

# PAS-DE-CALAIS TIME TRAVEL

From medieval battles to trench warfare and power-hungry monarchs to industrial innovators, Pas-de-Calais is packed with historical sites. **Gillian Thornton** goes time travelling »

Overlooking Place Godefroy de Bouillon in Boulogne-sur-Mer



“THE LAST CORNER OF ‘ENGLISH’ FRANCE TO BE RECAPTURED BY THE FRENCH IN 1558, CALAIS IS A MUST FOR ANY HISTORY BUFF”

Climbing the steps to the covered platform beside the country lane, I’m struck by how ordinary it all looks. Just a large arable field on the edge of a village. But then I think about what happened here and my perspective changes. Many Anglo-French battles took place on French soil during the medieval conflict we now call the Hundred Years War, but few are as famous as Agincourt, immortalised by Shakespeare in *Henry V*.

Here in the small village of Azincourt – forever misnamed in history books thanks to an English nobleman with dodgy pronunciation – history comes zinging vividly to life, not just on the battlefield, where the cream of French nobility died at the hands of the English archers in October 1415, but also in the excellent museum, a must-see for history lovers in this tranquil corner of Hauts-de-France.

The department of Pas-de-Calais borders historic Flanders, modern Belgium, and, barely 20 miles away across the water, lies its sometime-friend, sometime-foe, England. My road trip along the Channel coast and inland through rolling countryside is set to take in a wealth of historical sites from battlefields to manufacturing museums to Remembrance sites.

IMPRESSING THE NEIGHBOURS

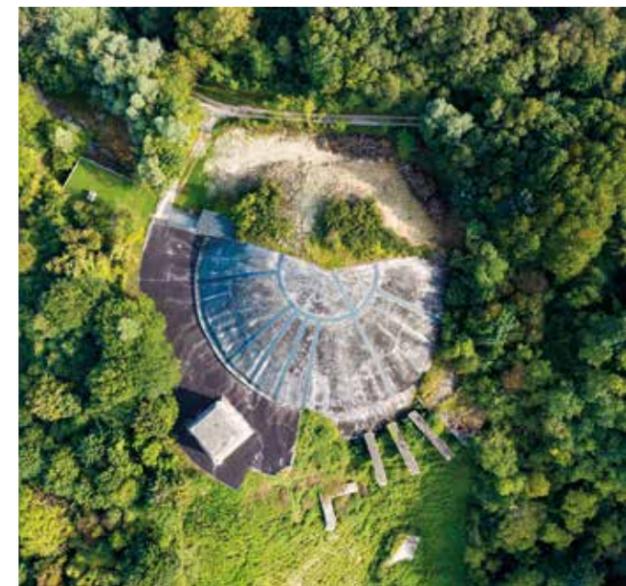
Two-way traffic has sailed across the English Channel for centuries, but I take the modern way



for my historical short break, driving my car onto Le Shuttle at Folkestone and letting the electric train whisk me sustainably beneath the waves to Calais in just 35 minutes.

The last corner of ‘English’ France to be recaptured by the French in 1558, Calais is a must for any history buff. From the top of the Town Hall Belfry – one of many in the area listed by UNESCO – you can see the remains of the English fort. Far below, Rodin’s famous statue recalls the heroism of six Burgheers of Calais who, after the Battle of Crécy in 1346, offered their lives to England’s King Edward III in exchange for sparing the town. For the record, Edward’s wife, Philippa of Hainault, persuaded him to spare both men and town. Don’t miss the statues of Winston Churchill and Charles de Gaulle in Parc Richelieu, or the one of the General with Madame de Gaulle near the Église Notre Dame, where they were married. »

**Clockwise from above:** The castle at Boulogne-sur-Mer with the Basilica of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception in the background; the Château de Bours; looking out from the City of Lace and Fashion in Calais; Boulogne’s old town; La Coupole; Calais harbour as seen from the Town Hall belfry; the statue of Charles and Yvonne de Gaulle on the Place d’Armes in Calais



IMAGES © GILLIAN THORNTON, SHUTTERSTOCK, LESCOLOCS, SOPHIE BRISSAUD



“IN 1520, A 28-YEAR-OLD HENRY VIII MET HIS FRENCH COUNTERPART, FRANÇOIS I, IN AN UNASHAMED DISPLAY OF ONE-UPMANSHIP”



**From top:** The dome of the basilica at Boulogne; war graves at Étaples; the fortified town of Montreuil-sur-Mer

Just south of Calais at Guînes lies the site of one of history’s most extravagant parties. In 1520, a 28-year-old Henry VIII met his French counterpart, François I, in an unashamed display of one-upmanship thinly disguised as an exercise in international relations. Discover the story of the Field of the Cloth of Gold (*Le Camp du Drap d’Or* in French) at the Tour de l’Horloge, as well as tales of the Viking adventurers who settled here and integrated with local people.

Hug the coast road south and just outside Boulogne stands a 53m column topped by a statue of Napoléon who, from 1803 to 1805, kept an army of 120,000 soldiers here, ready to invade England. It’s a reminder of one historic near-miss that would have dramatically changed the face of Britain. Then head into Boulogne’s Old Town, dominated by a domed basilica with the largest medieval crypt in Europe and a well-preserved castle that now houses a museum.

**CANCHE VALLEY**

Further down the coast, I stop at Étaples to pay my respects at the Commonwealth War Graves cemetery located on the site of a vast Great War field hospital. Northern France is littered with cemeteries, museums and memorials to the conflict, and this is the largest British cemetery in France, the last resting place of more than

11,400 soldiers from World War I plus a few from World War II. It’s impossible not to be moved by family dedications that include this one to a lost son: “A little card, I am quite well; a letter next, he bravely fell.”

Turn west to discover the fascinating history of chic Art Deco seaside resort Le Touquet-Paris-Plage, purpose-built in the early 20th century, or turn your back on the Opal Coast to follow the Canche river inland towards the lush countryside of the Vallées d’Opale. I make a welcome return to the pretty fortified town of Montreuil, once a strategic river port and today a popular destination for history lovers. Victor Hugo set part of *Les Misérables* here – commemorated in an annual festival – and the cobbled square and ancient streets are a delight. »



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AD PAGE

“JUST AS THE DONJON DE BOURS ROSE FROM THE FLAMES OF A DISASTROUS FIRE, SO TOO DID THE TOWN OF ARRAS”



# AD PAGE



**From top:** The majestic buildings on the Grand'Place in Arras; the Place des Héros in Arras; the River Canche passing through Hesdin

But the stand-out activity is a walk around the lofty ramparts and citadel, examples of 'Sun King' Louis XIV's penchant for war games and listed by UNESCO as prime examples of work by his military architect Sébastien Le Prestre, Marquis de Vauban, who spread his star-shaped ramparts, bastions and citadels all over the royal kingdom, including at nearby Arras.

Higher up the Canche valley, Hesdin is something of a surprise. In medieval times, a vast pleasure park filled with automata surrounded the château of the Dukes of Artois. The town was rebuilt under Spanish rule by Charles V in the 1550s, and was later recaptured by France in 1639 following a siege by Louis III and Cardinal Richelieu. Nothing medieval remains but the magnificent 17th-century Town Hall, open to visitors, dominates the central square. Ask at the Tourist Office for the discovery leaflet.

From Hesdin, it is just 15km to Azincourt, one of six local heritage sites participating in the Escapades Médiévales passport scheme. I stop at the nearby Donjon de Bours, a beautifully restored tower house dating from the 14th century, and experience a taste of local life during the Hundred Years War.

## DEEP SOUTH

Just as the Donjon de Bours rose from the flames of a disastrous fire, so too did the historic market

town of Arras. Virtually annihilated during the Great War, the arcades and Flemish façades around its vast twin market squares were rebuilt to their 17th-century glory during the 1920s, along with the Gothic façade of the Town Hall, which hides an Art Deco interior.

Head beneath Place des Héros in front of the Town Hall belfry for a guided tour of the medieval chalk quarries, or *boves*, that still connect to private cellars, and take the lift to the top for far-reaching views over Saint-Vaast Cathedral – also rebuilt – and the Fine Arts Museum to the distant Canadian war memorial at Vimy Ridge. Don't leave town without visiting the Wellington Quarry, ancient quarries 20m below ground that were enlarged by New >>



PHOTOS © GILLIAN THORNTON

“LENS MINING BASIN IS RICH IN INDUSTRIAL HISTORY AND LISTED BY UNESCO AS A SHINING EXAMPLE OF URBAN REGENERATION”



**Clockwise from top:** Louvre Lens; Saint-Bertin's Abbey at Saint-Omer; the UNESCO-listed Terrils des Loos-en-Gohelle; the Audomarois marshes at Saint-Omer

Zealand miners over a six-month period. In April 1917, 24,000 British troops lived here for a week before emerging for a surprise attack that launched the Battle of Arras close to the Western Front. With recently updated presentations, the excellent three-part guided experience includes the museum, tunnels and film. It's intensely moving for all ages.

**HUMAN ENDEAVOUR**

If time permits, turn north to the former mining basin around Lens, an area rich in industrial history and listed by UNESCO as a shining example of urban regeneration. The Louvre-Lens art museum stands on the site of a former coal mine: industrial buildings have become living history museums, and slag heaps rehabilitated as nature reserves and sports facilities.

But with only a few days at my disposal, I turn back towards the Channel past a clutch of Great War Remembrance sites to the fallen of many nations, each one worth a visit. Barely 20 years later, hell broke loose again in 1939 with the start



IMAGES © GILLIAN THORNTON, YANNICK CADART, LESCORLOCS



of World War II. Visit La Coupole outside Saint-Omer (a *Ville d'art et d'histoire*): this domed Nazi bunker was built to fire V2 rockets on London but was, fortunately, never operational, the technology later making a positive contribution to the space race.

Stop off in Saint-Omer to visit the 16th-century Gothic cathedral and the excellent Hotel Sandelin Museum, housed in a late 18th-century town house and classified a Musée de France for its rich collections spanning the Middle Ages to the 19th century.

But my favourite local visit has to be the Maison du Marais, the gateway to the protected Audomarois marshland, that tells the social history of the town's long tradition of market gardening. Explore the visitor centre and then take a tranquil guided cruise past island homes where the postman still delivers by boat. It's yet another unique location in an area which is rich in historic gems. **FT**

**12 MUST-SEE HISTORIC ATTRACTIONS IN PAS-DE-CALAIS**

A dozen sites around this fascinating part of France that no history buff should miss

For more Nord inspiration visit [www.visitpasdecalais.com](http://www.visitpasdecalais.com)



**AZINCOURT**

It's humbling to look over such an important but ultimately small area that has changed little in the past 600 years. The excellent interactive museum brings the battle of October 25, 1415, vividly to life. [azincourt1415.com](http://azincourt1415.com)



**WELLINGTON QUARRY**

This offers an emotional and hard-hitting insight into the run-up to the Battle of Arras, all the more so because the offensive ultimately achieved so little. Expertly recreated with the latest technology, it's a must-visit. [www.carrierewellington.com](http://www.carrierewellington.com)



**ÉTAPLES CEMETERY**

Every military cemetery packs a punch but few more than this one, which underlines the numbers involved (there are 10,771 WWI graves) and the devastation caused to so many families across the Commonwealth. [www.cwgc.org](http://www.cwgc.org)



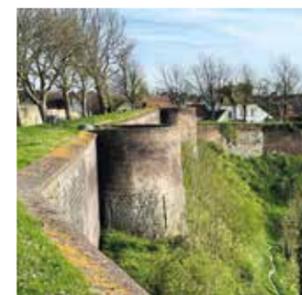
**LOUVRE-LENS**

This excellent art museum's Time Gallery is temporarily closed until December 4, 2024, while 250 replacement works of art are brought from Paris and displayed in chronological order. Other areas remain open. [www.louvre-lens.fr](http://www.louvre-lens.fr)



**ARRAS**

The Tourist Office in the Town Hall opens daily for access by lift to the bell tower and for guided tours of the *boxes* below the city's cobblestone streets. Catch the bustling market on Wednesday and Saturday mornings. [www.arraspaysdartois.com](http://www.arraspaysdartois.com)



**MONTREUIL**

Just 15km inland from Le Touquet, Montreuil is renowned for its food shops and restaurants, but with historic buildings at every turn, it's also the perfect destination for those with the urge to dig deeper into the past. <https://bit.ly/3UgiWMV>



**DONJON DE BOURS**

Guided tours of around half an hour reveal the human stories behind this atmospheric sandstone tower house with six turrets, no longer surrounded by water but still in the heart of lush farmland. [www.arraspaysdartois.com](http://www.arraspaysdartois.com)



**CALAIS**

Historic statues abound here in public parks whilst a gallery in the well-stocked Musée des Beaux-Arts reveals the background to Rodin's famous bourgeois group. And don't miss a ride on the giant seafront dragon too! [www.calais-cotedopale.co.uk](http://www.calais-cotedopale.co.uk)



**BOULOGNE**

The excellent Castle Museum contains fine arts, archaeology and Egyptian artefacts. Meanwhile, the dome of 19th-century basilica – which stands on the ruins of a medieval cathedral – has recently been restored. [www.boulonnaisautop.com](http://www.boulonnaisautop.com)



**HESDIN**

This charming small town, through which the Canche river flows, lies at the heart of the Seven Valleys and boasts a magnificent town hall, along with many reminders of its strategic importance in centuries past. [www.visitpasdecalais.com](http://www.visitpasdecalais.com)



**AUDOMAROIS MARSHES**

Discover how the marshland has been shaped over the centuries, then reconnect with nature on a cruise in a traditional *bacôve*, watching out for kingfishers and water fowl. There are plenty of walking trails and bike hire too. [www.lamaisondumarais.com](http://www.lamaisondumarais.com)



**LE TOUQUET**

Follow the self-guided walking trail to discover the distinctive Art Deco public buildings and private homes of this stylish holiday resort, which is a perennial favourite with Parisians. It's great for watersports enthusiasts too. [www.letouquet.com](http://www.letouquet.com) >>

## WHAT TO SEE AND DO IN PAS-DE-CALAIS

Have a favourite period in history? You will find a site to explore in Pas-de-Calais

For more travel inspiration visit [www.francetoday.com/travel-in-france](http://www.francetoday.com/travel-in-france)



The twin slag heaps at Loos-en-Gohelle have become a popular walking spot



The Ring of Remembrance

### GREAT WAR SITES

The **CWGC Experience** at Beaurains, near Arras, explains the work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission [www.cwgc.org](http://www.cwgc.org). North of Arras, the huge sculpted figures of the **Canadian National Memorial** at Vimy look over the former mining basin, [www.veterans.gc.ca](http://www.veterans.gc.ca) whilst on the opposite hillside, the **Basilica of Notre-Dame-de-Lorette** watches over the graves of more than 42,000 French soldiers from the Great War in the National Military Cemetery. Don't miss the nearby **Ring of Remembrance** and the **Memorial 14-18** history centre that explains the Great War in Pas-de-Calais. [memorial1418.com/en](http://memorial1418.com/en)

### MILITARY HISTORY

Step back into the 17th century as you set out from the citadel to Montreuil to follow the 3km walk

around the top of the Marquis de Vauban's majestic ramparts and bastions for sweeping views of the Canche valley and the surrounding countryside.

Discover the events of World War II in Pas-de-Calais at the **39-45 Museum** in Ambleteuse [www.musee3945.com](http://www.musee3945.com) and explore the secret German bunker of **Mimoyecques Fortress** which was built between Calais and Boulogne to house the V3 multicharge cannon to bomb London [www.mimoyecques.fr/en](http://www.mimoyecques.fr/en). And beneath the vast concrete dome of **La Coupole** in Wizernes, built as a missile launch pad, combine the



La Coupole in Wizernes

site's WWII history with its links to the space race at the 3-D planetarium. [www.lacoupole-france.com](http://www.lacoupole-france.com)

### INDUSTRIAL HISTORY

Take a tranquil stroll through the mining heritage sites of Pas-de-Calais, amongst them the

twin slag heaps of **Loos-en-Gohelle**. The tallest in Europe, they can be safely climbed and give circular views. Other heaps also serve as viewpoints as well as important nature reserves. [www.visitpasdecalais.com/explore-frances-mining-heritage](http://www.visitpasdecalais.com/explore-frances-mining-heritage). For an insight into the lives of local workers, visit the **Cité des Electriciens**. [www.citedeselectriciens.fr](http://www.citedeselectriciens.fr). Love lace? The **City of Lace and Fashion** in Calais stages displays and demonstrations of historic and contemporary lace, made by hand and by machine. [www.cite-dentelle.fr/en](http://www.cite-dentelle.fr/en)

### FAMILY-FRIENDLY VISITS

Young imaginations will be fired up at **Azincourt** but have cameras to the ready too at the **Tour d'Horloge** in Guînes where kids can dress up as knights and princesses and try hands-on activities geared to youngsters aged five to 12 [www.tour-horloge-guines.com](http://www.tour-horloge-guines.com). Older children will be moved by the poignant dedications at cemeteries to lost soldiers, many of whom were little older than themselves. And a panoramic view from a UNESCO-listed bell tower at Calais or Arras will impress any young geographer or historian with a head for heights. >>



The courtyard of the International City of Lace and Fashion in Calais

# AD PAGE

For more hotels and restaurants, visit [www.francetoday.com/food-and-drink-france](http://www.francetoday.com/food-and-drink-france)

## WHERE TO STAY & EAT IN PAS-DE-CALAIS

Whether you're sleeping over or just stopping for a meal, here are places to look out for on your history trail

### HOTELS

#### Hotel Ibis Styles Calais Centre

Located in Rue Royale within easy walk of the main sites, it has modern décor, a spacious bar/ breakfast area and is 15 minutes from the port and Eurotunnel, with parking for a small charge. [www.all.accor.com](http://www.all.accor.com)



The Hotel Ibis in Calais

#### 4\* La Matelote, Boulogne

This popular family-run hotel with 35 rooms is opposite the renowned sea life centre, Nausicaá, and has fantastic restaurants specialising in seafood. [www.la-matelote.com](http://www.la-matelote.com)

#### Les Hauts de Montreuil

Expect a friendly welcome at this historic hotel between the Citadel and main square. It offers modern rooms and a cosy bar and restaurant, plus paid parking. [www.logishotels.com](http://www.logishotels.com)

#### Hotel Mercure, Arras

Opposite the station and 10 minutes' walk from Arras' centre in one direction, Wellington Quarry in the other, Le 58 Restaurant serves a tempting mix of international and regional dishes. [www.le58bymercurearras.com](http://www.le58bymercurearras.com)

#### Hotel Ibis Saint-Omer Centre

This good value accommodation in the town centre serves authentic regional food in the restaurant. Parking with 20 spaces. [www.all.accor.com](http://www.all.accor.com)

### B&B

#### La Cour des Grands, Arras

Three double rooms and third-floor suite on Place des Héros are accessed via a small bar. The atmosphere is more Airbnb than guesthouse in this wonderful location with public parking in the adjacent Grand'Place. [www.lacourdesgrandsarras.com](http://www.lacourdesgrandsarras.com)



L'Histoire Ancienne in Calais serves up inventive bistro dishes



La Cour des Grands in Arras

### RESTAURANTS

#### Histoire Ancienne, Calais

Enjoy inventive bistro dishes from chef Patrick Comte in the splendid Art Deco style surroundings in Rue Royale in central Calais. Expect a zinc bar, vast jars of sweets and great food in a warm, friendly atmosphere. [www.histoire-ancienne.com](http://www.histoire-ancienne.com)

#### Le Channel, Calais

Between the Eurotunnel terminal and the town centre, Le Channel is an arts and culture centre in a former abbatoir. Eat locally-sourced produce in the lively bistro or at the adjacent Grandes Tables du Channel. [www.lechannel.fr](http://www.lechannel.fr)

#### Le Patio, Montreuil

With half-timbered frontage, Le Patio is next to – and part of –



Le Channel bistro in Calais

the Hauts de Montreuil Hotel. This spacious but intimate restaurant has an excellent three-course gourmet menu for €44 (€54 with cheese) or choose à la carte. [www.leshautsdemontreuil.fr](http://www.leshautsdemontreuil.fr)

#### La Belle Époque, Hesdin

This popular local restaurant is in Rue Daniel Lereuil just off the main square with a view over the



La Belle Époque in Hesdin



Crab mille-feuille at Le Patio

Canche from the interior tables or from the riverside terrace. A mix of local and international dishes are all served with a smile.

[www.la-belle-epoque-hesdin.com](http://www.la-belle-epoque-hesdin.com)

#### L'Oeuf ou La Poule, Arras

Just off Place des Héros, this popular small restaurant with 28 covers majors in creative cuisine around local eggs and poultry. Outdoor tables for 20 on the pedestrianised street are ideal in fine weather.

[www.loeufoulapoule.fr](http://www.loeufoulapoule.fr)

#### Bacôve, Saint-Omer

This Michelin-starred restaurant, run by chef Camille Delcroix and his wife, Carla, uses seasonal, local produce, including veg from the Audomarois and freshly-caught fish from the Opal Coast.

[www.restaurant-bacove.com](http://www.restaurant-bacove.com)

## PAS-DE-CALAIS ESSENTIALS

### GETTING THERE

#### BY AIR

Fly to Paris and continue by train.

#### BY TRAIN

**Eurostar** trains no longer stop at Calais-Fréthun. From Paris, take the **TGV** high-speed train to Arras (50 min) or Calais (1h 40m).

#### BY CAR

Maximise your carbon footprint by taking your car on **Eurotunnel Le Shuttle** for the 35 min journey from Folkestone to Calais. [www.eurotunnel.com](http://www.eurotunnel.com). Or take the ferry from Dover to Calais in 1h 30m with **DFDS, P&O** or **Irish Ferries**, or Dover to Dunkerque with **DFDS**.

### TOURIST INFORMATION

[www.visitpasdecals.com](http://www.visitpasdecals.com)

