

## *Basse Normandie - In the land of William the Conqueror, half-timbered houses, Calvados, Camembert and D-Day*



*The colorful port of Honfleur*

### **A JOURNEY THROUGH LOWER NORMANDY, FROM THE D-DAY BEACHES TO THE FLOWER COAST**

*Moving south to Basse Normandie....*

To absorb both the history of the Norman Conquest and WW II's Battle of Normandy and to experience a slice of life in the lovely, bucolic Normandy countryside, we chose for our base the prosperous dairy-farming heartland, **Le Pays d'Auge**, in the **Calvados** département. Atmospheric Calvados is the land of verdant valleys, spotted cows, Camembert cheese, sparkling cider and the apple brandy known as *Calvados*.

As our home base we selected a rural *gîte*, an artfully renovated former 18th century half-timbered stable, **La Vie de Cocagne**, surrounded by Normandy's prettiest villages, orchards, fabled thoroughbred stud farms and directly on the "*cider and calvados*" routes. The beaches of the Floral Coast lie fifteen minutes away.

From our *gîte* we filled our market baskets in postcard pretty **Beuvron-en-Auge**, **Cambremer**, **Beaumont-en-Auge** and **Le Bec Hellouin**, some of France's very most photogenic villages, toured stately manor homes (**Château de Vendevre** and **Saint-Germain-de-Livet**), visited Henry the Conqueror's 11th century fortress in **Falaise** and sampled the area's acclaimed soft and creamy cheeses in the villages of **Camembert**, **Livarot** and **Pont-l'Évêque**.

**THE D-DAY BEACHES; OMAHA, UTAH & POINTE DU HOC, SWORD, GOLD AND JUNO**



*Omaha Beach, D-Day + 68 years*

The **D-day landing beaches** and related World War II sites are, unquestionably, the major points of interest for Americans visiting Normandy. The long awaited Operation Overload, the Allied landing on Normandy coast, one of the most important events of World War II, attracts thousands of visitors year around. Thus, history buffs will want to dedicate at least three days to the Battle of Normandy sites, as they extend for some 45 miles along the Atlantic coast.

History lovers should not miss the following: the unforgettable, state-of-the art museum, **Caen Peace Memorial**, the lovely city of **Bayeux**, first-liberated and largely spared of destruction, with its soaring Gothic cathedral and 1,000 year-old, 230-foot long embroidered **Tapestry** that chronicles the story of the Norman conquest of England, the **D-day Invasion beaches**, the painfully beautiful and poignant **American Cemetery** on the bluff above Omaha Beach, the remains of the amazing engineering feat of the massive Port Winston artificial harbor, "**Mulberry B**", at **Arromanches**, ground zero for the invasion, the tragic, jagged cliffs of **La Point du Hoc**, bravely scaled by U.S. Army Rangers, and the German gun batteries of **Longes-sur-Mer**.

Further west on the Cotentin Peninsula, one should also visit **Ste. Mère Eglise**, the first village liberated on D-day and where American paratrooper **John Steele** famously drifted down in the night, only to be left helplessly entangled on the church steeple, (immortalized in the movie *The Longest Day*).

Next door, visitors will find the fascinating Airborne Museum housed in two parachute-shaped structures, whose collection is dedication to the aerial landings.

For easy and quick access to all the WWII monuments, we advise visitors use the charming city of Bayeux as their base. Our recommended hotel: the new boutique 4-star Villa Lara, in the heart of the pleasing old quarter.

We also highly encourage visitors to engage the services of one of our recommended private historian-guides or to take a full day small group minivan tour with one of our trusted D-day touring companies, whose guides are walking encyclopedias of the history of Normandy's chapter in the war.



*Ste. Mère Eglise*



*Airborne Monument*



*American Cemetery, Omaha Beach*



## ALONG THE FLOWER COAST

As an extra bonus, our rental sat just minutes away from the region's top apple brandy and cider producer, **Domaine Dupont**, whose products can be sampled at Manhattan's finest restaurants from *Eleven Madison Park* to *Le Bernardin*.

Here we sampled the full line of their wares, from **cidre bouché** (praised by Eric Asimov in the NY Times) to 20-year old vintage calvados, along with *pommeau*, a blend of apple brandy and apple juice, and *crème de calvados*, an irresistibly delicious cream liqueur.

On the **Côte Fleurie** (Floral Coast) to the east, often referred to as the Northern (or Parisian) Riviera, we began in the ultra glamorous Belle Epoque seaside resort of **Deauville**. Here we shopped with the well-dressed locals at its chic outdoor market in the **Place Morny**, walked along the famous boardwalk, **Promenade des Planches**, and window-shopped its luxury designer boutiques.



*Mairie, Deauville*

At the turn of the century, Europe's nobility flocked here to build their exclusive and extravagant villas-by-the-sea, to race their yachts and patronize this immaculate city's elegant Grand Casino, its grand Normandy and Royal Barrière hotels and its fabled racetracks. And it is in Deauville where the star-studded American Film Festival is held each September.

In its neighboring and less formal sister, **Trouville-sur-Mer**, across the River *Touques*, we enjoyed a *Moules-frites* feast, facing France's most elegant fish market, where one's dinner comes straight off the boat.



*Moules, Brasserie Les Vapeurs, Trouville-sur-Mer*

Further east, we wandered the narrow, atmospheric cobblestone streets and artists' studios of **Honfleur**, arguably France's most picturesque fishing port and favorite retreat of Impressionist painters. Honfleur was the birthplace of both Impressionist *Eugène Boudin*, mentor to Monet, and 19th century composer *Erik Satie*, and from here explorer **Samuel de Champlain**, who founded Quebec in 1608, hoisted sails for his many expeditions to North America.

We made sure to pay a visit to Honfleur's Wednesday organic market on the **Place du Marché** and to its 15th century church of **Sainte Catherine**, the largest and oldest wooden church in France, built by local shipbuilders, with naves whose oak ceilings mimic the upturned hulls of sailing ships.

We also found time to explore the windswept, unspoiled **Cotentin** peninsula in the Manche *département*, reaching the tiny, quiet fishing village of **Barfleur** at its northeastern tip, with its grey granite houses softened with white shutters. It is here where the Normans prepared for the Battle of Hastings. Nearby we discovered the lovely and equally scenic yachting port of **St-Vaast-la-Hougue**, home of France's finest oysters.

**DINING IN BASSE NORMANDIE**

Our favorite dining experiences were found in St. Vaast at the immaculate, nautical-themed **Le Chasse Marée**, where we feasted on spectacular oysters, in quayside Trouville on the terrace of the Art Deco **Brasserie Les Vapeurs**, where we devoured the region's freshest mussels and haddock, in **Cambremer**, at the mother/daughter-run, cozy bistro, **Au p'tit Normand** and in serene **Le Bec Hellouin**, where we discovered an unbeatable value €19, 4-course gourmet menu at homey **Restaurant de la Tour**.



*Restaurant de la Tour, Le Bec Hellouin*



*Oysters for one at Le Chasse Marée in St. Vaast*



*Fresh haddock in Trouville-sur-Mer*



*Au P'tit Normand, Le Bec Hellouin*



*Mushroom season, market day in Deauville*

In enchanting Honfleur gourmands should not miss stocking the pantry at the “gourmet emporium par excellence”, **Maison Gribouille**, and dining (with advanced reservations) at the two Michelin-starred and and Haoabese influenced **Sa.Qua.Na.**, “Savors, Quality and Nature”, by brilliant chef *Alexander Bourdas*



**STAYING IN BASSE NORMANDIE**



*La Vie de Cocagne, Bonnebosc*

This 3-bedroom, 2-bath home, **La Vie de Cocagne**, is surrounded by meadows in an extremely peaceful country setting, just a mile away from the village of **Bonnebosc**. Inside, we found the house eclectically decorated with a funky mix of contemporary and antique furnishings and very comfortably outfitted for a week's stay with all the necessary creature comforts.

The well-equipped kitchen, outfitted with stainless steel appliances and a Nespresso machine, was supplied with all the essentials for creating gourmet meals, and we found the fridge thoughtfully stocked with basics (including the famous Norman butter and cider) for our arrival. The open dining/living area offered a dining table for six and a large lounging space with a soaring beamed ceiling, wood-burning stove, I-pod dock, wide flat screen TV offering 300 channels and a DVD library. And the Italian slate rain showers in the downstairs bedrooms came with bathrobes, slippers and toiletries.



*Living Room, La Vie de Cocagne*

Outdoor amenities included private, secure parking, a garden and terrace complete with sun loungers, a dining table for six, a barbecue grill and hot tub.

Across the fence, we found three friendly equine neighbors, a horse and two donkeys (Basil and Chocolate), who came to greet us each day when we returned from our excursions.



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