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ELIZABETH CHAMBERS OF SANTA BARBARA, CALIFORNIA





Two Hours Outside Paris
**THE NEW
 NORMAN CONQUEST**

When the City of Light becomes just too much, sea-swept salvation is a short train ride away.

By Alexander Lobrano

Parisians adore *la mer*, so it's no wonder the vast flat beaches of Normandy instantly became the favorite destination of the French capital's scenery-seeking artists when the railroad line to the port city of Le Havre opened in 1847. Now, eight generations later, Parisian tastemakers are falling once again for the Norman coastline and its seagull-streaked skies, briny air, and quiet green backcountry of half-timbered manor houses. Easily reached by train or car, Normandy is the perfect weekend out of Paris. But whereas Deauville reigned for decades as the region's

most glamorous resort, today it's Honfleur and its environs that are captivating the smart set. (The short take on these sister towns is that if Deauville is for Versace wearers, the ever more gentrified Honfleur is strictly Hermès.)

Located on the south bank of the Seine estuary, Honfleur was one of the most important centers of art in 19th-century Europe. Its transformation began when Eugène Boudin, who was born in Honfleur in 1824, returned to Normandy from Paris to paint *en plein air*. The power of his stirring paintings of the Norman landscape

eventually drew an admirer, a young artist named Claude Monet, to the region. So while the beau monde of Paris frolicked in the surf off nearby Deauville, Honfleur was quietly winning a spicy reputation for *la vie bohème*, which revolved around the **FERME SAINT SIMÉON**, a hilltop farmhouse inn on the outskirts of town. In a setting Boudin described as "the most ravishing spot in the world," the master and other sojourning artists, including Monet, Courbet, Jongkind, and Millet, gathered at tables set under the apple trees to feast on local shrimp.

Today the Ferme Saint Siméon is a legendary and very luxurious 34-room country-house hotel. Rather miraculously, however, the view from the perched gardens that so captivated those pre- and early Impressionists remains largely unchanged. To be sure, if you book Room 22, which was once Monet's atelier, you'll notice that the north shore of the estuary has been industrialized, but beneath its mannered mien the inn retains the engaging aura of raffish bonhomie it had in the days when Boudin and company were settling their bills with sketches instead of cash they didn't have. Though it doesn't come with the same pedigree as 22, another favorite is Room 20, a cozy junior suite with a sitting room where it's easy to snuggle up on the plump settee with a good book on a rainy afternoon—weather that would also give a perfect excuse to head for the hotel's large spa, with its indoor swimming pool.

A few miles inland, the recently opened 15-room **AUBERGE DE LA SOURCE** is a delightful example of the new generation of small hotels that are making Honfleur so popular. Created from several 17th- and 18th-century half-timbered farm buildings and set in a lush green valley at the edge of a rushing stream, this relaxed but stylish hideaway has spacious rooms with raw oak floors, cherry-and-cream curtains, and beds topped with fluffy duvets. Dinner is served in front of the fireplace in the main lodge, and the menu runs to delicious farmhouse food such as duck foie gras with fig compote; tomato risotto garnished with langoustines, scallops, and crabmeat; camembert baked in phyllo pastry; and pear-and-pineapple clafoutis.

In town, **LA PETITE FOLIE**, which occupies an 1830 Directoire house and is owned by American-born Penny Vincent and her French husband Thierry, has become one of the most popular bed-and-breakfasts in France. The five rooms overlook the walled garden and Moorish-style folly that inspired the property's name, and they're beautifully decorated with antiques, beds made up with Porthault sheets, and fabrics from Pierre Frey. Each room has its own decor, and all of them are charming, but the room to choose is La Chambre Bleue, which is tucked away under the eaves on the top floor. Penny serves a delicious country breakfast every morning and is a terrific source of in-the-know restaurant suggestions and touring tips.

True to its storied past, Honfleur remains a magnet for creative types, too, although these days they're more likely to be weekend television producers, filmmakers, and chefs

than sculptors and painters. Honfleur has, in fact, also emerged as a hot destination for serious food lovers. Last March the talented young chef Alexandre Bourdas won a second Michelin star for his superb contemporary French restaurant **SA.QUA.NA** (the name is an abbreviation of *saveurs* [flavors], *qualité*, and *nature* and a play on *sakana*, the Japanese word for fish). Not only has Bourdas boldly upended the usually formal, fussy character of Michelin-starred Normandy restaurants—here, fancy silver is skipped in favor of linen runners on oak tables and stemless Riedel glasses—he's also created a deceptively simple (and ever-changing) menu that has included dishes like sea bream with broccoli, baby leeks, and passion fruit seeds in fermented butter. Reservations are essential.

The town of course abounds in great places to have a plate of freshly shucked Normandy oysters with a glass of Muscadet around the Vieux Bassin, the beautiful old stone-lined harbor constructed by French naval architect Abraham Duquesne in 1681, but the other serious table not to miss is the hip **L'ENDROIT**, the favorite canteen of local antiques dealers, graphic designers, and other arty types. This relaxed dining room is usefully open on Sundays, and its loftlike decor is softened by retro touches and antiques. L'Endroit serves such excellent fare as sautéed baby clams with chorizo and rabbit with tapenade.

Finally, although Honfleur's delightful **MUSÉE EUGÈNE BOUDIN** is the first stop for anyone interested in the Impressionists, one of the finest collections of their work in the world is in Le Havre, at the spectacular **MUSÉE MALRAUX**. Long ignored by weekenders who assumed that France's second-largest port was too gritty, Le Havre was classified as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2005 for its strikingly modern city center (rebuilt after World War II by architect Auguste Perret). It makes for a funky and fascinating day trip. Don't miss the **APPARTEMENT TÉMOIN AUGUSTE PERRET**, which is outfitted with furniture and housewares Perret designed to introduce the locals to a modern way of life after the war, and have lunch at the excellent **JEAN LUC TARTARIN** restaurant. Afterward, head to the city's Sainte-Adresse suburbs for the magnificent views of the English Channel that inspired what may well be the most beloved Monet painting in America, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's *Garden at Sainte-Adresse*. From here it's just an hour's drive back to peaceful Honfleur, where you'll be wooed all over again by its gentle, unstudied beauty. What could make for a better weekend? •

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