

The medieval castle of Pierrefonds was commissioned in 1393 by the Duke of Orléans

Green heart of **HAUTS-DE-FRANCE**

Gillian Thornton takes a road trip through the green spaces of northern Hauts-de-France and discovers a diverse landscape »



IMAGE © SHUTTERSTOCK

“MAROILLES HAS A SURPRISING AMOUNT TO OFFER... AN HISTORIC WATER MILL, AND A PRETTY VILLAGE GREEN”



For a village that barely numbers 1,500 residents, Maroilles has a surprising amount to offer: a broad main street lined with houses of red brick and blue stone, an historic water mill, and a pretty village green complete with bandstand and 18th-century Arc de Triomphe.

Life moves at a gentle pace here in the heart of the Avesnois Regional Nature Park, an area of tree-lined meadows, small farms and villages in the northeast corner of Hauts-de-France. And whilst Maroilles may be modest in size, this pretty village in the Nord department is famous with foodies throughout France. Love a cheeseboard? Then look out for the distinctive square shape and rich red rind of Maroilles cheese, one of the smelliest but tastiest in France. Far from being grey and industrial as many French southerners imagine, northern

France revels in vast areas of green space. So finding myself with an early autumn week to spare, I plan a circuit from the sandy beaches of the Channel coast to the *bocage* pasturelands of the Avesnois, the Champagne vineyards of the Marne Valley and the lush landscape of the Somme and the Seven Valleys.

And to start my tour in green mode, I travel beneath the English Channel to Calais with Eurotunnel Le Shuttle, driving my car onto an electric train for the 35-minute journey. With no air pollution, ultra-low levels of greenhouse gas emissions and no disruption to marine life, it's the best way to keep my carbon footprint low.

AUDOMAROIS TO THE AVESNOIS

Head out of Calais and you are soon in the Parc Naturel Régional des Caps et Marais d'Opale, one of four protected natural parks, or PNRs, in the region. Strike off to the south and the twin



headlands of Cap Blanc-Nez and Cap Gris-Nez give way to Pas-de-Calais's vast rolling fields of cereals. Drive east and you'll arrive at an area of marshland around Saint-Omer, famed for its market gardening, especially cauliflowers, chicory and carrots.

Stop off at the fascinating Maison du Marais for the full story of this UNESCO-listed biosphere where the postman still delivers by boat to island homes, and relax on a guided excursion by electric boat. Amongst the rich flora and fauna, I'm thrilled to spot the azure flash of a kingfisher, not once but twice.

Next morning I skirt Lille and the former mining area around Lens, now listed by UNESCO as a beacon of industrial regeneration for its natural spaces and heritage attractions. Two hours after leaving Saint-Omer, I arrive in the Avesnois PNR which stretches from the fortified town of Le Quesnoy in the west to the tranquil lake of Val Joly in the east, the largest lake north of Paris.

Enjoy a flavour of the Avesnois not just in Maroilles cheese, but in cider, apple juice and craft beers. And there's culture here, too, in the tranquil countryside. MusVerre at Sars-Poteries is an extraordinary museum and creative workshop celebrating the industry that thrived here from 1801 to 1937. Purpose-built in sober colours with clean lines and farmland views, MusVerre traces the history of local glassmaking, but also champions the work of

Clockwise from left: The small but beautiful village of Maroilles; the mill on the Helpe river at Maroilles; exploring the Audomarois biosphere reserve by boat; cows grazing on pastureland in the Seven Valleys; inset, a tasting platter at the Ferme du Pont des Loups; the view from MusVerre in the Avesnois PNR; the tranquil Lac du Val Joly in Avesnois



contemporary artists. Don't miss the *bousillés*, one-off pieces produced by workers for family and friends – the glassworker's art at its most imaginative.

MARNE VALLEY

From the Avesnois, I head south through Aisne for a welcome return to the delightful hilltop town of Laon. Wander the narrow streets of the historic quarter, climb the cathedral tower, and join a guided tour of the citadel's underground passages. If time permits, head up the green slopes of La Cuve Saint-Vincent for a unique panorama of town and country.

South of Laon, the landscape changes again at Château-Thierry, where champagne vineyards line the south-facing slopes of the Marne Valley. Some 500 small winegrowers work in Aisne alone and, together with the larger Pannier champagne house, they account for 10% of all champagne »



WHAT'S COOKING IN LE TOUQUET-PARIS-PLAGE IN 2023 ?



SCAN ME



“VIOLET-LE-DUC'S
'CINDERELLA' CASTLE IS
A GLORIOUS TESTAMENT
TO THE POWER OF
CREATIVE IMAGINATION”

production. Book ahead to avoid disappointment if, like me, you want to both try and buy. For an elegant overnight stay, book in at nearby Château de Picheny where your warm welcome begins with a complimentary glass of bubbles amongst the antique furniture, the perfect apéro before a table d'hôte dinner more worthy of a gastronomic restaurant than a three-suite guesthouse.

ROYAL FORESTS

The next day I turn northwest into Oise, swapping the serried rows of vines for dense woodland and two of the best-known châteaux north of Paris.

My first stop is Pierrefonds, a medieval castle looked after by the Centre des Monuments Nationaux. Commissioned in 1393 by the Duke of Orléans, this hilltop stronghold was partially dismantled in 1617 under Louis XIII after a siege, and the ruins later bought by Napoleon I. But it was Napoleon III who commissioned architect Eugène Viollet-le-Duc to rebuild it in the 1850s. His fanciful restoration took almost 20 years to complete and whilst architectural authenticity may have been somewhat stretched, Viollet-le-Duc's 'Cinderella' castle is a glorious testament to



IMAGES © GILLIAN THORNTON



HAUTS-DE-FRANCE | GREAT DESTINATIONS

the power of creative imagination. Don't miss the light show amongst the faux tombs and statues in the cellar.

From Pierrefonds, I take a detour in the Compiègne Forest to explore the heritage village of Saint-Jean-aux-Bois before pitching up at Compiègne, just 10 miles from Pierrefonds, and an altogether different Napoleonic castle. Built for Louis XV, the Château de Compiègne became the residence of Napoleon I and an Imperial entertainment venue for Napoleon III. Allow a full day to explore its sumptuous state apartments, the Museum of the Second Empire and the National Car Museum. Napoleon III's wife, Eugénie, loved to walk in Compiègne Forest, but an equally delightful way to enjoy the tranquil woodland avenues and château views is on horseback. No previous experience is necessary for a magical afternoon astride a Henson, a breed of small, sturdy horses from the Baie de Somme, starting from the Pôle Équestre riding centre.



Clockwise from top:
The lovely hilltop town of Laon; Gillian explores on horseback in Compiègne Forest; the champagne vineyards lining the Marne Valley; the imposing Château de Pierrefonds

SEVEN VALLEYS

Homeward bound, I continue northwest into the Somme department where memorials, monuments and museums to the Great War »



Clockwise from top: Hesdin Forest is a delight to explore; the Ulster Memorial Tower, which stands on what was the German front line during the Battle of the Somme; the stunning Château de Compiègne; walking in the Sept Vallées

stand proud in peaceful rolling countryside, each one worthy of a visit: Thiepval and Péronne, the Lochnagar Crater, the Ulster Tower and many more. And at the heart of it all is Amiens, regional capital and a must-see, not just for its stunning Gothic cathedral and old quarter, but for Les Hortillonnages, an area of market garden plots divided by navigable waterways and accessible to all on guided boat tours.

My route passes close to the Forest of Crécy where English forces devastated French troops in 1346, before I slip seamlessly back into Pas-de-Calais and the lush Seven Valleys, now marketed to visitors as the Vallées d'Opale.

Inland from Le-Touquet-Paris-Plage on the Opal Coast, this undulating area of farmland and river valleys is one of the department's best-kept secrets. Take a canoe excursion on its two main rivers, the Canche and the Authie, or enjoy a »



"THIS UNDULATING AREA OF FARMLAND AND RIVER VALLEYS IS ONE OF THE DEPARTMENT'S BEST-KEPT SECRETS"



IMAGES © GILLIAN THORNTON

GREEN TODAY

1 Destination Compiègne Pierrefonds - Fill up with positive energy!

Come and recharge your batteries and in the heart of the national forest of Compiègne... on foot, on horseback and by bike!

Compiègne-Pierrefonds 80 km from Paris and 45 minutes from Roissy-Charles De Gaulle airport, 2h30 from the Channel Tunnel.



2 Equine Sophrology (Sophrology - the physical and mental exercises intended to relax the body and mind)

The horse is a wonderful sophrologist who allows you to reconnect with yourself and with nature in the unique setting of the Compiègne forest. For 2 hours, with a qualified riding and sophrology teacher, you can discover or deepen your links with the Henson horses, on foot, followed by a horseback ride in the woods, taking in the beautiful surroundings, in the heart of the Grand Parc du Château de Compiègne. The session will end with a moment surrounded by horses absorbing all their positive energy.

For information / reservations : Cercle hippique de Compiègne, pole-equestre-compiegne.fr, 03 44 40 02 02, 70€/ per person.

3 Musical forest bath:

These walks combine contact with nature and listening to live music, because they have many points in common and pursue the same goal: the connection with oneself, source of harmony and well-being.

For information / reservation: Festival des Forêts, festivaldesforets.fr, 03 44 40 28 99 / contact@festivaldesforets.fr, 24€/per person

4 Incredible flora and fauna to discover / Rejuvenating activities : hiking, biking or carriage rides

ON YOUR BIKE!

Take the cycle path that connects Compiègne to Pierrefonds via the majestic forest of Compiègne! On your way, you will be charmed by the castle of Compiègne, the charming village of Vieux-Moulin, the Abbey Church of Saint-Jean-Aux-Bois, the castle of Pierrefonds... and why not take advantage of the mild spring for a picnic stop at the Saint-Pierre ponds?



*Location de vélo :
www.veteix.com,
03 44 83 44 83,
www.picardieforetsvertes.com, 06 07 54 99 26
www.lerelaisducycliste.fr,
03 44 83 18 37*



You dream of freedom, of escaping in the heart of large forest spaces, discover, on horseback Henson, the majestic national forest! Whether you are a beginner or a more experienced rider, hike with family or friends, in complete safety, in the company of an equestrian

guide and savor a feeling of fulfillment and well-being! Breathe! Marvel! The time is yours!

For information / reservation : Cercle hippique du Compiègnais : pole-equestre-compiegne.fr, 03 44 40 02 02, Entre 25 € and 70 €.

5 To extend your stay:

For a perfect vacation, you will need to find YOUR cocoon! A hotel in the heart of the city? A bed and breakfast in the countryside? Or why not an unusual accommodation? All you have to do is choose... Not so simple!



6 Discover the gastronomy of our destination

Between two visits, don't forget to take a gourmet break! Treat yourself in the Compiègne and Pierrefonds brasseries. Some suggestions among many others : Le Bistrot des Arts, Les Ferlempins, le Bistrot de l'Imprévu, Hôtel Le Beaudon, le Chalet du Lac, Le Castel, Les Etangs de l'Abbaye, l'Auberge du Pont, Not to mention : Michelin-starred restaurant: L'Auberge de la Bonne Idée in Saint-Jean-Aux-Bois.

The teams of the Tourist Offices of the Agglomeration of Compiègne and Pierrefonds Lisières de l'Oise are at your disposal to accompany and advise you!

www.compiegne-pierrefonds.fr



As part of the European EXPERIENCE project (Interreg France Channel England Programme), the destination is adopting a new tourism strategy around low-season and experiential tourism. Thanks to the FEDER fund, this has enabled it to create new experiential offers and to finance unprecedented infrastructures such as the rehabilitation of the site of the priory of Saint-Pierre in Chastres and the creation of the Historic Immersion Site at the Antoine Vivenel Museum. (opening next May)

Interreg
France (Channel) England
EXPERIENCE
Fonds européen de développement régional



For more places to visit, go to www.hautsdefrance tourism.com

12 MUST-SEE SITES

Explore the best green spaces and countryside attractions of Hauts-de-France



Clockwise from top: From Tardinghenon on Cap Gris-Nez, you can see the white cliffs of Dover in England; the battlefield at Azincourt, as seen from the viewing tower; the Azincourt1415 museum; Hesdin's Town Hall

leisurely ramble through field and forest. Either way, you will be rewarded with breathtaking scenery and tranquillity.

The historic market town of Hesdin is worth a stop too, built as a strategic fortified town in the 16th century. You can't miss the grand galleried porch on the Town Hall, but not all Hesdin's treasures are obvious, so call first at the Tourist Office for the town guide. And if you can't resist a floral display, stop off at nearby Boubers-sur-Canche where the whole community pulls together with public plantings and private gardens that provide colour, shape and interest throughout the year.

With time for just one more visit before my return trip on Le Shuttle from Calais, I choose Azincourt – or Agincourt, thanks to a mispronunciation by one of Henry V's English knights. The splendid village museum was recently revamped as Azincourt1415 and the story of the epic battle is graphically told through



“SIX CENTURIES MAY HAVE ERASED THE TRACES OF MEDIEVAL WARFARE, BUT IT IS EASY TO IMAGINE THE SIGHTS AND SOUNDS OF THE BATTLE”

interactive exhibits and videos. But most impressive for me is the battlefield itself, still an open field more than 600 years after Henry's small English army devastated the cream of French nobility in the October mud. Walk, drive or cycle the perimeter, and do stop at the viewing tower. Six centuries of agriculture may have erased the traces of medieval warfare, but it is easy to imagine the sights and sounds of the battle in this unspoilt rural setting. I just can't help wondering what Viollet-le-Duc would have made of it all. **FT**



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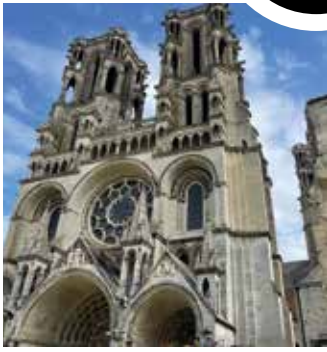
SITE DES DEUX CAPS
Walk or cycle the headlands of the Channel Coast with views across the water to England on a clear day. Information, local produce and exhibitions available at the visitor centre.
www.lesdeuxcaps.fr



AUDOMAROIS MARSHES
Explore the fabulous flora and fauna and the stories of the people who have shaped this wetland market gardening community surrounded by nature. Regular boat excursions available.
www.lamaisondumarais.com



MUSVERRE, SARS-POTERIES
Discover historic collections plus contemporary glass by international artists in this excellent museum in the heart of the beautiful Avesnois countryside.
www.musverre.lenord.fr



LAON
Explore with an audio guide on loan from the Laon Tourist Office (children's version and English version both available), or pick up the free leaflet to the self-guided trail around this pretty town.
www.tourisme-paysdelaon.com



CÔTE 2004
This huge hillside memorial at Château-Thierry honours the American soldiers who gave their lives in the Great War. Also close by is the Aisne-Marne American cemetery at Belleau.
www.abmc.gov



CHÂTEAU DE COMPIÈGNE
This home to kings and emperors is open daily 10am to 6pm apart from Tuesdays and public holidays. Park open from 8am until 5pm-7pm, depending on season.
www.chateaudecompiegne.fr



ARMISTICE MUSEUM
This forest clearing at Compiègne has a replica of the railway carriage where the Armistice was signed on November 11, 1918, as well as a memorial garden and museum. Open daily from 10am.
www.armistice-museum.com



CHÂTEAU DE PIERREFONDS
This is an intriguing example of a 19th-century reinvention of the Middle Ages. Take time too to explore the pretty small town below the castle walls.
www.monuments-nationaux.fr



CHÂTEAU DE CHANTILLY
History, horses and an outstanding art collection are on offer at this glorious estate with formal gardens by Andre Le Nôtre, plus Chinese and English gardens. Closed Tuesdays.
www.chateaudechantilly.fr



HORTILLONNAGES, AMIENS
Small cultivated islands shaped by generations of market gardeners known as 'hortillons' from natural marshland surround the old bed of the River Somme.
www.visit-amiens.com



SOMME VALLEY
As well as the moving memorials to the victims of the Great War, there are a range of outdoor pursuits here, from river trips and angling to birdwatching, hiking and cycling.
www.visit-somme.com



AZINCOURT
Step back into the Middle Ages at Azincourt1415 interactive museum and then walk or drive beside the medieval battlefield and absorb the atmosphere of the great battle.
www.azincourt1415.com »

THINGS TO SEE AND DO

There is plenty to do in Hauts-de-France whether you're the outdoors type, a history buff, or a culture vulture

PROTECTED GREEN SPACES

Explore walking and cycling routes through the region's Regional Nature Parks (PNRs) – the **Caps et Marais d'Opales** and the **Avesnois** but also the smaller **PNR de Scarpe-Escaut** north of Valenciennes and the **PNR Oise-Pays de France** in the far south around Senlis.

Discover the walking trails of the **Clairmarais** marshland reserve near Saint-Omer or take a boat ride around the nearby Audomarois from **Maison du Marais** www.lamaisondumarais.com. At Maroilles, download the **Baladavesnois** app for a guided walk with interactive activities. And in Amiens take a boat tour with commentary through **Les Hortillonnages** www.leshortillonnages-amiens.com.



Why not explore the Compiègne Forest on horseback?

For excursions on horseback at **Compiègne**, visit www.pole-equestre-compiegne.fr. Or ride a Henson in its home area of the **Marquenterre** in the Somme Bay www.visit-somme.com.

Amongst many glorious open gardens is the **Jardins de Viels-Maisons**, a family project in Aisne begun in 1991 on the site of an 18th-century kitchen garden www.jardins-vielsmaisons.net. Close to the Somme Bay, tour the Abbey and Gardens of **Valloires** www.jardinsdevalloires.fr and in Pas-de-Calais, explore the innovative themed areas of the **Jardins de Séricourt** – a classified jardin remarquable, www.jardinsdesericourt.com.



The Jardins de Viels-Maisons is a family project in Aisne on the site of an 18th-century kitchen garden

GASTRONOMY

Hauts-de-France is the official European Region of Gastronomy for 2023, thanks to its quality produce and a commitment to sustainability. In the Avesnois, buy beers, biscuits and a range of specialities from the Nord at **Maison Defroidmont** in Maroilles www.boutique-defroidmont.fr and from the **Ferme du Pont des Loups** cheese dairy and shop in Saint-Aubin www.fermedupontdesloups.fr.



Pick up some moreish goodies at Ferme du Pont des Loups

Follow the **Route du Champagne** www.champagne.fr through the Marne Valley to visit winemakers such as small family producer **Daniel Gerbaux** at Chézy-sur-Marne, www.champagne-daniel-gerbaux.com, and **Champagne Météyer**, which also offers a small museum,

guided tours and masterclasses www.champagne-meteyer.com. Advance booking advised.

CULTURE

The Renaissance château of Villers-Cotterêts in Aisne is due to reopen this summer after major restoration as home to the **International Centre for the French Language** www.cite-langue-francaise.fr

REMEMBRANCE

Major Great War remembrance sites include **Thiepval** and the **Chemin des Dames** in the Somme Valley; the Canadian



A warm welcome awaits in the vineyards at Champagne Météyer



The Ring of Remembrance lists 579,606 soldiers who died in WWI

monument at **Vimy Ridge** in the north; and the American cemeteries and memorials of the **Marne Valley**. Immaculate cemeteries and memorials to all nationalities dot the countryside of Hauts-de-France.

FIND OUT MORE ABOUT Commonwealth War Graves

at www.cwgc.org and tour their visitor centre at **Beaurains** near Arras. Also near Arras is the **Ring of Remembrance** listing 579,606 soldiers who died in the countryside of Northern France during the First World War. www.memorial1418.com »

For more travel inspiration visit www.francetoday.com/travel-in-france

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www.moneycorp.com

WHERE TO STAY AND EAT

Where to rest and refuel as you explore the green wonders of Hauts-de-France

HOTELS

Mercure Centre Gare, Saint-Omer

Close to the train station and historic city centre, it has 74 rooms, a restaurant (closed Sunday evenings) and parking. www.allaccor.com

T'aim Hôtel, Margny-lès-Compiègne

This modern 80-bedroom hotel on the banks of the Oise is part of the Aiden by Best Western chain. It has a panoramic terrace restaurant with master baker/pâtissier on site. www.taimhotel.com

Clos de la Prairie Hôtel, Gouy-Saint-André

A charming family-run restaurant on a small 19th-century farm surrounded by 12 acres of meadows. Delicious gourmet dinners are cooked by Sébastien and served by Sandrine. www.leclosdelaprairie.com

Hôtel Spa Marotte, Amiens

5-star boutique hotel in a former Belle Époque bank, with newly opened restaurant, spa and additional bedrooms. www.hotel-marotte.com



La Maison d'Aubépine in Sains-du-Nord serves up organic produce

B&B

La Maison d'Aubépine, Sains-du-Nord

Guest house in typical Avesnois style with three bedrooms and a micro-restaurant in bright, modern annexe serving delicious dishes made with local organic produce. www.maison-aubepine.fr

Château de Picheny, Montlevon

Deep in the Aisne Champenoise, this former hunting lodge from 1869 has three elegant guest suites and public rooms full of



The Mercure Centre Gare is the perfect base from which to explore Saint-Omer

antiques. Table d'hôte dinner is available on reservation. www.chateaudepicheny.com

Au-Bois Dormant, Huby-Saint-Leu

In the heart of the Seven Valleys, five minutes' walk from Hesdin Forest. Private parking, garden, outdoor pool. Table d'hôte dinner available on reservation. www.auboisdormant.fr

RESTAURANTS

L'Industrie, Saint-Omer

Near the cathedral and theatre, this friendly family-run restaurant and 2-star hotel has six bedrooms and serves local seasonal produce and homemade bread. www.lindustrie-hotelrestaurant.com

L'Écurie, Hesdin

Indulge in gourmet regional dishes in this equestrian-themed town centre restaurant, with its shady terrace for al fresco summer dining. Fixed price menus and à la carte. Two Michelin forks. www.restaurant-lecurie.com



Enjoy elegant accommodation at the Château de Picheny



Englishman Colin Campbell-Austin runs L'Entente Cordiale in Hesdin

TEA ROOMS

L'Entente Cordiale, Hesdin

This popular *salon de thé* selling luxury grocery items is run by Englishman Colin Campbell-Austin. Light lunches, afternoon tea, early evening tasting platters. www.lententecordialefrance.com

L'Encas et L'Échoppe, Gouy-Saint-André

Part café, part décor shop, part garden. Open Thursday to Sunday, noon to 6pm from April to December. Creative food for vegans, veggies and pescetarians. www.leleagouy.com

HAUTS-DE-FRANCE ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE

BY AIR Fly to Lille in the north of Hauts-de-France or to Paris, just south of the region.

BY TRAIN Take the Eurostar direct from London to Lille or Paris Gard du Nord, then transfer to regional trains or hire a car.

BY CAR Gillian minimised her carbon footprint by taking her car with Eurotunnel Le Shuttle from Folkestone to Calais in just 35 minutes. www.eurotunnel.com

Or take your vehicle on the ferry from Dover to Calais with **P&O Ferries** or **DFDS**; from Dover to Dunkirk with DFDS; or Newhaven to Dieppe with DFDS.

TOURIST WEBSITES

www.hautsdefrancetourism.com
www.frenchweekendbreaks.co.uk

