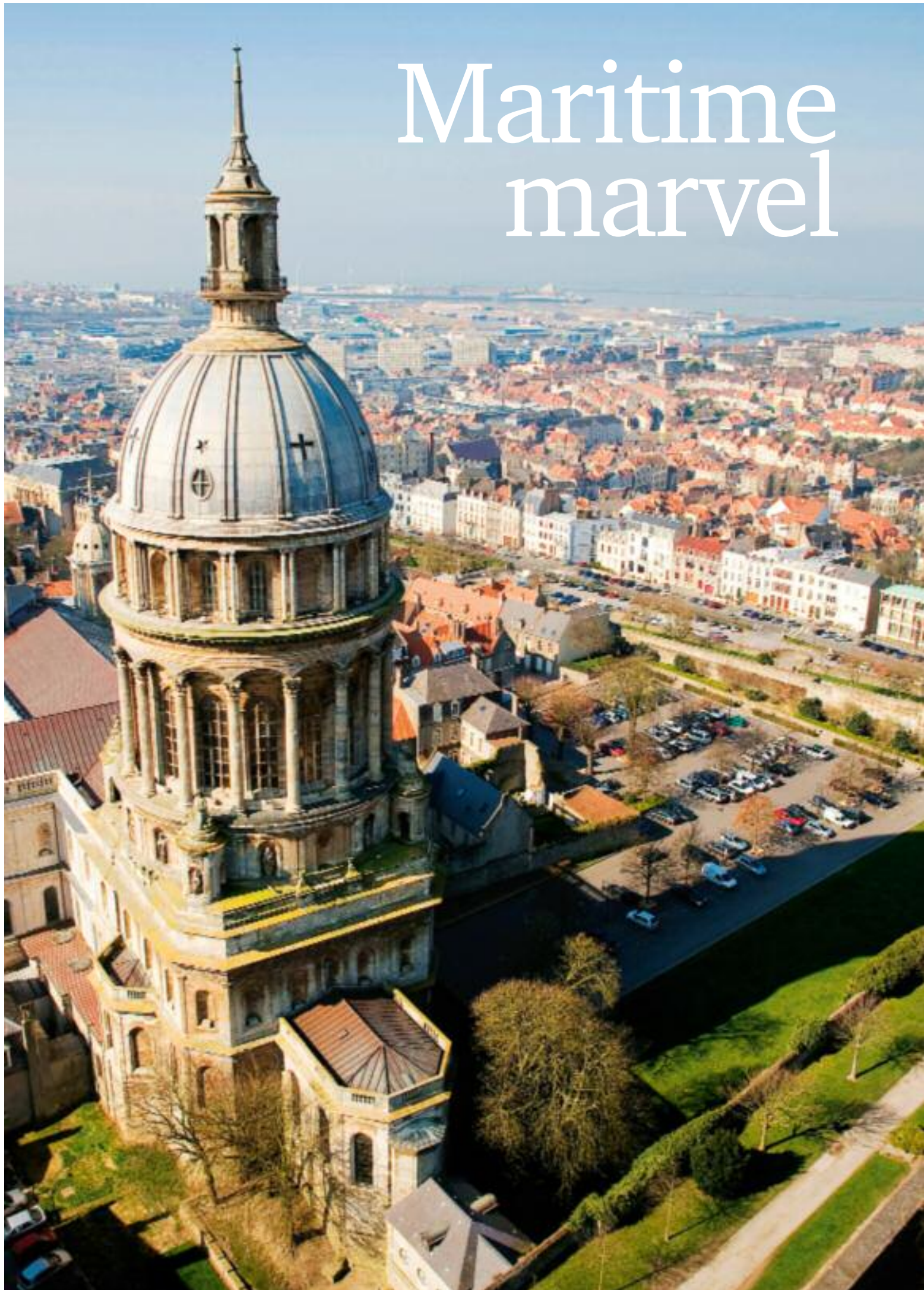


# Maritime marvel



Just a quick hop across the Channel, the maritime centre of Boulogne makes a perfect short break destination.

**Alison Brown** enjoys a trip to the city by the sea

Standing on the lush green hills above the charming coastal city of Boulogne-sur-Mer, Dover's dramatic white cliffs can clearly be seen across the grey-green waters of the Channel on a clear day. Located on the Côte d'Opale in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais, the Boulonnais coast boasts its own chalky precipices, which almost perfectly mirror its English counterpart. Located just some 20 miles from England, for centuries the area served as a stepping-stone for would-be and successful invaders. Today this proximity to British shores works to everyone's advantage; the city centre is an easy 30-minute drive from the Calais ferry port and tourists driving past this area heading south are missing out on one of France's most authentic seaside destinations. Boulogne may not have the guaranteed sun of more southern coastal cities, but few places can match its rich maritime history.

Travelling along the coastal route from Calais, there's spectacular scenery to behold. Impressionist painters were drawn to this rugged and unspoilt coastline in the late 19th century, naming it the Côte d'Opale because the changing light and iridescence of the cliffs reminded them of the semi-precious stone. It was from these shores in AD 43 that the Romans, led by Emperor Claudius, launched their successful conquest of Britain. And in 1805, Napoléon assembled La Grande Armée in Boulogne while he formulated an unsuccessful plot to invade England. The city also played an important part in Operation Sea Lion, the failed German plan to invade Britain.

## Historic heart

Just before you reach Boulogne, the road passes through Wimereux, a lovely Belle Époque seaside town, which now serves as a residential suburb of the city. Upon entering Boulogne, you pass through the newer part, called the Bas Ville, which suffered extensive damage during World War II and has since been rebuilt. Beyond this you reach the Ville Haute, the medieval walled city, and it's here that you'll discover the historic heart of Boulogne. The Ville Haute is dominated by the Basilique Notre-Dame, standing on the site of the city's medieval cathedral, which was destroyed during the Revolution. The original church was built to house the wooden statue of Notre Dame de la Mer (Our Lady of



the Sea) which according to local legend, miraculously appeared on the city's shores in an unmanned boat. Soon a series of miracles were associated with the statue and the church became a popular site with pilgrims on their way to Santiago de Compostela. Today you can still see the salvaged hand of the original wooden statue alongside a replica of the work built in 1793. Inside the modern church, a large statue of Mary and Jesus in a boat brings to mind this part of Boulogne's history.

The maritime representation of the Virgin Mary might seem out of place to some, but in Boulogne, religion and the sea have always been inseparable. Whether or not they're religious, superstitious fishermen still observe old church practices. According to tradition, all new seafaring vessels must be blessed in a religious ceremony before sailing. Even second-hand boats have to be re-blessed for their new owners.

There's more to discover about the city's history, at the Château-Musée, a 13th-century castle-cum-museum, located in the eastern corner of the walled city. But by just meandering through the quaint, cobbled streets of the Ville Haute, you can get a real feel for this place. Take a look inside any number of antique shops and you'll find more traces of nautical heritage; in addition to the traditional collectables, there are oars, life savers and old ship wheels for sale. In recent years this neighbourhood has become popular for its many shops and places to eat. Nestled between all the

**LEFT: Boulogne, dominated by the Basilique Notre-Dame** **ABOVE: Local fishermen unload the morning's haul at the docks near the fish market**



trendy cafés and specialist shops, you may notice the imprint of seashells above some of the doorways. Scallop shells, the symbol of Saint James, were used as sign that the house's occupants would welcome pilgrims on the way to Santiago.

Today this symbol has a different significance for locals, as Boulogne is one of the major producers of scallops in France. Indeed, it's the biggest fishing port in the country and this is very apparent on a busy Saturday morning at the local fish market. Here fishmongers line the harbour selling the day's haul, which is pulled from fishing boats just a few feet away. They move swiftly, cleaning the fish as fast as they come in and displaying them on trays of ice. Their customers also make haste, quickly snatching up the catch of the day and heading straight home to enjoy the freshest bounty of the sea. Food miles are not an issue when it comes to seafood in Boulogne.

## Standing guard

In the centre of the market stalls stand two larger-than-life statues of a traditional fisherman, Batisse, and his wife Zabelle. The couple are characters from Boulonnais folklore and play an important role in local customs, making regular appearances in parades and festivities. At the market, they seem to be guarding over Boulogne's maritime heritage and their presence lends a sense of tradition to the activity, reminding us that fish have been caught and sold here for generations.

If you're still hungry for more *piscine* action, visit the Capécure, a commercial port where the fish is auctioned, and salted and smoked. There's an abundance of herring, a fish so beloved by locals that there's an annual festival in its honour. Every November, crowds gather in Boulogne to celebrate the herring, which coincides with the arrival of the Beaujolais Nouveau.

A stroll through the popular weekend market at the Place Dalton reveals a different side to Boulogne's gastronomic delights. Although there's still plenty of smoked and pickled fish for sale, there's a wide variety of cheese, cured meats, baked goods and fresh produce available. Be sure to visit the world famous Philippe

Olivier cheese shop, just off the market square, where you'll find more than 300 different kinds of cheese, including local favourites such as the pungent Vieux Boulogne. After all that gastronomic sightseeing, a well-deserved lunch break is the perfect time to sample some of Boulogne's best. Restaurants here make the most of local

supplies, serving up some of the best seafood in France.

On the menu, of course there's plenty of herring in all its various forms – fresh, smoked or roll mops, pickled

herring rolled into circular shapes. You probably won't see words like 'locally sourced' and 'fresh' on the menu – some things just go without saying. But there's no doubt about the fish's origins.

The real extent of this city's love affair with the sea becomes clear at Nausicaä, Boulogne's multi-million pound marine life centre. Locals are very proud of the attractive centre, which celebrates its 20th anniversary this year. Wandering through the extensive interactive displays and sea life reconstructions, one could easily be overwhelmed by the vast scope of the exhibits. Every aspect of the world's oceans is touched on here, from the delicate ecosystems of tropical paradise to the effects of sea pollution. *La Mer des Hommes*, which focuses on man's interaction with the sea and the impact on endangered resources, covers everything from sea pollution to water supplies. But the real highlight is the aquarium, considered to be the finest in France, and home to some 35,000 animals in 4.5 million litres of water. Adults and children alike delight in the rare chance to see these exotic creatures up close. It gives a whole new meaning to a seaside holiday.

Back from the depths of the ocean, a walk along the seafront is the ideal way to end a visit, returning once more to the maritime attraction which has shaped the life of this bustling, atmospheric city such a short distance from our shores. 🇫🇷

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**Restaurants here make the most of local supplies, serving up some of the best seafood in France**

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**CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: The Basilique Notre-Dame in the Ville Haute; One of many antique shops in the centre; A statue of Madonna and child inside the Basilique; Locals celebrating the herring festival with a barbecue; Statues of Batisse and Zabelle at the fish market; Fishing off the pier in the harbour; The Saturday market at Place Dalton; Boulogne's fish market**

## FRANCOFILE

Enjoy your own short break in the city by the sea

### GETTING THERE

#### By ferry/road:

Alison travelled by ferry with SeaFrance. Boulogne is approximately 30 minutes from the Calais ferry port.

**By rail:** Direct trains from Paris



Nord take just under three hours.

### WHERE TO STAY

#### Hôtel La Matelote

80 Boulevard Sainte-Beuve

62200 Boulogne-sur-Mer

Tel: (Fr) 3 21 30 33 33

[www.la-matelote.com](http://www.la-matelote.com)

Situated on the seafront, Hôtel La Matelote's central location

makes it an ideal base for exploring Boulogne.

### WHERE TO EAT

#### Enclos de l'Évêché

6 Rue de Pressy

62200 Boulogne-sur-Mer

Tel: (Fr) 3 71 90 05 90

[www.enclosdeleveche.com](http://www.enclosdeleveche.com)

A charming bed and breakfast/restaurant in the

heart of the old city ramparts offering a varied menu.

### TOURIST OFFICE

#### Office de Tourisme de Boulogne-sur-Mer

Parvis de Nausicaä

62203 Boulogne-sur-Mer

Tel: (Fr) 3 21 10 88 10

[www.tourisme-](http://www.tourisme-boulognesurmer.com)

[boulognesurmer.com](http://www.tourisme-boulognesurmer.com)