

The Beaches of Normandy: France

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Featured Columnist

There can only be a few places in the world that have been so shaped by the events of wartime that even their names come directly from those incidents. Such places can be found along the coastline of Northern France, the beaches of Normandy.

Talk to anyone about these beaches and the chances are that they won't think of them as being a mecca for sun seekers, like most beaches around the world, but instead their minds will instantly go back to the events of 1944. Many of you may already know the history of the D-Day landings, but for those who don't, they started on June 6, 1944, when Allied Forces (including British and Commonwealth, United States, Free French, and other troops) landed in German-occupied France. It was the biggest amphibious invasion of all time, putting 165,000 troops on to those beaches in just one day. From there, the land invasion of France began, supported from the sea and air, and it was the beginning of the end of the Second World War, although it would prove to be a long and painful process, with peace in Europe declared nearly a year later on VE Day on May 8, 1945.

Taking part in the D-Day landings, which were also known as Operation Overlord and Operation Neptune, were soldiers from many countries, although the operations were principally led by the Americans, British and Canadians. It's perhaps also important to remember that France, at this time, had been under German occupation since 1940, so you can start to imagine how the arrival of the Allied troops was greeted.

I'd always known that my husband wanted to see the Normandy beaches and we got the opportunity to add that into our itinerary when we recently headed to Northern France to explore the region. When I first started planning, I began to wonder why I couldn't find any hotels within easy reach of the beaches. I tried the major towns in the region and everything seemed to be fully booked. Then it hit me. I was looking at visiting over the weekend of June 5 and 6, 2010. If that date sounds familiar, then perhaps it should be, as of course, that's the actual anniversary of the D-Day landings themselves.

Having realized what the issue was, I was able to find a hotel and we stuck with our plans to be there at that time, figuring that it would probably be a very moving time to visit. We arrived in the area on a very hot and sunny Saturday afternoon, which explains why the first beach we came to, Sword Beach, was packed with sunseekers. Just as we arrived, we saw soldiers parading along the road towards us, instantly

reminding us of the commemorations taking place this weekend. It's perhaps worth saying here that the beaches are all still known by the code names they were given for the D-Day landings.

Next to the beach and the thousands of people happily enjoying the sand and sea beyond it was a memorial to those who had given their lives here. Sword Beach was the furthest east of those in the landings and here, British and French free forces came ashore, which explained the Tricolour and the Union Flag flying above the memorial. We were soon to learn that this was one of literally dozens of memorials, scattered along the coast. Each village that had been liberated seemed to have created their own memorial to the forces who came ashore.

We quickly learnt that every time we saw flags fluttering the breeze, it meant there was a memorial to the D-Day landings below those flags. A little further along the coast and we started to see Canadian flags appearing, as we reached Juno Beach, where the British and Canadian forces came ashore. It was lovely to see that the flags were, not only present above the many memorials, but were also flying proudly outside people's homes in the villages that we passed through. It was clear that, although more than six decades had passed since those momentous days, the D-Day landings had never been forgotten by those who live along the Normandy coast.

Perhaps one of the best memorials we saw was just after a roundabout we passed on the outskirts of a village. What sticks in my mind from this was the row of Second World War jeeps and motorbikes that passed through on the road, as we were standing there and the Hercules aircraft that flew overhead. It was clear that many people were marking the D-Day weekend in their own way, both on the land and in the air and it seemed suitably fitting.

Although the beaches are very much enjoyed in the present day, everywhere we went, we saw remnants from 1944, be it gun placements or lookout towers that still survive to this day. It helped to put in perspective the events that happened all those years ago and remind you of the history of these beaches.

The third beach along the coast that we came to was codenamed Gold Beach and here, just outside the town of Arromanches were perhaps the most poignant remains from World War II. It was here that the British created an artificial harbour, called Mulberry or Port Winston, after the British Prime Minister, which would offload cargo. They were made from huge concrete waterproof structures, similar to those used as the foundations of bridges. I was amazed to see so many parts of this harbour remaining in the water, some of them just offshore, with

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children playing blissfully unaware on the beach nearby. It was a very surreal scene.

The final two beaches of the D-Day landings, Omaha and Utah, going from east to west along the coast, were both the preserve of the American forces. Sadly, we didn't have time to make it to Utah, but what struck us at Omaha, perhaps more than of the other beaches we'd visited, was its sheer isolation. Of course, all the beaches were difficult to take, with it relatively easy for the German forces to await them at the higher end of the beaches, with perfect views on the troops below struggling ashore. However, here, the cliffs that those soldiers had to climb seemed so much higher. We both commented that it seemed like an odd place to come ashore and you can't even begin to imagine how tough this beach must have been to take from German hands. It's a true testament to the courage and determination of every man involved in this operation.

With that, our tour of the Normandy beaches drew to a close, and without us visiting a single museum along the way, although there are plenty to pick from. We both felt that, having seen the beaches first hand for ourselves and read the various memorials, we had already learnt a great deal about the battles that took place here. Sometimes, to see sites for yourself is much moving and explains the history much more clearly than any museum ever could.

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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