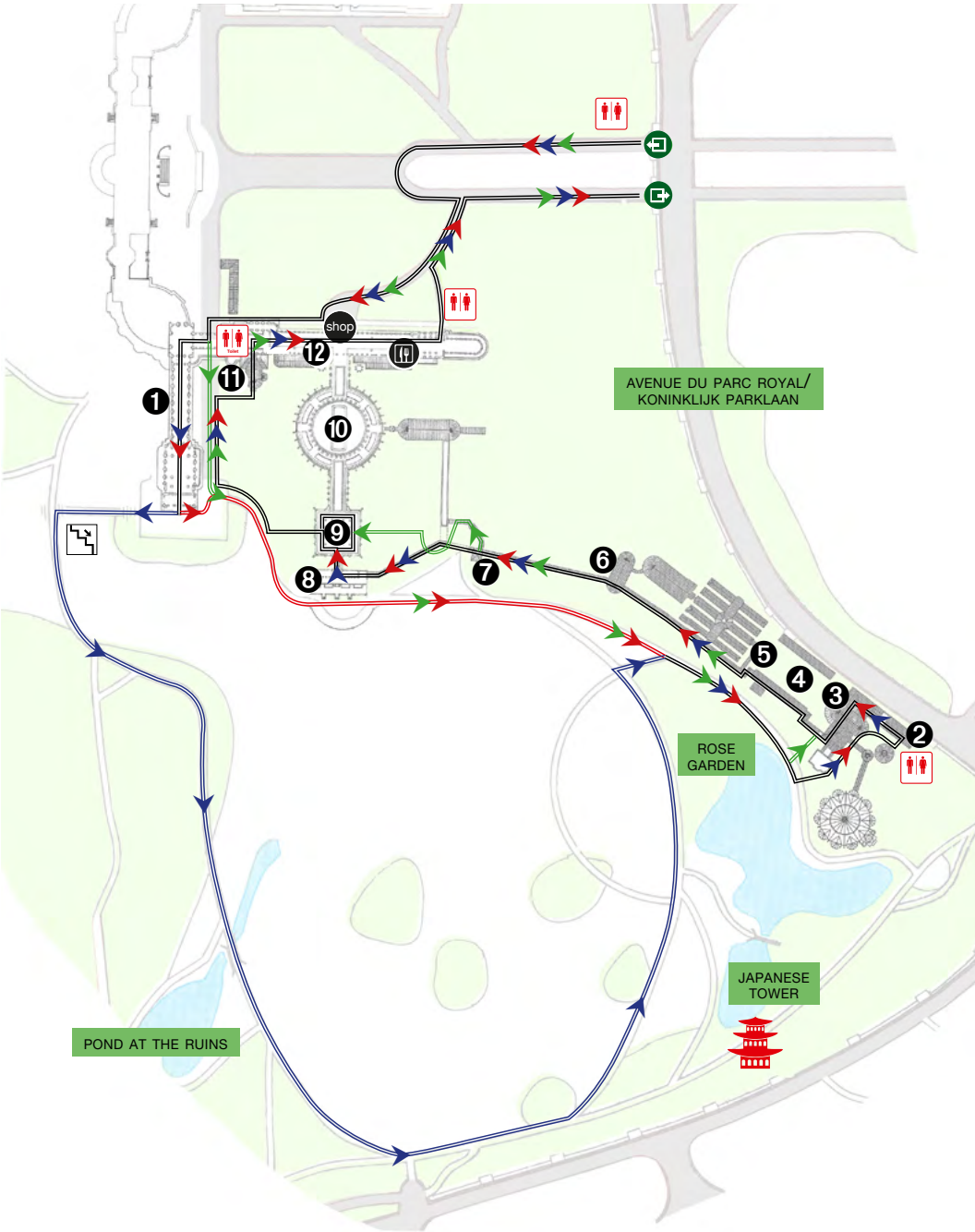
VISITORS' GUIDE
THE ROYAL GREENHOUSES AT LAEKEN



Long walk (not accessible during nocturnes): 3 km

Short walk: 2 km

May 5th: Route suitable for persons with limited mobility

❶ The Grand Gallery of Honour

A major fire raged through Laeken Castle on 1 January 1890. Subsequent renovation works prompted King Leopold II to realise a long-held dream: to greatly expand the castle. Laeken was no longer just to serve as a residence for the Royal Family. An entirely new wing was to be added on the Royal Greenhouses side for large receptions and international meetings. The guests had to enter this Grand Gallery of Honour via a monumental Grand Staircase of Honour.

This new wing was designed by French architect Charles Girault, who wanted to turn it into a small Versailles. He decorated the interior of the Great Gallery of Honour with gold leaf and allegorical paintings on the ceiling. But after the death of King Leopold II in 1909, his successor, King Albert I, decided to cut spending. He had everything soberly painted in a limited colour palette, which greatly lightened the feel of the Gallery of Honour.

The monogram "A" on the ceiling refers to the third king of the Belgians, although he would never really use the Great Gallery of Honour. The hall only been regularly used for official dinners during state visits and receptions since the 1990s (at the initiative of King Albert II and Queen Paola).

❷ Débarcadère and the Palm Plateau

When King Leopold II received guests in the greenhouses, the guests would enter through two separate entrances. Guests arriving by carriage were led to the garden side at the Embarcadère, where a semi-circular esplanade provided room to circulate. Those who came here on foot or by tram could use the convenient entrance on the street side, at the Avenue du Parc Royal/Koninklijke Parklaan. This second entrance is called the Débarcadère.

Today, the Débarcadère is the place where visitors enter the magical world of plants under glass. This is also the entrance to the Palm Plateau, which extends across this higher part of the greenhouse complex. The name 'Palm Plateau' refers to the whole of the greenhouses, the many nurseries, the water supply system, and the Palm Pavilion.

A small gallery with beautiful geraniums gives access to the Débarcadère, and to the cosy Loggia that opens onto the Palm Greenhouse, where the subtropical plants immediately convey the special atmosphere that reigns in this enchanting palace of glass and steel.



Palm House. *Photo Karin Borghouts*

❸ The Palm House

The Palm House is a rectangular building with a high oval transept in the middle. The iron structural elements are decorated with art nouveau floral motifs. A varied collection of subtropical plants grow on either side of the tiled path. To the left, a gallery leads to the Iron Church, while the stairs to the right lead to the Azalea Greenhouse.

❹ The Azalea Greenhouse

This greenhouse was built in 1885 for the cultivation of azaleas. Each spring, the gardeners create a stunning display inside it. Among the flowers stands a bust of Louis Paras, Head Gardener of the Royal Greenhouses in Laeken, from 1921 to 1939. It was sculpted by Queen Elisabeth in her studio.

❺ Queen Elisabeth's Studio

Queen Elisabeth (1876–1965), the wife of King Albert I, is known for her humanitarian efforts during World War I and her keen interest in art and culture. Herself a passionate violinist and sculptor, she mainly made portraits from life of family members, ladies-in-waiting and friends. The clay busts were then mostly cast in plaster – and often in bronze too – or, in exceptional cases, they were carved in marble, and provided with a wooden or stone pedestal. The Queen used to entrust the bronze and marble

versions to a professional, such as the Belgian artist George Minne (1866–1941) or Alfred Courtens (1889–1967). In addition to the completion date, many of her works also bear her monogram, “E”.

The sculpture studio was built in 1938, at the request of Queen Elisabeth, by the architect Fernand Petit (1885–1955), who later designed Brussels South (Midi) station with Adrien and Yvan Blomme. The large, east-facing window overlooking the park ensured maximum light. The building, erected in the style of an English cottage, is in the immediate vicinity of the Palm Pavilion where the Queen lived between 1941 and 1951, after the death of her husband. The studio was preserved in its original state and the objects on display likewise date from the period when the Queen occupied it.

More than eighty years later, the furniture and works of art in the studio were in need of thorough restoration. Thus, the furniture as well as the paintings and plaster busts of the Queen were carefully conserved in 2024-25. The front garden was also given a new planting inspired by the English garden, in harmony with the architectural style of the pavilion, on the occasion of the opening of the Greenhouses.



Queen Elisabeth’s Studio in 1938–39. *Photo Archives of the Royal Palace, Belgium*



The Geranium Gallery. *Photo Karin Borghouts*

❻ The Geranium Gallery and Diana Greenhouse

This 200-metre long gallery is made up of two parts. The first is the Geranium Gallery, which is full of all sorts of geraniums, fuchsias, heliotropes and abutilons. This gallery is above ground as far as the Mirror Greenhouse. Halfway along is the Diana Greenhouse, containing flowering plants, palms and a dombeya.

❼ The Mirror Greenhouse and the Underground Gallery

This is where the second part of the Great Gallery starts. The most eye-catching feature in the Mirror Greenhouse is the imposing royal fern in the centre. A cinnamon tree grows in a corner of the staircase. The Underground Gallery's walls are covered with pruned-back climbing fig (*Ficus pumila*) and oak fern, interspersed with different varieties of elkhorn fern. This path leads to the Embarcadère.

❽ Embarcadère

The Embarcadère, or Platform Greenhouse, dates back to 1886–1888. It was built at the same time as the neighbouring Congo Greenhouse. This is where the royal guests entered the greenhouse complex for receptions. The structure consists of two long parallel sections. A copy of Donatello's sculpture *David* adorns the part that overlooks the castle park. At each end of the other section stand sculptures by Charles Van der Stappen: *L'Aube* and *Le Soir* (*Dawn* and *Evening*). Cinnamon trees stand in the passageway and in the wings, while *Medinilla* are planted in vases that King Leopold II brought from the Far East.



Congo Greenhouse. *Photo Karin Borghouts*

❾ Congo Greenhouse

The Congo Greenhouse was built in 1886-1888 based on plans drawn up by architect Alphonse Balat. It is a square space crowned by an octagonal dome with four small square domes around it. This greenhouse was thoroughly renovated between 2016 and 2019 because the structure had deteriorated due to corrosion caused by condensation.

Originally, the King wanted to put flora from the Congo Basin here. But the tropical trees and plants did not get enough light and warmth in the winter, so they gave way to subtropical vegetation, including several varieties of palms (Australian, Chinese, and Californian), tree ferns, dracaenas, rubber plants, and standard ferns.

The soil is covered with green and yellow moss ferns. The central aisle of the greenhouse runs like a central axis straight through the Palms annexe to the Winter Garden.



⑩ Winter Garden

In summer 2025, extensive works started for the restoration of the "Winter Garden" conservatory. Unfortunately, the greenhouse is not open to the public during the works.

These works concern the main building, the two outbuildings, and the outdoor surroundings. They include restoration of the metal structures and joinery, replacement of all the glassware, renewal of the technical installations (electricity, heating, air conditioning), and restoration of the mosaics.

The aim is to preserve and restore this Belgian heritage gem, but also to reduce the greenhouse's energy consumption and ensure visitor safety.

⑪ Theatre Greenhouse

The Theatre Greenhouse is one of the most recent on the Royal Estate of Laeken. Designed by architect Charles Girault in 1905, it houses the camellias during the winter months.

⑫ Orangery

Rows of orange trees, laurel trees, rhododendrons, camellias and other shrubs are displayed on the esplanade in front of the Orangery and beside the chateau. These plants spend winter in the Orangery and are placed outside in the open air in spring. Two 'minarets' stand above the building, these are the iron chimneys of the heating system for the large greenhouses. The Orangery was built in the early 19th century for King William I of the Netherlands; the Theatre Greenhouse and Banquet Greenhouse were added on either side in the reign of King Leopold II. The main façade was also modified and its entrance arch stamped with Leopold II's monogram.

Origin and history of the Greenhouses

Built in the late 18th century as a summer residence for the governors of the Southern Netherlands, Archduchess Maria Christina of Austria and Duke Albert of Saxony-Teschen, the Castle of Laeken has been used as a residence by the Belgian monarchy since the country's independence. King Leopold I, the first King of the Belgians (who reigned from 1831 to 1865), purchased several adjacent plots of land to increase his estate.

King Leopold II (reigned 1865–1909) wanted to turn Laeken into a 'Palace of the Nation' to host congresses and ceremonies. He extended the castle and estate, redesigned the gardens and decided, in 1868, to build this majestic complex of greenhouses.

He entrusted the construction to the architect, Alphonse Balat. The greenhouses, linking galleries and annexes were built in several phases between 1874 and 1905. After Balat's death, the final extensions and alterations were carried out by architects Henri Maquet and Charles Girault.



The Royal Greenhouses. *Photo Karin Borghouts*

The best botanists, horticulturists and suppliers developed one of the most beautiful collections of flowers and plants on the continent of Europe in the greenhouses. The King himself also regularly brought back new species of plants from his travels abroad. Today's palms do not date back to his time, but some are their direct descendants, grown from seeds taken from the first specimens. From the very beginning, the orange trees, camellias, palms and tree ferns contributed to the splendour of the collection, and this is still the case today.

For thirty years, the King was closely involved with the building and planting of the greenhouses, sparing neither money nor time in order to create something truly unique with his 'city of glass'. He died on 17 December 1909 in the Palm Pavilion, where he lived for the last years of his life, after giving most of his properties and estates to the Belgian state. The independent public body managing this gift is called the Royal Trust and it still manages a large part of the royal estates today.



Photo by Queen Elizabeth, 1910

Origin and history of the Estate

The Royal Greenhouses of Laeken are an integral part of the Royal Estate of Laeken, which has been the residence of the Belgian sovereigns since Belgium's independence.

The estate has undergone many changes over the years: in 1780, it became part of the lands controlled by the Habsburgs, who ruled the Austrian Netherlands at the time. At that time, the Royal Estate of Laeken was used as a second home in the countryside, far from political and administrative concerns.

In 1794, French troops occupied the Austrian Netherlands, putting an end to Habsburg rule in the region. Following the French Revolution, Belgium was one of the lands annexed by France. Napoleon took possession of the Royal Estate of Laeken in 1803.

It was only at the beginning of the 19th century, after Belgian independence and the accession of Leopold I to the throne in 1831, that the Royal Estate of Laeken became the official residence of the Belgian Royal Family, marking a turning point in its history.

Although the Estate grew over time, under the impetus of Leopold I and then above all Leopold II, it acquired its current size and the greenhouses were built. Since then, they have traditionally been open to the public for three weeks every spring.

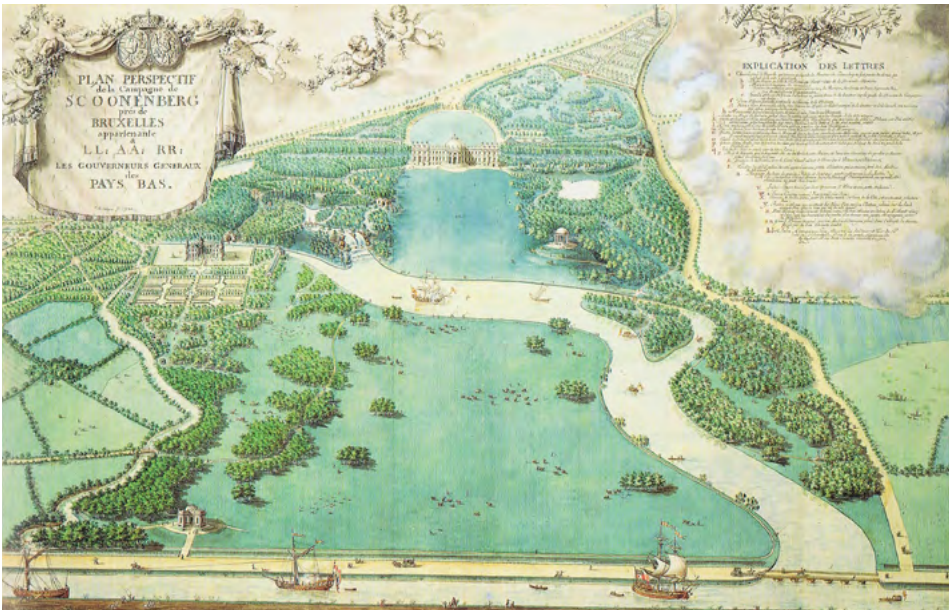


Illustration (1780s)

Key role for biodiversity in the Brussels region

The Royal Estate of Laeken is a haven of greenery, like a peaceful escape from time itself, and a wonderful reservoir of biodiversity right in the heart of Brussels. Designed in the style of an English park, it now covers 187 hectares, with a harmonious blend of woodland, meadows and wetlands.

Since its creation, the Estate has undergone numerous developments, but has always retained its natural, unspoilt character.

Now situated at the heart of a largely urban environment, the Royal Estate of Laeken plays a key role in preserving biodiversity, which is both precious and fragile. Its geographical location, size, peace and quiet and the diversity of its natural environments make it an ideal site for species — some of which are rare and protected — to visit and nest.









Every day, the teams at the Belgian Royal Trust are committed to maintaining, preserving and restoring this unique environment, by taking concrete action, in particular to protect natural habitats and support forest regeneration, while limiting the ecological impact of their activities.





Tree census
(Belgian Dendrology Society — August 2023)



Observations and census — evolution of species (Natagora and Natuurpunt, November 2024)

In addition, regular ecological studies and monitoring enable the Belgian Royal Trust teams to adapt their maintenance practices and anticipate changes in biodiversity.



Educational walk on biodiversity at the Royal Estate of Laeken. His Majesty the King talks to pupils.

To raise awareness among young Brussels residents about the importance of biodiversity and its preservation, the Royal Palace organises guided walks on the estate for primary school pupils from the City of Brussels in spring and autumn. This is done in collaboration with the Gembloux Agro-Biotech Faculty of the University of Liège.



The Royal Greenhouses of Laeken

Avenue du Parc Royal/Koninklijk Parklaan, 1020 Brussels (Laeken).
Each year, the greenhouses are open to the public for three weeks.

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