

# Where bands of brothers once walked

WORDS AND PICS: PHILIP SHARPE

Philip Sharpe wanted to see the places where the Allied troops made their historic landings on D-Day, June 6th 1944, as they set about liberating mainland Europe. Four days aboard a KTM 990 was the perfect way to see the Normandy beaches.











>The ancient port of Honfleur, painted many times by Monet.



>Ready for the rural roads of France.

**L**e Champ Massé farmhouse, spectacularly sited on a hillside at Coudehard, has an idyllic view over a deliciously peaceful rural scene – so peaceful it is hard to picture the vista as the scene of the last battle of Normandy in August 1944 when 125,000 German troops were surrounded in the 'Falaise Pocket'.

The farm is now the home of John and Jeanette Eggleton who run 'Bike Normandy' motorcycling holidays and who were my most genial hosts for a motorcycling 'short break' in August 2008. I use the inverted commas because I just cannot comprehend how much was fitted, so effortlessly, into just three days.

I have, over the years, enjoyed motorcycling holidays in places such as Thailand, South Africa and California, all of which require significant investment in time and energy just to get there. By comparison the overnight ferry from Portsmouth, arriving at Le Havre at eight in the morning, presented no problems.

I have been to Paris a number of times but have never holidayed in rural France. The holiday began straight away as one almost flew over the soaring Pont de Normandie across the mouth of the River Seine (no toll charge for motorcyclists – keep to the right!) to meet up for breakfast at the picturesque harbour of Honfleur.

My own bike (an Enfield 500 Bullet) not being quite up to the rigours of continental travel, I borrowed a KTM 990EFI Adventure, which gobbled the miles

between Lincolnshire and Hampshire, transporting me and a pair of rather large panniers comfortably (repeat, comfortably) to our destination.

There always has to be one (and this time it was me) who finds a way to make an exhibition of themselves. Yes, I did forget about the panniers. Yes, I was riding between bollards over the cobbles of the ancient port. But everyone was very helpful and verticality was soon restored despite the weight of a rather tall bike.

After making all thoroughly aware of that French (potentially lethal) system of 'priorité à droit' which may or may not apply – dependent upon signage – John led his flotilla of four bikes through some of the most picturesque, and traffic-free countryside en route for the Normandy coast. The lack of traffic was delightful – but France is about five times the size of Britain despite a similar population. "Please keep to the speed limits in towns and villages," John requested – this was not easy to achieve bearing in mind the effortless power of the KTM. It is fitted with a large digital speedometer, not quite so easy to monitor as a conventional clock!

While I'm at it, the only other observation I have about the KTM is that the electronic fuel injection system gives instantaneous power with the slightest movement of the throttle – a factor that calls for delicate operation during the navigation of roundabouts on roads often copiously strewn with manhole covers and general debris.

I must admit that the bike was just a little bit high for me (inside leg 31in). An inch longer leg or an inch lower bike would have made all the difference particularly in view of the Olympic athleticism needed to vault the aforementioned panniers (hot tip: make sure that your knee-pads are not obstructing your swing!).

The villages were immaculate with ancient timbered buildings and festoons of flowers – a demonstration of great civic pride. Over a glass or two of wine in the evening our group ruefully considered how long the hanging baskets would last in the hands of the mindless drunken vandals who infest so many of our English towns.

Our first stop was at Pegasus Bridge over the Caen Canal at Benouville which was captured by allied airborne troops on D-Day – 6 June 1944. It now has a serious museum complete with a full size model of a Horsa glider, two of which landed amazingly close to the bridge. The objective had been to seize all bridges in an arc behind the landing beaches. Many of these were demolished to prevent the arrival of German reinforcements. Others, like Pegasus were to be kept open to allow an Allied advance.





**"The remains of the incredible immense floating 'Mulberry' harbour – towed across the Channel from England – are still clearly visible."**

The famous café, the first building to be liberated by the Allies, we admired from a distance (could it really be the most expensive coffee outside Paris?) and we moved on to Arromanches for lunch. Here, where the remains of the incredible immense floating 'Mulberry' harbour – towed across the Channel from England – are still clearly visible, and where the D-Day museum dominates the seafront, colourful holidaymakers in summer sunshine, complete with ice creams, seemed rather incongruous. The truth is, of course, the opposite – Arromanches is a seaside town – which just happened to be the scene of one of the most spectacular military operations in history.

When the invasion occurred I was on four wheels (a pram!) and my visit, 64 years later was happily on two. Car parks were full but no one seemed to have any objections to us easing our bikes on to the promenade. How much time can be wasted on holiday looking for somewhere to park the car – a problem that just does not exist for the two-wheel traveller.

A sandwich for lunch! Not a slightly damp triangular offering served in a plastic container – but a crispy baguette, about a foot long, and made to order!

Then along the coast to the scene of the American landings and now the site, behind 'Omaha' beach, of the faultlessly immaculate American Cemetery with some 10,000 crosses arranged in geometrical precision overlooking the sea. It was after visiting this extremely moving scene that it crossed my mind that I had only been away from home for 24 hours. One could not possibly have made such effective use of time unescorted!

After a visit to the German Cemetery (over 20,000 remembered) and a much more sombre affair, we set off on the two-hour journey to Coudehard over some great biking roads – exhilaratingly curvaceous as opposed to tightly twisting. Day's riding total – about 190 miles.

We riders repaired to our en-suite bedrooms for a wash and brush-up while John and his wife Jeanette – an incredibly hard-working couple who moved from England to France for a better life-style – disappeared into the kitchen to prepare a superb four-course dinner (both are keen cooks).

Drinks, included ad-lib, were in copious supply – not surprising at an establishment with a large orchard and with three 1200-litre cider barrels in the cellar (not to mention the Calvados). Cheese, which in France comes before the sweet course, was well featured, with Camembert only five miles away – and we had ridden our bikes through Pont l'Eveque.

Left: Ready to say farewell to Normandy; Rich, Geoff, Becky, Philip, Terri and Cliff.  
Bottom: Battle-scarred tank brings the past to life.  
Below: Jim Cartmel, ex-sidecar trials ace, now lives in Normandy.







Next morning when I visited the cow-shed (no cows there nowadays) to wheel out the KTM I was rather surprised to see two similar – the property of Dave and Derek, two independent bikers. So, of the six visiting bikes at Le Champ Massé, three were KTMs – bearing in mind that these Austrian machines were relatively unknown in Britain until six or seven years ago this is perhaps some evidence of their popularity. Cliff and Terri were on a more traditional BMW RT1200; Geoff and Becky on a Suzuki SV 1000S and Rich on a GSXF 600.

After a leisurely breakfast (John having been down to the village to buy the bread) the next day had an emphasis on riding rather than history. At this point I should mention that John works hard to 'tailor-make' the ride to suit the participants.

After an hour-and-a-half of brilliant riding, including some magical curving forest roads, we stopped off at a bar in Carrouges for a cup of coffee. It is surprising who you meet! A Brit strolled into the bar who turned out to be Jim Cartmel who, as passenger to Roger Martin, was English sidecar trials champion in 1974 – they were works riders on a Beamish Suzuki 325.

A quick stop was made at the splendid Chateau d'O before carrying on to the delightful historic town of Fresnay sur Sarthe for a spot of lunch. Here I must congratulate the Lincolnshire market town of Spilsby on choosing a fantastic twin. Even the most loyal Spilsby resident would have difficulty in waxing too lyrical about their home town (pleasant though it is). But Fresnay is an absolute gem.

While waiting for our lunch to be prepared we strolled across the immaculate market square to the castle grounds. Through an arch and onwards past glorious and copious flower beds we reached a wall which overlooked a precipitous drop to the Sarthe and gave an aerial view of the lower part of the town.

Rain threatened in the afternoon, but a change of course enabled the happy troop to return to the farmhouse having felt only a sprinkling. John's concentration on good motorcycling roads took the party not the nearest, but the best way home – and, yes, another four course dinner!

## BIKE NORMANDY

Bike Normandy tours are based at Champs-Masse, which can accommodate up to 10 people, with ample secure storage for several motorcycles. There are jet-washers on site, a games room, a gym, plus that essential drying room for your riding kit.

Both road and off-road tours can be arranged, with backup luggage vehicles, and escorted

ride-outs along some of the most scenic roads in the area.

Located just a short ride from the ferry ports of Le Havre and Caen, Bike Normandy can arrange anything from a short weekend break, to a fully planned two-week tour.

Contact John or Jeanette on 0033 233 350 065 or email; [info@bikenormandy.com](mailto:info@bikenormandy.com) [www.bikenormandy.com](http://www.bikenormandy.com)

**Left: Fresnay's historic walls.**

**Bottom left: Lunch stops are part of the pleasure when touring France.**

## Homeward bound

With the ferry leaving at 5pm, and a recommendation that we should turn up 90 minutes early, the last day could have been something of an anticlimax – but, far from it.

Before breakfast I had strolled down the country lane impressed by the sheer peace of the place – peace only broken by John, in the Bike Normandy van, returning with bread for breakfast.

A visit to the nearby Montormel-Coudehard war memorial and accompanying museum was heartily recommended by John and Jen. It was within walking distance and worth a visit! We cheerily arrived at the memorial, complete with its Sherman tank.

The party which emerged from the museum was in a far more pensive mood. The high-tech displays were within a building sunk into the hillside giving commanding views over the plain. It was here, on Hill 262 North, that Polish forces fought to plug the remaining gap in the encirclement. Some 40,000 Germans escaped through this 'Corridor of Death' and joined the force which attacked from Vermoutiers on the other side. The result was, however, inevitable.

Human remains are still being found in the area. Only five years ago the last wartime scrapyard, at Trun, was emptied of some 300 tonnes. To me nothing defines the horror of the post-battle scene more resonantly than the description of a dark cloud which covered the plain, a cloud of flies from the corpses of 10,000 horses. It must have been a glimpse of hell for the survivors.

Then, with panniers loaded, we bade a fond farewell to Le Champ Massé, to Jeanette and Spencer the spaniel, then set off on a glorious ride to one of the most picturesque areas of northern France. A market-square lunch was followed by a ride from Vieux Port, with its traditional thatched cottages, along the course of the Seine back to Honfleur and the Pont de Normandie.

We happily arrived at the dock some 45 minutes before sailing (and about five minutes before loading began) – every moment of enjoyment having been squeezed out of the day.

It was raining when we arrived in Portsmouth at 9.30pm. It was raining when I emerged from the Premier Lodge at 6.30 the following morning on surprisingly busy roads. It was still raining when I was on the congested M25 (to learn that the A1M was blocked just north of Hatfield). Never mind, a diversion by way of Hertford kept the wheels turning towards home. I really do owe a deep debt of gratitude to Mr Lewis, whose products kept me warm and dry.

By the time I reached Huntingdon the weather had brightened somewhat. In the services car park at Peterborough a middle-aged gent made a beeline for my KTM. After all, it is bright orange and rather difficult to miss. He was certainly breaking the Tenth Commandment in that he definitely coveted the machine.

My mournful observations concerning the weather he dismissed, as he felt certain that my enjoyment in riding the KTM must have outweighed any minor discomfort. He might well have had a point. The Normandy trip represented 953 miles, covered in four days and time very, very well spent.