

SEINE RIVER CRUISE REPORT / HONFLEUR - PARIS

Normandy

While traveling through Normandy in mid-October 2002 by train, bus and CroisiEurope river cruise ship, I discovered a mostly rural corner of France that was largely dominated by green pastureland grazed by cows and sheep, small family farms, rolling hills, lush forests, horse ranches and apple orchards. Besides tourism, apples appear to be the main cash crop in Normandy from which the local producers make jams, jellies, cider and Calvados (apple brandy).

Normandy has many other faces, besides that rural one. It is home to the large port cities of Le Havre and Rouen, it has ancient fishing villages like Honfleur, as well as, modern and famous seaside resorts like Deauville and Trouville. It was a province once favored by many of the great impressionist painters of the late 19th and early 20th century when they immortalized medieval structures, like the Rouen Cathedral. And Normandy is also a contrast between the wealthy ruling class with their many well-preserved chateaux, as well as, the local farm and fishing families, with their simple half-timbered houses and the unadorned exteriors of their local churches.

The Seine River meanders through Normandy and it is most definitely the heart of this region. The river's upstream route begins on the English Channel and proceeds through the Normandy countryside, past the port city of Rouen and through the western suburbs of Paris. The cruise ship sails through the very heart of Paris as it passes by some its most famous landmarks along the way; La Defense, the Statue of Liberty, the Eiffel Tower, the Orsay Museum, the Louvre and Notre Dame, to name but a few. In some instances, the ship barely glides underneath some of the many ornamental bridges of Paris with only a few feet of headroom to spare. The experience of entering Paris by ship is as impressive to first time visitors of the city as it is to long time residents.

HONFLEUR

This was once considered a fishing village but it is now also a popular tourist town that is quite similar in many respects, in my opinion, to Bergen, Norway or Portofino, Italy. The cruise ship usually docks there for a bit more than 24 hours. The pier is within a 5-6 minute walk of the business district, the city center and the small ship harbor. This is the area of most interest to tourists and river cruise ship passengers. It is home to small hotels, cafes, restaurants, museums, galleries, craft stores, souvenir shops and ancient churches that are, and were, attended by countless generations of fishermen and their families.

The most famous local products of the region would be apple cider, fruit preserves, apple brandy and ceramics. Restaurants specialize in sea food and the aromas emanating from their kitchens are very enticing. English is not widely spoken here but it is not difficult to transact business. English newspapers like the International Herald Tribune are generally available at book stores and there seemed to be quite a number of tourists from the U.K. wandering the streets.

As it was raining on the morning of our cruise, the walking tour was abbreviated. It began at the St. Catherine Church and, weather permitting, we proceeded through the old town visiting various houses and buildings in and

around the port and harbor areas. There was plenty of time for souvenir shopping and individual sightseeing.

COTE FLEURIE MOTORCOACH TOUR

After lunch, the motorcoach pulled up right alongside the ship in order to board tour participants. The guide welcomed everyone on the coach and gave us some background information on the region as we traveled south from Honfleur through the Normandy countryside to the Chateau du Breuil, a famous local landmark where they produce Calvados Brandy.

We were shown through the distillery which included a 12-15 minute explanation of the procedure. From there, we walked around the beautiful grounds of the chateau to one of the storage facilities. This building housed at least 50 barrels of various vintages that were being stored for future release. Some of their best vintages are held for aging up to 15 years, or more.

Unfortunately, we were not allowed to visit inside the chateau itself but everyone on the tour was able to have a small sample of 2 types of the house apple brandy in typical cognac snifters. Ample time was allowed for passengers to buy various souvenirs in the tasting room's gift shop.

After leaving Chateau du Breuil, our coach traveled northwest to Deauville. Prior to going into this lovely coastal city, the driver drove us up a hill and through the deluxe golf resort of the Hotel Barriere, a beautiful property that also has a sister hotel across the street from the Deauville boardwalk. Normandy is known throughout France for its great golf courses and from this resort we had superb panoramic views of the coastline and the English Channel.

Upon exiting the golf resort, we continued climbing slightly in elevation while passing through an area that boasted some of the most beautiful chateaux and mansions in all of Deauville. We then headed for the sea coast where the coach let us out in front of the Deauville casino, next to the Hotel Barriere Deauville and just in front of the boardwalk. The guide gave us an hour, or so, to explore this area on our own. We visited the casino (fortunately there was no dress code), we walked to the beach along the fashionable boardwalk, and we did some window shopping at some of the most high end retail stores this side of Beverly Hills.

Once on the motorcoach, we headed back to the ship in Honfleur via Deauville's twin city of Trouville. Where Deauville is deluxe, I would have to say that Trouville is mostly first class. Our tour did not stop for a walk around in Trouville but we did drive around the city and past their casino.

Overall, the tour lasted about 4 hours, give or take. The motorcoach was comfortable and a bathroom was located on board, although, we were never on the coach for more than 25-30 minutes at a time between stops. We hit the area's absolute highlights that were not covered by the time spent in Honfleur, or on the river cruise itself. I assume this tour, as it is currently setup, will be similar in the future. No difficult or extensive walking is required on this tour.

CRUISING FROM HONFLEUR

Due to the tides (every 4 hours) from the English Channel, ship departure times from Honfleur do vary. Our ship left Honfleur at 10:00 PM and passed underneath 2 huge suspension bridges over the mouth of the Seine. We then sailed most of the night until reaching Caudebec-en-Caux where we docked for a few hours before dawn. There was some time to visit Caudebec on our own before departing for the Road of the Abbeys excursion at around 9:00 AM.

ROAD OF THE ABBEYS EXCURSION

The motorcoach arrived on time and boarded passengers very close to the pier. The coach headed southeast from Caudebec to Jumieges while the guide provided information about the region. We drove for a few miles past small farms and houses between the river and a limestone cliff before reaching the small town of Jumieges which is located in a scenic bend of the Seine River.

We started our visit to the abbey by passing through the gift shop before entering the grounds of the abbey itself. Per the literature, the Jumieges Abbey was originally founded in 654, destroyed often, only to be rebuilt, and destroyed again during the French Revolution. In 1852, the abbey was purchased and the new owner thoughtfully preserved the ruins before it finally become a French government historical site. The front facade of the ruins is very moving and eerie at the same time, as several dozen ravens and pigeons continuously circle the buildings where they have nested for generations in the upper reaches of the structure. It has been said that these birds symbolize the souls of the monks who have lived and died at the Abbey over the centuries.

The grounds are very nice and well-maintained but not overly manicured as you would find on a golf course. There are newer, more functional buildings located inside the walled compound that were not part of the original construction. Altogether, the tour lasts between 50-60 minutes with some additional time allowed to buy souvenirs at the end of the visit. It is a nice gift shop where you can also find items that are not only associated with the abbey. For example, we purchased a very nice guide book that proved to be quite useful while visiting other parts of Normandy.

Walking the grounds can be a bit difficult for people that may need canes, or wheelchairs to get around. Some parts are slightly uphill. Mostly, it is on small gravel paths, smooth flat stones and through grassy areas. 95% of those people on our tour were able to get around without problems. For those who found it tougher, they seemed quite content to lag behind and enjoy the beautiful scenery from various well-placed benches on the abbey's grounds.

After a short drive, the coach arrived at our second stop, St. Wandrille's Abbey. The visit here is much shorter as this is still a "working abbey". The monks there are the silent types, per the laws and customs of the abbey. A brief walk around a small portion of the grounds is followed by a visit to one of the chapels. A monk comes in, and through the guide/interpreter, people on the tour are encouraged to ask him questions about life at the abbey. When the questions are finished, there is an opportunity to visit the abbey's gift shop for souvenirs of the region that our guide said was very popular with U.S. visitors. It is important for CroisiEurope to know in advance that a visit to St. Wandrille Abbey will be part of the tour, so they can prebook the monk. They must be quite busy.

From there, its back on the coach for a short ride to the ship that is docked in Caudebec. Upon arrival, the ship sets off on the Seine River heading east. Altogether, this tour lasts less than 2.5 hours.

CRUISING FROM CAUDEBEC TO ROUEN

The scenery from Caudebec to Rouen is a mixture of farms, forests, countryside, rolling hills, limestone cliffs, timbered houses and chateaux. As you get closer to Rouen, there are more factories and port facilities along the river. Rouen is one of the biggest river ports in Europe with some fairly large oceangoing ships that load and unload cargo there. I was also surprised at how few bridges span the Seine River from the coastline to Rouen as the river is quite wide in some spots. It reminded me of some sections of the Rhine with its commercial ship traffic. Small boats ferry both people and cars across the river in many of the smaller towns and villages.

ROUEN

As mentioned earlier, this is an industrial and river port city with one of the most recognizable cathedrals in France, thanks to some of the impressionist painters, like Monet. The river cruise ship pier is in an extremely convenient location for the passengers. It is found on the north side of the river near the Pont Boieldieu. There are some 30 steps to climb to get from the river ship's pier up to street level.

From there, it is about a 5-6 minute walk along the Rue Grand Pont to the cathedral which is one of the main sites for a city walking tour. The Place de la Cathedral is a nice square with the main tourist office and shopping nearby. The street directly behind the cathedral, the Rue St. Romain, runs east from the cathedral and it is a great place to shop for antiques of all types and sizes.

Running west from the cathedral is the Rue du Gros Horloge. This is another good street for shopping but not necessarily for souvenirs and/or antiques. About 2-3 blocks west of the cathedral, on this street, is the famous clock with 2 different faces and a single hand that only marks the hours. This structure also includes a Gothic belfry and a Renaissance archway.

Further west on the Rue du Gros Horloge, you come to another famous site in Rouen, the market square where Joanne of Arc was burned at the stake. There are monuments and churches in this square dedicated to her memory, as well as, restaurants, cafes and souvenir shops for tourists.

There are many other interesting museums, churches, and historical sites within walking distance of the ship pier. I was amazed with some of the ancient timbered houses that are still standing. Some have to be 300-400 years old and that may also be the last time they were painted. I was pleasantly surprised by the city but somewhat disappointed by the cathedral which seemed to be in need of a lot of work, both inside and outside. Its historical significance, however, is beyond question.

The ship departs for an overnight sailing from Rouen to Mantes la Jolie and then on to Conflans Ste. Honorine. Departure from Rouen depends on the ship's schedule at the locks as we pass through quite a number of them during the evening hours on our way to Paris.

SAILING TO PARIS

The optional tour to Versailles departs after breakfast except on Mondays when the palace is closed. In its place, on Mondays only, the optional excursion is to the town of Auvers-sur-Oise. Lunch is served when the Versailles tour participants return back to the ship. The rest of the day is spent sailing through the western suburbs of Paris until shortly after the ship passes under the Pont d'Issy. At that point, we have officially arrived into the city of Paris.

As the ship's pier is located at the beginning of the Quai de Bercy on the east side of the city, it is necessary to sail almost the entire length of Paris. The first major site arriving into the city by ship is the Statue of Liberty. This replica of the original that stands tall in the New York harbor is a much smaller version. Almost immediately after the Statue of Liberty stands the Eiffel Tower which appears ahead of the ship for several minutes before we arrive alongside it. This gives anyone wishing to take photos many opportunities to do so. It is truly a magnificent site.

After the Eiffel Tower, there are many older, beautiful French government ministry buildings seen from the right side of the ship, as well as, several unique bridges adorned with statues. On the left side of the ship, we glide east past the Grand Palais and the Petite Palais, the Place de la Concorde, the Tuileries and the Louvre Museum. Just across the river from the Tuileries is the Musee d'Orsay which is now home to the great body of the city's impressionist artwork. Just after the Louvre, more government ministry buildings can be seen on the western end of the Ile-de-la-Cite while the beautiful Cathedral of Notre Dame inhabits the eastern half of the island.

The final major tourist site before we dock just east of the Gare de Lyon and the Gare D'Austerlitz is the enchanting Ile-Ste-Louis, one of the most beloved and visited areas of Paris. Once past the Ile-St-Louis, we pass the St. Martin Canal which leads north to the Bastille, and then on to the Quai de Bercy, which is located right next to the Palais Omnisports de Paris-Bercy. Altogether, the sailing time from entering Paris from the Pont d'Issy to the docking pier at Quai de Bercy takes about 70-90 minutes, depending, of course, on the river traffic.

(Please note that Paris docking locations may change from year-to-year and it is important to check with us to make sure that the special sailing across Paris, as mentioned above, is part of your cruise's itinerary.)

It is best, when overnighting on the ship in Paris, to ask the front desk staff to contact a taxi for you, if needed, for individual sightseeing. They will gladly advise the taxi driver where you wish to go and they will provide you with information on the location of the ship for your return taxi ride home. Walking is nice only if you wish to stretch your legs but if you are looking to walk to famous tourist sites, restaurants or cafes, forget about it. It's too far. Spend the money to hire a taxi. If a client needs a taxi at disembarkation to go to a Paris train station or airport, please make sure they do not schedule their departure until well after morning rush hour traffic is over, as it is extremely difficult to summon a taxi then.

