

# NOBLESSE

*Since World War II, France's windswept northern coast has been a place of pilgrimage. But not far from the somber beauty of the D-Day beaches lie a series of little towns where old-fashioned Gallic charm lives on in communities rich with cheesemakers, fishermen, and apple farmers who still practice their centuries-old trades. **Yolanda Edwards** and her family take a road trip through Normandy . . . and end up experiencing history in a whole new way.*

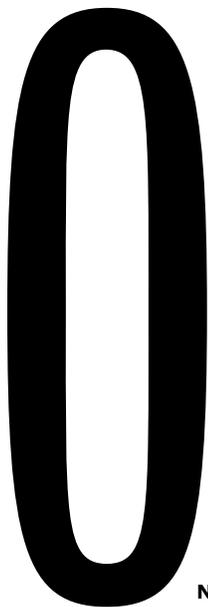


# THE

Photographs by MATT HRANEK

# SHORE





**ONE** OF the very best trips my family has taken was one in which I (a consummate planner) had little time to plan at all. But before I get to where we went, let me start with where we began: Paris. A set of unforeseen circumstances—my then six-year-old daughter, Clara, had come down with a fierce cold, and Air France had staged a strike—left us stranded with at least four idle days. My husband, Matt, and I weighed our options: Stay in a town we were already familiar with, or strike out for someplace new and easy to get to. And so we packed up, nestled Clara in our warm rental car, and headed northwest, for Normandy.

It certainly wasn't a region I knew well, and my only association with it was the D-Day beaches and Mont St-Michel. I knew a little about Bayeux and Honfleur (me: art history minor) and about Deauville and nearby Trouville (daughter: obsessed with *Gigi*). But beyond that bare sketch, all I had were some suggestions from friends and my smartphone. Our rough plan had us spending a night or two in Honfleur before exploring the coastline farther west.

We left the city in the morning and pulled into Giverny—the famous home of Monet, which is only ten minutes off the highway—a little over an hour later. Not surprisingly, Monet's much-painted garden is heavily touristed; you might run into the couple you chatted with while admiring his water lilies at the Musée de l'Orangerie in Paris two days before. But as pit stops go, it's ideal: a beautiful setting and a hit of bona fide culture.

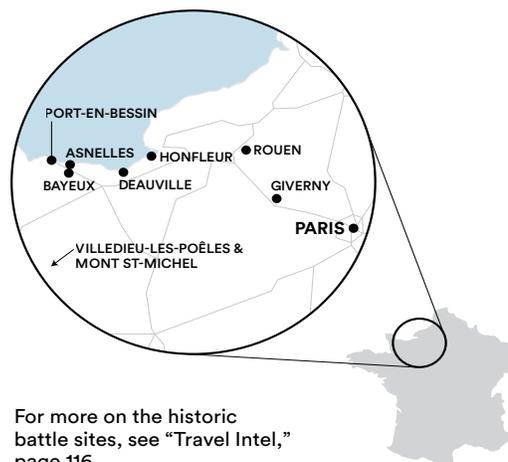
We then stopped in Rouen, a small medieval city strung along the banks of the Seine, and the capital of Upper Normandy, suggested to us by a cheesemonger friend in New York. It's probably best known for the Gros Horloge, the great astronomical clock that's nearly 500 years old, with internal mechanisms that are far older. It has its

own Notre-Dame Cathedral, the facade of which was prodigiously reproduced by Monet. It has centuries of historical significance in the wars between the English and the French. But the thing that trumped all of that, as far as Clara was concerned, was that Rouen is the place where Joan of Arc was burned at the stake. In fact, we parked our car right at the site of her martyrdom on the Place du Vieux Marché. This of course necessitated an explanation of who she was (which is why all of Rouen's other attractions will, in my mind, forever be sound-tracked to an endless feedback loop of my daughter asking, "But why did they kill her?").

Then it was on to Honfleur, which I loved. Yes, it's so charming that it can be overrun with tourists in summer, but even so, the people who live there are genuinely welcoming, and along with terrific restaurants, it has a great organic farmers' market every Wednesday morning right next to St-Catherine's Church. It is also simply beautiful, a quiet port town that has inspired so many of the country's most renowned artists. The composer and pianist Erik Satie was born there. Monet, the most famous of the Impressionists, painted there.

That night we stayed on the outskirts of town at a lovely hotel called La Chaumière. The rooms were huge and yet cozy, with wood-paneled walls; the views were vast, the breakfasts delicious and abundant; and the whole place was surrounded by grassy lawns that ran all the way down to the sea: heavenly.

**WE COULD** have remained longer in Honfleur—and indeed, unless you want to go very far west, it's the perfect place to stay when exploring much of Normandy—but we wanted to press on deeper into the region. Our next move was to base ourselves in Port-en-Bessin, at a place called Château La Chenevière. It's a grand old estate house, exactly what you want in this corner of the world, with a perfect blend of comfort and old-school style:



For more on the historic battle sites, see "Travel Intel," page 116.

## HISTORY LESSONS

Some of our favorites of the region's sites and museums.

### Bayeux Tapestry Museum

13 rue de Nesmond, Bayeux; 33-2-31-51-25-50; tapestry-bayeux.com.

### Château de Balleroy (Museum of Balloons)

Balleroy Développement S.A.S., Balleroy; 33-2-31-21-06-76; chateau-balleroy.com.

### Cornille-Havard Bell Foundry

11 rue du Pont Chignon, Villedieu-les-Poêles; 33-2-33-61-00-56; cornille-havard.fr.

### Ethnography and Norman Popular Arts Museum

Rue de la Prison, Honfleur; 33-2-31-89-14-12.

### Mémorial de Caen Museum

Espanade Général Eisenhower, Caen; 33-2-31-06-06-44; memorial-caen.fr.

### Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial

Omaha Beach, Colleville-sur-Mer; 33-2-31-51-62-00.

### Previous page:

An enormous cement caisson—the remains of a Mulberry Harbour, one of two temporary ports built off Normandy during World War II—marks the otherwise idyllic beach at Arromanches.

**Right:** Tripping down the cobblestoned alleyway outside the sixteenth-century building that houses Honfleur's Ethnography and Norman Popular Arts Museum.



SOCIETE LE VIEUX HONNEUR  
MUSEE  
ETHNOGRAPHIE  
ART POPULAIRE



**Right:** The seafood here is some of France's best—like this plate of plucked-from-the-ocean oysters. **Left:** Its beaches may be the site of one of the most famous battles in modern history, but Normandy is really all about ease. Here, a local and his dog enjoy a spring day (beachside, of course) in Courseulles-sur-Mer.



#### DOSSIER

Information and inspiration.

#### READ

*Calvados: The Spirit of Normandy*, by Charles Neal (Wine Appreciation Guild; \$95).

*D-Day, June 6, 1944: The Climactic Battle of World War II*, by Stephen E. Ambrose (Simon and Schuster; \$20).

*The Longest Day: The Classic Epic of D-Day, June 6, 1944*, by Cornelius Ryan (Simon and Schuster; \$17).

*Madame Bovary*, by Gustave Flaubert (Penguin; \$13).

#### WATCH

*The Big Red One*, directed by Samuel Fuller (1980).

*The Passion of Joan of Arc*, directed by Carl Theodor Dreyer (1928).

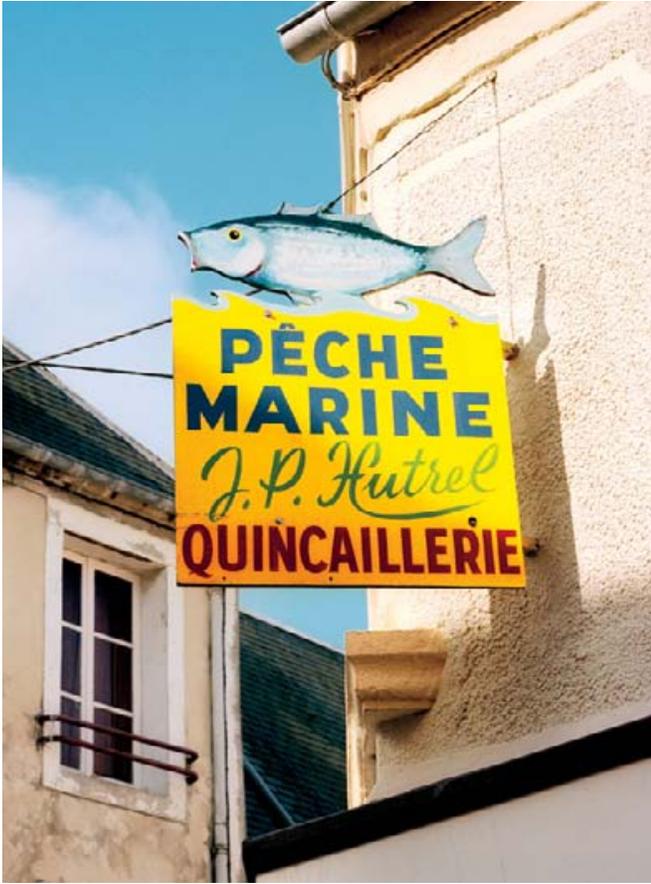
*Saving Private Ryan*, directed by Steven Spielberg (1998).

towering French windows, strategic deployments of toile de Jouy, lots of heavy linens, brass candlesticks on the fireplace mantles. The staff are well informed and gave us great suggestions for off-the-beaten-path adventures.

One recommendation we followed immediately was to visit Les Sablés d'Asnelles, a bakery in tiny Asnelles that is famous for its tinned shortbread cookies. Being there, meeting the floury-handed owner, epitomizes what's really special about Normandy. Not far from the solemn significance of the landing beaches are these living, working, small-industry villages that champion many of the things the French (and most of us) hold dear: good wholesome food and drink, strong local community, and beautiful handcrafted things that last. Throughout Normandy, artisans—cheesemakers, metalworkers, potters, lacemakers, bell forgers, and cidermakers—still run thriving trades.

After all, Camembert, Livarot, and Pont l'Évêque cheeses all come from Normandy, as do *caramels au beurre d'Isigny*, those lovely caramels made with creamy Norman salted butter.

Just outside Asnelles, we came across an umbrella maker called H<sub>2</sub>O Parapluies. It's a small family operation where all the components are hand-made and assembled in one room, and it happens to be on a farm (Clara and I attempted to wrangle chickens while Matt shopped the incredible selection of umbrellas, which come with a lifetime guarantee). Later the same day, at Les Vergers de Ducy, owner René Petrich took us on a tour of his 200-year-old family-owned organic cider farm, holding our daughter's hand as we strolled up and down rows of trees bearing different apple varieties. He also offered us a map of the cider route—indeed, you could come to Normandy for the cider alone. (And certainly don't



leave without picking up some of Petrich's amazing Calvados and Pommier.)

**BAYEUX, TOO**, harbored some unexpected delights, including its own impressive cathedral and the exceptional Bayeux Tapestry Museum (we sold Clara on a visit by pitching the tapestry as the world's longest comic strip). Afterward, we strolled through the town, stopping to admire lacemakers at work, their tiny delicate shears and hair-thin needles lined up precisely before them. (This is where lace is made for some of the couture houses of Paris.) Then we indulged in the *tarte aux pommes Normande* at the town's most famous tea-room, the nineteenth-century La Reine Mathilde, before continuing on to Port-en-Bessin. A real working-class port town, it has what is probably the region's greatest selection of striped mariner's shirts, fishing boats, and, best of all, one of our favorite restaurants of the trip: Le Bistrot d'à Côté, whose seafood towers are stacked high with fresh langoustines, whelks, oysters, and shrimp (for a fraction of what you'd spend in Paris).

Of course, we couldn't properly see Normandy without paying our respects at Utah and Omaha

beaches, as well as the nearby American Cemetery. As we walked with Clara past the endless rows of white crosses, we were silent—moved beyond words. Just up the coast, we stopped in pretty Arromanches, its own study in contrasts. There, an old-fashioned carousel is painted in sugary pinks and greens and blues, and scattered on the wide, long beach and in the steel-blue waters beyond are enormous cement caissons—the remaining sections of the Mulberry Harbours that the British erected as temporary ports during World War II. I was struck by the fact that these relics of one of the bloodiest battles of our time live right next to such sweet symbols of innocence and childhood.

Traveling with Clara in tow was a reminder of how different—and oddly liberating—it is to visit a history-rich town with a kid. Had Matt and I been alone, we would've likely succumbed to the self-imposed yet inescapable pressure of The Checklist, the one that demands you visit every site, every museum, every monument that you're supposed to. But when you're with a child, you adjust your expectations: You want to keep your kids stimulated, of course, but also entertained. You

**From left:** A fisherman's shop in Port-en-Bessin; a pony ride in Deauville; a café in Beuvron-en-Auge's village square; the fish market in Port-en-Bessin.



## WHERE TO EAT

**La Reine Mathilde**  
47 rue St-Martin,  
Bayeux; 33-2-31-92-  
00-59; reine-mathilde-  
patisserie.fr.

**Le Bistrot d'à Côté**  
12 rue Michel  
Lefournier, Port-en-  
Bessin; 33-2-31-51-79-  
12; barque-bleue.fr;  
entrées from \$13.

**Les Vapeurs**  
160 Blvd. Fernand  
Moureaux, Trouville-  
sur-Mer; 33-2-31-88-  
15-24; lesvapeurs.fr;  
entrées from \$13.

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follow, to some extent, their interests and whims, and in doing so, you often find yourself discovering places—little streets, parks, small shops—that you might not have on your own, because you'd have been so busy trying to see everything you thought you had to.

In Arromanches, we stopped at a small hotel called La Marine. While we were checking out its shop, we asked the clerk for some suggestions for the next day's road trip to Mont St-Michel.

**I'D ALWAYS** wanted to go there, but because of the distance from Paris (three and a half hours by car), we'd never made the trip. Now was our chance. The sight of the island appearing on the horizon is nothing short of dazzling. But then we got to the parking lots and had to wait in line. And then we pushed through a near-solid wall of humanity at the city ramparts only to find another crush of visitors inside. (And this was during the off-season.) Finally, we conceded defeat and fled back to the car.

But the day wasn't lost. We detoured into Villedieu-les-Poêles, what must be the copper pot capital of the world, an utterly charming town with

a genuine *fonderie de cloches* that produces enormous, cathedral-worthy bells. The Cornille-Havard Bell Foundry is open to the public, so we took a tour of the workshop and forge, where we got to see artisans plying their trade using techniques that date back to the Middle Ages. We couldn't leave town without at least one piece of copper: We chose a tiny butter warmer, which stashed easily in a carry-on.

On the return trip to Port-en-Bessin, we passed through the tiny village of Noron-la-Poterie, which is equally famous for pottery—simple designs, beautifully executed and produced in prodigious amounts. There, at the Atelier Céramique Turgis, we sighed over shelves and shelves of egg cups, café au lait bowls, pitchers, and tureens.

But of all the things we bought and did while on our trip, what I cherished most—and cherish still—was the little joys we encountered along the way: a walk through an apple orchard; a perfect plate of *moules-frites*; an umbrella maker tucked away on a farm. It was an ideal mix of quiet surprises, simple beauty, and historical poignancy—a perfect expression of Normandy itself, in fact. May it never change. ♦



## WHERE TO STAY

### **Château d'Audrieu**

Grand estate with a tree house, swings, slide, and huge lawn—perfect for families. Off the rue de Tilly, Audrieu; 33-2-31-80-21-52; chateau daudrieu.com; doubles from \$275.

### **Château La Chenevière**

Luxury hotel near the landing beaches and the picturesque fishing village of Port-en-Bessin. Escures-Commes, Port-en-Bessin; 33-2-31-51-25-25; lacheneviere.com; doubles from \$350.

### **Hôtel de la Marine**

Three-star hotel with a good restaurant and great views onto the sea. Quai du Canada, Arromanches; 33-2-31-22-34-19; hotel-de-la-marine.fr; doubles from \$83.

### **Hôtel des Loges**

Charming inn on a cobblestoned street, with just the right modern touches and an organic breakfast. 18 rue Brûlée, Honfleur; 33-2-31-89-38-26; hoteldesloges.com; doubles from \$160.

### **Hôtel La Chaumière**

Timbered manor house with smartly decorated rooms close to Honfleur and Deauville. Route de Littoral Vasouy, Honfleur; 33-2-31-81-63-20; hotel-chaumiere.fr; doubles from \$360.

### **Hôtel Saint James**

Well-appointed small inn with antiques and a fireplace in the salon. 16 rue de la Plage, Trouville-sur-Mer; 33-2-31-88-05-23; hotel-saint-james.fr; doubles from \$130.

The grounds at Château La Chenevière, a hotel/restaurant in Port-en-Bessin, are made for running around. Inside, the grand old estate house has just the right mix of comfort and luxury.

