



TRAVEL – FRANCE’S NORD-PAS DE CALAIS REGION

THE CONQUEST OF FRANCE

British visitors are visiting Northern France in ever-increasing numbers but there’s so much more to be discovered than hypermarkets and shopping malls if you’ve a car, a spare weekend and an adventurous spirit. Jonathan Crouch took a long, short weekend there and found the perfect place to relax....

Back in the 1400's, Henry V believed he owned Northern France and proved the point in 1415 at the Battle of Agincourt. Has much changed? You sometimes wonder. For many, Northern France is like a little Gallic piece of England and they prove the point by flooding through the Eurotunnel to take over the hypermarkets and shopping centres.

The French make the best of their defeat at Agincourt in the same way that today, they politely repel any attempt to Anglicise their Northernmost region. English is rarely spoken and surprisingly rarely understood. Food, customs, culture - all remain stoically Gallic in the face of hordes of English clutching hypermarket shopping bags.

Which is of course what almost every Englishman wants. A land near enough to be an easy half hour Eurotunnel shuttle ride away. But far enough removed in culture, cuisine and curiosity to feel like another world. Despite this, the accessible part of Northern France still remains quite unexplored by British visitors, this the area the French call the Pas-de-Calais region, stretching from Calais itself south along the coast past St.Omer towards Le Touquet and inland to the historic city of Arras. If you've a car, an adventurous spirit and a spare weekend, here's a destination that seems to have all the ingredients for a perfect short break.

Of course, ingredients are one thing, the end result another. Hence a recent weekend spent putting the appeal of the region to the test. The idea was to see exactly how much we could fit into a long motoring weekend without too much driving or an impossibly tight schedule. We wanted shopping, sight-seeing and relaxing time, plus a chance to soberly appreciate the battle-scarred history of the poppy-flecked Pas-de-Calais Fields. We wanted a lot.

Of course the key question was where to stay. I must admit that I’ve always yearned to have a place in France. Somewhere I could shoot across to for the weekend, then settle back in and feel at home. Somewhere that would be French – but not *too* French. Somewhere in the rural heart of the country, yet easily accessible from the Channel ports. Somewhere, in fact, like the Maison de Plumes.

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Here is a hotel – but not as you know it. The Maison des Plumes (www.maisondeplumes.com) is an 18th century French chateau in the little village of Heuchin, about 50 minutes drive from Calais yet deep in the heart of the scenic Pas-de-Calais region of northern France. And it’s a little slice of Britishness that’s unmistakably French. The Britishness is provided by the owners, Richard and Vanessa Rhoades-Brown, who a few years ago, saw and fell in love with the property before refurbishing it lovingly from scratch.

The result is a *pied de terre* that an increasing number of loyal guests are using both as a base for motoring holidays to explore the Pas-de-Calais area and as a stopover on their way out to destinations further south in Europe. Or indeed, as a welcome break on their return.



Arrive in the grand driveway and your first impressions of Maison des Plumes is that it's like every French Château you've seen in a picture book, imposing and impressive yet comfortably accessible. Inside, all the Bedrooms are individually designed and themed, have King Size Beds and feature their own en-suite bathrooms, with state of the art baths & showers.

After arriving on Friday night, Saturday morning brought the pleasant prospect of a leisurely drive to the historic city of Arras, with plenty of time for short stopovers at places like the Notre Dame de Lorette in Ablain-Saint-Nazaire (the largest French necropolis) and the poignant Canadian National Monument in Vimy. In truth though, we'd one eye on the clock throughout, mindful of the fact that the famous Saturday Market in the centre of Arras would stay only to 1pm. Spread out across the Grand Place and the Place des Heros in the middle of the city, this is a place to buy anything from dog biscuits to designer clothes at a fraction of the normal price.

Having checked it out fully, we found the perfect end to a busy but fruitful morning's shopping was lunch on an outside table at Le Bateau du Ch'ti (speciality seafood) in the shadow of the city's great Cathedral. Another longer shadow that hangs over Arras are the memories of the sacrifices made in the last century's two great wars, not only by the city's inhabitants but also by the allied troops who fought to liberate them. We re-lived some of their stories 20 metres underground that afternoon in the vast caverns of the WW1 underground museum in the city's Wellington quarry (www.carriere-wellington.com). Here, hundreds of British and Commonwealth soldiers endured unbelievably arduous conditions tunnelling under German lines for a surprise attack in April 1917. The unimaginable luxury we enjoy compared to what they suffered was contrasted by our classical French hotel later that night, the Univers in the centre of Arras (www.hotel-univers-arras.com), whose excellent menu served a lamb stew to die for.

Sunday morning bought a change of pace - as Sunday mornings should. Around 45 minutes west of Arras in the small town of Cheriennes lies the little garden of Guy and Eliane Lebel. Their passion has been to bring their little patch of land to life with burbling brooks and brilliant colours, shady seats and scarlet flowers. It's an idyllic place to sit, relax and unwind (for information, email guy.lebel@orange.fr) Sadly, we couldn't linger, due as we were for another slice of history at the Agincourt museum, another 30 minutes further on (www.azincourt-medieval.com). This rather incongruous French celebration of arguably the great British battle victory of all time - that of Henry V in 1415 - put us in the mood for a slice of Gallic Englishness to finish our weekend. Which was perfectly provided back at the Maison de Plumes by owners Richard and Vanessa Rhoades-Brown and an excellent dinner.

It had been a rich but memorable programme and by Monday morning, one that we had just a few hours left to enjoy. How to finish, we wondered? What would the typical British visitor do? Head to the supermarkets of course - or today, perhaps to something a bit more sophisticated. The Cite Europe, an enormous 21st Century shopping mall just next to the French Calais entrance to the Channel Tunnel, is like the biggest retail complex you can imagine, only better because it has more desirable, fashionable stores.

And so we returned home with memories as rich as the food and sites we had seen, so impossibly crammed in such a short, long weekend. Yet enjoyed in a way that didn't seem crammed or in any way tiring. We'd be back of course - and so would many other British 'invaders'. The conquest of France continues.

Want to replicate this journey? Here's what you need to know.....

The place to stay: Maison de Plumes – Heuchin - (www.maisondeplumes.com)

The places to visit: WW1 Underground Museum – Wellington Quarry – Arras – www.carriere-wellington.com

Agincourt - www.azincourt-medieval.com

Le Jardin des Lianes – Cheriennes - guy.lebel@orange.fr

General Information: www.thechannelhop.co.uk or www.pas-de-calais.com