



### HONFLEUR

The last English invasion of Honfleur, in 1415, lasted only 51 years; nowadays it looks more permanent. Itinerant Brits have long had a soft spot for the little Norman fishing port and now that the Pont de Normandie so successfully throws its elegant single span over the Seine, it is but a short drive from the ferry port - ideal for a weekend break.

It is not hard to see the appeal. Avoid the signposts to the new port area and take the old road directly into the town, via the long boulevard of the rue de la Republique. Its



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perspective narrows to frame the masts of the yachts that, year-round, crowd the Vieux Bassin, the heart of Honfleur. Here begins the old town, wisely 'sauvegarde', so that its picture book charm cannot be ruined.

A promenade around the four sides of the old harbour, past the numerous art galleries, the pavement cafés, the restaurants, the artists' easels, makes a perfect prelude to sitting in a waterside café to view all the activity. Unlike so many grey northern towns, shuttered and deserted in winter, there is always animation in Honfleur. Its quietest month is probably August.

The Quay St Etienne on the bassin's eastern side is the place to sit of an evening, when the sun warms the café tables. From this vantage point count the layers of the eccentric grey slate houses squeezed together on the opposite Quai Ste Catherine, a favourite poster view. Some are as much as eight storeys high, two narrow windows wide, their pitched roofs stepping up and down haphazardly. The impression is of a distorting mirror, squashing them into unnatural elongation.

Behind the quay are the smartened-up old salt warehouses, the Greniers de Sel, built in the 17th century to store the salt necessary to preserve the herring and cod catch and to warehouse the salt for the 'gabelle' the salt tax. Vast stone buildings, with magnificent oak beams, they are now used for concerts and exhibitions. Around them in the winding cobbled streets is an ensemble of highly picturesque sixteenth century plastered and beamed houses and the oldest church in Honfleur, now housing the Marine Museum. Started in 1369, it was completed in 1432, during the English occupation, by the decree of Henry VI.

To the seaward side is the old Lieutenant's house, La Lieutenance, like the crooked house in a children's playground, all odd levels and twisted roofs, scattered windows and stairs, turrets, beams and chimneys. Wallflowers brighten the faded beige stone and a larch sapling has impudently seeded itself inside the building. A plaque near here commemorates the voyages to Canada of one of Honfleur's most honoured seafarers, Samuel de Champlain, who in 1608 founded the city of Quebec.

A short climb from here is the Place Ste Catherine - more cafés, more restaurants, more

ridiculously photogenic houses and another church. This one is unusual, in that it is constructed almost entirely of wood. Built at the end of the Hundred Years War, at a time when the town's finances had been exhausted by the siege and the rebuilding of fortifications, the builders turned to local resources - the trees in the nearby forest of Touques - for the raw materials and then to the resident shipbuilders for their carpentry expertise. Inside are two long parallel naves, whose barrelled vaults, like upturned boats' hulls, rest on massive pillars of oak. The lower part of the walls is black and white panelling, very much in keeping with the traditional building to be seen in manor houses and cottages all over the surrounding region of the enchanting Pas d'Auge.

This is usually the extent of tourist exploration but the quartier of Ste Catherine is full of intriguing narrow cobbled streets lined with fascinating houses, whose details - worm-eaten beams and carved lintels, dovescots,



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turrets and glimpses of overgrown courtyards - reward the stroller with time to stop and stare. Look for the rue de Homme de Bois to see what I mean. On many of the doors are the plaques that announce that this was once the home of a locally renowned poet, philosopher, Admiral, painter or musician. Erik Satie lived in one of the oldest houses in the Rue du Homme de Bois.

Monet painted the église Ste Catherine in 1867, on one of his frequent visits to the town. His interpretation of the scene, along with those of other artists - Corot, Dufy, Millet, Jongkind - inspired over the centuries by different aspects, hang in the town's museum in the rue de Homme de Bois. The museum is named after Eugene Boudin, born in Honfleur in 1824, the son of a fisherman. Many of his most famous and covetable paintings of family beach outings in Trouville and Honfleur are on show here.

Boudin it was who encouraged his artist friends to join him in painting the view from a farmhouse just a kilometre west of Honfleur - the Ferme St Simeon. There they would sit at their easels, infatuated with the effects of light and shade on the shifting water below, recording their 'impressions' in a revolutionary style that was to lead to a totally new artistic concept. The hostleries in the town were too expensive for their slender means, so they begged Mère Toutain, who owned the farm, to give them lodging. In return for the bed, the flagons of cider and the plates of fresh shrimps supplied by the amiable widow, they covered the farmhouse walls with drawings and paintings, the like of which would undoubtedly bring a gleam to Sotheby's eye today.

All perished now, alas, but the farm building remains, very little changed in outline from the photographs and paintings that depict it in its artistic heyday, but now reincarnated as a hotel. It is ironic that the refuge to which the impecunious artists fled is now the most expensive lodging not only in the town but for many a kilometre. (A luxurious double room costs £850!)

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