



ROUEN REVISITED

Roger Wheeler returns to Normandy

Normandy, our closest French neighbour, is always worth a visit and I should know. As I settled into my seat on the good ship **Cote D'Abatre**, which has been chugging across from **Newhaven** to **Dieppe** for many years, a thought struck me, I first used this ferry, although not this ship, in 1962 and since then have done so at least once a year. I was quite surprised that I had been going to Normandy for so long, never mind frequent flyer points how about frequent ferry points? Newhaven/Dieppe is the oldest ferry link in the country; it started around 1863, even before I was born. It has had many owners including Sealink, SNCF, P&O Stena which sold the line to TransManche which sold to LD Lines and now the route is operated by Danish company DFDS Seaways. It's not bad, takes just under four hours and can be quite cheap. We took the car with two passengers and it cost just £78 return, but that was in February.



DIEPPE

So we land in Dieppe, one of the best kept and attractive French ports on the north west coast. Over the years this pretty little town hasn't changed that much; it has one main street, the **Grand Rue**, which has lots of individual shops and bars. The harbour quay is packed with dozens of restaurants and although they all serve similar menus, they all seem pretty good. We had dinner at **Le Newhaven**, which has been there for over 40 years and is in our opinion one of the best, and on a bleak Wednesday in February was the only restaurant with customers. We put up at our favourite hotel, the **Mercure**, right next to the casino on the seafront and like all Mercure

hotels was completely reliable with very nice rooms, comfy beds and friendly staff, all you need in a hotel.

The next day we headed to **Rouen**, just 40 miles away on good, almost empty roads. If you're in a hurry then it need only take about 50 minutes. But not being in a rush we took the slower D195 road through some really beautiful country, calling briefly at a couple of pretty little villages, **Saint-Saëns** and **Tôtes**, and then on to Rouen.



This medieval city, 45% of which was destroyed by the RAF during WW2, is an architectural gem with most of the buildings faithfully restored. The old town is a maze of cobbled streets full of fascinating shops and ancient half-timbered buildings. Rouen is mainly famous as the city that burnt Joan of Arc at the stake in 1431 and is the fourth most important port in France. It lies on the river **Seine** just 85 miles from Paris but it is a major destination in itself. There is a street of artists' studios – 'ateliers', tailors sitting in their shop windows sewing suits, shops making musical instruments in the traditional way, a shop selling about 100 types of olive oil and one selling what looked like about 1,000 spices. There's an amazing range of high quality furniture shops too and as for fashion, this is a city of style! There are many great boutiques selling fabulous clothes at not particularly fabulous prices. The patisseries are amazing but very bad for the waistline. This

city isn't known for its gay scene, but the **XXL Bar**, the only gay spot in town, is very pleasant and worth a visit.

We booked into a Mercure hotel again, right next to the cathedral and it was excellent in every way; comfortable, clean, welcoming and with its own underground car park. There isn't a restaurant but there's a full room service menu. The city is full of restaurants of varying styles and prices. There's a strong North African influence as well as, surprisingly, an Afghan eatery. We ate in **La Walsheim**, which features Normandy and Bavarian specialities – sauerkraut is a favourite, if rather heavy dish. Our table was on a small balcony overlooking the main dining room, great fun and very enjoyable. Three courses for 18€ plus a decent bottle of wine also 18€ meant that we ate very well indeed for 54€ (£48). We look for restaurants that have customers and this one is very popular with the locals.

The next day we found, what looked like, a great steak house, **La Boucherie Restaurant**. It wasn't very busy so we declined the offer of a table in a corner and went to a nice one in one of the huge windows overlooking a pleasant square. The waiter stormed over and ordered us to sit where he had told us to or *"go back to England, we don't want you here"*. Somewhat shocked and a bit dazed we left never to cross the threshold again. In 50 years of visiting this part of France this is the first, and hopefully the last time, I've met any form of hostility.

We wandered back through town and chanced on **Pascaline**. We had eaten there very happily some years ago and although it looked pretty quiet we went in. Sad to say that although the food was fine, the staff have completely lost the plot; the service was so slow we were almost eating the table cloth, no one smiled and the cashier avoided all eye contact. We felt unwelcome and although we had enjoyed our meal, once it arrived, we would probably not return.

As the crow flies, Rouen is only about 150 miles from Brighton and 70 of those miles are spent on a boat, so despite a couple of very small hiccups with restaurants we will return. www.mercure.com



ROUEN

www.gaynormandie.com
www.rouentourisme.com
www.dfdsseaways.co.uk
www.rouen.fr