

# Conquering Normandy

You can't beat this part of northern France; it's an absolute winner in so many ways, says our Travel Editor

WORDS: Helen Werin PHOTOGRAPHY: Robin Weaver



Sunset at Mont-Saint-Michel

**S**urely nothing can top midsummer evenings at Mont-Saint-Michel? The sensation of being in a magical, mystical, medieval storybook village is enhanced by the quietness of the narrow streets, empty now that the daytime masses have long gone. It is 10pm and, apart from a few late diners lingering in restaurants, I have the walls and the paths twisting and winding beneath the monumental Romanesque-Gothic abbey all to myself.

That's until I get to the Tour Gabriel with its sensational view across the bay where a handful of people have gathered to take sunset pictures. This is special.

Buses are still running along the causeway to the island. In fact, they run around the clock, with the early hours transport for the

'penitents and pilgrims', so the driver tells me. As I walk back to Roly, our motorhome, I reflect upon how different Mont-Saint-Michel is by day when hordes of tourists move in a slow crocodile through the streets of France's first World Heritage Site.

The next day, with the tide well out, I watch more 'crocodiles', this time snaking their way across the expanse of sands towards another island. The bay is subject to some of the most extreme tidal variations in the world and signs warning not to go across these potentially treacherous sands without a guide are everywhere.

I find shelter from the blazing sun on a stone seat tucked in the shade of the Benedictine abbey. The overpoweringly brooding presence of this masterpiece of >

## ME AND MY 'VAN



Helen Werin...

is MMM's Travel Editor and adores touring France, particularly for the many and excellent facilities it offers motorhomers



2002 Roller Team Auto-Roller 41 on a Fiat 2.3-litre diesel engine. Roly's cosy layout, with overcab double bed, pullman-style dinette and generous locker space suits our family

**BELOW LEFT TO RIGHT** Nez de Jobourg; Yachts moored in the harbour at Diélette

medieval architecture is almost tangible. As I stare up in awe I'm surrounded by squawking gulls and fearless little sparrows eager for a crumb.

We're pitched on a large aire a couple of miles away, alongside a (multi-user) riverside path leading towards the world-famous landmark. It's a terrific approach, with the rocky outcrop on which the abbey sits rising out of the heat haze like a mirage. We're spending three nights here to experience all the variations in the light that create different atmospheres around Mont-Saint-Michel.

It's hard to leave Mont-Saint-Michel behind. It's still in our sights as we follow the Route de la Baie, passing fields of wheat, maize, barley and oats under threatening-looking skies. The road winds through hamlets and signs advertising cider, calvados and pommeau for sale pop up around every bend.

Arriving in Genêts, we see the Mont-Saint-Michel in a totally different light as the sun tries to make an appearance. At Saint-Jean-le-Thomas, photographer Robin walks out across the baie du Mont-Saint-Michel to take pictures, but is driven back as he sinks rather alarmingly in the soft sand.

En route to Jullouville we pause for a final impression. The abbey is the only tall feature as far as the eye can see and brings to mind the fairytale castle in the opening credits of Disney films.

Many of the beaches of the Manche seem to go on forever. The tides at Agon-Coutainville recede for miles, sometimes

attracting hundreds of people searching for clams and crabs and other fish; it's gusty and the beach is empty when we visit. At Gouville-sur-Mer, colourful clapboard huts are strung out among the dunes, its infinite sands enticing us to linger.

Further north, at spectacular Cap de Carteret on the Côte des Îles, we look over the Écréhous islands to Jersey beyond (it seems so close from here). As Robin strides ahead along the clifftop *sentier*, he urges, "Come here!"

One of the longest and loveliest golden beaches that I've ever seen stretches north towards the horizon (Plage de la Vieille Église). Descending onto the sands, we pass what little is left of the church dedicated to Saint-Germain-le-Scot (one of the evangelists of Cotentin in the fifth century). Astonishingly, we have this boundless beach almost entirely to ourselves.

Being able to see Guernsey is torture as I love the island and am keen to show it to Robin, who's never been. So, we drive to Diélette from where a ferry to Guernsey departs and look for somewhere to leave Roly.

Diélette is an odd sort of place: a pleasure harbour with chandlery and bistro and, above the port, a few cottages, then a wide sweep of road that goes round a small headland to a dead end at the Flamanville Nuclear Power Plant. Signs for a camping-car stop off the Les Pieux road attract us and I'm overjoyed when the owner shows me a track along which we can walk to Diélette port within a half-hour. We *can* take a day trip to Guernsey! ►



From Nez de Jobourg and Nez de Voidries, near the Cotentin's northwestern tip, Alderney (only 10.5 miles away) is clearly visible. Between these two promontories, the waters of the little cove of Senival are an intense turquoise. Birdwatchers flock to the 125m-high granite cliffs of Jobourg – among the highest in France. Sensational vistas from the clifftop paths, with Jersey on the horizon, is what we've come here for.

With rain forecast we drive to Bricquebec, where a market is in full swing with stalls piled with fruit, ciders and olives in the shadow of the twelfth century castle's polygonal tower. At Saint-Sauveur-le-Vicomte, the medieval château is next to the municipal campsite. This castle played an important part in the 100 Years War, but was severely damaged during WWII.

Stories of D-Day bravery and heroism are at every turn across the Cotentin. Portraits of fresh-faced young men adorn lamp posts in every town and village. In La Haye-du-Puits, wartime scenes are displayed on the streets next to images of the places as they are now. The most poignant is a photograph of the current schoolmistress with her class passing by the church. This is shown alongside a picture of members of the teacher's family with their children pushing a handcart loaded with belongings as they pass the very same church in their flight from the fighting.

At Sainte-Mère-Église a model parachutist hangs from the church tower in tribute to US paratrooper, John Steele, who dangled from the steeple for more than two

**TOP TIPS**

For information about visiting Mont-Saint-Michel in your motorhome

[bienvenueaumontsaintmichel.com/en/preparing-your-visit/arriving-by-camper-van](https://bienvenueaumontsaintmichel.com/en/preparing-your-visit/arriving-by-camper-van)

Exploring Mont-Saint-Michel and reaching the abbey involves lots of steps. If you have mobility issues

[ot-montsaintmichel.com/pratique/tourisme-pour-tous](https://ot-montsaintmichel.com/pratique/tourisme-pour-tous)

Look out for 'stop and go' offers at campsites. We got a regular pitch with electric for €12 (£11.41) – less than half the usual price – at the five-star Camping le Cormoran, right by the beach, by arriving after 6pm and leaving before 10am

**BELOW** View from Cap de Carteret towards Plage de la Vieille Église and the dunes of Hatainville

hours on that fateful June night in 1944. His experience (he was cut free by a German soldier and taken prisoner, but managed to escape and rejoin the troops) is just one of the incredible stories told in the many museums, on the beaches and in towns.

One could spend days exploring all the monuments and memorials inscribed with countless names and the exhibitions about the Normandy landings (British troops were predominant at the beaches further east). At Utah, one of the most famous landing beaches, a half-track M3 and a Sherman M4A2 tank stand as a reminder of WWII. There are remains of pontoons on the *plage*, which looks out over the uninhabited Îles Saint-Marcouf a little offshore.

Flower Camping Le Haut Dick is right on the canal at Carentan, from where we can branch out to explore other towns and seaside resorts and the D-Day landing beaches. Isigny-sur-Mer may be renowned for its butter, cream and caramels, but what appeals to me is its characterful and refreshingly 'untouristy' fishermen's quarter (known as the Hogues district). The tiniest of houses are squeezed between others painted in pretty shades of peach, pale blue and pink.

At Grandcamp-Maisy, beautiful villas along the seafront and on the Rue Gambetta date from the nineteenth century, reflecting a time when society discovered this place as a higher-end holiday resort and it boasted such luminary visitors as Alexandre Dumas and Emile Zola.

At Pointe du Hoc we visit the Ranger



455 miles

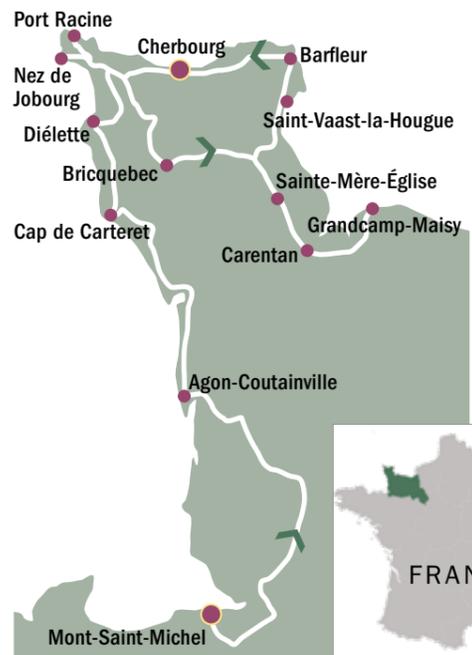


**THE JOURNEY**

In June we spent two weeks exploring Normandy as part of a seven-week tour of northern France. This feature covers our route from Mont-Saint-Michel to Cherbourg for the Portsmouth ferry

**THE COSTS**

Fuel Average 30mpg .....	£86.45
Ferry Cherbourg-Portsmouth .....	£180
Site fees (€165.50) .....	£157.35
Excursions Two adults: return day trip Diélette-Guernsey (€70) .....	£66.55
<b>Total costs</b> .....	<b>£490.35</b>



**INFORMATION**

Normandy is the birthplace of impressionism, apparently

[en.normandie-tourisme.fr](https://en.normandie-tourisme.fr)

Discover La Manche

[manche-tourism.com](https://manche-tourism.com)

For ferries to Guernsey (not currently running)

[manche-iles.com](https://manche-iles.com)

**ABOVE CLOCKWISE** Market day in Isigny-sur-Mer; A replica Viking ship moored in the marina at Carentan; D-Day memorial *Ever Forward* at Grandcamp-Maisy

Monument on the cliff overlooking the approaches to Omaha and Utah beaches. This monument was erected by the French to honour the men of the American Second Ranger Battalion who climbed the 100ft-high cliffs under enemy fire to seize the German artillery that would have fired on the landing troops.

Using ladders and rocket-launched grapple ropes – which could shoot over the cliffs – and knives and bayonets to improve their grip, they succeeded. The enemy bombardments collapsed part of the cliff, creating piles of debris that helped the rangers in their climb. Exploring the remains of bunkers, with their 2m-thick concrete walls and anti-aircraft positions among the bomb craters, we're mindful of the tremendous abilities and determination of the courageous rangers.

On the approach to Omaha beach at Vierville-sur-Mer, a Mulberry Harbour (artificial harbour supporting the D-Day

invasion) is strung out alongside the road. It's so windy on the beach here that I can hardly stand up straight and, despite waves crashing ferociously on to the foreshore, a few hardy local children are splashing in the shallows. It's a scene in stark contrast to that of June 1944, when hundreds of infantrymen were killed here by enemy fire as they landed on the sands.

We adore the northeastern tip of the Cotentin. Saint-Vaast-la-Hougue is a popular pleasure and fishing port with plentiful seafood restaurants and we watch as an amphibious vehicle loaded with birdwatchers trundles out to Tatihou island. The blustery weather forces us to take momentary shelter in the little Chapelle des Marins, where plaques line the walls, commemorating men lost at sea – some in very recent years.

Beyond the chapel is the causeway to La Hougue fort, the Vauban tower built in the seventeenth century to protect the bay. >



We stroll around the promontory in the shade of its immense walls.

One of our favourite places on the Cotentin peninsula is Barfleur, a delightful fishing village of neat granite houses clustered around the port, dominated by the seventeenth century Église Saint-Nicolas. In the Middle Ages Barfleur was one of the main points between Normandy and England for pilgrims to Mont-Saint-Michel. The Miquelots (as the pilgrims were known) would find hospitality in Barfleur after their arduous journey. Our refreshment comes in the form of enormous ice cream sundaes in the olde-worlde Café de France on the quay.

On our last day, before the late afternoon ferry back to Portsmouth, we head for picturesque Port Racine, which lays claim to being France's smallest operational port. The countryside along this coast is very scenic, rolling and wooded, with charming

**ABOVE CLOCKWISE** Château de Saint-Sauveur-le-Vicomte; Amphibious vehicle leaving Saint-Vaast-la-Hougue taking tourists to Tatihou Island; Harness racing practice on Utah Beach

communities of lovingly tended gardens rather reminiscent of Pembrokeshire.

At Omonville-la-Rogue we stop to study the sea, bending almost double in to the wind and hoping that the waves will calm down within the next few hours (they don't).

Weaving along the coast towards Cherbourg on the Route des Caps has been a very pleasant journey, though we're reminded of our imminent departure by the sight of a ferry coming into port. It comes as a bit of a shock after our quiet coastal route to turn a corner and suddenly hit the roundabouts and supermarkets on the approach to Cherbourg-Octeville. It feels almost as if we've entered another world.

Alarmed by the waves beating at the forts offshore at Querqueville, we're reluctant to board our ferry. All too soon, we're on the *Normandy Express*, mal de mer bags at the ready... **MMM**

**WE STAYED AT**

**Aire de Camping Car**, Route du Mont Saint-Michel, 50170 Beauvoir

[camping-montsaintmichel.com/aire-mont-saint-michel](http://camping-montsaintmichel.com/aire-mont-saint-michel) All year

Two adults, pitch and electric: From £13.50 (£12.84)

**Aire at Plage de Gouville**, Rue du Beau Rivage, 50560 Gouville-sur-Mer

All year  
 £10 (£9.51), including water and electric

**Aire (Flot Bleu)**, Boulevard Lebel Jehenne, 50230 Agon-Coutainville

All year  
 £8 (£7.61), including water and electric

**Château de Lez-Eaux**, Avenue de Lez-Eaux, 50380 Saint-Aubin-des-Préaux

0033 233 516609 [lez-eaux.com](http://lez-eaux.com)

1 April - 12 September 2021  
 Two adults, pitch and electric: From €26 (£24.72)

**Aire at Rue Robert Asselin**, 50580 Portbail

All year Free, borne for water (charge)

**Aire at Plage de Sciottot**, 50340 Les Pieux

All year Free (no facilities)  
 0033 233 413394  
 [camping-lecormoran.fr](http://camping-lecormoran.fr)

4 April - 26 September

Two adults, pitch and electric: From €27 (£25.67). 'Stop and go': €12 (£11.41)

**Motorhome stop**, La Chaussée (D65), 54340 Tréauville

All year  
 €7 (£6.65) including water and electric

**Flower Camping Le Haut Dick**, 30 Chemin du Grand Bas Pays, 50500 Carentan

0033 233 421689  
 [camping-lehautdick.com](http://camping-lehautdick.com)  
 12 May - 26 September  
 Two adults, pitch and electric: From €19 (£18.06)