cells, wooden chambers for the worst criminals sentenced to life imprisonment, made by order of Joseph II (September to December 1784) and removed in May 1790 by decision of Leopold II. On the lower floor there were 29 of them in 1785 (reconstruction from 1992 according to original sources).

29 Room for guards (1785)

30 Torso of a switchboard for a Siemens & Halske telephone exchange in a German army air raid shelter.

Note: Dates in brackets indicate the year of foundation or first written mention. Installation refers to a museum installation that is an attempt to reconstruct the original condition based on conserved sources.

