

Cliffs of culture

Nick Rider follows in the footsteps of Monet, Maupassant and a gentleman-burglar as he explores the eccentric villas and magnificent cliffs of **Étretat**

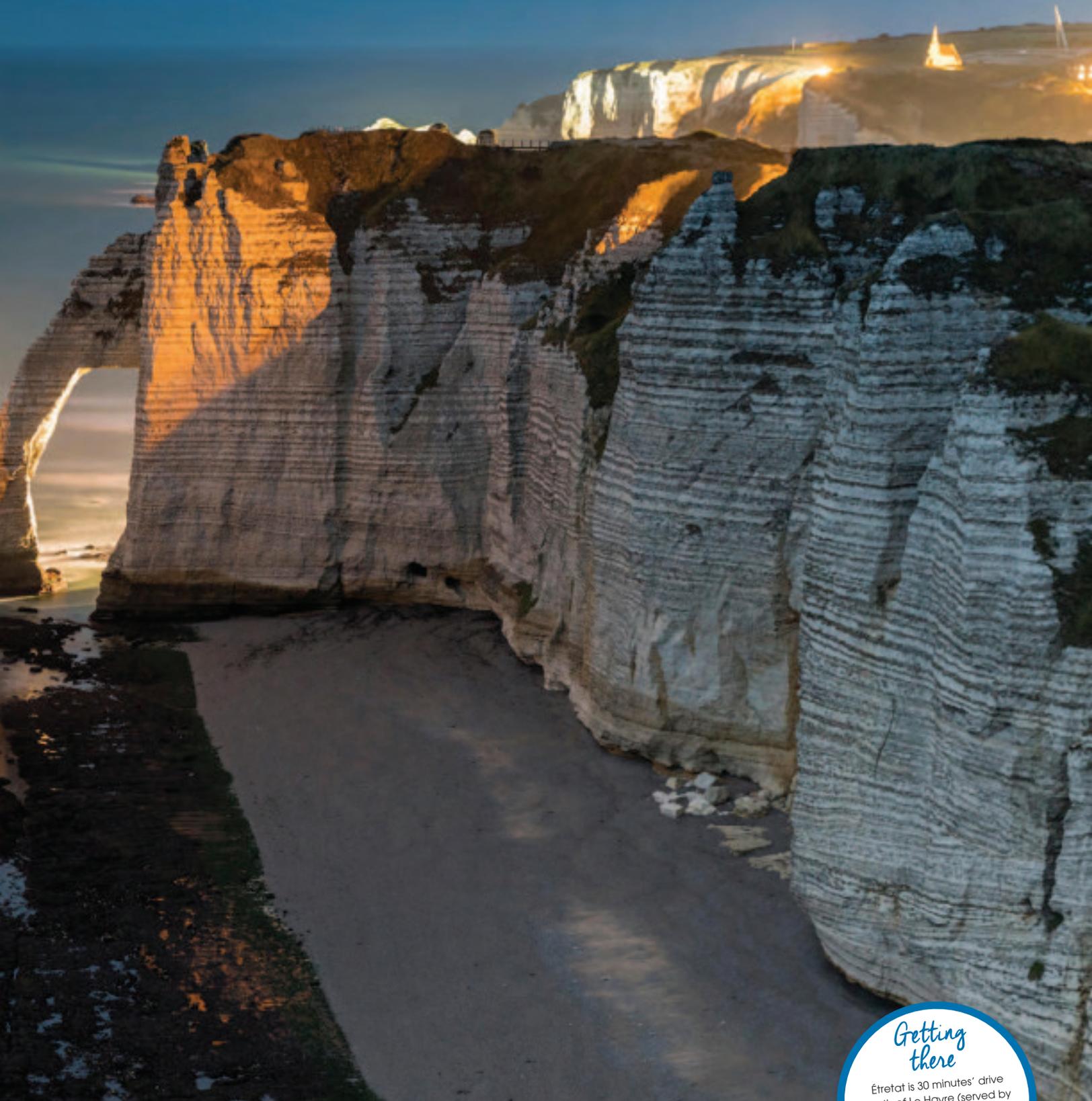


Tucked into a narrow gap in the chalk wall of the Côte d'Albatre, Étretat has exceptional status among French seaside towns, celebrated by poets, painters and musicians.

Amid the open fields of the Caux Plateau, Étretat's snug valley creates a lush, leafy microclimate, once said to be the healthiest in the world. Its curving pebble beach is framed by

France's most famous cliffs, with two majestic stone arches – the Porte d'Amont to the east and Porte d'Aval to the west – beside which a great spike of rock called the Aiguille (Needle) soars up out of the sea.

In the mid 19th century, little Étretat became the most fashionable resort in France, leaving it filled with the era's most fanciful architecture –



an essential part of its whimsical atmosphere. It was a remote fishing village until the 1830s, when the painters Eugène Lepoittevin and Eugène Isabey came here, drawn by the cliffs and translucent light, and writer Alphonse Karr – the real instigator of Étretat’s boom – enthused about the village in the Paris press. Bohemians were soon followed by high society, from Parisian

bankers to pan-European royalty.

Under the Second Empire, especially – from 1852 to 1870 – Étretat became quite the place to be. It had few hotels; instead, the thing to do was take a villa. Wander along the lanes on the sides of the valley – some private roads, but open to pedestrians – and you can find these grand constructions, poking out among the trees. →

Getting there

Étretat is 30 minutes’ drive north of Le Havre (served by one sailing a day from Portsmouth), or one hour and 30 minutes from Caen (three sailings a day from Portsmouth).

Eat

Le Bistretatais

17 Rue Adolphe Boissaye
+33 (0)2 35 28 89 43
etretat-le-bistretatais.fr

Stay

Villa Les Charmettes

Allée des Pervenches
+33 (0)2 35 27 19 08
etretat-chambres-hotes.com

New Windsor Hotel

9 Avenue George V
+33 (0)2 35 27 07 27
newwindsorhotel.net

Shop

La Rose des Vents

2 Rue Monge
+33 (0)2 35 29 66 91
larosedesvents-etretat.com



Château Les Aygues

Soaking up the sun on the white beaches beneath Étretat's famous cliffs



Many have Loire château-style pepper-pot towers (an Étretat trademark), while others are supersized half-timbered cottages.

And, since they were built for summer entertaining, all villas worthy of the name have lovely, sometimes enormous, gardens.

One of the grandest was built in 1858 for the most successful composer of the day, Jacques Offenbach, and named Villa Orphée to recall his first great success, *Orpheus in the Underworld* (source of the music for the can-can). His garden parties were renowned, with fireworks that annoyed his neighbours and performances by stars from the Paris Opera. The second Villa Orphée (the first burnt down in 1861) still stands on the road now called Rue Offenbach.

Most Étretat villas are still privately owned, but one that can be visited is Château Les Aygues, on the same road. The building, with its fairytale towers, was constructed in 1866 for the Polish-Russian Prince Lubomirsky, but for several years it was the summer home of ex-Queens of Spain Isabel II and her mother María Cristina. Visitors today can get an idea of the atmospheric grandeur of a golden-age villa, and see the current owners' remarkable antiques collection, from relics of the house's royal guests to exquisite Chinese porcelain.

An essential part of Étretat's aura is that it has appealed not just to the wealthy but to artists and writers. The author most closely associated with Étretat is Guy de Maupassant, who grew up here and returned throughout his life. An avid chronicler of the town's social rituals, he also left superb descriptions of its landscapes and originated the much-quoted comparison between Étretat's arches and 'an enormous elephant, dipping its trunk into the waves'.

Another writer inseparable from Étretat is Maurice Leblanc, creator of the 'gentleman-burglar' Arsène Lupin, France's master-criminal answer to Sherlock Holmes. Suave, witty and gallant, Lupin has been a model for every charming thief ever since. In his most famous story, *L'Aiguille Creuse* (The Hollow Needle), he has a lair *inside* the Needle of Étretat, and to this day people often ask if the Needle is actually hollow. Leblanc's delightful house and garden, Le Clos Lupin, can be visited with a multi-lingual audio tour that evokes the stories' flavour.

Painters, of course, have done most to enhance Étretat's magic. Corot, Boudin, Courbet, Signac, Matisse and many others painted the beach and *falaises* (cliffs), but the artist most indelibly associated with Étretat is Claude Monet. He painted these cliffs more than 80 times, in all weathers. Maupassant vividly described meeting Monet on the Falaise d'Amont, followed by a boy carrying all the canvases he had in progress at the same time, capturing the light at different times of day. →

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Following in the brushstrokes of Monet at Les Jardins d'Étretat



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LES JARDINS D'ÉTRÉTAT



A dramatic sunrise over the cliffs

A figure of Monet, made of sticks by Polish artist Wiktor Szostalo, now stands evocatively on one of his favourite painting spots inside Les Jardins d'Étretat – an enchanting, Alice-in-Wonderland-like modern 'art garden' of intertwining areas recently created below the Notre Dame chapel on the Falaise d'Amont.

Today, Étretat keeps up its cultural connections with events each summer, including an Offenbach Festival in August. But at any time, an unmissable part of any visit is to follow Monet up those superb cliffs.

There have been some rock falls recently – a natural process – but there is no likelihood the arches will collapse any time soon. The path up the Falaise d'Aval, to the left looking seawards, leads to spectacular views over the Needle and a third, even grander arch further west – the Manneporte.

The Falaise d'Amont is best for gorgeous sunsets back over the Porte d'Aval; one of this coast's greatest pleasures. These are places and seascapes you can contemplate for hours, and revisit time and again.

You can also see the cliffs from a different angle with La Mer Pour Tous, which offers boat trips along the coast to Étretat from nearby Fécamp. From sea level you get a dramatically fresh perspective on the Needle, and even sail through the Porte d'Aval.

But whether from a boat or from a distance, the Porte d'Amont really does look like an elephant... 