

HISTORY

A Town of Two Tales

Genial Bayeux, France, just wanted to mind its own business, but two of Europe's great invasions clinched it a place in history. BY KAREN BERGER

I'm looking at an action comic strip from the 11th century depicting a flotilla sailing across a sea to war. My eyes wander the 72 frames embroidered on a piece of linen 231 feet long and 20 inches high, each one illustrating part of the story: A promise, a betrayal, a battle for a kingdom.

I'm in Bayeux, a town in Normandy, and the linen is the Bayeux Tapestry, one of the most important relics from medieval Europe. If you have a mental picture of a Norman town, Bayeux would be it: half-timbered houses, cobbled streets, and a cathedral that seems too big for a population of 1,500 souls (unlike many towns here, Bayeux was not bombed in World War II). The hotel I'm in completes the picture: The three-star Lion d'Or dates to the 18th century. Its restaurant—frequented during WWII by Gen. Eisenhower, Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and Field Marshal Rommel—features specialties like salt-marsh lamb, and oysters and sole from the English Channel, a few miles away.

The Channel—"La Manche." Without that seaway of roiling water, Bayeux might rate a paragraph in a guidebook. But the town's location just inland of the Channel placed it in the path of two major European events: the invasion of England in 1066 by Norman ruler William the Conqueror, who sailed from nearby beaches to do battle at Hastings (the subject of the tapestry); and the landing of Allied forces on the same beaches



on June 6, 1944—D-Day—to fight the Nazis. Bayeux was the first French town freed by the Allies, on June 7, 1944, and is thus the ideal place to learn about the first invasion and commemorate the second.

As I study the tapestry in the Musée de la Tapisserie de Bayeux, the details



D-Day lives on in Arromanches, where the Allies built an artificial harbor in 1944. A Bayeux Tapestry panel (below) shows Halley's Comet shooting over England's doomed King Harold.

strike me: Boatbuilders axing down trees to make ships, servants roasting meat for a royal banquet, and heads rolling as soldiers are speared off their horses in the Battle of Hastings. By the last panel, English ruler Harold has been killed and his troops are fleeing. The still-bold colors embroidered onto the linen tell the story with the vividness it must have had in the Middle Ages.

I head off the next day to explore that other, more recent war, driving east to Arromanches and the Musée du Débarquement—Museum of the Landing. Its exhibits detail the construction of an artificial harbor here just after D-Day. En route I breeze past summer homes. Cafés here are named for Lord Mountbatten and Winston Churchill. Entering

one, I speak in French, but the owner responds in English. "I'm pleased to speak English," she tells me. "I was a girl during the war, and my parents lost everything. The Allied liberation freed us. This is one way to say thank you."

At the museum I view a film that describes the construction of this "eighth wonder of the world," a harbor the Allies built to receive supplies. Twelve days after D-Day, the harbor was operational.

My last stop is the American Military Cemetery at Omaha Beach. I look upon

endless rows of white marble stars and crosses. Below, the waters of the Channel shimmer, a peaceful scene. Water can wash the blood away, I find myself thinking, but not the stories. And they are stories we all need to know.

KAREN BERGER has written nine books, on hiking, backpacking, and scuba diving.

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Bayeux Tourism Office, Pont Saint-Jean, B.P. 343-14403, Bayeux; tel. from U.S. 011-332-3151-2828; www.bayeux-tourism.com. Lion d'Or Hotel, 71 rue St-Jean, Bayeux; tel. from U.S. 011-332-3192-0690. Musée de la Tapisserie de Bayeux, rue de Nesmond, Bayeux; tel. from U.S. 011-332-3151-2550; e-mail tapisseriedebayeux@dial.oleane.com.