162 views | Dec 3, 2019, 07:00am

Normandy Weekend Guide: 5 Things You Must Do When Visiting Etretat

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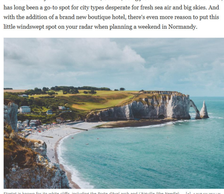
Travel

A small seaside town clustered along a sweeping pebbly beach bookended by magnificent white cliffs that jut out from the water, Etretat, being just a two-hour drive from Paris, has long been a go-to spot for city types desperate for fresh sea air and big skies. And with the addition of a brand new boutique hotel, there's even more reason to put this little windswept spot on your radar when planning a weekend in Normandy.



Etretat is known for its white cliffs, including the Porte d'Aval arch and L'Aiguille (the Needle). ... [+] LUCA SALVALAIO,IT

Etretat's towering white chalk cliffs carved by wind and water into photogenic formations like the Porte d'Aval Arch and L'Aiguille (the Needle; see above) were put on the map by the impressionist artists Gustave Courbet and Claude Monet who were fascinated by its natural beauty. "Etretat is becoming more and more amazing. Now is the real moment: the beach with all its fine boats; it is superb, and I am enraged not to be more skilful in rendering all this. I would need two hands and hundreds of canvases," Monet famously said.

Located in Normandy, in Northwestern France, Etretat's known for its murky waters and inky skies, long walks, and sea food restaurants. In terms of places to stay, there are a couple of options, but Les Tilleuls, which opened last summer, is the town's finest upscale boutique hotel, turning the Etretat experience into a real luxury getaway.

Sample French Country Living at Les Tilleuls

Today In: Lifestyle

When a Parisian tells you they're going to Normandy for the weekend, it usually means they are headed to their country home - often a big beautiful half timbered affair with moody sea views and manicured sloping lawns - to enjoy the simple, and in my humble opinion, best things in life: oysters and long seaside walks. If however, you aren't lucky enough to have your own place to pop over for the weekend, then you have beautiful Les Tilleuls.

Les Tilleuls hotel in Etretat Normandy France. LES TILLEULS

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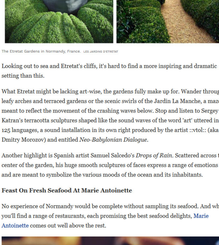
Opened last June by the daughter of a Belgian family that already has several hotels and restaurants under their belt, Camille Gerndorff has taken over this exquisite 18th century villa with all the trimmings of a family mansion home and turned it into a countryside sanctuary that will win over even the staunch of urbanites.

A picture of French country living perfection - and that includes Tilla the friendly house golden retriever - Les Tilleuls is the sort of place where you feel at home as soon as you step into the black and white chequered hallway and catch sight of the library den with its roaring fire.

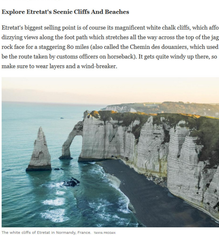
Complete with creaky floorboards, antique furniture, and nooks for reading - the upstairs den comes with a window seat suspended close to the ceiling so you look out at the views of the town and nearby Etretat gardens. This den also doubles up as a yoga studio throughout the year, as well as during retreats managed by yoga and mindset coach Salomé.



Les Tilleuls hotel in Etretat Normandy France. LES TILLEULS

The five guestrooms are light and airy, painted in soothing country greens and cornflower blues, and come with huge beds and windows that look out onto the leafy garden. The "presidential" suite, where French A-list actor Jérémie Renier was staying while I sojourned here, has a distressed Chesterfield and a Louis XVI dresser with a free-standing bath and 1930's fixtures, giving the space that added air of grandeur steeped in its 17001s epoque.

Supper, a hearty affair rustled up with local, seasonal produce by the resident chef, is laid out by a crackling fire either in the library or living room, and must be booked ahead. Breakfast is served in the dreamy country home kitchen dining room, where guests sit at a large wood table by a stone fireplace in winter and out in the garden in the warmer months, while chef Cory, a Canadian import, puts together energy-boosting açai bowls and smoothies - there are also croissants and *pains au chocolat*, crisp baguette and homemade jams, for those craving French staples, *bien sûr*.

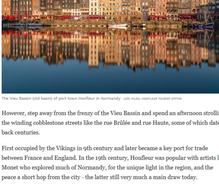


Les Tilleuls hotel in Etretat Normandy France. LES TILLEULS

Les Tilleuls is the perfect spot for staying out of the cold and catching up with some reading, writing, and even films you've been meaning to watch as it has a private cinema equipped with top-notch surround sound in the vaulted basement. However, if you can bear to tear yourself away for an hour or two, there's plenty to explore outside too.

Stroll The Experimental Etretat Gardens

Perched atop the white cliffs, just under the scenic Notre-Dame-de-la-Garde church, is the meditative Jardins d'Etretat. Skilfully revived by landscape architect Russian-born Alexandre Grivko, they have morphed into an avant-garde open-air gallery of compelling artworks blending art, technology and ethical values steeped in nature.



The Etretat Gardens in Normandy, France. LES JARDINS D'ETRETAT

Looking out to sea and Etretat's cliffs, it's hard to find a more inspiring and dramatic setting than this.

What Etretat might be lacking art-wise, the gardens fully make up for. Wander through leafy arches and terraced gardens or the scenic swirls of the Jardin La Manche, a maze meant to reflect the movement of the crashing waves below. Stop and listen to Sergey Katran's terracotta sculptures shaped like the sound waves of the word 'art' uttered in 125 languages, a sound installation in its own right produced by the artist :::vol:: (aka Dmitry Morozov) and entitled *Neo-Babylonian Dialogue*.

Another highlight is Spanish artist Samuel Salcedo's *Drops of Rain*. Scattered across the center of the garden, his huge smooth sculptures of faces express a range of emotions and are meant to symbolize the various moods of the ocean and its inhabitants.

Feast On Fresh Seafood At Marie Antoinette

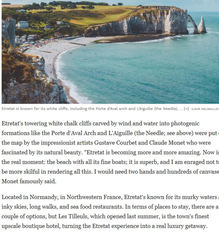
No experience of Normandy would be complete without sampling its seafood. And while you'll find a range of restaurants, each promising the best seafood delights, Marie Antoinette comes out well above the rest.

Marie Antoinette is the best place in Etretat for seafood. OHMLAIS.COM

Specialties include seafood platters overflowing with crab and lobster as well as prawns and oysters, but there are also other options (including excellent meat dishes). The setting is cosy and the stellar service is second to none. Just make sure to book ahead of time to avoid disappointment as there is usually a waiting list, especially at weekends and during the holidays.

Explore Etretat's Scenic Cliffs And Beaches

Etretat's biggest selling point is of course its magnificent white chalk cliffs, which afford dizzying views along the foot path which stretches all the way across the top of the jagged rock face for a staggering 80 miles (also called the Chemin des douaniers, which used to be the route taken by customs officers on horseback). It gets quite windy up there, so make sure to wear layers and a wind-breaker.

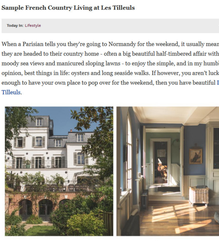


The white cliffs of Etretat in Normandy France. NATIONTRAVEL

Make The Day Trip To Neighboring Honfleur

While there is plenty to keep you busy in Etretat itself, like its little town with the occasional magnificent half timbered house that suddenly flings you centuries back, the region offers lots to do too, including the pretty harbour town of Honfleur a 45-minute drive away.

I wouldn't necessarily recommend staying in Honfleur as it tends to be overridden with tourists who have come to gawp at its harbour that bobs with yachts and leisure boats, and have a *crepe* or *moules-frites* (mussels and fries) at one of the tourist-trap restaurants along the water.



The Vieu Bassin (old basin) of port town Honfleur in Normandy. LES PLUS, HONFLEUR TOURIST OFFICE

However, step away from the frenzy of the Vieu Bassin and spend an afternoon strolling the winding cobblestone streets like the rue Brûlée and rue Haute, some of which date back centuries.

First occupied by the Vikings in 9th century and later became a key port for trade between France and England. In the 19th century, Honfleur was popular with artists like Monet who explored much of Normandy, for the unique light in the region, and the peace a short hop from the city - the latter still very much a main draw today.

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