

Powerful Visit to Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial

If you recall, my lovely wife and I paid a visit to Paris, France this past November. Paris was a city that did not disappoint and if you would like to understand why, simply check out the [blog post](#).

I left you hanging a bit in that post because our trip did in fact continue beyond Paris. I briefly mentioned the fact that we had run into a couple who had left Normandy for Paris the night before Anne and I departed for Normandy. Let's explore what that next part of our trip was like!

In a word, the visit to Normandy was powerful. It chills you to the bone knowing what went on there. Read on for some of the highlights of our visit to the Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial.

Monday 11/12: Depart Paris for Normandy

Though we loved our stay in Paris, Monday brought us to Normandy by train. Truth be told, there is almost no way to compare the two destinations. Each are equally amazing and each for their own unique reasons.

Before we get too far into the details of what we found in Normandy, I must pause to let you in on a funny mistake. Since we arrived there on the train, we simply decided to walk from our hotel to the train station. Normally, this would be no big deal. However, it turned out to be our only mistake of the trip so far!

Anne and I ended up getting thoroughly and completely soaked in a heavy rain shower during that walk. To say the least, that was quite the invigorating experience. We most certainly survived to tell the tale and it has become quite a funny little anecdote that we now share about our trip.

Onward to Caen

As they say, the show must go on. Once we dried off after our little misstep, Anne and I took another train, this time to Caen. This is a city located in the northern region of Normandy and features a central attraction, the Château de Caen, that happens to be situated at the very top of a hill. It really is quite a picturesque area, thanks in part to the two abbeys located on either side of it.

We decided to rent a car once we arrived in Caen so we could have the vehicle until Friday, which was our planned day to return back to Paris. You may be surprised to find out that renting a car in France was actually quite easy! We Americans drive on the same side of the road as the French and the steering wheel is located on the same side of the car, so driving was almost like being at home. Though the scenery was, admittedly, quite a bit different!

The only real difficulty that I encountered in terms of driving the car was the fact that we ended up renting a vehicle with a manual transmission. And here we have another funny moment: I

simply could not figure out how to get that car into reverse. We had ourselves a few laughs and eventually I did get things figured out so we could set off toward our destinations. Away we went, touring the Normandy region of France of our own accord in our rental car.

Visiting Normandy

Now on to the main event: the Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial. The cemetery is found in Colleville-sur-Mer in the northwestern portion of France and was created on June 8, 1944. It is, in fact, the very first American cemetery located on European ground.

For those that are not familiar with the Battle of Normandy or for those who have not had the opportunity to attend a history class recently, let's take a quick look at what exactly happened here.

Two days before the cemetery became necessary, over 150,000 Allied soldiers descended on the beaches of Normandy in an effort to force the Nazi troops out of Western Europe, according to [History.com](https://www.history.com). Ultimately, their efforts paid off and the Allied forces were able to take control of the five beaches at Normandy.

This success came with a tragic toll in terms of the sheer number of lives lost. According to this same History article, we still do not have an exact number of lives lost that day. Estimates generally suggest casualties numbered in the thousands. The invasion of Normandy's beaches has come to be more commonly known as "D-Day."

The Visitor Center

Our first stop at the Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial was the visitor center. This in and of itself was a powerful experience with so much information to absorb about the Battle of Normandy. The visitor center honors those who fought in the battle and many relics have been preserved for visitors to observe. There is no charge to tour so it provides an economical way to soak in world history for those on a travel budget.

Among the multitudes of interesting things to see in the visitor center are the movies and letters from the soldiers who perished on the beaches of Normandy. These men were real people, with loved ones fervently awaiting their safe return home. Many of the soldiers would never make it back home to those loved ones.

This is a must-see if you are visiting France as it really brings home what a tragedy occurred here. It also makes one deeply grateful for those that died in service to our country; may we always remember those who gave the ultimate sacrifice.

The Cemetery

As we concluded our time at the visitor center, we moved on to the cemetery itself. I don't think that I can stress enough what a poignant experience it is to visit this place. The pictures give you

an idea of what it feels like to stand and look out over the rows and rows of grave markers, but they don't quite do the cemetery justice.

As it happened, our timing was such that we arrived here just after a large celebration for Veteran's Day. Our experience here was truly amazing, however, it would have been that much more incredible to be on hand to witness this celebration.

The Statue at the Heart of It All

Once we took in the actual cemetery, we could not leave without visiting a few more sites here. We moved from the cemetery to the bronze statue known as the "Spirit of American Youth Rising from the Waves."

Surrounding the statue is a reflecting pool and from here you are able to take in the beach, the burial area and two statues representing both France and the United States of America.

A Peaceful Ocean View

Since this is a final resting place for thousands of souls, it seems only fitting that the view be spectacular. Standing among the rows and rows of grave markers, you can look out and take in the awe-inspiring beauty of Omaha Beach.

It is difficult to imagine the terror these soldiers experienced as they stormed the beaches of Normandy, but looking at the beach below one can begin to picture a glimmer of the horrors that awaited them that day.

Now, 75 years later, we found ourselves stopping to pause in appreciation of the sacrificed lives and to take a moment of silence to honor the fallen.

The Armistice Day Celebration

Armistice Day is celebrated each year on November 11 to observe the anniversary of the signing of the armistice between the Allies and the Germans, effectively putting an end to World War I.

Unfortunately, we had arrived one day too late and we ended up missing the commemoration. However, we heard reports that it was a huge celebration. There was also an amazing event in Paris as well, with 80 world leaders coming to France to observe Armistice Day. We were fortunate to be able to observe these celebrations taking place while we stayed in Paris. It truly is a cause for celebration and a time to appreciate the unity of these many world leaders!

The Conclusion

Touring the awe-inspiring sights of the Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial was, without a doubt, a weighty experience. The entire site from the memorial to the visitor center

was put together so well with such thoughtful intention! I highly recommend taking the time on your travels to France to pause here at Normandy.