

Nord- Pas de Calais/Picardy

Overview

As France's northernmost region, Nord-Pas de Calais is the first port of call for many cross-Channel arrivés in France. Some drivers arriving by ferry at Boulogne-sur-Mer or Calais head due south or west, but wiser travellers and short-breakers do well to stop off and sample its considerable charms. From the historic fields of Flanders and Artois and the flat, post-industrial landscapes of the Nord to more characterful seaside villages and nature-filled estuaries to the West, it has much visually to lure the discerning visitor, not to mention a proud sense of local identity borne out by its food and cultural traditions. Just south lies Picardy, famous for its flower gardens and battlefield memorials, which recall the Somme's unique place in world history.

Main cities and towns

Beyond Calais, so beloved of booze-cruisers, the region's must-visits include historic and buzzing Lille (TGV access, great for shopping and open-air chess-playing!), Roubaix (the former Flemish textile giant on the Belgian border), characterful Cambrai, pretty Arras and attractive Douai. Near Cambrai is Le Cateau-Cambrésis, birthplace of painter Matisse, while hilltop settlement Cassel has mansions of note and fascinating connections with the grand old Duke of York, no less. Amiens is Picardy's capital city and, like Beauvais, it has a magnificent cathedral, while coastal attractions include elegant Le Touquet nestling amid dunes and pines, and Montreuil-sur-Mer (actually 15kms inland!).

Places to visit

Both serious historians and the more casually intrigued should make a beeline for the Somme's war memorials to reflect and remember, or to the huge port of Dunkerque, scene of an heroic troop evacuation in 1940. On a lighter cultural note, head for Amiens during the cathedral's son-et-lumière season (when the west façade becomes a riot of colour) before exploring the charming canals and cottages of the St-Leu quarter. Also unmissable is the amazing Art Deco swimming pool-cum-art gallery in Roubaix, while in the Nord capital Lille, taking in the Ancienne Bourse (old exchange building), the Euralille shopping centre and the Opéra should be on everyone's tick list. And Laon, looking onto the plains of Champagne and Picardy, is dominated by one of France's earliest and finest Gothic cathedrals – great for a holiday snap or two.

Things to do and see

There are plenty of ways to enjoy the great outdoors in northern France. Nature lovers will be in bird-spotting heaven in the Marquenterre reserve, between the Canche and Somme estuaries, while other highlights on the Côte d'Opale are the vertiginous headlands of Cap Griz-Nez and Cap Blanc-Nez. They are perfect for a leisurely exploration on foot – by car the D940 offers some spectacular views. Down on the wide beaches, activities like sand yachting and horse riding will keep adrenaline junkies happy, the more sedate preferring to tee off in one of the region's countless

superb golf courses. For stimulation of the mental kind, head to La Coupole, a excellent war museum in an old bunker near St-Omer. In Picardy, meanwhile, it's the flower gardens that draw visitors – riots of colour set among charming country homes. See for yourself the famous “Roses of Picardy” made famous in song.

Food and drink

Given its cold winters and industrial heritage, hearty one-pot wonders dominate menus in the extreme north of France. Head to a Lille estaminet for a rustic Flemish stew such as carbonnade flamande (beef and onions braised in beer) – you will often see that the potatoes harvested on the region's wide plains appear alongside in the form of frites. Andouillettes, chitterling sausages not for the faint-hearted, are also popular in Nord-Pas de Calais, while the busy coastal ports and fishing villages provide the region with a bumper fish catch. Expect to choose between cod, sole, ling mussels, shellfish and herring when you sit down for lunch. As for Picardy, her most famous export is Chantilly cream, whipped cream sweetened and enhanced with vanilla and normally served over fresh summer fruits.

Family attractions

There is plenty for kids to enjoy in Nord-Pas-de Calais and Picardy. Seaside towns like Wimereux, Hardelot and Berck-sur-Mer are certified KID stations, guaranteeing plenty of activities (beach clubs, pony-trekking and windsurfing) and safety for little ones. Whilst you are on the coast, head for the splendid Nausicaà aquarium in Boulogne-sur-Mer, where you come face to face with hammerhead sharks and tuna shoals. Sweet-toothed youngsters will love a visit to the Beussent chocolate factory 10km from Montreuil-sur-Mer, while for a brilliant day out in Picardy, head for the rollercoasters, medieval banquets and Parc Asterix, based on the adventures of the cartoon Gaul bumblers Asterix and Obelix. Or how about a steam train ride in the Upper Somme Valley or hot air ballooning above the Château de Chantilly?