

## Normandy

### Overview

The region of Normandy, so called after the settlement of the Vikings (“Northmen”) from the 9<sup>th</sup> century onwards, boasts an abundance of historical intrigue, cultural attractions, pretty coastal villages, lush countryside and sensational food and drink to make content even the most demanding cross-Channel visitor. As home to some of France’s largest ports – Dieppe, Le Havre and Cherbourg – it’s a point of entry for millions, while everything from the cider orchards of Calvados to Monet’s Garden at Giverny, from the luscious Pays d’Auge – home of Camembert – to the D-Day landing beaches, keeps them ever amused, entertained, fed and well-watered.

### Main cities and towns

Ancient Rouen, the capital of Upper Normandy with its handsome spires and renovated half-timbered houses, is one for the artistically and architecturally curious, while Caen, capital of Lower Normandy, will please historians – it was founded by William the Conqueror in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Despite terrible World War II damage, the city has much to offer – excellent museums, a lively buzz thanks to its student population and a great location as a base for exploring the Normandy landing beaches. Fécamp is an attractive fishing port, while Cabourg, home to Proust for a while, epitomises 19<sup>th</sup>-century grandeur with its promenade. Coutances in the western Manche department has a remarkable cathedral and lovely landscaped garden while Barfleur is a great last-minute stop before getting the ferry back to the UK.

### Places to visit

With so much of note to see, Normandy spoils its visitors for choice. Rouen’s Gothic cathedral, beloved of Monet, is essential viewing, as is the glamorous resort of Deauville with its casino, racetrack and Hollywood star-lined boardwalk. Its nearest, if quite different, neighbour Trouville has a more homely feel – it’s full of great seafood restaurants and great for family beach holidays. Honfleur, just along the corniche, is everyone’s favourite picture postcard fishing village. Other coastal attractions include the Alabaster Coast’s enchanting white cliffs, the celebrated outcrop abbey Mont-St Michel and, lest we forget, the D-Day beaches. You can remember those that died heroically on the Cotentin Peninsula either at the beaches themselves around Arromanches or at one of the area’s many Allied cemeteries.

### Things to do and see

Those seeking invigorating fresh air during their stay in Normandy should head for Suisse Normande south of Caen, where rugged terrain and the River Orne provide perfect settings for outdoor pursuits such as mountain biking, rock climbing and kayaking. Or why not go walking on the beaches and cliffs of Etretat, where a first glimpse of the Falaise d’Amont rock formation will have you gasping for entirely different reasons. Those hoping to enter horticultural heaven will not want to miss the region’s enchanting gardens – try the Rose garden trail, which takes in cottages and châteaux, for a green-fingered tour to remember. Or how about exploring one of Normandy’s four national parks and her other green spaces and beaches – golf, horse

riding and all manner of water sports round up the long list of great activities that can fill a weekend break to the brim.

#### Food and drink

South of Lisieux, the rolling hills and valleys of the Pays D’Auge invite Francophile foodies to sample local produce on their specially created cheese and cider routes (don’t forget to stop at delightful Beuvron-en-Auge). The villages of Livarot, Camembert and Vimoutiers will satiate fromage fans, while drinkers of boozed-up apples will find local producers offering samples all over the area (the even pokier Calvados is, of course, produced in the department of the same name). Dairy is big in these parts –butter and cream sauces abound, including those using the celebrated crème fraîche d’Issigny, while meat such as pork and duck are traditionally served with orchard fruits. Seafood is a winning choice in coastal restaurants with locally harvested scallops, mussels and oysters coming to the fore.

#### Family attractions

Whether it’s good clean family fun or things of a more educational nature that you are looking for, Normandy has it covered. The Cité de la Mer aquarium has twin appeal – it celebrates Dieppe’s nautical heritage and entertains kids with fishy exhibits at the same time. More animal-based antics can be enjoyed at the Reptilarium in Beauvoir, Cerza Zoological Park and Jurques Zoo, while youngsters will love the feel of yore at the ‘Village enchanté de Bellefontaine’. A visit to the 70-metre tapestry at Bayeux, complete with the much-contested one-in-the-eye for poor Harold, is a rites-of-passage for any first time Normandy visitor, while for some older children, it’s never too early to gently reveal the pivotal role that Normandy’s shores played during the war, something the Caen Memorial does very well with videos and exhibits detailing the lead-up to, and aftermath of, D-Day. Adults, too, will be moved by what they learn.