

Landing in the recent past

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Sarah Meyrick visits Normandy, where dignitaries and veterans will go this summer to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the D-Day landings

SHUTTERSTOCK



Poignant: Omaha Beach at sunrise

IT IS a hot August day, and the children are tired after a 27-kilometre cycle-ride. Bribe with the promise of ice cream, they have doggedly made it to the Normandy American Cemetery, at Colleville-sur-Mer.

But the party (a dozen or so families) have arrived in a hot and sticky heap, only to find that, at 17.01, the memorial is firmly *fermé*. There is no alternative but to scramble down to the vast golden Omaha Beach for a game of, erm, French cricket.

The next day, we explore the memorial, with its row upon row of polished white headstones. We are awed into silence, and it takes an hour or two before anyone feels like saying very much. And then Jack, who is nearly 12, voices the question that has been troubling him: "Is it really OK to play and picnic on a beach where so many people died so horribly?"

A decade on from that day, it is a completely different experience visiting the sites of the Normandy landings. Now the museums and memorials generally stay open until dusk, and, if you happen to find one closed, you simply carry on along the coast to another; for there are now 30-plus excellent museums.

FAR from fading into the past, the history of this stretch of coastline has become ever more present. And this summer, prime ministers, presidents, and European royal families will descend on Normandy, along with surviving veterans, to mark the 70th anniversary of the D-Day landings in solemn ceremonies.

The battle lasted three months, but it is the start of the manoeuvres - D-Day (or "Jour J" to the French) - on 6 June 1944 which is commemorated. The complex operation, codenamed "Overlord", was the result of meticulous planning. The crux of the plan was to attack where the Germans would least expect; so, rather than head for the narrowest part of the Channel, the Allies made for the less heavily fortified coastline of Lower Normandy.

The timing was determined by the movement of the tide (to avoid Rommel's defences, which expected a high-tide attack, if any); and the lunar cycle (the troops required moonlight), which left just eight days in any month when the plan stood a chance of success. In the event, Eisenhower's original date of 5 June was postponed by 24 hours because of bad weather.

The Allies began their invasion with an airborne assault of 24,000 British, American, and Canadian troops shortly after midnight, and an amphibious landing of Allied infantry and armoured divisions on the coast at 6.30 a.m. The rest of the story, as they say, is history.

THE battle for Normandy may have been the turning point in the war, liberating France and eventually forcing the surrender of Nazi Germany, but it came at a high cost: almost 40,000 Allied troops and 60,000 Germans were lost.

Today, concrete reminders of the campaign litter the northern coast of Lower Normandy, from Quineville to Trouville. In addition to the dedicated museums and cemeteries, history is written into the landscape in the form of bunkers and batteries.

And, while the tourist trail provides a welcome boost to the local economy, you have a sense that there is more to it than that. At one B&B, near Arranches, we are struck by our hosts' warmth when they discover that we are British. Francophiles as we are, the welcome is warmer than in certain snottier parts of France.

If you decide to visit the paying museums (free to Second World War veterans, and to many members of the armed forces), look out for the Normandie Pass, which offers a discount on entry fees. But you may do just as well to visit one or two of the 27 military cemeteries that commemorate the dead, for free, which often includes interpretative exhibitions.

The American cemetery covers a lovely 70-hectare site. Alongside the vast expanse of 9387 headstones, a Garden of the Missing bears the names of 1557 lost soldiers. The display tells the stories of all-American farm-boys called on to make the ultimate sacrifice, thousands of miles from home.

The German cemetery, at La Cambe, is (unsurprisingly) an altogether more sober place, focusing on the search for peace and reconciliation rather than heroism. The headstones are fewer (although there are 21,222 graves) and smaller, and the unglamorous view extends over the N13 dual carriageway.

THE British cemetery, in Bayeux, contains 4116 graves of Commonwealth soldiers, and 532 of other nationalities, all planted with roses. Most moving are the graves to the unnamed soldiers "known only to God", scattered among the heartfelt tributes to beloved sons, brothers, and husbands, many of them heartbreakingly young.

Return visits to this stretch of coastline yield new insights every time. And it is hard to imagine not being deeply moved, as dignitaries will no doubt be this summer. Most commemorative events are open to the public, with some restrictions (see normandie-tourisme.fr).

And if it all becomes too much, there is always Bayeux, with its glorious cathedral, and that other Norman invasion, to contemplate, through the justly celebrated tapestry.

normandiememoire.com

dday70.co.uk

tapestry-bayeux.com

TRAVEL DETAILS

Brittany Ferries run a number of ferry routes to Normandy: brittany-ferries.com/ddaytour, or phone 0871 244 1400. Alternatively, there is Condor: condorferries.co.uk, 0845 609 1024, from £64 for a car and two people; or DFDS: dfdssea-ways.co.uk, 0800 917 1201, from £78 for a car and two people). Cityjet flies from London City Airport to Deauville-Normandie: cityjet.com, 0871 66 33 777, from £139pp).

Leger Tours offers a five-day walking tour: visitbattlefields.co.uk, 0844 504 6251, from £449pp, including coach travel. Shearings offers coach tours: shearings.com, 0844 824 6351, from £444pp); or pick Guided Battle-field Tours: guidedbattlefield-tours.co.uk, 01633 258 207, from £475pp).