Tour Code
JHFC

ADVENTURESABROAD

NORTHERN FRANCE & THE CHANNEL ISLANDS

with Jonathan Hodgson

14 days

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Day 1 Arrival in Nantes: Welcome to Brittany's Atlantic Capital

Welcome to Nantes, the historic capital of Brittany where the Loire River meets the Atlantic. This elegant city has reinvented itself from shipbuilding powerhouse to cultural hub, though traces of its maritime past remain—the medieval Château des Ducs de Bretagne still commands the old quarter, and graceful 18th-century townhouses line the quays where merchants once traded West Indies sugar and timber from the Americas.

Tonight we gather for our first meal together, meeting fellow travellers and looking ahead to the journey before us.

GETTING TO NANTES: We begin this tour in Nantes rather than Paris to focus on our Atlantic/Channel coast narrative and avoid the high costs of the capital, which many people have already visited. If you have not yet experienced Paris and would like to extend your trip to include it, many travellers reach Nantes via the frequent TGV train from Paris Montparnasse (2h 15min, departures every 30-60 minutes). Nantes can also be reached by direct flights to Nantes-Atlantique Airport (NTE), with connections through numerous European countries.

Overnight in Nantes.

Included Meal(s): Dinner

Day 2 Nantes Neolithic Loop: Carnac's Standing Stones & La Roche-aux-FÃ©es

This morning takes us deep into Brittany's Neolithic heartland, visiting two of Western Europe's most impressive megalithic sites. We begin at La Roche-aux-Fées—the "Rock of the Fairies"—where 42 massive stone slabs form a passage grave built between 5000-4000 BC. The dolmen stretches nearly 20 metres, its capstones weighing up to 45 tonnes, raising questions about the engineering capabilities and social organization of these ancient builders. Local legend claims that counting the stones will reveal your marriage prospects, though no two counts ever match.

From here we continue south to Carnac, site of the world's largest collection of standing stones. More than 3,000 menhirs stretch in alignment rows for nearly four kilometres across the Breton countryside—erected between 4500-3300 BC for purposes that remain mysterious. Were they astronomical calendars? Ceremonial pathways? Territorial markers? We walk among the Ménec and Kermario alignments, where stones stand like silent sentinels across fields that have witnessed 6,000 harvests. The Museum of Prehistory provides context for what we've seen, displaying tools, pottery, and burial goods that connect these monuments to the people who built them.

By late afternoon we return to Nantes, the Neolithic landscape fading behind us as we re-enter the present.

Overnight in Nantes.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Nantes - Loire Valley: Chambord & Chenonceau

Leaving the coast behind, we journey inland to the Loire Valley, where French kings and nobles built châteaux that defined Renaissance elegance. Our first stop is Chambord, the largest château in the Loire Valley and perhaps its most audacious. François I conceived this hunting lodge as a demonstration of royal power—440 rooms, 282 fireplaces, 84 staircases, and a roofline designed to resemble Constantinople's skyline. The famous double-helix staircase may have been inspired by Leonardo da Vinci, who lived nearby at Clos Lucé during the château's construction. From the rooftop terrace, where chimneys and turrets create a forest of stone, the forest of Chambord extends to the horizon—a 5,440-hectare game reserve as large as inner Paris.

We continue to Chenonceau, the "Ladies' Château" whose history belongs to the remarkable women who owned and shaped it. The château spans the River Cher on five Renaissance arches, its two-story gallery reflected in the water below—an architectural grace note that makes Chenonceau instantly recognizable. Henri II gave the château to his mistress Diane de Poitiers, who added the bridge and exquisite gardens. When the king died, his widow Catherine de Medici forced Diane out and transformed the bridge into the gallery that defines Chenonceau

today. The rooms preserve their stories—Diane's bedchamber in black and white, Catherine's in her signature green.

Overnight in the Loire Valley.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Loire Valley: ChÃ¢teau d'Amboise, Clos LucÃ© & Village Exploration

This morning we visit the Château d'Amboise, perched on a rocky outcrop commanding sweeping views over the Loire River and the medieval town below. Charles VIII transformed this medieval fortress into a Renaissance palace in the late 15th century, bringing Italian craftsmen to create what became a model for Loire châteaux. François I spent his childhood here and later invited Leonardo da Vinci to Amboise, installing him at nearby Clos Lucé. When Leonardo died in 1519, he was buried in the château's Chapel of Saint-Hubert—the small Gothic gem clinging to the ramparts, its door lintel carved with scenes of the saint's conversion.

We continue to Clos Lucé, the elegant manor house where Leonardo da Vinci spent his final three years. François I installed the aging genius here in 1516, granting him a generous pension and freedom to think, dream, and work. The house preserves Leonardo's private apartments and studio, while the gardens display working models of his inventions—constructed from his notebook sketches. The flying machine, the tank, the paddleboat: engineering concepts centuries ahead of their time, conceived by a mind that refused boundaries between art and science. An underground tunnel once connected Clos Lucé to the royal château, allowing the young king to visit his mentor for conversations that ranged across philosophy, engineering, and art.

The afternoon allows time to explore Amboise's cobbled streets, perhaps visiting local caves for Vouvray wine tastings or simply wandering the riverside promenades where the Loire reflects medieval towers and Renaissance facades. Your Tour Leader can suggest charming villages worth exploring independently: Montrésor with its medieval arcades, Lavardin's ruined fortress overlooking the Loir, or the gardens and walkways that line the Loire through this peaceful valley. Those interested in wine can arrange tastings of Vouvray or Chinon through the Tour Leader.

Overnight in the Loire Valley.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Loire Valley - Normandy: D-Day Beaches & Bayeux

We leave the Loire Valley this morning for Normandy, the landscape gradually shifting from riverside châteaux to the agricultural plains of the Calvados. By midday we reach the D-Day beaches where on June 6, 1944, Allied forces launched Operation Overlord—the largest amphibious invasion in history.

We begin at Juno Beach, where the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division came ashore under heavy fire. Despite suffering nearly 1,000 casualties on D-Day alone, Canadian troops pushed further inland than any other Allied division that day. The Juno Beach Centre stands as Canada's primary D-Day museum in Normandy.

We continue to Omaha Beach, the bloodiest of the five landing sites, where American forces faced devastating fire from German positions on the bluffs above. Above the beach, the Normandy American Cemetery spreads across 172 acres overlooking the landing site. Here 9,388 white marble crosses and Stars of David stand in precise rows, while the names of 1,557 missing are inscribed on the memorial's curved walls—men whose bodies were never recovered. The Memorial Museum of the Battle of Normandy chronicles the 100 days from June 6 through the complete liberation of Normandy.

Late afternoon brings us to Bayeux, miraculously spared destruction during the Battle of Normandy and liberated intact on June 7, 1944—the first French town freed from German occupation. Bayeux Cathedral rises above the medieval town centre, its Norman Romanesque nave consecrated in 1077 with William the Conqueror in attendance.

Overnight in Bayeux.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Bayeux - Mont Saint-Michel - Saint-Malo

This morning we journey west to Mont Saint-Michel, the abbey-crowned island rising from the tidal flats of Normandy's coast. According to legend, the Archangel Michael appeared to the Bishop of Avranches in 708, commanding him to build a church on this granite outcrop. What began as a small oratory evolved into one of medieval Christendom's great pilgrimage sites—a Benedictine abbey whose construction spanned six centuries. The approach reveals why medieval pilgrims called it "the Wonder of the Western World": at high tide the mount becomes an island, surrounded by the highest tides in continental Europe; at low tide, vast sand flats extend for kilometres.

We climb the narrow Grande Rue through the fortified village, past medieval houses and shops that have served pilgrims for 500 years, ascending stone staircases to the abbey itself. The Romanesque church crowns the summit, its choir suspended 80 metres above sea level. Below, the Gothic marvel known as La Merveille—the "Marvel"—stacks three stories of architecture on the north face: guest hall, Knights' Hall, and the gravity-defying cloister where monks walked between heaven and earth.

By mid-afternoon we continue to Saint-Malo, the ancient corsair city commanding the mouth of the Rance River. Granite ramparts encircle the old town—rebuilt stone by stone after World War II devastation, following original plans so precisely that the reconstructed city feels genuinely medieval. We walk these ramparts as evening approaches, watching tides surge through the harbour mouth where privateers once sailed under royal license to harass English shipping.

Overnight in Saint-Malo.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Ferry to Jersey & St. Helier Orientation

This morning's ferry crossing takes us from France to Jersey, largest of the Channel Islands. The two-hour journey across the Gulf of Saint-Malo traces a route travelled for centuries—Jersey has orbited between French and English influence since William the Conqueror (then Duke of Normandy) seized England in 1066. Though the islands remained loyal to the English Crown when King John lost Normandy to France in 1204, their character remains distinctly Anglo-Norman: French place names and Norman-French patois survive alongside English institutions, pounds sterling circulate with Jersey's own currency, and locals still say they're going "to England" when they cross to the mainland.

We arrive in St. Helier, Jersey's capital, its harbour wrapped around the bay where fishing boats and pleasure craft bob at anchor. Our local guide meets us for an orientation tour of the town, introducing us to St. Helier's blend of Victorian prosperity and Norman heritage. We walk the markets and lanes where Victorian architecture speaks to Jersey's 19th-century wealth, discover the medieval Royal Square where the island's parliament still meets, and learn the rhythms of island life that will shape our next three days.

Overnight in Jersey.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Jersey: Elizabeth Castle, War Tunnels & Atlantic Wall

This morning our guide leads us on a maritime walk around the harbour to Elizabeth Castle, the fortress commanding St. Aubin's Bay. Built in the late 16th century on a rocky islet, the castle served as Jersey's primary defence for 350 years. At low tide we walk the causeway; at high tide we reach the fortress by amphibious "castle ferry"—either approach dramatic in its own way. Inside, Tudor ramparts blend with German bunkers and gun emplacements added during World War II, creating layers of military architecture spanning four centuries.

From the castle we continue to the Jersey War Tunnels, the massive underground complex German forces carved into the hillside between 1941-1945. Originally conceived as barracks and artillery workshops, the tunnels were converted to an emergency hospital as Allied invasion loomed. Slave labourers from across occupied Europe excavated over 1,000 metres of galleries, working in brutal conditions—many died and were buried in unmarked graves. Our guided tour reveals the story of Jersey's five-year occupation: rationing, resistance, collaboration, and the slow starvation of the final winter before liberation.

We then explore Jersey's southwestern defences. At Noirmont Point, Batterie Lothringen preserves German coastal artillery positions—massive gun emplacements built into the headland. We continue to Saint Brelade's Bay, where the 12th-century Fishermen's Chapel stands beside one of Jersey's most beautiful beaches. Our final stop is La Corbière Lighthouse, Jersey's most iconic landmark, perched

on rocks at the island's southwestern tip. If tides and group size permit, we may access the interior.

Overnight in Jersey.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Jersey Heritage: Samares Manor, La Hougue Bie & Mont Orgueil Castle

This morning takes us to Samares Manor, a Norman manor house surrounded by 14 acres of botanical gardens. The estate dates to the 11th century, though the current house is largely 18th-century. We tour both manor and gardens, discovering a horticultural collection that draws on Jersey's mild maritime climate to cultivate plants from around the world. Formal herb gardens give way to Japanese maples, and tropical specimens thrive where frosts rarely reach. The Jersey Rural Life Museum preserves agricultural tools and domestic items from the island's farming past.

From Samares we continue to La Hougue Bie, one of the finest Neolithic passage graves in Western Europe. Built around 3800 BC—700 years before Stonehenge's stone circle—this burial chamber lies beneath an 18-metre-high earth mound. We descend into the 20-metre passage, its walls lined with massive granite slabs, emerging in the central chamber where Jersey's Neolithic inhabitants placed their dead. The tomb remained sealed for millennia until its rediscovery in 1925. Two medieval chapels perch atop the mound, built by pilgrims who recognized the site's sacred character without knowing its true age. The Neolithic thread that began at Carnac four days ago ends here, 1,700 years later in human chronology but connected by culture and belief across the English Channel. A simple lunch at the site café allows time to absorb what we've discovered.

Our afternoon takes us to Mont Orgueil Castle, the medieval fortress commanding Gorey Harbour on Jersey's eastern coast. Our private guided tour leads us through chambers and passageways, emerging on battlements where English garrisons watched for French invasion fleets for 400 years. Time permits a gentle stroll down to Gorey's picturesque harbour, where tea and cake await those who wish to linger.

Overnight in Jersey.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Jersey - Ferry to Guernsey: Castle Cornet & Victor Hugo's Hauteville House

This morning's ferry crosses to Guernsey, second-largest of the Channel Islands and distinct from Jersey in character and history. The hour-long journey passes between islands that, despite their proximity, have maintained separate identities—different laws, different currencies (though both pegged to sterling), different dialects of Norman French, and a historic rivalry that occasionally surfaces in inter-island sporting contests.

We arrive at St. Peter Port, Guernsey's capital, its Georgian and Regency terraces climbing steeply from the harbour. On arrival we tour Castle Cornet, originally built in the 13th century but rebuilt and expanded over 800 years of military use. The castle served as Guernsey's primary defence and at various times housed the island's governor, served as a prison, and (during the English Civil War) held out for Royalist forces long after the rest of the island submitted to Parliament. The Maritime Museum within the castle tells Guernsey's story as a seafaring society—fishing, trading, and occasionally privateering shaped island prosperity.

Late afternoon takes us to Hauteville House, where Victor Hugo lived in exile from 1856-1870. The French author fled Napoleon III's regime and found refuge on Guernsey, purchasing this townhouse overlooking the harbour and transforming it into a monument to his own creativity. Hugo designed every room, covering walls with the ornate decorations and symbolic arrangements that reflect his romantic genius. Here he wrote Les Misérables and finished Les Travailleurs de la Mer, working at a rooftop study with views across to France—the homeland he could see but not return to for 19 years.

Overnight in Guernsey.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Guernsey: Herm: Shell Beach & Island Tranquility

Our first island day trip takes us to Herm, the smallest inhabited Channel Island open to visitors. The 20-minute ferry crossing from St. Peter Port delivers us to an island without cars, without permanent shops (beyond the seasonal café and hotel), and without the infrastructure that defines modern life elsewhere. Only 60 people live on Herm year-round—the Heyworth family who lease the island from the States of Guernsey, plus a handful of staff who maintain the hotel, café, and essential services.

Herm stretches just 2.4 kilometres long and less than 800 metres wide, small enough to walk its perimeter in a few hours. Shell Beach on the northeastern shore is perhaps the Channel Islands' finest—white sand composed of millions of shells ground smooth by Atlantic tides, the water impossibly clear over white seabed. Belvoir Bay curves along the southern coast, rockier but equally beautiful, while the northern cliffs offer views across to Guernsey and the smaller islands beyond. Neolithic dolmens dot the island—burial chambers from the same culture that built La Hougue Bie and the Carnac alignments, completing the circle of our Neolithic journey.

A simple lunch is included today, pre-booked at the island's café—fresh seafood, local produce, and the kind of unhurried meal that Herm's pace demands. The afternoon is yours to explore, swim, or simply sit on Shell Beach watching tides reveal and conceal the causeway to neighbouring Jethou. By late afternoon the ferry returns us to Guernsey.

Overnight in Guernsey.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Lunch

Day 12 Guernsey: Rocquaine Bay, Fort Grey & the Shipwreck Coast

This morning takes us along Guernsey's west coast to Rocquaine Bay, a sweeping curve of sand and shingle backed by the ancient fortifications of Fort Grey. The distinctive round tower, built in 1804 during Napoleonic war fears, now houses the Shipwreck Museum—appropriate for a coast where currents, rocks, and Channel storms have claimed hundreds of vessels over centuries. The museum's collection of salvaged cargo, ships' timbers, and navigational equipment tells stories of maritime disaster: the mail packet Stella, lost with 105 lives in 1899; the SS Elwood Mead, grounded in 1954; and countless smaller vessels claimed by Guernsey's treacherous waters.

From Fort Grey we continue along the coast road, where German occupation towers stand sentinel at regular intervals—concrete observation posts from World War II, when Guernsey endured five years of occupation. The fortifications are less dense than Jersey's but equally imposing: gun batteries, bunkers, and command posts built by forced labour from across occupied Europe. At L'Ancresse Common on the northern tip, the defensive works cluster thickly, guarding the wide bay where German commanders expected Allied landings that never came.

The afternoon is yours to explore Guernsey as you wish. The island's 27 miles of coastline offer dramatic cliff walks, hidden coves, and sandy beaches. St. Peter Port rewards wandering—narrow lanes climbing between Georgian townhouses, the covered market where locals shop for produce and flowers, the Victorian promenade along the harbour. Your Tour Leader can suggest coastal walks or arrange visits to sites of particular interest.

Overnight in Guernsey.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Guernsey - Sark Day Trip

This morning's ferry takes us to Sark, smallest of the four main Channel Islands and perhaps the most distinctive. Sark has no paved roads, no cars, no public lighting—transport is by bicycle, horse-drawn carriage, or foot. The island retains a feudal system dating to 1565, governed by a Seigneur under laws that make Sark unlike anywhere else in the British Isles. Only 500 people live here year-round, and that population drops further in winter when some businesses close and families retreat to larger islands.

We explore Sark by horse-drawn carriage and on foot, the traditional methods of seeing the island's dramatic coastline and interior. A walk takes us to La Coupée, the knife-edge isthmus connecting Great Sark to Little Sark—a natural causeway barely 10 metres wide with 90-metre drops to the sea on either side. Before concrete railings were installed in 1945, schoolchildren crawled across La Coupée on hands and knees during storms. From the ridge, views extend across to the French coast and neighbouring islands, seabirds wheeling in the updrafts below.

Time permits exploring Sark's gardens and headlands before our return ferry to Guernsey. The island's lack of artificial light pollution makes it one of the world's few designated Dark Sky Islands—on clear nights, the Milky Way arcs overhead with a clarity lost to most of Europe. Even in daylight, Sark's profound quiet creates a space outside modern time, where the absence of engines and electricity reconnects visitors

to a slower rhythm.

Overnight in Guernsey.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Departure from Guernsey

This morning we transfer to Guernsey Airport for departures throughout the day.

Au revoir, and as they say in the Channel Islands' Norman-French dialect: A betot--until soon.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast