

ART AND HISTORY BY THE SEINE

Chris Morley journeys from Paris to Normandy on France's second longest river



'Paris is a city where you can eat anything,' says Boris, our effervescent tour guide. We are sitting in a snug brasserie in the 6th arrondissement, delving into slabs of Camembert and Saint-Nectaire, our glasses brimming with Chardonnay and Merlot. It's a suitably indulgent introduction to the 'Taste of Paris' tour, one of several excursions offered on this Seine cruise that starts in Paris and sails 242km to Rouen before returning. Our home is the Scandi-chic Viking Skaga, moored at Port de Grenelle with a front-row view of the Eiffel Tower. That evening we slip anchor and loop through the twinkling capital on our way to the green heart of Normandy.

Wrapped in colour

The next morning, I wake up in a wooded valley with mist hovering over the glassy river. After a morning in La Roche-Guyon, a sleepy village overlooked by a 12th-century château, we head to Giverny. Cycling from our mooring at Vernon, we pedal along a disused railway path, where, in 1883, Impressionist painter Claude Monet leaned out of a train window and spied the tumbledown farmhouse that became his home for the next 43 years. Stepping into the artist's Japanese garden, you're presented with a living canvas of colour and light. The waterlily pond was Monet's muse – he even polished the floating leaves to create better reflections. The second garden, the Clos Normand, is a floral explosion

of purple irises, pink roses and tangerine nasturtiums. It's like being wrapped in colour – a sensation that continues inside the green-shuttered, pink-rendered house. Standing in the chrome yellow dining room feels as if you're bathing in a pool of sunshine. It's an uplifting visit that ends perfectly, rolling back to our boat for a picnic of local cider, buns and macarons.

Normandy calling

Docking at Rouen, we head to Honfleur on the Seine estuary, whose skinny streets are peppered with interesting buildings – a 17th-century salt warehouse, an alley of half-timbered shops and 15th-century St Catherine's church, its vaulted roof like an upturned ship's hull.

After dinner, there's time to explore Rouen and witness another of Monet's artistic obsessions. Walking from the boat to the city's medieval heart, along a nondescript pedestrian street, I turn the corner and – pow! – there stands the huge Gothic cathedral, its intricately carved facade, painted by Monet over 30 times, glowing in the evening sun.

The next day is more sombre, as we tour the Normandy beaches, where Allied forces fought their way to shore on 6 June 1944. At Ranville War Cemetery, I walk through row upon row of graves of young men in their teens and 20s. Our tour guide, Fred, lays a bouquet at the



A Viking cruises boat passes Château Gaillard (above left); the old mill on the Seine at Vernon





Final toast

Between excursions, life on board is punctuated by excellent meals and entertainment. The menu highlights regional dishes – think *boeuf bourguignon* and *crêpes Suzette* – alongside lighter and meat-free options. Activities add to the fun, whether you want to practise your French or prep *tarte au citron* with chef Jozsef. After dinner, live musicians serenade us with everything from opera to jazz.

Back in Paris, our last night ends with a toast on deck as the Eiffel Tower puts on a shimmering light show. It's been a packed week of art, history and painterly scenery that's left me feeling

both rested and impatient to see it all again.

✦ **Paris and the heart of Normandy, 7-nights/8 days, from £2,995 per person, viking.com**



VERSAILLES TELLS A RIVETING STORY

Cross of Sacrifice and a Canadian visitor reads the poem *In Flanders Fields*. I think about my dad, David, who followed the first wave of troops into Normandy, and how lucky he was to come home.

Embroidered tales

There are more gems to come. In Bayeux, I marvel at the 11th-century tapestry tale of the Battle of Hastings. It's a fabulous creation, full of drama and detail – like the fiery orb of Haley's comet (a bad omen) and broken bodies on the battlefield.

The palace of Versailles tells an equally riveting story. A former royal residence, it became a museum after Louis XVI and wife Marie-Antoinette were executed after the Revolution. The opulence is staggering, every surface gilded, painted or mirrored. The Hall of Mirrors is suitably bling, an expression of wealth, artistry and, ultimately, a doomed monarchy.



Clockwise from top left:
Honfleur; a Parisian food tour; Versailles; a bar in Rouen; and La Roche-Guyon