



Normandy in the snow

A trip to the continent is usually a summertime affair but one UBG contributor has found a different time of year to sample some Gallic delights. Story/pics Mike Blake



You must have seen one of those 'Pack-it-all-in-and-move-abroad-to-a-new-life' programmes on TV? The new life is usually based in nice countryside with cheap property that's the result of a total absence of jobs in the vicinity. Normandy is a good example of this scenario. Although most people just scream through the place on their way south or west, Normandy has a lot to offer in terms of lovely villages and a slow pace of life.

John and Jeanette Eggleton have solved the employment problem by making their new home the centre for leisure weekends run by their company Bike Normandy. There are two offerings, a road bike trip where they meet you at the port and take you touring and an off-road version where they bring in local guides to take you out on the local trails starting from their property. (They are also open as a regular B&B in the summer. For

details check out www.bikenormandy.com).

Their place is ideal for accommodating a crowd of people on bikes. The basement has pool and table-football plus a big fridge full of drinks. The décor is sparse, a bit like a clubhouse but it also has a 'drying room' where heaters and dehumidifiers dry your kit overnight, which is bloody vital in winter. The lounge-diner is huge, with an open fire to warm your bits on and big sofas to rest while you stroke the dogs and lubricate your throat in advance of the evening meal.

We arrived too late for this on Friday night; it was past 1 o'clock in the morning before we arrived from the Caen ferryport. One piece of advice if you go to France, take a good map.

We were a party of eight, organised by Darren who I'd met last year on one of Chris Evans' Normandy trips. There were two Scousers and the rest were all from Tarleton near Preston.

My three previous trips to Normandy off-road have been in November. The weather is usually mild and wet, very wet but, this year was different, and a harsh winter – the weather forecasters had been warning us about it for months – was upon us. The temperature on day one was barely above freezing. The cold took its toll on several of the batteries, a bump start down the hill being needed to fire them up.

Firing up the distinctly jaded riders was more of a challenge. Riding gear is a big question on days like this. You don't want to be cold, but trail riding is hard physical work, sitting in a puddle of sweat is a recipe for hypothermia when you stop. Snow started to fall as we left and I wondered if the jacket I'd bought on eBay was waterproof. I needn't have worried; by the time we paused for breath I had a breastplate of solid ice!

Riding in the snow was a new experience for me, but to be honest it wasn't too bad. The snow was more predictable than the frozen grass, which was always ready to catch you out if you gave the bike too much right hand. The conditions varied enormously with a solid covering of snow giving way to frosted grass then frozen mud every couple of miles. We coped well, despite the hangovers, and were grateful for lunch. Eating out in small restaurants in rural France is not the wallet draining that travellers to Paris know so well. You can eat and drink well as a group for 8-18 euros, depending which of the fixed price menus you select.



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Dinner on the second night was followed by extended drinking into the small hours and our only casualty of the weekend. Scouser Roger has several stitches in his head, the result of falling down and hitting his head on the corner of a wall. Unperturbed he insisted that he was fine as blood spurted rhythmically between his fingers. John took him to hospital where after treatment he offered to walk the 10 miles back from the hospital rather than give John the bother of driving him. I risk no libel suits by admitting that Roger was not 100 per cent sober throughout this incident. Roger was returned with an amusing bandage that made his helmet sit rather high on his head but otherwise didn't seem to worry him.

On day two we put the bikes in the vans and onto the trailers and headed to the Suisse Normand. This wooded, hilly area is a must for off-roaders, no more flat farm tracks here. The 'Chemins' (trails) twist through the trees with steep gradients and plenty of water crossings.

Large rocks in water-formed gulleys knock the front wheel sideways and gnarly roots, slippery with frost and mud, do their best to see you and your bike on the deck. Amazingly, offs were few, but there were some notable exceptions and some cracking (no pun intended) collisions with trees.

After a couple of hours' hard graft in the forest most of the riders were steaming, literally. So was the Husaberg, but a rest for the boys and a top up of the radiator from my camel-back for the Husy and all was well. The next downhill section saw my GasGas sliding slowly down a muddy slope with both wheels locked, until we hit a tree, which left the Pampera with a shortened front mudguard. This didn't bother me overly until we left the woods and got back out onto fast lanes with watery ruts. I was covered in slurry in seconds! My 'V-wipe' was the only thing that gave me any temporary vision. Luckily GG parts are cheap, although the replacement mudguard came with no mounting holes pre-drilled.



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I did the job 'by eye' after 30 minutes of futile messing with callipers and rulers. It looked fine, ie no wonkier than the original. GasGas bikes have 'character' that's why the owners love them so much; no two bikes are quite the same, even new.

Somehow riding on the right is more exciting than the usual left-hand side of the road, so a trip to France is always worthwhile. Add the advantages of the wine, food and the friendly people and the appeal is obvious. In the UK, no one likes off-road riders. Sneered at, abused or just haughtily ignored by passers-by, it is a pleasant surprise to have French farmers hold open gates and wave you on your way.

Hunting (shooting with dogs not fox-hunting with horses) seems to be the national sport in the countryside. This can require a few diversions to the planned route but no angry confrontations. The gun-toting hunters are best avoided after lunch, which is always washed down by plenty of booze. Having French guides certainly helps in

dealing with the natives. The guides are seasoned Enduro riders and favour KTMs, mostly strokers to deal with the steep gradients and forests of the Suisse Normand, unlike other trips, which require you to navigate by 'road-books' (like on a rally). For this trip you just follow the guides who are friendly and flexible and happy to vary the route based on the conditions and the capabilities of the group. Two of us became separated at one point so we were directed down a short cut along a railway line. My chain came off on this section; I'm not surprised, as riding across railway sleepers is enough to pulverise your body and shake your bike to bits.

The current NERC bill threatens the future of off-road riding at home. I just hope that trips across the Channel will remain a pleasant change from the usual but I fear they may one day become the last resort...

■ www.bikenormandy.com