

Great French weekends ... Pas de Calais

A new service in this underrated region offers local 'greeters' to show visitors the best places to eat, drink and soak up the sights.

Liz Boulter tries it out...

Asked what the far north of France is like, most people would say either a) dreary, flat and industrial, or b) haven't the faintest because we just get on the autoroute and head for Provence/the Dordogne/the Alps. Only those in the know would tell you that the countryside of the Pas de Calais département is among the prettiest you'll find anywhere, with expansive vistas of rolling hills, and hidden valleys opening one from another. Add an impressive coastline - cliffs, headlands and miles of dune-backed sandy beaches - and history by the spadeful (Battle of Agincourt, anyone?) and the area ought to be a magnet for tourists.

The weather and the area's post-industrial image don't help. But while there is some bleak country around Lille, the land further west is as glorious as, say, Dorset - but with better food. And summers are a degree or two warmer than in southern England.

So, how to make people forgo or delay the long autoroute slog and make time for the delights a stone's throw from the Channel ports? Enter the greeter, a concept invented in the early 1990s to encourage visitors to New York. Residents of the Big Apple were recruited to spend a few hours showing visitors that their city was not all mean streets and police sirens, and share their insider knowledge.

Though fear of muggers and crazed drug addicts is not what puts people off visiting the Pas de Calais, the principle is the same. As in New York, these are not professional guides, but locals with a passion for their area, who will take you (for free) off the beaten track, to places that match your interests. Local history or natural history, long walks or long lunches - you look up the speciality on the website greeters62.com, and choose your greeter.

Being of a greedy disposition, my husband and I plumped for gastronomy and are met by Guislaine, a chatty farmer's wife who travelled the world - including a couple of years in the US, hence her fluent English - before settling in quaint Wierre-Effroy. Bouncing around the village and its scattered hamlets in her exuberant company, we feel less like tourists and more like we are meeting a friend keen to show off their home turf. After taking us to a chapel and an open farm, Guislaine settles us at a table in the cosy Auberge de Sainte Godeleine for a long chat over beer and crêpes with cassonade, a honey-coloured raw sugar made from the sugar beet that grows in just about every other field hereabouts.

The countryside around may look like Tolkein's Shire but, as elsewhere, small farms have been swallowed up by vast agricultural concerns. But that has left many delightful period farmhouses ripe for turning into hotels. Such a one is **La Ferme du Vert**, close to Wierre-Effroy. The late 18th-century buildings have been converted into 16 stylish rooms with up-to-the minute bathrooms, and a restaurant serving modern versions of traditional dishes. The hotel is run by two brothers, sons of the original farmers. Two other brothers run a fromagerie behind the farm, making five varieties of cow's milk and goat's milk cheese - served at dinner and available at the farm gate.

Following our greeter's suggestions, we spend the following day eating and drinking our way round the food producers of the "Sept Vallées", a beautiful region of clear babbling waters and secret valleys below green hills. Not that the inhabitants appear to have much time to appreciate nature's riches, for here live some of the hardest-working people we have ever met.

Take Valérie Magniez, a young mother of three who runs **La Halte d'Autrefois** in the Créquoise valley. Run on strict ecological principles, La Halte offers organic goat's cheese from its own herd of 20-odd goats, and bread from a wood-fired oven. Flour for the bread and oats for the goats come from organic producers a few miles away. The goats, milked by hand, live in a two-storey des res built by Valerie and her husband,

Christophe, from local wood. And by the side of a stream five minutes' walk away the pair have built - also themselves, also from local wood - a romantic chalet which they let to holidaymakers. Visitors are welcome to help on the farm, but should be aware that the chalet has no electricity and only a composting toilet.

We feel like sybarites sitting in Valerie's sunny courtyard sampling the fresh goat's cheese (each little cheese takes a litre of milk and two days to make) and excellent chewy bread while she dashes around getting lunch ready before the kids get home from school, chatting all the while about the two-day cheese- and bread-making courses they run for up to 50 children. In autumn, when the goats are pregnant and therefore not being milked, rather than take a breather, the couple make litre upon litre of delicious cider from their own orchard. This washes down the bread and cheese perfectly.

Further down the valley, we interrupt the labours of François Delepierre, who shows us round his organic and "heritage" fruit and veg at **Aux Légumes d'Antan** in Offin. There are black carrots and white beetroot, more varieties of mint and basil than I can count, and 18 varieties of tomato - black, purple, yellow, green, and one with skin like a peach - all grown without polytunnels, because you get more flavour that way. François's organic techniques include bluetit nesting boxes - your average bluetit apparently gobbles up 1,000 insects a day. His mum helps him run a two-room B&B and weekend restaurant, but François tends his 30,000 square metres virtually alone - working 20-hour days in high summer. We pile a crate with lettuce, red onions, yellow courgettes and home-made jams and bid farewell as he heads off for more hours' hard graft.

Now for something sweet. In another sleepy valley independent chocolatiers Alain de Rick and his brother Bruno make fine truffles and pralines from cocoa beans they source in Madagascar, Ghana and the Amazon basin. Tours of their factory in Beussent are popular with English school parties and busloads of French pensioners alike.

Back in the Créquoise valley is the factory where Hubert Delobel, remembering the sickly redcurrant liqueur his grandmother used to drink, decided to try to use the jewel-like fruits for something more suited to modern palates. With Hubert's son Romain we tour the factory, bottling plant and currant garden, then sit in the sun to sample the sparkling deep pink aperitif **Perlé de Groseille**. It's fruity but deliciously sharp, and we add a few bottles to the chocs and veg in the boot.

Such a food-packed day demands a hearty dinner, which we have at **La Ferme des Chartoux** in nearby Maresville. This former sheep farm is more homely than La Ferme du Vert, with lots of floral fabrics in the bedrooms. But its tarte à l'oignon is a thing of wonder - delicate golden pasty holding a mass of tender onions quivering in eggy, cheesy creaminess.

The queen of the Pas de Calais greeters is Colette Martel, a teacher of English with a small B&B and a huge appetite for meeting people. She takes us to visit her neighbour, renowned sculptor Bruno Maillard. Charm itself, Bruno shows us around his studio. It was he who produced the series of nine white steel figures - from fishermen to archers - that adorn bridges over the nearby A16. Sitting in the sculptor's garden discussing art and ideas with him and his philosopher partner, we reflect that this is about as far from the usual museum-church-coffee-shopping tourism as you can get.

Then Colette whisks us off for one more lunch, at **Froggy's**, just off the main square in walled Montreuil-sur-Mer. If you never thought you could go into raptures over a pork chop, Froggy's will change your mind.

We love greeters, we decide. But, loading our groaning stomachs into the car for the drive back to Calais, we vow that next time we'll book the services of Christian, whose speciality is long-distance walks.