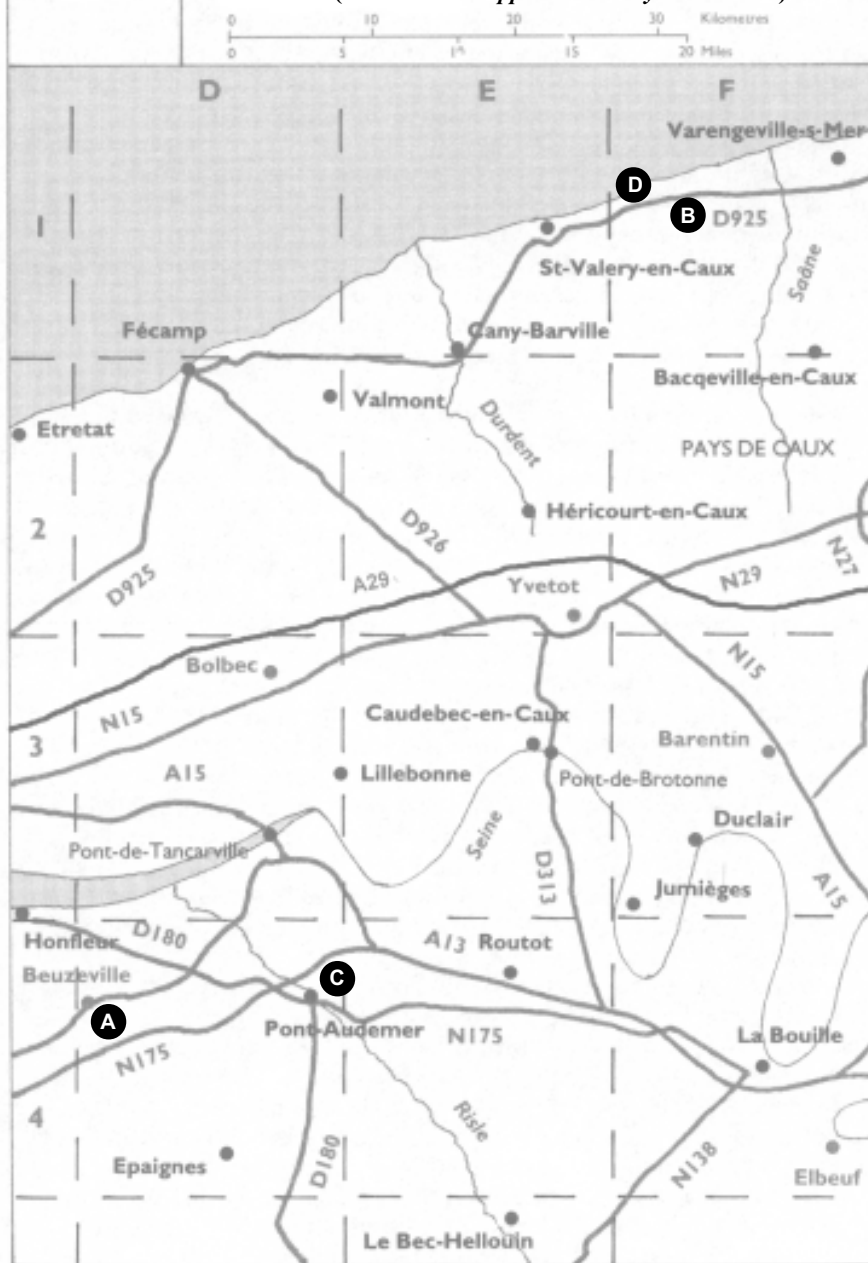


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Pays de Caux: *abbayes, falaises, colombiers* and a harp. Bridges, ferries and river valleys. *Cidre, calvados, Pommeau* and *Bénédictine*. (Refer also to *Upper Normandy* on website.)



The map on the left is a cartographic image of contrasting countryside. The plateau area north of the **Seine** is called the **Pays de Caux**.

The coast is renowned for the high chalk cliffs (*falaises*) which dominate the shoreline. In the hinterland tiny picturesque chalk streams are very much my own cup of tea though I cannot say I like the extensive hedge-less prairies which cover much of the Caux plateau. The Seine estuary and valley are uglier than ever; industrial complexes and urban sprawl have crept into every available corner. Thankfully, there are numerous man-made treasures to compensate and, on the left bank of the Seine, the Parc Régional de Brotonne is a welcome and refreshing green lung. I'll start with my personal scenic favourites: the valleys of the River **Durdent** (E1/E2) and the River **Saône** (F1/F2).

The Durdent is pretty as a picture. One big plus is that roads are in constant touch with the stream. Start with a scenic splash at a gorgeous spot. Locate **Cany-Barville** (E1), head south on the D131 for a mile or so and turn left towards the church marked on the map. At the point the lane crosses the stream (a ford) you'll find the church and a private house (recently a small hotel), the Manoir de Barville. Park, and take a stroll along the lane; no-one is likely to bite your head off.

A few hundred yards upstream is the 17th-century Château de Cany. Moated and full of handsome furniture, the severe-looking château, redeemed by the pastoral river setting, managed to survive the Revolution. Continue south and do some detailed navigation, nosing out in the process some striking examples of *colombiers cauchois*, the dovecotes of Caux. Built of stone and red bricks, and with tiled cone-shaped roofs, each one is a treat; don't miss them.

The first, at Grainville-la-Teinturière (E2), is easily spotted, near the church. The second is harder to find. Do not use the signposted route from the church alongside the D131 at Oherville. Instead, drive up the one-car-wide lane half a mile to the north, between two banks cut out of the hillside covered with a dense beech wood. At the top, among the trees to the left, you'll spot the fortified Manoir d'Auffay and, nearer the entrance from the road, the exceedingly handsome dovecote, built in a mosaic of brick patterns. This is also the site of a new Musée des Colombiers Cauchois (open weekends in May and June and every day from July to mid September). Now back to the river.

The third dovecote is also hard to locate. Head north on the D149 from **Héricourt-en-Caux** (E2). At the top of the hill, after the bend, turn right towards Anvéville; the *colombier* is part of a farm which is on the right in half a mile or so. You are allowed to enter.

You will love the Durdent Valley, the unspoilt villages and the mix of meadows, trees and gentle stream. There are several water mills between Grainville and Héricourt and, at the latter, a riverside *auberge*. Autretot (E2), south of Héricourt, is a four-star *village fleuri*. One enterprising business is S.A. Sotrosa at Ouainville (E1), west of Cany-Barville. Here you can buy *oeufs de truite* – used to such good effect at the Manoir de Barville – smoked fish, varying *confits*, *soupe de poisson*

and other goodies, including *cidre*, *calvados* and *pommeau* (apple juice and *calvados*). Finally, there's an Ecomusée de Moulin St-Martin at Cany-Barville which explains local crafts during the last century (open p.m. at weekends from June to September).

The Saâne (F1/F2), together with its tiny tributary, the Vienne (the Michelin maps do not identify, by name, the marked stream which flows north from **Bacqueville-en-Caux**: F1/F2), are not as seductive as the Durdent. But do seek them out. The many villages are prosperous places. All have differently-styled churches. The D2 road is never really in contact with the Saâne and the only way to best appreciate the water vistas is to constantly cross, by car or foot, the numerous bridges which cross the river. Make an effort to find the stern looking, multi-towered Château d'Imbleville (F2), the ancient stone house with half-timbered balcony at Auzouville-sur-Saâne and, to the east, the handsome Manoir d'Herbouville at St-Ouen-le-Mauger (F2).

The smaller ports and resorts on the Caux coastline leave me cold. Over the decades I have visited them out of season, in winter, spring and autumn; perhaps on a hot summer's day I would see them at their best. However, there are several sites worth a detour.

Start in the woods surrounding **Varengeville-sur-Mer** (F1). The Renaissance Manoir d'Ango is a pleasing Italian-styled diversion; note the fine dovecote. To the north of the D75, on the D27 leading to the sea, is the renowned, somewhat too much I think, Parc Floral des Moutiers: a Lutyens house and the Gertrude Jekyll inspired gardens attract thousands of visitors. The wooded grounds and the many hidden corners please the eye, especially the fabulous rhododendrons which I was so lucky to see at the end of May. Drive the narrow one-way lanes near Vasterival (F1), lined with cottages and houses galore, some simple, some swish. Enjoy the vistas from the viewpoints.

Continue west. Admire the vast église at Bourg-Dun (F1); the thatched cottages and one of the smallest rivers in France at Veules-les-Roses (F1: both villages have a first-class restaurant); and the colourful harbour at **St-Valery-en-Caux** (E1). Visit the over-the-top Palais Bénédictine at **Fécamp** (D2): a mixture of ornate Gothic and Renaissance buildings; an art museum housing paintings, sculptures and ivory; and a history of the Bénédictine story, explaining how the spirit is distilled and a fascinating demonstration of the 27 spices and plants which are used to make the heady liqueur. Before leaving the port don't forget the impressively-proportioned interior of La Trinité Church.

The best route to **Etretat** (C2) is along the minor roads, not the D940. Leave the car whenever you can and walk the GR21 footpath, which runs along the top of the cliffs; this advice also applies to both sides of Etretat, the only way to marvel at the Falaise d'Amont, the Falaise d'Aval and the famous natural arches to the west of the resort.

Inland from Fécamp two châteaux deserve your attention. **Valmont** (D2) is particularly creditworthy as a considerable effort has been made to lay on all sorts of attractions. The 15th-century castle has a medieval, 11th-century keep, a 16th-century Renaissance wing and a large leisure park. The Château de Bailleul (D2), south-west of Valmont, is a 16th-century square building, noted for its kitchen and a bedroom where Mary Queen of Scots stayed after she fled from Scotland in 1561; just as noteworthy are the gardens and trees in the park.

Man has certainly left his mark on the banks of the Seine. I've grumbled already about the bleak features: what of the more positive benefits? Two *ponts*, the **Tancarville** suspension bridge (D3) and the harp-like, cable-stayed **Brotonne** (E3), are massive. An even larger one, the Pont de Normandie, is east of **Honfleur** (C3); at 856 m between the two towers, this is the world's longest cable-stayed bridge (Brotonne is 320 m). **Caudebec-en-Caux** (E3) and **Duclair** (F3) are pleasant but busy spots; cross the Seine by car ferry from the latter. Do that, too, at **La Bouille** (F4), squeezed onto the river's left bank; walk the narrow streets and promenade.

Four renowned abbeys are located on the map: the austere, three-sided Cistercian Abbaye de Valasse (D3), north of **Lillebonne** (see the ruins of the latter's grass-banked Roman theatre); the Abbaye de St-Wandrille (E3), east of Caudebec, a Bénédictine glory and the home of Europe's oldest dining room (*le réfectoire*); the mighty abbey ruins at **Jumièges** (F3), still a stunning reminder of the many once great Norman abbeys; and, the last of the quartet, the Bénédictine Abbaye St-Georges at St-Martin-de-Boscherville (F3), east of Jumièges.

South of the river is the green lung I referred to earlier: the two sections of the Parc Régional de Brotonne, one the great beech and oak forest (E3), the other the Marais Vernier (D3). Call at the Maison du Parc at Notre-Dame-de-Bliquetuit (E3), south of the bridge, for details of several points of interest: the new Maison du Lin (flax) at **Routot** (E4); the Musée du Sabotier and Le Four à Pain (a rural bakery) at La Haye-de-Routot, north of Routot; the Maison des Métiers at Bourneville (E4); the Musée de la Marine at Caudebec (E3); and the Maison de la Pomme and La Forge at St-Opportune-la-Mare (D4/E4).

Now three favourites. **Pont-Audemer** (D4) is full of half-timbered houses between the two arms of the **Risle** (connected by tiny canals, the town is tagged la Venise Normande); market day is Monday. **Honfleur**, an atmospheric port where the *vieux bassin* is a magnet for painters. The abbey at **Le Bec-Hellouin** (south of E4) has a lovely setting; walk through the shady grounds and don't be intimidated by St-Nicholas' Tower; study the plaque before making the 200-step climb.

Finally, some man-made delights as you head for the Pays d'Auge (map 6): the *église* at St-Germain-Village (D4); the 1,000-year-old yew tree and the church at St-Symphorien (D4); the church and half-timbered houses at **Epaignes** (D4); and the delectable church at Le-Bois-Hellain (D4). Relish, too, the many half-timbered *maisons Normandes*.