

NORMANDY'S CLASSIC COAST

**LONG A FAVORED SEASIDE
RESORT OF THE PARISIAN ELITE,
THE CÔTE FLEURIE IS
SHEDDING A BIT OF ITS FORMAL**

**RESERVE. MICHAEL GROSS FINDS
LIVELY RESTAURANTS, WIDE
BEACHES, SMALL MUSEUMS, AND
PLENTY OF EASYGOING GLAMOUR.
PHOTOGRAPHED BY DAVID NICOLAS.**

Cafés line the boardwalk
in Deauville, facing the
English Channel.



It is often cloudy in Deauville—

even in summer. But that doesn't stop the daily promenade on the famous boardwalk known as Les Planches. For all the many pleasures of this serene resort town, made semi-famous by its music and film festivals and its appearances in movies and gossip columns, it is the simple act of walking along the sea that defines the place. The beach, which looks west across the English Channel, is impossibly wide, studded with the brightly colored, artfully tied-up parasols that are Deauville's visual signature. Looking south, the sand and ocean run into distant cliffs. To the north, the cranes and towers of the port of Le Havre in the distance seem austere and otherworldly rather than industrial, shimmering in the ever-changing light of the Seine estuary, the unique natural phenomenon that drew the Impressionists more than a century ago.

At the edge of the sand are Deauville's beach cabanas, a long row of dressing rooms separated by low fences—each inscribed with the name of a movie star or director: Stanley Kramer, Stanley Donen, Burt Lancaster, William Wyler, Clint Eastwood, Yul Brynner, all in a row. But the main attraction here is the stream of people, rich and poor, tweens and teens, refugees from the *banlieues* and the bourgeoisie, French farmers and Parisian flaneurs, Arabs, Africans, Brits, Italians, and

even the odd American, all out for a bracing stroll in the sea air and then, perhaps, an espresso, a croissant, some *crevettes grises* or *moules marinières* at one of the beachside restaurants and cafés. They come in the sun. They come when it rains. They even come in winter. It's the best show in town.

Laboring under the impression that France's Côte Fleurie, the 40-mile-long Norman coast between the Seine and the Orne estuaries, a favorite of luminaries from Marcel Proust and Claude Monet to Yves Saint Laurent and Angelina Jolie, was a solid stretch of *société sur la plage*, the Parisian equivalent of New York's Hamptons, I'd worried I'd feel like an outsider. Would I find my nose pressed against the glass at polo matches, the races at Deauville's half-timbered Clairefontaine hippodrome, five-star meals next to movie stars in Michelin-rated restaurants and extravagant dress-up evenings at the local casinos? But although all those diversions are on offer, they certainly don't define the place.

Despite its glamorous image, despite the surrounding countryside full of verdant, rolling horse farms, expensive villas, and châteaux, the Côte Fleurie is serene and low-key, a quiet and accessible alternative to the south of France, a French Montecito as opposed to Malibu. In some ways, the place is

Moules marinières at Les Vapeurs restaurant, in Trouville-sur-Mer. Opposite, from left: A bellman at the Casino Barrière de Deauville; a TKYEAR Citroën in town.



Boats line the beach in Étretat, north of Deauville. Clockwise, from left: Chez Miocque restaurant, in Deauville; posing for pictures by the city waterfront; fresh seafood at the market in Trouville. Opposite: on the boardwalk in Deauville.



defined by what it lacks; although it has beaches, the Côte Fleurie is no Riviera. It has wonderful food, but nothing is over-the-top. There's nightlife, but it, too, is more patrician than pyrotechnic. The preferred sports are golf, tennis, and horseback riding; there are no mega-yachts, and unlike St.-Tropez and the Côte d'Azur, where the divisions between the very wealthy and everyone else are as clear as the fences dividing public beach from private club, here, you don't need to be in the in crowd to feel at home.

COSMOPOLITAN THOUGH IT IS, THE CÔTE FLEURIE IS ALSO something of a small town. Deauville was conceived during the Second Empire of Napoleon III by the Duke of Morny and a few others, including a doctor from the little next-door working-class fishing port of Trouville, just across the Touques River, as a resort for the imperial court and its followers. A village sprang up out of previously deserted marshes and dunes, and it was soon said that wealthy Parisian men kept their wives in Deauville and their mistresses in Trouville.

At the same time, Eugène Boudin, a landscape painter from Honfleur, met a young artist named Claude Monet and

taught him to use oil paints and to work outdoors. A local widow, Madame Toutain, lived a few miles away in Honfleur, another eye-catching port town, this one dating back to the 11th century, when it was a fortress guarding the mouth of the Seine. Artists like Monet, Jean-Francois Millet, Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, Gustave Courbet, and the poet Charles Baudelaire (an early champion of Boudin), all stayed at Mme. Toutain's farmhouse on a hill outside Honfleur, where they slept on straw beds, ate the local shrimp, and painted nature and the slate-front houses in the town's 17th-century harbor from dawn until dusk—which stretches until after 10 p.m. in summer.

Though the widow's farm was sold in 1870 and the artists scattered, that hillside is now the site of the Ferme Saint-Siméon, a pleasant, family-friendly inn and spa with an ambitious (if overrated) restaurant. Today's view across the Seine—straight into the industrial port of Le Havre—is hardly what Monet saw, yet it's still easy to imagine how Honfleur became the crucible for Impressionism, which came into vogue as Deauville did in the late 19th century.

Simultaneously, Cabourg sprang out of the dunes at the southern end of this lush stretch of (Continued on page 000)

ON THE WEB: DEAUVILLE

GUIDE: CÔTE FLEURIE

The Côte Fleurie is just 120 miles northeast of Paris. Rent a car in the capital city and make your way to the coast via the A13.

STAY

FERME SAINT-SIMÉON

Rue Adolphe Marais, Honfleur; 33-2/31-81-78-00; fermesaintsimeon.fr; doubles from \$293.

NORMANDY BARRIÈRE 38

Rue Jean Mermoz, Deauville; 33-2/31-98-66-22; lucienbarriere.com; doubles from \$TK.

ROYAL BARRIÈRE Blvd.

Cornuché, Deauville; 33-2/31-14-39-59; lucienbarriere.com; doubles from \$TK.

EAT

AUBERGE DE L'ABBAYE 2

Rue de la Libération, Beaumont-en-Auge; 33-2/31-64-82-31; lunch for two \$87.

CHEZ MIOCQUE 81 Rue

Eugène Colas, Deauville; 33-2/31-88-09-52; lunch for two \$TK.

LE CENTRAL 5/6 Rue des

Bains, Trouville-sur-Mer; 33-2/31-88-80-84;

dinner for two \$TK;

doubles from \$TK.

LES VAPEURS 160 Blvd.

Fernand Moureaux; 33-2/31-88-15-24; lunch for two \$106.

SEE

BAYEUX TAPESTRY MU-

SEUM Centre Guillaume Le Conquérant, Rue de Nesmond, Bayeux; tapisserie-bayeux.fr; 33-2/31-51-25-50.

CASINO BARRIÈRE DE

DEAUVILLE 2 Rue Edmond Blanc; 33-2/31-14-31-14.

CASINO BARRIÈRE DE

TROUVILLE Place du Maréchal Foch, Trouville-sur-Mer; 33-2/31-87-75-00.

DEAUVILLE AMERICAN

FILM FESTIVAL Runs annually in September. Visit festival-deauville.com for more information.

EUGÈNE BOUDIN

MUSEUM Place Erik-Satie, Honfleur; 33-2/31-89-54-00.



HIPPODROME DE DEAUVILLE-CLAIREFONTAINE

Rte. de Clairefontaine, Tourgéville; 33-2/31-14-69-00; hippodrome-deauville-clairefontaine.com; races run in July, August, October, and December.

MAISONS SATIE 67 Blvd.

Charles V; 33-2/31-89-11-11.

NOTRE DAME CATHE-

DRAL Place de la Cathédrale, Rouen; 33-2/32-08-32-40.

STE.-CATHERINE CHURCH Quai Ste.-Catherine, Honfleur;

33-2/31-89-23-30.

ST.-GERMAIN DE LIVET CHÂTEAU St.-

Germain de Livet; 33-2/31-31-00-03.

READ & WATCH

IN SEARCH OF LOST TIME by Marcel Proust.

A MAN AND A WOMAN

(1966), directed by Claude Lelouch.



Cocktail hour at the Royal Barrière hotel. Opposite: Trouville's Le Central at night.



(Continued from page 000)

coast. In the 1880, Marcel Proust spent a childhood summer at its Grand Hôtel. He returned as an adult in 1907, after it had been rebuilt in a failed attempt to turn the family resort into another Deauville. Renamed Balbec, Cabourg and its palace hotel were key settings in Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*. When he wrote those volumes, the historic, aesthetic, and geographic parameters of the Côte Fleurie were already set.

However you looked at it, the coast represented very good real estate. So just before World War I, the manager of the Trouville Casino, then the area’s center of gravity, decided to build some more grand hotels on the beach. When Trouville refused permission, Deauville said yes, and the Royal and Normandy hotels and the casino between them, which dominate the seashore, were erected. After a brief stint as hospitals during the war, they were ready to receive when royals and painters, as well as actors, writers, and designers like the young Coco Chanel, who started her career there, poured in for what became known as the *années folles*, or crazy years after the war, the real start of the 20th century. Although equestrian enthusiasts from America began coming to the Côte Fleurie in the 1920’s, attracted by its race-tracks, polo, and annual summer auctions of thoroughbred yearlings, and French filmmakers began making movies here in the 1950’s, it was only in the mid-1970’s, with the advent of the Deauville film festival, that it acquired a broader international renown.

THOUGH I WAS NEVER INVITED TO ANY grand châteaux or to one of the farms where Deauville thoroughbreds are raised and trained, I did meet a number of those who’ve been habitués. My first morning in Deauville, just after breakfast, I struck up a conversation with Philippe de Nicolay, 53, president of the Deauville Polo

Club and son of Baroness Marie-Hélène de Rothschild. It was his 52nd season there, “so I qualify, almost, as a local,” he joked. He certainly sounded like one as he extolled the area’s virtues. “It’s lushly green, wonderfully peaceful, and the weather is invigorating,” he said. “And when it’s sunny, it’s the best place in the world—and only 120 miles from Paris.”

Nicolay was full of stories of the glory days of the Côte Fleurie, when he’d see the likes of Aly Khan and Rita Hayworth at the races. “People are fanatical about the horses,” he said. There is still “some razzmatazz,” he explained, during the film festival and also during the summer racing and auction season, when the population of Deauville swells from 3,500 to 60,000—more than a few of them royals and retainers, though now more often from the Middle East than the French nobility. But Nicolay was also keen to tout the region’s more accessible attractions and the off-season beauty some know only from films like *A Man and a Woman*. “The charm of Normandy is very close to our hearts,” Nicolay said. “This is not St.-Tropez or Cannes. You don’t come here to be seen.” Then he laughed to himself. “But you’re noticed,” he allowed.

A day later, I joined the mayor of Deauville, Philippe Augier, and his wife, Béatrice, for a late-afternoon drink. Augier was the assistant to a Baroness d’Ornano, who preceded him as mayor for 24 years. They protected its many landmarks, and banned outdoor advertising so people could see them unobstructed. But even as Augier spoke with pride of Deauville’s packed calendar of cultural and sporting events, and especially its “pleasure, glamour, and elegance,” as the mayor put it, he and his wife also urged me to get out of town.

“You have to see the countryside,” said Béatrice, “the small villages, the churches, the gardens, the castles.” Then, as most do, her husband joked about the weather. “It’s not a problem,” he insisted. “No sun...or sun...or rain! Walking in the rain on the beach is very romantic. That’s why the Impressionists came: to catch the changing light.” Pointing outside, where gray skies had cleared just in time for sunset, he added, “Today was perfect—you had all in the same day.”

Maybe they can sell the weather.

AND THEY’RE RIGHT: THE CÔTE FLEURIE has more than beaches to offer. There’s the local architecture, the ancient Norman houses up and down the coast, the 17th-century port at Honfleur, the 19th-century public grandeur of Deauville and the private glamour of the fantastic timbered and towered mansions that line the sea at Houlgate. From the late 20th, there’s the swooping, soaring Pont de Normandie, which was, when it was opened in 1995, the longest cable-suspension bridge in the world, connecting Honfleur and Le Havre. More pedestrian, but no less pleasing, are the street markets in Deauville’s Place Morny and in Trouville, where fish stalls—Boudin famously painted them—stretch the length of the port, offering provisions for gourmet chefs and instant, inexpensive alfresco meals.

Though it’s a local cliché, one must eat at Les Vapeurs and Le Central, two adjoining seafood brasseries facing the Trouville port. Vapeurs is the sort of French restaurant you dream—and have nightmares—about: the zinc accents, the paper-covered tables, and of course, the comically abrupt waiters. The delicate Norman sole (it’s called Dover across the Channel) my wife and I ordered was perfect.

Over the next few days, we explored. Honfleur was picturesque: a tourist town, but one steeped in history. It’s where Samuel Champlain set off on his voyages of discovery around the same time that Louis XIV’s finance minister, Colbert, redesigned the town, knocking down the walls and building massive salt cellars, a dock, and the visual landmark of the port, the Lieutenantcy, the residence of the king’s local officer. It incorporates part of the town’s original ramparts and the original medieval fortress gate. Nearby is Honfleur’s greatest surviving building, the Sainte-Catherine Church, and its separate bell tower, dating back to the 15th century. The largest, most unusual wooden church in France, it was built by marine carpenters and its vaults resemble the interior of a ship’s hull. Around the quay, narrow slate-front houses, each different from the next, lean helter-skelter, squeezed so tightly together they look as if they are holding each other up. It’s best to avoid the galleries in town; any hunger for art can be satisfied at the Eugène Boudin Museum, which honors Honfleur’s famous native son, and at the eccentric Maisons Satie, birthplace of the surrealist composer Erik Satie, where a series of odd but amusing tableaux vivants tell of his life and times.

Ten miles up the coast from Le Havre is Étretat, hometown of Guy de Maupassant and a favorite subject of the Impressionists. It emerges from a land-

scape of flat fields and has a lovely crescent beach surrounded by mammoth, sheer cliffs and natural stone arches.

Driving through the surrounding Pays d’Auge we found, as Deauville’s mayor promised, beauty and history, both natural and man-made. The local châteaux are no rivals for those of the Loire, but Saint-Germain de Livet, a half 15th-, half 16th-century castle with two small towers, has beautiful grounds, Renaissance frescoes, mementos of Delacroix, and an amusing house tour—it was occupied, though it lacked running water, until 1957.

Rouen has its cathedral, another Impressionist landmark, and Bayeux’s famous tapestry—displayed in a well-run little museum—tells the story of the Norman conquest of England. And of course, just south of the Côte Fleurie are the landing beaches of a conquest that came almost a millennium later, the invasion of Normandy. They have a different sort of fascination. As do the small towns that dot the countryside, like Beaumont-en-Auge, where we waited out a rain storm and had a quiet, delicious lunch at the Auberge de l’Abbaye, just across the street from the town’s church. It was established in Carolingian times and—once the sky cleared—revealed grounds with a commanding view of the Touques Valley.

There was a sense here of being somewhere special and rare, where those who’d arrived before you don’t exactly open the gates, but aren’t slamming them shut in your face, either. Which is why my favorite memory is not of horses and riders taking dawn canters on the shore, the brightly colored beach umbrellas, the castles, or the tapestries.

It was, instead, our last meal in Deauville. After our first few moments at Chez Miocque downtown, I felt I was being studied and told my wife I was uncomfortable—a large, loud balding man in resort clothes, at a table filled with what were clearly local horsemen, had stared at us from the moment we walked in.

As our appetizers arrived, he got up, came to our table, and pointed to mine, a big bowl of *moules*. In a gravelly voice, he said: “I approve.” Then he asked if we were Americans, and we established that he was Jacques Aviègne, the owner and a local character, and that years before, he’d run two restaurants in New York where we had often eaten. I relaxed and realized that I’d found the heart of the Côte Fleurie, a place both familiar and strange, where I would like one day to be known but was accepted nonetheless, simply because I had the sense to go there, even when it’s cloudy and raining. ✚