

Normandy & Brittany

HIGHLIGHTS

- Pondering the price of France's liberation at the moving **war cemeteries** (p70) near the D-Day beaches
- Savouring superfresh seafood at the harbourside restaurants of **Honfleur** (p90)
- Watching the sun sink into the sands around the abbey of **Mont St-Michel** (p85)
- Sipping Norman cider and learning about its production at apple farms along the **Route du Cidre** (p77)
- Strolling along the walled city's ramparts at sunset for kaleidoscopic views over **St-Malo** (p82)

TERRAIN

Normandy's woodlands and pastures are cut by low valleys and rolling hills; Brittany has low-lying plains and gentle uplands, with hills in the northwest and the central-south.

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Normandy and Brittany sit side by side in northwestern France. The sea is a central and commanding force in both, but other than sharing a climate similarly affected by it, the two provinces are excitingly different.

Historically cut off from the rest of the mainland by dense, impenetrable forest, Brittany was for all intents and purposes an island. Patchwork farming fields now take the forest's place, though pockets still remain. But Brittany still stands with its back to the rest of the country, looking oceanward, offering wild coastlines, white sandy beaches and savage cliffs. It also sets itself apart by virtue of a strong sense of identity, evident in its Celtic traditions and language.

Normandy is a place of churned butter and soft cheeses, where gentle fields divided by hedgerows end at chalk-white cliffs and dune-lined beaches, and the salty tang of the sea is never too far away. Normandy has played a pivotal role in European history, but during the D-Day landings of 1944 Normandy leaped to global importance. Although many towns were shattered during the Battle of Normandy, the landscape is still dotted with sturdy châteaux and stunning cathedrals, as well as the glorious abbey of Mont St-Michel.

Cycling through the two regions offers a range of sights as varied as prehistoric monuments and medieval towns, picturesque ports and serene canals, sturdy châteaux and magnificent cathedrals, with gastronomic delights all the way.



NORMANDY

Known for cows, cider and Camembert, Normandy is a land of gentle hedgerow-split fields stretching down to chalk-white cliffs and dune-lined beaches. Cycling Normandy's byways takes you straight into these distinctively lit pastoral landscapes of Impressionist-painting fame. Plump farm animals graze lazily on open meadows interspersed with apple orchards and dotted with half-timbered houses. Even inland, though, the salty tang of the sea is never too far away.

Gourmets and gourmands alike will take pleasure in the Normand table, a culinary reflection of the region's enticing blend of the maritime, the pastoral and the urban – and of old and new. The D-Day beaches are a short pedal from the marvellous 11th-century Bayeux Tapestry; sheer cliffs meet the sea along its rough-hewn coasts; fishing boats jostle with designer yachts in the harbour of Honfleur, and nothing compares to the austere but tourist-spirited island abbey of Mont St-Michel.

Normandy is divided into two administrative *régions*: Haute-Normandie (the Eure and Seine-Maritime *départements*) to the east and Basse-Normandie (the Calvados, Manche and Orne *départements*) to the west.

HISTORY

Normandy has long played a pivotal role in the history of France. After invasions in the 9th-century by Vikings, in 911 Charles the Simple of France and Viking chief Hrölf agreed to make the Rouen region home to these Norsemen (or Normans), hence the

area's name. Only 150 years later, in 1066, one from this Norman stock, the Duke of Normandy (better known as William the Conqueror), set sail from its shores with 6000 soldiers and crushed the English in the Battle of Hastings. The story of his military campaign and eventual crowning as king of England is told by the Bayeux Tapestry (p86).

Normandy was also the front line of Anglo-French hostilities for much of the Hundred Years War, near the end of which a persuasive 19-year-old woman named Jeanne d'Arc (Joan of Arc) was burned at the stake in Rouen.

But it was the World War II D-Day landings of 6 June 1944 that catapulted Normandy to contemporary global importance. Although many towns were shattered during the ensuing Battle of Normandy (see boxed text p72), the landscape is still dotted with robust châteaux and stunning cathedrals.

ENVIRONMENT

The eastern part of Normandy is ideal for farming and grazing. North of the Seine it's a vast plateau ending at the coast in chalky white cliffs. Central Normandy is known as the *bocage* (farmlands subdivided by hedges and trees) – a mixture of woodlands and pastureslands cut by low, humid valleys and rolling hills. Western Normandy and the Cotentin Peninsula bordering Brittany are part of the granite Massif Armoricaïn, evident in the peninsula's rugged coastline.

Normandy is home to four *parcs naturels régionaux* (regional nature parks): Brotonne straddles the Seine and is carpeted in bluebells in springtime, when deer, boar and hare are abundant; Normandie-Maine



'LE NORMAND'

Cycling great Jacques Anquetil (1934–87), born in Mont St-Aignan, Normandy, was a true *Normand*; he loved to eat, no matter what the time of year or race. He was the first man to win the Tour de France five times, in addition to his record nine victories in the Grand Prix des Nations, six of which were in a row. His impressive *palmarès* (record of achievement) include two triumphs in the Giro d'Italia (Tour of Italy), the first (in 1960) by that of a Frenchman; and boasting rights as the first man to win, over several years, the triple crown of three-week stage races: the Giro d'Italia, Tour de France and Vuelta a España (Tour of Spain).

Anquetil's professional career lasted from 1953 to 1969. Tragically, he died of cancer at 53. His memory lives on in, among other places, Paris' Bois de Vincennes, where the velodrome bears his name.