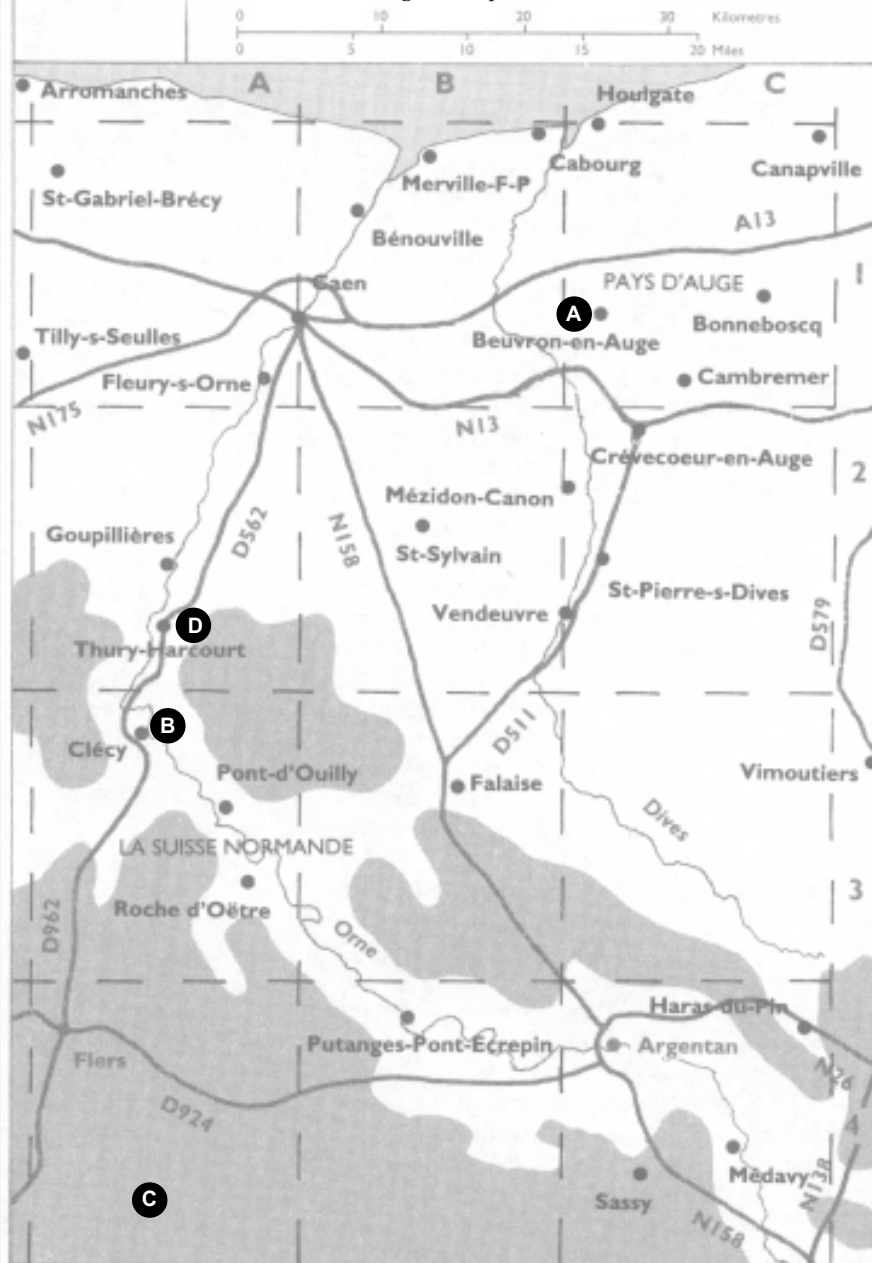


6

Suisse Normande & Pays d'Auge: 5C land and no pig's squeak. Jerusalem. Boucle and Roches. Manor houses and châteaux. Café Gondrée, Pavé d'Auge and a poterie at La Ruelle.



For me Normandy, Britain's 'partner-in-history', is an extension of our island home. The map on the left will take you to a land of wooded hills, easy-going rivers, beech forests and handsome towns and villages, many of which were rebuilt after the devastation of 1944.

I have divided the chapter into three parts. First I'll provide you with some ideas on the best countryside to explore; the landscape, both man-made and natural, is well coiffured with hardly a hair out of place. Then I'll give you details of four producers and suppliers from whom you can buy some of Normandy's renowned '5C' culinary delights: cream, cheese, cider, *calvados* and *charcuterie*. Finally, I'll devote some space to numerous man-made sights and museums, many of which span the vast swathe of history during this turbulent millennium.

I'll start part one in the **Pays d'Auge** (C1/C2), a land of dazzling brown and white timbered cottages. In spring the Pays d'Auge is an enchanting, intoxicating sight. Intoxicating? Literally, as the apple orchards are laden down with blossom, destined to become that fiery amber-hued brandy, *calvados*, or, alternatively, sparkling cider with an almost russet glow. In April the hedgerows are lined with primroses; later, wild flowers replace their sunny faces (that's true of all Normandy). In May fields are awash with wild yellow irises.

Seek out **Beuvron-en-Auge** (C1), east of **Caen**, an unbelievably evocative Normandy village; no wonder the community "protects" the superb half-timbered houses. Then head north-east on the D146; be sure to make the short walk to the *chapelle* at Clermont-en-Auge for the extensive panorama to the west. Continue on to Rumesnil, follow the Dorette upstream to La Roque-Baignard (C1), south-east to La Boissière (C2), west to **Cambremer** and finish on the D101, with views to the south, towards **Crèvecœur-en-Auge** (C2).

Next, south-west to **La Suisse Normande** (A3/B3), in reality the middle section of the **Orne** Valley, where wooded hills and river aspects please the eye. Start at **Thury Harcourt** (A2). Walk the Boucle du Hom where a loop of the Orne does an almost 360-degree clockwise turn. At St-Rémy, north of **Clécy** (A3), follow the signposted Route des Crêtes to the Pain de Sucre viewpoint – Normandy personified.

A riverside café, south of the bridge between Clécy and Le Vey and on the Orne's left bank, is the ideal spot for a cooler. Just south of a weir, the terrace also proves to be a good 'hide' for watching dragon flies skimming the surface, birds going about their hectic business and fishermen working the fall in the river. See the Orne at **Pont-d'Ouilly** (A3), continue south on the D167, cross the river and then climb to the **Roche d'Oêtre**. Here the viewpoint, reached through the heady aroma of a pine wood, overlooks the River Rouvre, hardly visible in high summer, so dense are the forests far below you.

Drive the lanes on both banks to **Putanges-Pont-Ecrepin** (B4), enjoy the river scenes there, and continue south-east, taking in the views north-east of Ménil-Jean. At Ménil-Glaise (B4), most easily reached by the lane 400 yards north-east of the cemetery at Batilly, man and Nature combine to shape the most seductive of river aspects.

North of Thury-Harcourt, and not part of La Suisse Normande, the Orne has a more unassuming face. Start from **Goupillières** (A2), head north on the D171 and D212, use the lane which runs alongside the river south of Pont-du-Coudray and continue north, on both banks, to **Fleury-sur-Orne** (A1). The latter is on a hill; seek out the riverside site of the Ile Enchantée restaurant. Here the Orne is indeed enchanting, a pretty contrast to the wretched urban sprawl surrounding Caen. At Pont-du-Coudray detour east to the *poterie* at La Ruelle, south of Clinchamps-sur-Orne (A2). The potter, Gérard Quinchez, produces stunning work; he was taught his craft by Owen Watson (see *Chitenay* on website).

Visit the newly-created 750-acre nature reserves in the Orne estuary. These are north of Sallenelles (B1): call at the Maison de la Nature et de l'Estuaire in the village for details of walks, viewpoints and the different birds to be seen. There is nothing wretched about the superb seaside resorts that line the shore to the north-east of Sallenelles: **Cabourg**, **Houlgate**, Villers-sur-Mer, Deauville and Trouville are smart, sophisticated and have marvellous leisure facilities.

Now for part two. First, pay a call on Pierre Huet at 'La Brière des Fontaines', on the D101 south-west of Cabremer (C1): here you'll find the highest quality *calvados*, cider and *pommeau* (an amber *apéritif*, a blend of apple juice and *calvados*) in a variety of different-sized bottles. Second, to the Domaine de St-Loup, just over one mile south of Crevècoeur (C2) and to the east of the D16; here you can buy the finest Camembert cheese. Third, to the hard-to-find Ferme Le Boquet, where you can purchase farm-made *Pavé d'Auge* and *Pont-l'Evêque* cheeses (leave them to mature): find Vieux-Pont, north-east of **St-Pierre-sur-Dives** (C2), locate the cross between the village and Boquet, and 400 to 500 yards to the south, on the D154, you'll spot the farm with white gates on the left. Finally, if you want to savour some of the tasty treats made from every part of a pig (other than the squeak), then call at the Baratte *charcuterie* at **St-Sylvain** (B2), south-east of Caen.

Part three and some man-made sights. I've divided the map into two sections, right and left, and listed them from north to south.

Canapville (C1), north-west of Pont-l'Evêque: the picturesque stone and half-timbered Manoir des Evêques (p.m. mid June to Aug, except Tues; rest of year p.m. Fri and weekends). Pont-l'Evêque (east of C1): the motor museum at the Château de Betteville, south of the A13 (tel 02 31 65 05 02); and the Musée du Calvados et des Métiers Anciens which explains the skills of local craftsmen in past times (open every day).

Bonnebosq (C1), east of Beuvron: a gorgeous 16th/17th century Auge manor house (02 31 65 11 07). **Crèvecoeur-en-Auge** (C2): a collection of half-timbered buildings on a small site with art and science exhibitions (July and Aug every day; p.m. April to Sept; p.m. rest of year). **Mézidon-Canon** (C2): an 18th-century mansion and park of woodland, wild flower meadows, water features and walled gardens (July to Sept: p.m. except Tues. April to June: p.m. weekends).

St-Germain-de-Livet, south of Lisieux (both east of C2): small château of differently-shaded stone and brick; towers, moat and timbers (p.m. April to September; rest of year tel 02 31 31 00 03). **St-Pierre-sur-Dives** (C2): the vast covered market (not a nail or screw in sight) and the Gothic abbey church; and the Musée des Techniques Fromagères in the abbey grounds which explains the process of cheese making (02 31 20 97 90).

South-east of St-Pierre is **Vendeuvre** (C2): visit the 18th-century chateau, a sober building; more fun is the museum of miniature furniture (p.m. June to mid September). Lisores, north of **Vimoutiers** (east of C3): Fernand Léger Museum; outdoor and indoor exhibits of his ceramics, mosaics and, especially striking, seven stained glass windows; isolated, attractive site (April to October; not Wednesday).

Crouttes, west of Vimoutiers (east of C3): St-Michel Priory, a collection of eight buildings, one a tithe barn (p.m. mid June to mid Sept). **Vimoutiers**: the Musée du Camembert, a reconstruction of a traditional farm *fromagerie* (May to Oct: every day except Monday p.m.). **Haras-du-Pin** (C4): National Stud with handsome buildings and attractive grounds (a.m. and p.m. every day mid April to Sept; p.m. rest of year except Tuesdays; 02 33 39 92 01). Château de **Médavy**, south-west of Haras (C4): interesting moats (every day mid July to mid Sept). Château le **Sassy** (C4), west of Médavy: formal gardens and terraces (weekends April to Nov; every day July and Aug).

Arromanches (north-west of A1): the Musée du Débarquement tells the story of the 1944 Mulberry Harbour. Courseulles, to the east: La Musée de la Mer, a super aquarium (02 31 37 92 58). **St-Gabriel-Brécý** (A1): château, church and exquisite French formal garden (closed Wed). **Merville-Franceville-Plage** (B2): the prodigious fortifications of a German coastal battery. **Bénouville** (B1), north-east of Caen: the Pegasus Bridge Museum (Apr to Oct) and the Café Gondrée, the first building to be liberated in 1944. **Tilly-sur-Seulles** (A1 edge): a village taken and re-taken 23 times in June 1944; a museum tells the story of those devastating days. (Don't miss the poignant Jerusalem Cemetery where 48 souls are buried: alongside the D61 at Chouain, north-west of Tilly.)

Caen (A1/B1): abbeys, churches, castle and museums (including the 'Memorial', a modern structure alongside the bypass, which explains the history of the period from 1929 to today, how the Second World War came about, the years of occupation and the Battle of Normandy).

Thury-Harcourt (A2): château ruins, burned by the Germans in 1944, and 170 acres of picturesque grounds and gardens (p.m. May to September). Clécý (A3): the Musée Hardy; the work (mainly of La Suisse Normande) and memorabilia of the artist André Hardy (02 31 69 79 95). **Falaise** (B3), fittingly the final entry and two sites which span 900 years of history: the castle where William the Conqueror was born in 1027; and the Musée Août 1944 which explains the fierce battle for the town.