



Where Impressionism was Born

Like countless other Francophiles, I am captivated by French art, history and fashion, as well as the cheeses, wine, pastries, cuisine and films of France. I saw *Midnight in Paris*, with Owen Wilson and Rachel McAdams, twice. So when I heard about a trip to Normandy, I signed up pronto and started packing my chicest black clothes.

The six-day itinerary followed the pallet of the Impressionist painters through Normandy; from Monet's garden in Giverny, to the cathedral of Rouen, across a patchwork quilt of emerald fields and lush valleys — dotted with lambs and cows — to storybook seaside resorts with chocolate shops, fresh fish, flower markets and sidewalk cafes.

Rouen: Praised by Pissarro as being “as beautiful as Venice.”

We began our journey in Rouen meandering through the old town, down narrow, cobblestoned streets lined with two-storied, half-timbered homes and along the pedestrian street of the Great Clock (rue du Gros Horloge). It's easy to appreciate the evolution of architectural styles in the 14th to 18th-century restored homes. Hours of strolling left us hungry for lunch so we popped into the gastronomic restaurant, Le 6ème Sens, for a three-course extravaganza. With our bellies full, we visited Rouen's famous 13th-century Gothic cathedral, painted by Monet.

When Monet painted the façade of Rouen cathedral, he worked on up to 14 different canvasses at one time, capturing the ever-changing light and color.

“Color is my day-long obsession, joy and torment.” Claude Monet

When Monet painted the façade of Rouen Cathedral, he worked on up to 14 different canvasses at one time, capturing the ever-changing light and color. He painted at various times of day, during multiple seasons and in different weather conditions, tracking the passage of time, color and light on the cathedral façade. Monet painted from a window on the second floor of a women's lingerie shop. Today, it houses the tourist office. At the end of the day, while my travel partners were preparing for dinner, I returned to the empty cathedral, settled into a wooden pew and watched twinkling red-and-blue light filter through the stained glass windows.

On a more somber note, no visitor to Rouen misses the historic square where Jeanne d'Arc was burned at the stake.

Travelgirl tip: If you're here in July or August, catch “The Impressionists By Night,” a light show that is projected on the cathedral façade and the Beaux-Arts Museum, portraying the life and work of Monet, Pissarro and Gauguin during their time in Rouen.

Left: This half-timbered home with thatched roof in the countryside near Deauville is characteristic of homes in Normandy, where the style was first popular in the Middle Ages.