

Bon voyage



Brittany's super-ferry 'Normandie' sets sail, little Fiesta safely stowed...

Well travelled he may be, but **Darren Calpin's** yet to drive his own car on Continental roads. Until now. Here's hoping Normandy's highways are quiet...

THE NERVES ARE starting to kick in now. The cars queued in front of me have, after a good 20 minutes of being stationary, started inching forward – and now it's my turn. "Here we go," I mutter under my breath and within a few seconds I'm driving my little Fiesta up a steep concrete ramp and round onto the gigantic 'Normandie' cross-channel super-ferry, its cavernous loading bay waiting to consume us all like a great metal basking shark.

Up another ramp I go and, before I know it, I'm almost bumper-to-bumper with the Peugeot estate in front of me. One of the French deck hands instructs me to stop and inserts a set of chocks under my wheels. Another hands me an info card detailing which deck I'm parked on and where the nearest

stairwell is. Job done.

I should probably explain that, even though I'm a well-travelled man who's driven everything from motorcycles to Soviet-era jeeps in various parts of the world, I've never actually driven my own vehicle on the continent before. Thus, when the opportunity to take my car on the overnight Portsmouth-Caen (Ouistreham) ferry for a three-day self-drive tour of the D-Day landing beaches came up, I jumped at the chance to earn my European driving spurs.

Let's be honest though, driving onto the ferry is the easy part. And, it must be said, the whole process of checking in and loading up at the Brittany Ferries port in Portsmouth is a pretty straightforward affair; far less stressful than the

rigmarole you have to endure at airports.

Now, safely ensconced in my cosy four-berth cabin, my mind once again wanders to the main event – driving on the 'wrong' side of the road for three days. I can't lie, even though I've memorised maps of Ouistreham and scrutinised the roads I'm likely to take on Google Street View, I'm still feeling a bit anxious about how I'll fair. Lying back on my surprisingly comfy single bed, I console myself with the fact I'll have a good night's sleep under my belt when I arrive tomorrow morning and that, being a Sunday, there probably won't be that much traffic on the roads anyway. And with that, the ship starts moving and I fall easily off to sleep.

A SNAIL'S PACE

The next day starts with a tinkling melody playing through the Normandie's PA system that sounds like the soundtrack from an old Commodore 64 game. Our early morning call. Evidently, I've just enough time to wolf down a cooked breakfast in the casual Riva Bella buffet restaurant, and fit my recently purchased beam

deflectors to my headlamps. These are legally required in France; driving without them (or a first aid kit, warning triangle and high-vis vest) is a big no-no and the local plod will swiftly hit you with a hefty on-the-spot fine if they catch you flouting the rules.

Despite being well prepared, well rested and well fed, I feel palpably nervous as I turn on the ignition and prepare to disembark. A cacophonous sound of squealing brakes reverberates around the ship's huge emptying belly – it's time to go.

Still in our queues, we leave the Normandie and edge steadily around the port's snaking roads toward passport control. It's about 6am and still a little dark. As we round a bend and filter into the various different lanes, I can see the road I need to take when I exit the port (Rue des Dunes) through the perimeter fence. Save for one lonely old Citroen poodling along at a snail's pace, it looks completely free of traffic.

Ten minutes later and I'm the one poodling along the Rue des Dunes at a snail's pace,

The region's poignant war memorials are easily reached by car



There's a first time for everything! Next stop, roundabout confusion



Deserted roads herald Darren's arrival in Normandy

Brittany's Portsmouth port beckons for Darren and his trusty motor



my heightened senses on full alert. I open my driver's side window fully for a blast of fresh air, and then open the passenger side window just for good measure. If I had a sunroof I probably would've opened that too.

HIGHWAY FAUX-PAS

Whether it's the super-effective air conditioning or the continued absence of traffic, my confidence starts to grow. The apprehension is still there, but the thrill, the excitement of finally getting to drive on the continent, is ever-so-gradually pushing my initial fears to one side.

I become emboldened as the day goes on, taking roundabouts, junctions and pedestrian crossings solidly in my stride. It helps enormously that the 'STOP' signs at junctions are displayed in English. Even as I head west out of Ouistreham on the meandering D514, past Sword Beach and through some very cramped town centres, I feel relatively comfortable behind the wheel.

But then, for some bizarre reason, I decide

to go the wrong way (clockwise) around a roundabout in Luc-sur-Mer and I immediately need a new pair of pants. Luckily, this sleepy little seaside town is still very quiet so there's only one car – piloted by a very animated driver – that I need to extend my profuse apologies to. His English is very good. So good in fact that he manages to sum up my rogue manoeuvre with just three words.

By mid-afternoon, my bizarre faux-pas on the roundabout is a distant memory and I finally start to feel at ease behind the wheel, ie I put my windows up and turn the radio on. With my anxiety levels bottomed out and the sun shining brightly, I actually start to enjoy the intoxicating sense of freedom that comes from being 'on the road'. I stick to the coast roads as much as I can, stopping at anything and everything that piques my interest or catches my eye. And, in this part of the world, that's a hell of a lot.

D-DAY MEMORIES

With all five of the D-Day landing beaches: >>

Watery escapes

Sword, Juno, Gold, Omaha and Utah sited along this 50 mile stretch of coast, the region is effectively one huge open-air museum of the world-changing events that took place here 75 years ago. Indeed, you can't go very far at all without seeing a German gun battery, Allied war memorial, preserved battle tank or – most moving of all – vast war cemetery. Reminders all, that the liberation of Europe came at a huge cost, not just to the British, Canadians and Americans who provided the bulk of the sea, land and air forces, but also to the many other nationalities, including France, who contributed to the largest seaborne invasion in history.

I visit all five of the landing beaches over the next two days. While places like the scenic seaside town of Arromanches are

pleasant and even rather upbeat, others, most notably the immaculate American cemetery overlooking Omaha Beach, are hauntingly sombre.

Though D-Day is now an integral part of the region's identity, there is of course far more

to Normandy than its recent history. After all, this is the land of William the Conqueror, a proud region characterised by Calvados brandy and sleepy little hamlets so idyllic they might have been dreamed up by Walt Disney. It also boasts one of the most beautiful medieval cities in all of Northern France, Bayeux, home of the famed tapestry.

Sitting outside a relaxed little bistro back on Ouistreham seafront, I feel privileged that I've been able to explore this region and learn about its rich history in such an enjoyably versatile way. Spying the Normandie on the horizon, slowly making its way towards us, I hit myself with a simple question: if I could use one word to sum up a road trip along the Normandy coast, what would it be?

Liberating. **GTW**

Get me there

- The Portsmouth to Caen (Ouistreham) crossing with Brittany Ferries takes around six hours, with the cost of a return journey around £430 for one vehicle and a four-berth outside cabin.
- Special fares are available for multiple-vehicle groups (minimum of 10 vehicles), as well as groups of 30 or more people.
- Plan your journey and find out more at brittany-ferries.co.uk

The odd highway faux-pas aside, the French roads pass many a sight-seeing gem