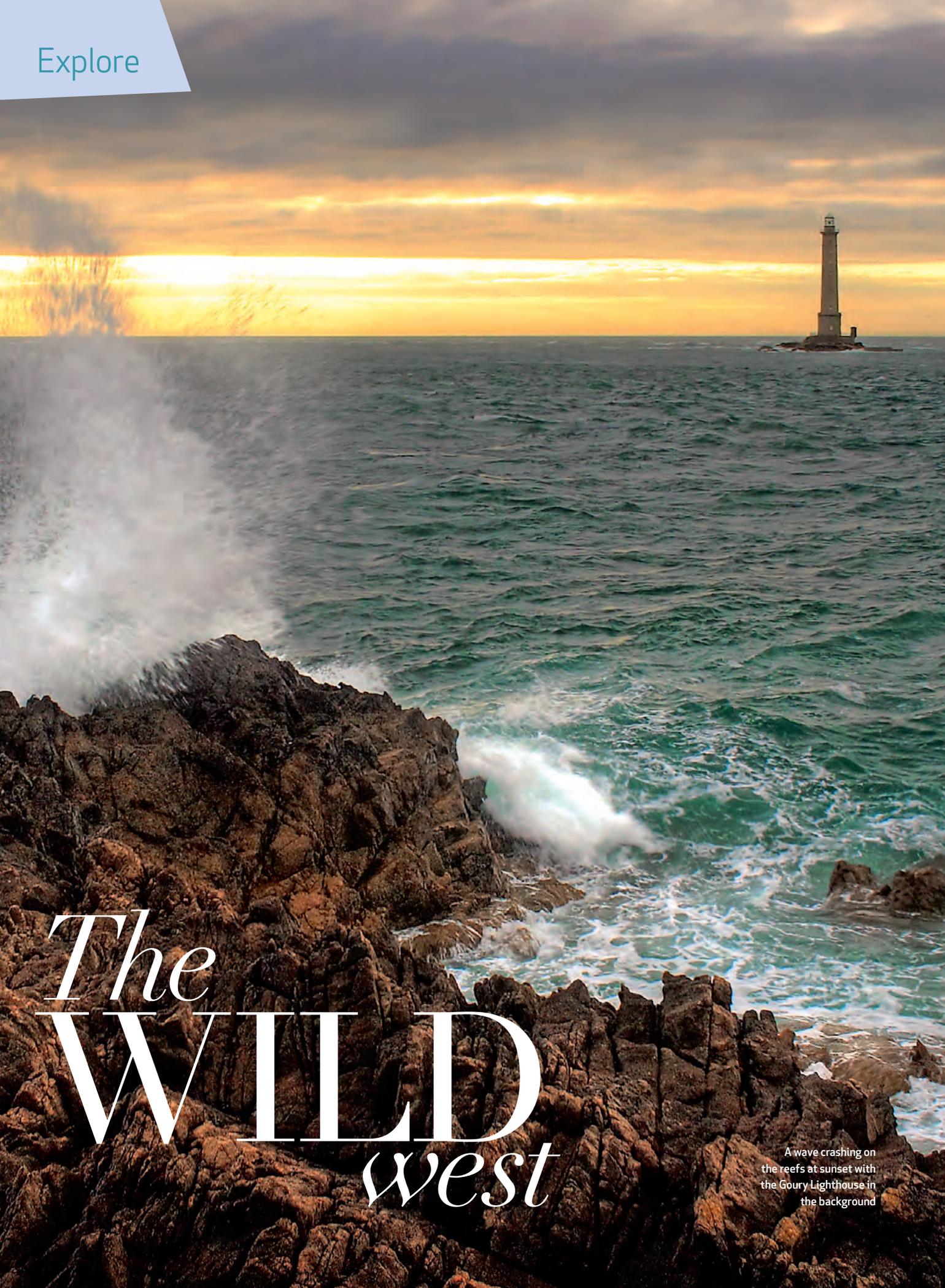


Explore



The
WILD
west

A wave crashing on the reefs at sunset with the Gourey Lighthouse in the background



PACLO DE FAVIER/HEMIS/GALAMY

An aerial view of Granville, on the Cotentin Peninsula

Nick Rider discovers romantic castles, fine ciders, snug beach towns and wide open spaces in **Normandy's Cotentin Peninsula** – just off the ferry



Leave the ferry. Turn sharp right immediately after leaving Cherbourg harbour, following signs for La Hague and the Route des Caps, and in just a few minutes you enter a world of increasingly narrow lanes leading to deep-green countryside and massive cliffs falling away into the surf.

One of the great charms of France is the ease and speed with which you can pass from urban modernity to utterly unhurried countryside. The Cotentin Peninsula of Normandy, jutting into the English Channel, takes this to extremes. It often goes unnoticed by travellers heading south, which is a great pity. Within a few kilometres of Cherbourg, the peninsula's western side, especially, offers an extraordinary variety

of landscapes, seascapes, weather, historic relics and empty beaches.

Immediately west of Cherbourg is Cap de la Hague, a 15-mile arm of granite reaching out into the ocean. The D45 road along its northern flank twists around tight bends encased by towering hedgerows, broken by spectacular views over fern and heather-covered cliffs. La Hague is particularly alluring when the sun is shining, picking out the wild flowers along the cliffs and changing colours in the sea, but it's also a wonderfully wild and atmospheric place when the weather turns; when giant waves thunder against the rocks and the winds blow the cobwebs away. And dotted along the roads, grey-stone villages sit huddled around stout early-Norman churches. →



1 2

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1 A tribute to painter Jean-François Millet in Hameau Gruchy
2 The 16th-century Château de Nacqueville 3 Gréville-Hague



Though rain and its famous winds can seem the dominant note in the Hague landscape, wherever there are sheltered valleys there are microclimates that are exuberantly lush and leafy. Near the foot of La Hague is the Château de Nacqueville (gardens open May-Sept, Thur, Fri, Sun and public holidays, noon-6pm), an august granite mansion begun in 1510. In the 1830s Hippolyte de Tocqueville, brother of the great political philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville, commissioned English landscapers to create a magnificent 'English-style' garden here. Full of flowering shrubs and exotic flora, it was superbly designed to frame the view across an artificial lake and out to sea.

A short way further west, the Manoir de Dur-Ecu (gardens open July-Sept, Tue-Thur, 11am-1pm, 3-7pm) is a much more rugged medieval pile with another fine garden, and two attractive gites for rent. The name *Dur-Ecu* ('hard shield') is said to come from

Walking

The Cotentin is wonderful for walking. The GR223 long-distance footpath runs right around the coast close to shore or on top of the cliffs, but is most beautiful around Cap de la Hague, where it began life as the 'Sentier des Douaniers', used by *douaniers* (customs officers) to pursue smugglers. It's easy to walk it for just a kilometre or so, as access is well indicated along the road with *sentier littoral* (coastal footpath) signs.

The other great walking area is the wild dunes north of Barneville-Carteret. The GR223 as usual runs behind the beaches, but there are well-indicated side routes. Cap Carteret, just above the harbour, is easily accessible, and there are great longer trails beyond the point into the dunes of Hatainville and beyond. Tourist offices all provide local walking guides.

A spot of shopping

As well as these regular traditional markets, in summer there are extra markets in beach towns, mostly on Sundays. All markets start early and generally pack up by noon or 1pm. Try Barneville on Saturdays; Carteret on Thursdays; Coutances on Thursdays; Granville on Wednesdays and Saturdays; La Haye-du-Puits on Wednesdays; Lessay on Tuesdays; Pirou-Plage on Sundays; and Portbail on Tuesdays.

a follower of William the Conqueror, who saved the Duke from a deadly blow with his own shield.

Apparently remote, La Hague has also played its part in French culture. From Gréville-Hague a lane leads to little Hameau Gruchy and the Maison Natale Jean-François Millet (open June and Sept, Tue-Sun, 2-6pm; and July-Aug daily 11am-6pm), the humble birthplace in 1814 of one of the most influential 19th-century French painters and now an evocative small museum. A path leads past it to a viewpoint overlooking the crag of Castel Vendon, often painted by Millet, and joins one of the most beautiful sections of the coastal footpath.

In Omonville-la-Petite, the most flower-filled of La Hague's sheltered villages, is the Maison Jacques Prévert (open daily June and Sept 11am-6pm; and July-Aug 11am-7pm), the home of one of France's most popular modern poets from 1970 until his death in 1977.

La Hague ends at the rock inlet of Gourey, with a lifeboat station, a memorable restaurant and a real sense of being at the world's end. Beyond it there is only a magnificently slender lighthouse rising from the waves, and, on a clear day, Alderney away to the west. Road and path run on to more

great views overlooking the rock snout of the Nez (Nose) de Jobourg, riddled with caves once used by smugglers. The south side of La Hague is emptier and more open, with giant cliffs dropping down to Vauville, another of the Cape's most ancient villages.

From there, immense sandy beaches run down virtually the whole west side of the Cotentin to Mont Saint-Michel, interrupted only by the occasional headland, a few rivers, tangy little fishing ports and clusters of holiday cottages. Therefore, there's always abundant beach space, whether for lying out in the sun or walking against the wind.

The winds, Atlantic currents and crashing surf mean that swimming can be hazardous at some points and needs to be approached with care – there are no lifeguards on the emptier beaches. But Siouville-Hague, south of Vauville, is a hotspot for surfing and windsurfing, and there are sheltered, calmer beaches that are far more family friendly, such as the Anse de Sciotot.

Behind the beaches is another extraordinary landscape – a vast expanse of wild empty dunes, many like small mountains, rich in birdlife and interrupted by gullies of thick vegetation. The dunes are ideal for walks towards the sunset with limitless skies and the wind whipping through the coarse grass.

Barneville-Carteret, centre of the Côte des Isles – so-called because of its links with the Channel Islands – is three towns in one: Carteret, a fishing and yachting port with harbour-side cafés and restaurants; Barneville, a craggy Norman hilltop country town; and Barneville Plage, a neat beach resort with the obligatory summer cafés offering *moules-frites*. It thus combines →

“The dunes are ideal for walks towards the sunset with limitless skies and the wind whipping through the coarse grass”

Stay

Le Landemer Urville-Nacqueville

La Hague's standout hotel first opened its doors in 1870 on a roadside promontory with magnificent ocean views, nowadays 20 minutes from Cherbourg. Claude Monet stayed in 1909, and was so entranced by the view “he forgot to paint”. Later it fell on hard times, but since 2013 new owners have transformed it into a sparkling modern boutique hotel, with fine attention to detail, charming service and creative cuisine. Rooms in a separate cottage have individual terraces, and throughout there's the same magnetic view. +33 (0)2 33 04 05 10 or le-landemer.com

Hôtel des Isles Barneville-Carteret

A bright, light hotel presiding over Barneville beach, with nautical-themed rooms and a swimming pool. Seafood is naturally a restaurant highlight. The same owners have the similarly attractive Hôtel des Ormes in Carteret. +33 (0)2 33 04 90 76 or hoteldesisles.com +33 (0)2 33 52 23 50 or hoteldesormes.fr

La Ferme des Mares Saint-Germain-sur-Ay

A charming hotel in a giant old stone farmhouse near the coast west of Lessay, run by British chef Mike Allen and his wife Sonia. His inventive cooking features the best local produce, and he also offers weekend cookery courses. +33 (0)2 33 17 01 02 or la-ferme-des-mares.com

Brittany Ferries offers a range of accommodation all over the Cotentin Peninsula. Visit brittanyferries.com and holidayfrancedirect.co.uk



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let holiday homes, offers around 150 rentals in the Manche department of Normandy, with a choice of gîtes, cottages, villas, chalets and even châteaux! The three bedroom longère-style cottage pictured is situated half an hour from Cherbourg, in the depths of the Cotentin countryside, yet only five minutes from the beautiful unspoilt, sandy beaches of the West Cotentin coast. To find out more visit holidayfrancedirect.co.uk/nm002651



A paraglider takes off from Cape Carteret, Barneville-Carteret



4 At the fair in Lessay, 'tournous' load spits with joints of lamb over wood fires 5 The magnificent Pirou castle, south of Lessay



all the features of the traditional French seaside, only in miniature and with a relaxing low-key charm. There are attractive hotels, fine food stores, two markets on different days, and, though the sea tends to vanish at low tide, the well-tended *plage* is a family favourite. As another contrast, beyond Cap de Carteret there are some of the most spectacular dunes and beaches to explore around Hatainville and Surtainville.

A little further south is one of the Cotentin's most atmospheric small harbours at Portbail, dominated by the fortified tower of its church, with an early Christian baptistery from around the fifth century.

Eat

Auberge de Goury Auderville

In a fabulous location at the end of Cap de la Hague, and at its best the mainly fish and seafood menus match the scenery.
+33 (0)2 33 52 77 01

L'Hermitage Promenade Abbé Lebouteiller Barneville-Carteret

One of the best-value of Carteret's harbourside restaurants: traditional, friendly and reliably enjoyable.
+33 (0)2 33 04 46 39 or
maisonshotels-hermitage-carteret.com

Le Comptoir de l'Atelier Gourmet 13 Avenue Aristide Briand Granville

Granville's harbour restaurants are fun, but for something more refined head for this combination shop-and-restaurant, with light, original dishes and high-quality wines.
+33 (0)2 14 13 64 32

Lanes run off the main road to the right every few hundred metres to yet more beaches, sometimes named and sometimes just signposted 'La Mer'.

The western Cotentin was a major area of Viking settlement in Normandy, but in general has played little part in French or any other affairs since the Middle Ages – at least until the second world war, when it saw fierce fighting from June to July 1944. As a result many of its early medieval monuments are extraordinarily unchanged. In the market town of Lessay is one of the most awe-inspiringly beautiful of all Norman abbeys, begun in around 1056. Against all appearance it is actually a 'reconstruction', for the abbey was devastated in 1944, but painstakingly rebuilt using the original stones. Each summer it hosts classical concerts featuring distinguished musicians.

Sitting quietly in the plain to the south of Lessay are two unmissable castles. Not neat châteaux with gilt-edged furniture, but real knights-and-princesses castles, to fire anyone's imagination. Pirou (open every day except Tuesday, April-Sept 10am-noon, 2-6.30pm) looks exactly like a child's drawing of a castle, sitting above its moat. It's believed there was a stronghold here even before the Vikings, for according to legend when the Norsemen first attacked Pirou the original inhabitants escaped by turning into geese. By around 1030 it was the castle of Serlon, eldest son of the Hauteville clan who carved out Norman kingdoms in Italy (see box above).

The Normans on tour

William the Conqueror seized England in 1066, we know, but much less well known are the Normans' adventures in Italy. Tancred de Hauteville, a minor lord from tiny Hauteville-la-Guichard, deep in the Cotentin near Coutances, had 12 sons. The eldest, Serlon, married the heiress of Pirou and so was set up, but his brothers were naturally more restless. In 1036 three of them, led by Guillaume, known as *Bras-de-Fer* or 'Iron Arm' because of his giant strength, set off for Italy, supposedly on a pilgrimage but more likely on a fortune-hunt. They found work fighting for the Byzantines against the Saracens, but soon began to carve out territories for themselves. Iron Arm became Count of Puglia.

This success led more Hautevilles and their men to make the trip, particularly Robert Guiscard, who forced the Pope to recognise him as ruler of most of southern Italy. He was surpassed by the youngest brother, Roger, who established a Norman domain in Sicily that lasted for over a century. These feats and many more are recounted in a little museum at Hauteville-la-Guichard and, with suitably romantic gloss, on the tapestry at Pirou.

To enter Pirou you must pass through three gates (out of an original five) and walk almost a full circuit of the moat – so those inside could get a good look and maybe an arrow-shot at you before deciding to let you in. Inside, precipitous staircases scramble up to narrow battlements, where you can easily imagine Norman soldiers peering out to sea. Pirou's most remarkable possession is the *Tapisserie de Pirou*, a modern tapestry telling the story of the Hautevilles in Italy, made with the same techniques as the Bayeux tapestry, but by just one person, Madame Thérèse Ozenne, between 1976 and 1992. →

Gratot's fairy princess

The strangest feature of Gratot castle is a very tall near-hexagonal tower topped by a square room, the *Tour à la Fée* (Fairy Tower). The story goes that long ago a young *seigneur* of the Argouges clan was out riding when he came across the most beautiful girl he had ever seen, bathing in a pool. She ran off, but he, completely smitten, searched and searched until he tracked her down. She told him she was not a mortal but a fairy spirit, but he wouldn't give up until she agreed to marry him, with one condition – that he never mention death in her presence.

They lived together at Gratot for 10 years, until one day he decided to throw a banquet for all of his Argouges relatives, and she took a very long time getting ready. Not the brightest of heroes, the *seigneur* stumped angrily up the tower, thinking of his dinner, and asked if she was waiting... "until they were all dead?" Whereupon his fairy wife slipped out of the window with a piercing scream, and he was left to weep away his life alone.

It's said that on some nights her scream can still be heard around the castle.



6 and 7 Gratot Fairy Tower and winding stairway
8 The Dior Museum, Granville 9 Granville's fishing port and the Notre-Dame du Cap Lihou

Cider sampling

The Cotentin produces very distinctive ciders, with a light dryness and low sugar due to the rocky soil. Cider farms also produce calvados or apple brandy, pommeau (a liqueur mix of calvados and apple juice), juice, cider vinegar and sometimes other products. Their shops are generally open all year; summer farm tours cover the orchards, cider presses and (of course) tastings, and easily last over an hour. For a full list of local producers, visit cidrecotentin.fr

Only a short way from Cherbourg down one of the Cotentin's densest hedgerow-tunnels, Cidrerie Le Père Mahieu, Hameau les Mesles, near Bricquebosq, has wonderful fresh juice. Very friendly tours (in English) and tastings are provided through summer. Visit leperemahieu.com

At Cametours, east of Coutances, Cidre Fermier Lemasson is an all-organic producer with a fresh approach and a unique product in 'P'tit Zef' – calvados, orange juice and apple juice. Lively tours are also available (July-Aug Mon-Sat, reservation preferred). cidre-lemasson.fr

Please check opening times of visitor attractions before visiting to avoid disappointment.

If Pirou looks like a child's picture of a castle, Gratot (open daily 10am–7pm) comes straight from a fairytale picture book, with its pepper-pot towers and wide duck-filled moat. It even has a fairy story attached to it (see box above). This was a stronghold of the Argouges, one of the grandest aristocratic families in Normandy, whose name was besmirched in the hundred years war by the roguish *Chevalier* Jean d'Argouges, who sold the town of Granville to the English. Gratot was first built in the 14th century, but it features many additions, including the bizarre 15th-century Fairy Tower. It's now partly a ruin, but there's plenty to explore, including the winding stairway up the Fairy Tower itself.

For one more radical change of style, continue to Granville. Repeatedly attacked throughout the 12th to 18th centuries, in many cases by the English, the old town or *haute-ville* still has the feel of a cliff-top fortress. Below it is a busy fishing port, with *de rigueur* quayside fish restaurants.

“Repeatedly attacked throughout the 12th to 18th centuries, [Granville's] old town still has the feel of a cliff-top fortress”

Granville's most distinctive attraction, though, is on the cliffs behind the old town in the 'Villa Les Rhumbs' or Musée Christian Dior (open June-Oct daily, 10am-6.30pm; garden open all year). This late-19th-century pink mansion, surrounded by an exquisite rose garden, was the Dior family's seaside home, where the legendary couturier spent every childhood summer. Each year the museum presents a fresh exhibition on different aspects of his work and the House of Dior; the 2015 show is 'Dior: the New Look Revolution', looking at the enormous impact of his first collection in 1947. Suddenly, from the tractor-pace lanes of the Cotentin, you're in the land of Parisian glamour. 🚢

Tourist information

Manche: touristmanche-tourism.com
Cotentin: cotentin-tourisme.com
La Hague: lahague-tourisme.com
Côte des Isles: otcdi.com
Normandy: normandy-tourism.org