

A LONG WEEKEND IN

Normandy

Take the pain out of riding abroad – just sort out the ferry, arrive in France and let a guided touring company do all the hard work. What could be easier?

Words and pictures **Nathan Milward**

- ✓ Riding in a group
- ✓ Making friends
- ✓ Friendly locals
- ✓ Good roads
- ✓ Great cheeses



Portsmouth, late one Sunday night. I'm at a petrol station putting fuel in the Suzuki's tank while over the road a couple of youths steal a metal fence from a building site and

intentionally carry it into the path of an oncoming car. Fortunately it falls and hits the ground just in time for the Volvo to go over the top of it. The youths run off, laughing. I shake my head and wonder what's become of the world.

The scene is made more stark by the weekend I'd just spent in France, Normandy to be precise. For three days I'd seen nothing but quaint little villages, rolling countryside, and plenty of peace and quiet which surely would have been destroyed by someone this side of the Channel.

I was there as a guest of Bike Normandy, a motorcycle touring company owned and operated by English couple John and Jeanette Eggleton. Seven years ago the pair quit their jobs in England, bought a farmhouse not far from Camembert and began offering tours to English folk who might want a weekend away, in a foreign county, without having to worry about navigating, or where they're going to stay that night, or whether or not they're going to find any good roads to ride. Such things are guaranteed. The couple can accommodate a maximum of ten people, the tours can be tailored to you – they can even take you off-road.

On the overnight ferry from Portsmouth to Le Havre, I met the other guys booked on

the trip. They were four Welshmen: two were coppers, one was a special, and the other in the forces. There were supposed to be a few more but they'd had to cancel last minute. That left Steve on a Suzuki GSX1400, Alex on a Bandit 1200, and Luke and Griff each on a GSX650F. Given that I was riding RiDE's GSX1250FA test bike, it was a Suzuki full-house. Though no way intentional, the Suzuki was deemed perfect because of its panniers, comfy seat and because nobody else on Team RiDE needed it for the weekend.

We met John and Jen on the Friday morning at a café in the town of Honfleur, a short ride from the ferry terminal. It was a beautiful spot, down by the harbour, the sun beginning to warm the first round of croissants. To break the ice I'd dropped the 1250 doing a u-turn in a side street, the scuffed paintwork and engine casing nowhere near as badly damaged as my pride. But we laughed. And drank more coffee and went through the safety briefing where we were told to keep an eye out for a red triangle with a black cross in the middle. This sign means slow down – just around the corner you'll find a side lane which has right of way to turn into the main road, no matter how fast the foreign motorcycle is going. Best try to remember that.

With that, we rode. Through Normandy, down tight twisty lanes and along sweeping forest-flanked roads. The pace was good, the weather brilliant, the scenery not quite as spectacular as other parts of France; quite drab in places.

It was the little villages we passed through, with their wooden shutters and hanging baskets and quaint little squares, that enthralled. What I liked about France was the way bikers were generally treated by other road users. Most pulled to one side, giving us room to pass. The driving

Planning checklist

✓ TWO WEEKS BEFORE

Ring Bike Normandy, confirm place. Book ferry as not included in price, check I have European Health Insurance Card (old E111) and take out travel insurance as EHIC doesn't include repatriation costs

✓ DAY BEFORE

Pick up bike and Hein Gericke gear from office, pack panniers, check passport, booking reference, fill tank, check tyre pressure, check weather forecast



Anyone dropped a bike? Any youths with fences? No? Looks like we're safe to board then...

What I took

Debit card, passport, driving licence, ownership documents, ferry booking reference, camera, laptop, pack of sweet, some mints, one pair of knackered trainers, flip flops, shorts, t-shirts, jumper, spare gloves, cap, toothbrush, toothpaste, deodorant, Hein Gericke textiles, Lid helmet, Stylmartin boots, book (*Jupiter's Travels*), open mind, clean pants