NORMANDY LIES NORTH-WEST OF PARIS, a visually splendid combination of rolling agricultural land, sandy beaches and classic French port towns. Between the cathedral at Bayeux and Monet's garden at Giverny, the back roads of Normandy are ideal for exploring, a place where you're apt to spy ancient half-timbered houses. The land of Calvados and Camembert, of classic French cuisine, Normandy is a place where your manor house hotel overlooking a 19th century seaside boardwalk provides a more telling glimpse into French culture than any museum can.

Neighboring Brittany lies due West of the French capital. A craggy coastline, mystical Celtic culture and a strong seagoing tradition are hallmarks of the province. With its numerous standing stones, Brittany also has monuments that surpass Stonehenge in terms of archeological importance. But most people come to sun on the white sand beaches, to stroll along the dramatic cliffs and take boat excursions to the hundreds of offshore islands. You can spend your days in Brittany touring well-preserved medieval villages, listening to the strains of Celtic music and sitting down to steaming bowls of mussels, testimony to the province's seagoing tradition.
The major gateway to Paris and the rest of France, the airport lies northeast of Paris and is a fine starting point for an exploration of nearby Normandy and Brittany.

18 Miles

Giveny. The water lilies, the carpet of nasturtiums, the rhododendrons and the wisteria are memorable attractions in the gardens that surround the house where painter Claude Monet lived from 1883 until his death in 1926. You can stroll through the large studio where he painted his water lily canvases, and then step into the house, with its famously bright yellow kitchen. The works on display are reproductions, but it matters not, because still you get a true sense of how it was when Monet lived, painted and planted here. The gardens may well be his greatest masterpiece.

8 Miles

Fécamp. This town is for anyone who adores oysters. Evidence of Fécamp’s obsession with the bivalve can be found by stepping into the church of St-Mée, which houses the Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires. So delectable are the oysters from this town that Cancale shells have been found in the camps of Julius Caesar. They were eaten by Louis XIV at Versailles and accompanied Napoleon to Moscow. Even today, the shells litter the beach and the rocks along the white glutton as if made of mother of pearl.

6 Miles

St-Malo. Walk the ramparts in the walled city and then stop at the Musée de la Ville for a St-Malo history lesson. The Musée International du Long Cours Cap-Hornier is housed in a 14th century château. It’s devoted to those who sailed around Cape Horn, from the 17th to 20th centuries, and it’s a trove of nautical memorabilia. Like nearby Mont-St-Michel, this is an area of dramatic tidies, and at low water, you can walk out to the Belle de Grand Bé, the burial place of the writer Michel. But watch the tide, or you’ll have to wait at least six hours before returning.

201 Miles

The Crotzer Peninsula. From Finistère, or Land’s End, is that part of Brittany that extends farthest west into the Atlantic, the Britanny of dramatic cliffs and wild scenery. One way to get to the essence of this most famous bit of Brittany is by driving around the rocky Crotzer peninsula. Visit the remnants of Brittany’s oldest abbey at Landevennec. Pause at the town of Morgat, with its lovely crescent-shaped beach and a delightful harbor. Take a brief boat trip out to the Crotzer, spectacularly colored caves in the cliffs that can only be seen via boat. Then continue on to Camaret, a charming little seaside vacation town, for an afternoon or an evening.

41 Miles

Caen. Despite a severe bombardment during the War, there are some marvelous ruins remaining in Caen. Start with the ramparts of William the Conqueror’s château. Within those walls is a Beaux-Arts museum, which houses work by Rembrandt, Durer, Monet and Boudin. Be sure to visit the Abbaye aux Hommes, and the church of St. Etienne, a Romanesque structure designed to hold the tomb of William the Conqueror. The matching site is the Abbaye aux Dames, which was commissioned by Matilda, wife of William the Conqueror.

At its heart is the church of la Trinité, a Romanesque structuredesigned to hold the tomb of William the Conqueror. There are painters and galleries galore in Honfluer, model ships and antique furnishings. There are native son Eugene Boudin, a forerunner of Impressionism and a teacher to the young Monet. The Musée Eugene Boudin shows much of his work, with additional paintings by Monet, Dufy and others.

10 Miles

Bayeux. One of the gems of Normandy, Bayeux offers a glimpse into the Middle Ages. Of paramount interest is the famously famed Bayeux Tapestry, a 70-meter embroidered linen artwork recounting the Norman Conquest of Britain, now housed in the Centre Guillaume-le-Conquérant. Be sure to visit the Cathedral of Notre-Dame, which once housed the tapestry, and still bears traces of a Romanesque layout. The Musée de la Bataille de Normandie is also well worth a visit.

9 Miles

Mont-St-Michel. This is truly one of the most splendid and most visited sites in all of France. The site of Medieval pilgrimages, the island still retains its magic despite an influx of tourists. The abbey, which includes the archangel-stopped church and the Gothic buildings that are known as the Merveille, or the marvel, is indeed awe-inspiring. But simply getting to Mont-St-Michel is half the fun, thanks to the dramatic causeway that connects it to the mainland. Once you’re there, you walk around the narrow streets on the base of the rock, with its tumble of medieval houses, and get away from the crowds to explore on your own. If time permits, go to the North Tower to watch the tide rush in across the bay, a site that’s most dramatic during March and September.
Locronan. This wonderfully preserved medieval town was long a center of sail-making. Nowadays, its primary attraction, apart from its splendid architecture, are the dozens of artisan shops filled with crafts from local artists. 14 miles

Quimper. Quimper, which has been beautifully preserved, is the major city of Finistere and the heart of Breton culture. You can listen to the Breton-speaking populace, stroll along the quays of the river Odet and look at the houses along the Rue Kerreon and Place au Beurre. You should also make a point of climbing Mont Frugy, which is not an especially difficult walk along the switchback Promenade de Mont Frugy, for a panoramic view of Quimper. You can get a crash course in the culture of Brittany at the Musée Departemental Breton, a bastion of costumes, artifacts and crafts. Since the 17th century, Quimper has been famous for “faïence,” glazed earthenware. So pause at the Musée de la Faïence and then visit the Faïenceries HB la Pêche. The number is uncertain, with speculation about astronomical and religious significance highest on the list of probabilities. 16 miles

Carnac. Megaliths are the reason you should come to Carnac. These stones include menhirs, upright stones which may weigh as much as 20 tons, and dolmens, which are stone burial chambers. There’s a large concentration of them around Carnac, most dramatically in the “alignements,” parallel lines of menhirs that can run for several miles. The exact meaning of the megaliths is still unclear, with speculation. 16 miles 44

Vannes. A wonderful seaside town, made livelier yet by students from the University of Rennes. The section of town known as Vieux Vannes is a maze of streets that surround the cathedral, with ramparts and walled gardens. Inside La Coteur, you’ll find the Musée de Vannes, which contains a Beaux Arts museum. Better yet is the nearby Musée d’Archeologie, with a world-class collection of megalithic artifacts and medieval treasures. On a different note, the Aquarium lays claim to having the best collection of tropical fish in Europe. From the harbor, you have views across the Gulf of Morbihan, where tradition had it that there were 365 islands. The number is uncertain, although what is certain is that French celebrities own many of them as fashionable retreats. A boat tour around them is delightful, and thought-provoking, dotted as they are with megalithic ruins. 17 miles

Pont-Aven. The numerous art galleries in Pont-Aven are testimony to the town’s best-known artist-resident, painter Paul Gauguin. He came in the 1880’s, living and painting here before leaving for Tahiti. The work he did in Pont-Aven, however, is considered some of his finest painting and it inspired many other artists, including Emile Bernard. Take a walk along the Promenade Xavier-Carré, which gives you a birds eye view of some of the town’s more imposing mansions. A stroll of an hour or so will bring you into the Bois d’Amour, a wood that has inspired legions of painters and poets. 11 miles

La Coste, which gave its name to the city, is the most dramatically in the “alignements,” parallel lines of menhirs that can run for several miles. The exact meaning of the megaliths is still unclear, with speculation about astronomical and religious significance highest on the list of probabilities. 16 miles

La Ferme St-Siméon. This restored farm was a retreat for 19th-century painters such as Monet, Sisley and Courbet, who were attracted by the coastal light. The rooms are tastefully decorated, and the menu is a paragon to the rich Normandy cuisine. Rue Adolphe-Muras, 14600 Honfleur. Tel: (33) 02 31 81 78 00; Fax: 33 02 31 89 48 48. For reservations in the U.S.: 800-735-2478.