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Pas-de-Calais: crafty farmers, archers, hides and humbugs.
Foie gras, chocolates and fish soup. Nausicaa, a must for all.
 V2s. *Les Misérables*. (Refer also to *Pas de Calais* on website.)



I shall begin the first of the 44 chapters in *Mapaholics' France* with a classic example – and explanation – of what I mean by a ‘freewheeling philosophy of exploration’: look beyond the obvious; get used to using Michelin’s yellow and white lanes; laugh over your wrong slots; see France as few tourists do; and, above all, enjoy yourselves.

Study both the map on the left and the Michelin spiral-bound atlas map sheet. Most Brits, heading south and east, or returning home, rush across the Pas-de-Calais. (The French are just as bad: witness the Parisians on the new D126 (B4) which connects exit 4 on the A26 and **Le Touquet**.) As a consequence most tourists miss out: you and I know better – so let me help you seek out the not-so-obvious.

Start at **Fruges** (C4). Hereabouts a handful of enterprising farmers, producers and craftsmen deserve your support. First the Ferme Auberge du Sire de Créquy (tel 03 21 90 60 24), route de Créquy, 62310 Fruges. (Exact location: north of D130 by the word ‘Préhédre’ on the map.) What a thriving affair: buy their farm-produced cheeses, butter and other products; but, better still, relish their terrific menus (lunch or dinner but you must book ahead). Their own produce features strongly, of course; especially *flamiche au fromage* and their home-made cheeses. Menu prices are modest. On Sundays the place is buzzing, packed to the rafters with an exclusively French clientele.

South-east of Fruges is Verchin and to the south of the hamlet is the Ferme Bocquet; buy breads, tarts and *brioche cuites au feu de bois* by Patricia and Jacqueline (03 21 04 43 66). Purchase dried flowers at the home of Marie-Christine and Chantal Carrez – at Crépy, south-east of Verchin (03 21 04 65 43). Relatives of the Sire de Créquy owners make *brebis* (ewe’s milk) cheeses at their farm alongside the road immediately to the south of the D130, just above the word ‘Coupelle’, south-west of Fruges. Buy wines from Les Caves du Vieux Chai at Fressin, south of Créquy and in the Planquette Valley (03 21 90 61 43).

All the neighbouring terrain is unassuming, unspoilt and unseen – with extensive views from high ground and, as a contrast, pastoral valleys. The Créquoise Valley is especially eye-catching at Royon (B4): here the D130 crosses the stream; trees provide shade on the ‘green’ alongside the water; there’s an *auberge*, handsome small château and minute waterfall to the south-west. Enjoy the river aspect from the bridge at Loison-sur-Créquoise – and then pay a call on the enterprise Delobel, on the D130 south of the village, where you can try, and buy, *perlé de groseille* or *framboise* (slightly sparkling *apéritifs*). Embry (B4) is a scenic treat from the hillside to the south.

Now to **Maninghem** (B4) where, just north of the church, you can purchase *foie gras*, *rillettes*, duck *cassoulet* and *pâtés* at the whitewashed farm of Christine and Hubert Dellerie (03 21 90 52 77). Spare a minute for the single Commonwealth War Grave of Captain G.W.W. Morris, who was killed on 22 May 1940. I wonder how the captain came to be buried at Maninghem? After the harvest, dive down to Clenleu (south-west of Maninghem) and admire the *tressage de blé* (corn dollies)

made at the farm of Hervé Vielliard (03 21 90 50 25); then tuck into pancakes and cider across the road. Be sure to leave by the steep 14% climb.

I have long loved the Course Valley which flows south from near **Desvres** (B3) to **Montreuil** (A4). Today there are many swish new villas at the southern end of the valley but the famous old *auberge* at Inxent still captivates. The Course is at its most appealing where the borders of Inxent and Beussent (B4) rub together. Just north of the latter Alain Derick, at Les Chocolats de Beussent, makes highly reputed *chocolat frais*; you can try and buy (03 21 86 17 62). Rest awhile at Doudeauville (B3): what could be more refreshing than sitting on the bank by the stream, shaded by trees, with a drink in your hand (buy the latter at the Café des Sports)? Nearby **Samer** (A3) is renowned for strawberries.

As I said in the introduction, I can only scratch the surface in each chapter. Do your own exploration in the *pays* between the Course and **Bourthes** (B3) and Maninghem to the east: churches, old manors, footpaths, vales, streams and houses with a Spanish influence at Hucqueliers (B4) are just some of the surprises awaiting you.

Before leaving the countryside around Fruges detour to Agincourt (**Azincourt** on the map: C4). Here, on 25 October 1415, Henry V won his great battle. With the help of a new information centre and noticeboards you can see why the French *chevaliers* were massacred by Henry's deadly archers – trapped as the former were between the woods of Azincourt and Tramecourt. Further south (D1) is the battlefield of **Crécy**, where 69 years earlier, on 26 August 1346, Edward III won his famous victory, the start of the Hundred Years War. From a viewing tower you can survey the same scene that Edward witnessed and where, for the first and not the last time, the French learned the bitter lesson of the stunning use made of the longbow by the English and Welsh archers. On that same day cannonballs were also used for the first time.

Other valleys appeal too. North of Crécy is the **Authie** where, on either side of the river, you pass through communities and scenery a world away from the hectic N1. I have a soft spot for **Argoules**, north-west of Crécy (D1), and its *auberge* under a lime tree umbrella. The nearby Cistercian Abbey of Valloires and its renowned gardens present an impressive mixture of landscape and architecture; there's a vast collection of thousands of roses and shrubs.

The **Aa** Valley, from the source near Bourthes (B3) to **Lumbres** (C3), is seen by few. You have to work hard to get the best of the river views: wherever possible use side roads that bridge the stream. The mill at Renty (C3) is easily seen from the D129; one surprise, the wheel still turns. The owners of the handsome château, with a black-hatted tower, at the junction of the D191/D225, just north of St-Martin, have gone to some trouble to hide their property. Park and peek.

What of lesser-known treats? West of Crécy, on the coast, is the huge Marquenterre Bird Sanctuary. There are many hides where you can watch migrating species; details from the Domain du Marquenterre at 80120 St-Quentin-en-Tourmont (03

22 25 03 06). Between the **Canche** and Authie valleys, at Buire-le-Sec (north of Crécy), is the Maison de l'Art et de l'Artisan, where several dozen artists show their varied work. Desvres (B3) is famous for its delicately decorated pottery (*faïence*); visit both the Maison de la Faïence and the workshop/exhibition of one of the manufacturers, Les Artistes Faïenciers (39 rue Rodolphe Minguet).

Tasting treats abound too. In **Boulogne** (A3) Philippe Olivier's treasure-trove *fromagerie* must not be missed: 43-45 rue Thiers. Hidden in the maze of Le Touquet's streets (A4) is Serge Pérard's exhilarating fish restaurant at 64 rue de Metz (see Michelin red guide): his *soupe de poissons* is fabulous. At Neufchâtel-Hardelot, between Boulogne and Le Touquet, pay a call on the *boulangerie-pâtisserie* of André Trupin, 20 rue du Chemin (on the D119E west of the village) and marvel at his old wood and traditional ovens: taste his handiwork too. At **Berck-Plage** (A4) see how *berlingots* (humbugs) are made in the traditional way; try them and buy them at Le Succès Berckois, 56 rue Carnot.

In the hills east of Boulogne, Le Boulonnais, are quiet villages and lanes – part of the Parc Naturel Régional Nord Pas-de-Calais: Réty (A2) and **Le Wast** (B2) are just two. The park is split into two parts: a semicircle to the east of Boulogne; and a circle of terrain around **St-Omer** (C2). For information on events and places to see, call on the Maison du Parc, 'Manoir du Huisbos', at 62142 Le Wast; and the Maison du Parc, 'Le Grand Vannage', at 62510 Arques (south of St-Omer). North of Boulogne is the Côte d'Opale, renowned for sandy beaches, dunes, cliffs and the glorious views from **Cap Gris-Nez**. Explore Le Boulonnais and the Côte d'Opale by bike. Many firms hire them, including Cyclo Plein Air at **Wissant** and Cycles Marius at **Wimille**.

There are many varied museums in the Boulogne area: the Maison du Marbre et de la Géologie at Rinxent (A2, east of **Marquise**) – note the many marble and stone quarries; the creepy V3 base at the Forteresse de Mimoyecques (north-east of Marquise); the Atlantic Wall Museum at Audinghen (north-west of Marquise); the Musée 39-45 at Ambleteuse (west of Marquise). Don't miss Boulogne's superb Nausicaa, the world's largest sea centre: there's an aquarium for the public and research facilities for marine professionals. Visit tropical lagoons with rainbow-coloured fish and see conger eels in a rusting wreck.

Many other Pas-de-Calais museums appeal: the impressive fine arts museum at the gracious Hôtel Sandelin in St-Omer; the Musée Municipal at Berck-Plage – specialising in ethnology and archaeology; the fine arts Musée du Château at Boulogne; the fine arts, scientific and technical culture of the Musée des Beaux Arts et de la Dentelle at **Calais**; the fine arts Musée du Touquet at Le Touquet; the regional archaeology exhibits at the Musée Quentovic in **Etaples** (A4); the modern and contemporary art displays at the Musée du Dessin et de l'Estampe Originale at **Gravelines** (C1); and, finally, the contemporary art at the Musée d'Art Contemporain at **Dunkerque** (and the Jardin de Sculptures which surrounds the ultra-modern building).

Not surprisingly the Pas-de-Calais has many links with wars fought over the centuries. Between Calais and St-Omer is one of man's more hideous creations: a monstrosity of reinforced concrete called the Blockhaus d'Eperlecques (C2). The blockhouse was planned to be a firing pad for V2 rockets aimed at London. Three centuries ago the legendary and crafty military architect, Vauban, was associated with most of the formidable fortresses built throughout France: seek out the red-brick ramparts at Montreuil (A4); the well conserved fortress at Gravelines; Fort Nieulay, west of Calais (B1); the Fort d'Ambleteuse (north of Boulogne); and the St-Omer fortifications.

Other more pleasing examples of man's architectural skills abound. The entertaining Grisendal Water Mill near Wimille (A2), built in 1811, where Monsieur Roy, the miller, still passionately perpetuates the craft handed down from generation to generation. (The mill is alongside the Wimereux, to the east of Wimille.) **Montreuil** (A4), once a Roman port, is now a small hilltop town more than 10 km inland. Enter through the northern medieval town gates. Wander through cobbled streets and walk the Vauban ramparts circuit (three km). Both Victor Hugo, in his epic *Les Misérables*, and Laurence Stern, in *A Sentimental Journey*, wrote about the town. **Hesdin** (D1), like Montreuil, is a film-makers' delight (many of the original *Maigret* TV episodes were shot there).

Some readers will be interested in festivals, *son et lumière* shows and other events held in the area. (If you want information on festivals, spectacles and similar events throughout France contact your MDLF.) Here's a handful held in the Pas-de-Calais (phone numbers in brackets): "Music and Ramparts" at Boulogne (first three weeks in June: 03 21 31 68 38); the Medieval Festival at the Château d'Hardelot (A3) (July/August: 03 21 83 71 22); the Hardelot Festival of classical music (July/mid August: 03 21 83 02 65); the International Kite Meeting at Berck (early April: 03 21 09 50 00); and the Flobart (traditional fishing boat) Festival at Wissant (A2) (end August: 03 21 85 15 62).

Just as my children have enjoyed the long, sandy beaches of the area in past years so will yours too. The best known are the beaches at **Hardelot-Plage**, stretching over 17 km and bordered by pine woods; the beach at Le Touquet, backed by the elegant promenade and resort; the smaller version at **Wimereux** (don't miss the dunes to the north, at de la Slack); and the sands and dunes at Berck-Plage and Fort-Mahon Plage (A4). An added attraction here is the Aquaclub Côte Picarde – fun and recreation with water slides and bubbling pools.

Poking noses and fingers into markets could well be an irresistible idea for many of you. Here is a list of some of the smaller markets held in the area: St-Omer (Saturday morning); Desvres (Tuesday morning); Etaples (A4) (Tuesday and Friday morning); Montreuil (Saturday morning); Samer (A3) (Monday morning); Wimereux (Tuesday and Friday morning).

Finally, I'll finish by reminding you of some of the more illustrious tourist attractions in the bigger towns and resorts.

Le Touquet. A sophisticated seaside resort with wide and long sandy beaches. Designer boutiques on the main street and casinos cater for the posher Porsche-owning Parisians. The Aqualud indoor watersports centre on the sea front keeps children happy for hours. The covered market, too, is a lively affair: Thursday and Saturday mornings (and Monday mornings, too, from mid June to mid September).

Calais. Don't bypass Rodin's bronze sculpture, The Burghers of Calais, in front of the town hall; the work commemorates the surrender of six townsmen in 1347 to King Edward III. The lighthouse, near the Gare Maritime, offers exceptional views across the Channel to the English coast on clear days. The Musée des Beaux Arts, already mentioned and in the heart of the town, contains exhibits of Flemish lace and linen. To the south is the vast Channel Tunnel terminal; note, too, the line of the new TGV track. Bridges on the roads south of **Ardres** (B2) provide many a chance to see the bullet trains on the move.

Boulogne. After Nausicaa, already referred to, spend time in the Ville Haute, the 13th-century hilltop town, with the Basilica of Notre-Dame and ramparts; the oldest church, St-Nicolas, in *place* Dalton; and the museum, in the castle, noted for Egyptian treasures. Don't forget the *fromagerie* treasures, over 200 varieties, at Philippe Olivier's cheese shop at 43-45 rue Thiers. The display is a roll-call of French cheeses. Northern varieties have pride of place but you will also encounter many unknown regional versions rarely seen elsewhere: *Le Bergues* (near Dunkerque); *Le St-Winoc* (made at an abbey); *Le Belval* (near Hesdin and **St-Pol**: E1); *Le Crayeux de Roncq*; and *Le Vieux Boulogne*.

St-Omer. The ancient wool town's charm has survived extensive war damage. There are pretty, old canalside houses, handsome main square, impressive Basilica of Notre Dame and the exceptional museum in the Hôtel de Sandelin (displays of fine and decorative arts, especially clay pipes and ceramics). Tour the *marais* (marshes) and waterways (explore by punt) north and east of the town. At nearby Arques (to the immediate south) the astonishing Ascenseur des Fontinettes has been preserved: the hydraulic lift was built in 1887 to replace a series of locks and raised canal barges a distance of 40 feet.

And last, but not least, may I put in a special word for one of my favourite small towns, Bergues, just off the edge of the map (south-east of Dunkerque). A peaceful place, with walled fortifications, belfry (a copy of the original destroyed in 1944), first-rate Musée Municipal (in the Mont-de-Piété) and a network of canals fringed by Flemish-styled houses. North of the ramparts is the star-shaped Couronne d'Hondschoote, a defensive complex of moats and walls designed by Vauban, the military architect, which now provides a delightful walk along a canal and lakes. I wonder what the wily genius would make of the fort's new use? Peace, not war, is an appropriate end to this Pas-de-Calais chapter.