

Mont St. Michel: Normandy, France

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Featured Columnist

The world has many beautiful sights, but perhaps one of the more unusual is that of a towering abbey, located on its own island literally in the middle of the nowhere. That's the basis for Mont St. Michel, located in Normandy, in the north of France, around half a mile away from the main coast. It literally looms out of the skyline in the distance, as you approach it. We were driving towards it and started to catch tantalizing glimpses from the motorway, then as it crept closer and closer, it became a totally mesmerizing sight. I was glad I wasn't driving, as I couldn't tear my eyes away from the place.

Today, it's attached to the mainland by a causeway and, as you park, it's reassuring to see signs telling you that it's not likely to be flooded today! It certainly gives you an idea of how the place can easily be cut off, if the weather turns on you. Despite the causeway, some people do still head to the island along the beaches laid out in front of it, but to do so, you really do need to know what you're doing and time it right, as the tides can easily flood these areas.

The history of Mont St. Michel dates back to the eighth century, when legend suggests that St. Michael, the archangel, appeared to St. Aubert, the Bishop of Avranches, in 708 and told him to build a church on the island.

That monastery started to grow in power, when the church backed William the Conqueror's claim to the English throne. It was given land in England, including a small island, just off the Cornish coast in southwest England. The building that went up there was modeled on Mont St. Michel and became known as St. Michael's Mount. Having been there, you could immediately see the similarities between the two.

From that point, Mont St. Michel grew to become a Benedictine monastery, which had its greatest influence around the 12th and 13th centuries. Pilgrims would journey from far and wide to visit the monastery, which was a renowned center of learning by this time. You can only imagine how they must have felt, as they approached this daunting building.

One look at the abbey shows you the environment it was built in, obviously in a time when good defenses were needed. It's a daunting sight as you arrive and look up, realizing, as we did with sinking hearts, that there's going to be a lot of uphill climbing to be done. Fortunately, the climb is not something you notice, as the second you enter, there's

lots to be seen.

Once you enter through the main fortified gate, you're immediately into the main street through Mont St. Michel, the Grande Rue, which is filled with shops and restaurants on both sides. The shops were packed with souvenirs of all shapes and sizes, some understandably over-priced and others much more reasonable. It was the same story with the restaurants, some of which had fixed price menus that were a lot cheaper than I'd anticipated. It's just a shame that they weren't open when we wanted to visit.

Part of the reason for that is that we visited on a Sunday and that probably helps to explain why the place was so packed. It was almost claustrophobic at times with the crowds enjoying the warm afternoon. It's possible that a few of the people we saw could even have been locals, as the island is still home to a small population of around 40 people. You can even choose to stay the night at one of the hotels here. We toyed with the idea for some time, but attractive as it sounds, one look at this place and you can immediately see what a nightmare getting your luggage in and out through cobbled streets and up and down hills would be.

Fortunately, we were able to escape the Grand Rue through an alleyway to one side. We were to learn quickly that there are plenty of these little alleyways, heading all over the island. They're like rabbit warrens, but just as soon as you think you're starting to get lost, suddenly they bring you out somewhere familiar.

We were in luck and our path took us straight to the Eglise St. Pierre, the parish church of the island, which offered some stunning views up to the abbey above. It was odd to stand in the peaceful churchyard, just literally a few steps above the bustling Grande Rue below.

We headed up further, although on a hot day, that was a tall order in itself. It was fascinating to see how high the walls of the abbey are, although sadly by the time we got to the entrance of it, we were both too shattered to climb anymore. As we looked inside, we could see another long set of steps awaiting us and that was too much for us right then. Around the corner, we got a sneak peek into the grounds of the abbey and it certainly looked like a beautiful place.

We continued our tour around the island, following the line of the impressive fortifications, getting some wonderful views out on the beaches below. This is a truly isolated spot, but also magnificent in its isolation as well. Although we were literally almost cut off from the mainland, I couldn't help but feel strangely at peace here. I guess that's

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how those who lived here all those years ago, and those who still live here to this day, feel about this place.

Mont St. Michel is certainly a unique place to visit. There's no admission charge, although parking will set you back five Euros, and you do have to pay eight Euros if you want to visit the abbey. It's a wonderful day out and I'm really glad we headed off the beaten track to see it, as it was out of our way, but I think if we went back, maybe next time we'd pick a weekday, so that we could hopefully enjoy it when it's a bit quieter, as the crowds did detract from the feel of the island.

About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)

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