

“Guy de Maupassant compared the arch to an elephant dipping its trunk into the water”

Lasting IMPRESSION

The natural and architectural wonders of Normandy have inspired countless artists. Helen Werin follows in their footsteps



It's 9.30pm and I'm watching the sun set through the natural arch of Porte d'Aval at Étretat on Normandy's Alabaster Coast. The last rays are glinting off the top of the 70m-high 'Aiguille d'Étretat' – the needle-like rock behind it (main picture).

Earlier we'd climbed to the top of the Aval cliff via a path that had become slippery in light drizzle, so we were above this natural sculpture. The French writer Guy de Maupassant, who fell in love with this place, compared the arch to an

elephant dipping its trunk into the water. We don't dare go near the edge – we're 85m above the Channel here.

We could, in fact, have strolled on the Perrey – Étretat's promenade – to admire this and the second of Étretat's wonders, the Porte d'Amont, to the east. But we also wanted to see the largest of these offshore formations that so caught the imagination of the most celebrated Impressionists. Manneporte, the most westerly, is a little further along the Aval cliff. Our first impressions? Wow!

CLIFF RICHES

Next day and we're on top of more cliffs at Cap Fagnet, above Fécamp. We're on the other side of Porte d'Amont, described by Maupassant as "extending a giant leg into the sea". From below comes the sound of music from the town's fête. Around us are Second World War German bunkers, radar and observation posts.

Back on the Perrey we stand on the spots, marked by plaques, where Claude Monet painted. Our daughter, Sophie, wants to skim stones, but there are signs

Honfleur – even more of a treat by night

DID YOU KNOW?

Rouen's cathedral has a tomb said to contain the heart of Richard the Lionheart

warning us not to remove pebbles from the beach as they protect the village from floods and the cliffs from erosion.

Étretat is the start of our canvas 'trail' which takes us down the Seine valley to Rouen. On the way we try the velo-rail (which involves riding a specially-modified bicycle along an old railway line) at Les Loges and wander gardens of wallabies bounding free at Le Parc de Clères.

FOREST FUN

We discover baby deer and boar in the Forêt de Roumare, the flamboyant Gothic beauty of the Church of Notre Dame at Caudebec and the remains of a Roman theatre at Lillebonne. We cross the Seine via one of the free ferries to the Forêt de Brotonne to

wonder at the curious le Chêne-Cuve, a tree with four trunks. From Sahurs we cross again, this time to pretty La Bouille, with its many galleries, where the artist Alfred Sisley was so inspired by the landscape.

From near the ruins of the 7th-century Abbaye de Jumièges, we cycle past apple, plum and cherry orchards and thatched cottages. The cheapest of buses – just two euros return – whisks us from Jumièges to Rouen, another place to which artists have always flocked. We get aching necks from constantly looking up at medieval architecture and fabulous stained glass in its churches. Our feet ache from wandering cobbled alleys of wildly-leaning houses and tiny cafés. Just like Monet, who rented a room opposite it, we're entranced by the façade of the Cathédrale Notre-Dame.

We walk down the Rue du Gros Horloge and under the 16th-century clock that gives the street its name. Our destination is the Place du Vieux Marché, where Joan of Arc was burnt at the stake in 1431. A modern church and a large cross mark the spot.

Artists were drawn to Honfleur in the 19th century



Photos: Robin Weaver

The Pont de Tancarville (toll) carries us over the Seine to the Côte Fleurie and charming Honfleur – which is everything we've been led to expect from the Impressionists' paintings. By day, the quay and the cobbled streets with their crooked, half-timbered buildings brim with tourists attracted by the well-preserved beauty that lured artists in the 19th century. At night, it's even more of a delight, enhanced by the twinkling lights of a night market.

Our only disappointment is that Honfleur's beaches look over the industrial area of Le Havre, opposite. We have to venture along the coast to the long, sandy and extremely popular beaches of Trouville-sur-Mer, Deauville and Villers sur Mer for a more scenic outlook.

Our homeward journey takes us over the thrilling Pont de Normandie (toll), a steep, cable-stayed giant bridge which broke world records when it was built. As we sail out of Le Havre, I can clearly see Porte d'Aval and the needle rock of Étretat; our great first, last – and lasting – impression. ■

INFORMATION

SITES

A choice of sites in northern France can be found in the Club's 2012/2013 *Caravan Europe: Guide to Sites and Touring in France*, priced £5.99 to members (non-members £7.99) plus £2.50 postage and packaging. Order your copy at caravanclub.co.uk/caravaneurope or by calling 01342 327410. Sites to consider:

- **Camping de la Forêt**, Rue Mainberte, 76480 Jumièges (p345). Call 0033 2 35 37 93 43 or see campinglaforet.com
- **Camping La Catinière**, Route d'Honfleur, 27210 Fiquefleur Aquainville (p334). Call 0033 2 32 57 63 51 or see camping-honfleur.com

No fewer than 11 sites in Normandy are featured in the Club's 2012 *Ultimate Guide to Continental Caravanning* (including the two mentioned above), all of which have been inspected and are bookable through the Club's Travel Service (contact details below).

TRAVEL/TOURISM

- **Ferry and sites bookings via the Club** – for site and ferry details and to make bookings call 01342 316101 or see caravanclub.co.uk
- **Normandy tourism** – normandie-tourisme.fr



The Train Touristique Étretat Pays de Caux

Photo: TTEPAC