

# Literary paper trail



From Marcel Proust to Gustave Flaubert, Normandy has inspired some of the greatest writers in France. **Alison Weeks** follows in their footsteps

**E**ven if you have never set foot in Normandy, you would probably recognise the scenery. Its chalky cliffs, picturesque harbours and sweeping meadows have been immortalised in paintings including Claude Monet's *Impression, Soleil Levant* and *Les Falaises à Étretat*. While this gentle landscape is often celebrated as the home of Impressionism, Normandy has also played a significant role in the lives of literary giants.

Easily accessible from Paris – Caen is two hours by train from the capital – the region has long provided an escape for city dwellers. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the urban upper classes flocked to coastal hot spots such as Deauville and Dieppe. One such visitor was Marcel Proust; the author was born in Paris in 1871 and although he spent most of his life in the capital, he went regularly to the coast, seeking relief for his asthma. Most of the trips were to Cabourg which, along with Deauville and Trouville-sur-Mer, provided the inspiration for the fictional town of Balbec in his chef d'oeuvre, *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*.

Lying between Caen and Deauville, Cabourg was a former fishing village turned seaside resort that

attracted wealthy tourists to its elegant Grand Hôtel, built in 1855. Always one for keeping up with society, Proust stayed there every summer from 1907 to 1914 and featured it in his novel as the Grand Hôtel of Balbec. The author likened its glass-fronted dining room to a giant aquarium where the bourgeoisie were displayed for the benefit of working-class passers-by strolling along the promenade.

With its Belle Époque grandeur, the hotel remains almost as Proust knew it, although the beachfront promenade has been renamed in his honour. Today's guests can dine in the 'aquarium', with its grand interior and stunning sea views, or conjure up their own memories (Proustian or otherwise) with tea and the famous *madeleine* sponges in the salon. Enthusiasts can even ask to stay in Proust's room (it's number 414). Beyond the hotel, signs referring to the author, with ►



## On the trail of Marcel Proust

Above: The coastal resort of Cabourg, where Proust spent several summers at the Grand Hôtel



#### On the trail of Maurice Leblanc

Above: Rooms at Le Clos Lupin museum in Étretat re-create scenes from the Arsène Lupin stories



selected excerpts from his work, have been placed along the seafront and around the rest of the town.

Further up the coast lies another town with strong literary links. Étretat is best known as a favourite of the Impressionists, in particular Monet, who painted the famous alabaster cliffs. But this picturesque spot was also home to Guy de Maupassant, France's greatest short-story writer. He was born in 1850, reputedly at the Château de Miromesnil, near Dieppe, but after his parents separated, he spent the greater part of his

childhood living with his mother in Étretat.

Although he went on to work in Paris and travel widely, the author maintained a strong affection for his coastal home.

After the success of his first volume of short

stories, *La Maison Tellier*, Maupassant returned to Étretat and built La Guillette, a Mediterranean-style villa near the sea. Here he completed his novel *Bel Ami* and wrote what is often considered his greatest work, *Pierre et Jean*, in 1887. The home is not open to the public, but they can visit the Château de Miromesnil.

Étretat was also home to a less familiar author, Maurice Leblanc. Born in Rouen in 1864, Leblanc got his start by writing short stories for magazines, but his breakthrough came with the creation of the 'gentleman thief' Arsène Lupin in 1905. Sometimes described as the French answer to Sherlock Holmes, Lupin featured in about 20 novels, in which he outsmarts the authorities (usually for the greater good). The character has appeared often on the big screen, most recently in 2004, played by Romain Duris.

Although he lived mostly in Paris, Leblanc bought a home on Rue Guy de Maupassant in Étretat in 1918, so that he could return to his native Normandy each summer. Today the house has been transformed into



#### On the trail of Guy de Maupassant

Above: The famous cliffs at Étretat, the coastal town where the author built his villa, La Guillette

a visitor centre dedicated to his work, with an audio guide narrated by 'Arsène Lupin' and rooms re-created to represent scenes from the detective stories. The visit is based mainly on *L'Aiguille Creuse* (*The Hollow Needle*), in which Lupin unlocks the secret to the lost treasure of the kings of France (which happens to be hidden inside a needle of rock off the Étretat coast).

About 20 minutes north of Étretat lies Fécamp, another coastal town popular with writers and artists, although its biggest claim to fame is Bénédictine, the fragrant herbal liqueur supposedly based on an ancient recipe used by monks at the local abbey. Maupassant's grandmother lived at 98 Rue Sous-le-Bois (now Quai Guy de Maupassant), which some scholars believe was his actual birthplace. They maintain that Maupassant's mother made up the claim that he was born at the Château de Miromesnil in an attempt to raise her social status.

Victor Hugo, author of *Les Misérables*, often visited Fécamp and wrote several poems about the area. Away from the coast and deep in the Normandy countryside lies another place with significant ties to Hugo. The charming village of Villequier nestles between rolling orchards and the River Seine. The grandest homes in this unassuming *commune* can be found along the riverside and it is here that Hugo, his wife and daughters were invited to stay by their friends, and

PHOTOGRAPHS: ALISON WEEKS

Vacquerie, in 1839. Surrounded by flowers and overlooking the peaceful river, it is a delightful place, which makes it all the harder to realise that it was the setting for the most tragic episode in the author's life.

Hugo's daughter, Léopoldine, married Charles Vacquerie in 1843. Later that year, the newlyweds were staying at Villequier when they were drowned in a boating accident a few miles up river from the house. Hugo was devastated by the loss of his young daughter and never fully recovered from the tragedy. His moving poems, *Demain, dès l'aube* (*Tomorrow at Sunrise*) and *À Villequier*, tell of his annual pilgrimage to her grave in the town. [See our French Classic feature in the UK July issue, number 178].

Today the Maison Vacquerie houses the Musée Victor Hugo, a well-appointed museum dedicated to the life and works of the author that contains personal effects of his family and of the Vacquerie. A short walk from the house, Hugo's statue looks out over the River Seine and the site of Léopoldine's death.

Hugo travelled extensively in Normandy, but one of his favourite places was Rouen, the region's historic capital. With its ancient buildings and charming medieval streets, it is clear to see why the great Romantic was a fan of the city. An advocate of the preservation of historic monuments, the author was particularly fond of the Gothic cathedral and



#### On the trail of Victor Hugo

Above: The Musée Victor Hugo in Villequier and (below) a view along the River Seine from the museum



## NORMANDY'S WIDER LITERARY LINKS

These English-language writers also have associations with the region:

#### FORD MADOX FORD

The English author of the *Parade's End* trilogy served in France during World War I and later lived in Paris. Ford spent his final years in the resort of Deauville and died there in 1939. He is buried in the town cemetery.

#### OSCAR WILDE

After his release from Reading prison in 1897, the Irish playwright went into exile in France. Before moving to Paris, he stayed at a hotel in Berneval-le-Grand, near Dieppe, where he wrote *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*.

#### ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE

While staying with a friend near Étretat, the Victorian poet nearly drowned off the coast. Bizarrely, one of his rescuers was a young Guy de Maupassant, who would later write about the encounter in *L'Anglais d'Étretat*.



### On the trail of Gustave Flaubert

Above: A room at the Musée Gustave Flaubert et d'Histoire de la Médecine in Rouen

nicknamed the city 'la ville aux cent clochers' (the 'city of a hundred bell-towers').

The cathedral was a favourite subject of Monet, who painted it at different times of the day to capture the varying light on its façade. Rouen's most famous son, Gustave Flaubert, drew inspiration from the landmark and used it for a pivotal scene in his most famous novel *Madame Bovary* (1857). It is here that Emma Bovary meets her lover, Léon, before the two embark on an infamous carriage ride around the city. Flaubert also based *La Légende de Saint-Julien l'Hospitalier*, a story that features in his *Trois Contes*, on a stained-glass window in the cathedral.

Born in 1821, Flaubert was the son of a prominent Rouen surgeon and grew up in the family's apartment adjoining the hospital. Today the apartment is part of a dual-purpose museum dedicated to both the author's life and the history of medicine. Visitors can see the room where Flaubert was born, as well as a variety of personal artefacts and even the stuffed parrot that inspired the pet Loulou in *Un Coeur Simple*, another of the *Trois Contes*. There is an important collection of 19th-century medical objects, which would have been familiar to the author, as he grew up in a world of science. Flaubert drew on this medical milieu in his writing, particularly with the character of Charles Bovary in *Madame Bovary*, but also with the scientific precision with which he approached his prose and his pursuit of *le mot juste*.

Yet some of his greatest inspiration came from a very different place. As a young man, Flaubert spent a great deal of time at the family's country home in Croisset, a hamlet just outside Rouen. Although he later travelled abroad and lived in Paris, he returned frequently to Normandy and to Croisset in particular. Flaubert devoted himself to his work there, earning a reputation as the 'Hermit of Croisset'.

Ironically, while shunning the urban life in favour of this pastoral setting, Flaubert toiled over *Madame Bovary*, about a country doctor's wife who longs for the excitements of the big city. Although the family house no longer stands, Flaubert's depictions of rural life give a portrait of 19th-century Normandy as accurate and lasting as any painting. The novel, which caused a scandal for its 'immoral' content, came to be regarded as a classic work, helping to ensure the region's place on the literary map. 📍

## FRANCOFILE

Follow the literary path in Normandy

### GETTING THERE

**By ferry:** Alison travelled from Portsmouth to Caen with Brittany Ferries. Crossings from £119 one way for a car and two passengers. Tel: 0871 244 0744 [www.brittanyferries.com](http://www.brittanyferries.com) See *holiday planner* on page 89 for more details.

### WHERE TO STAY

**Le Grand Hôtel**  
Les Jardins du Casino  
14390 Cabourg  
Tel: (Fr) 2 31 91 01 79  
[www.accorhotels.com](http://www.accorhotels.com)  
Step back in time at the elegant hotel where Marcel Proust stayed.

Doubles from €210.

### La Maison Blanche

3 Boulevard René Coty  
76790 Villequier  
Tel: (Fr) 2 35 56 76 82  
Charming B&B in a 16th-century manor house with sweeping views of the River Seine.  
Doubles from €100.

### WHERE TO EAT

**Restaurant**  
**Le Clos Lupin**  
37 Rue Alphonse Karr  
76790 Étretat  
Tel: (Fr) 2 27 30 19 33  
[www.le-clos-lupin.com](http://www.le-clos-lupin.com)  
Named after Maurice Leblanc's gentleman

thief, this charming restaurant serves local specialities. Menus from €15.

### Le Grand Sapin

12 Rue Louis le Gaffric  
76490 Villequier  
Tel: (Fr) 2 35 56 78 73  
[www.legrandsapin.fr](http://www.legrandsapin.fr)  
Rustic restaurant with views of the River Seine.  
Menus from €15.

### WHERE TO VISIT

**Château de Miromesnil**  
76550 Tourville-sur-Arques  
Tel: (Fr) 2 35 85 02 80  
[www.chateau-miromesnil.com](http://www.chateau-miromesnil.com)

### Musée Victor Hugo

Quai Victor Hugo  
76490 Villequier  
Tel: (Fr) 2 35 56 78 31  
[www.museevictorhugo.fr](http://www.museevictorhugo.fr)

### Le Clos Arsène Lupin

15 Rue Guy de Maupassant  
76790 Étretat  
Tel: (Fr) 2 35 10 59 53  
[www.etretat.net](http://www.etretat.net)

### Musée Gustave Flaubert et d'Histoire de la Médecine

51 Rue de Lecat  
76000 Rouen  
Tel: (Fr) 2 35 15 59 95  
[www.rouentourisme.com](http://www.rouentourisme.com)



### TOURIST INFORMATION

**Cabourg tourist office**

Tel: (Fr) 2 31 06 20 00  
[www.cabourg.net](http://www.cabourg.net)

### Étretat tourist office

Tel: (Fr) 2 35 27 05 21  
[www.etretat.net](http://www.etretat.net)

### Rouen tourist office

Tel: (Fr) 2 32 08 32 40  
[www.rouentourisme.com](http://www.rouentourisme.com)