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Northern soul

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architectural
treasures*

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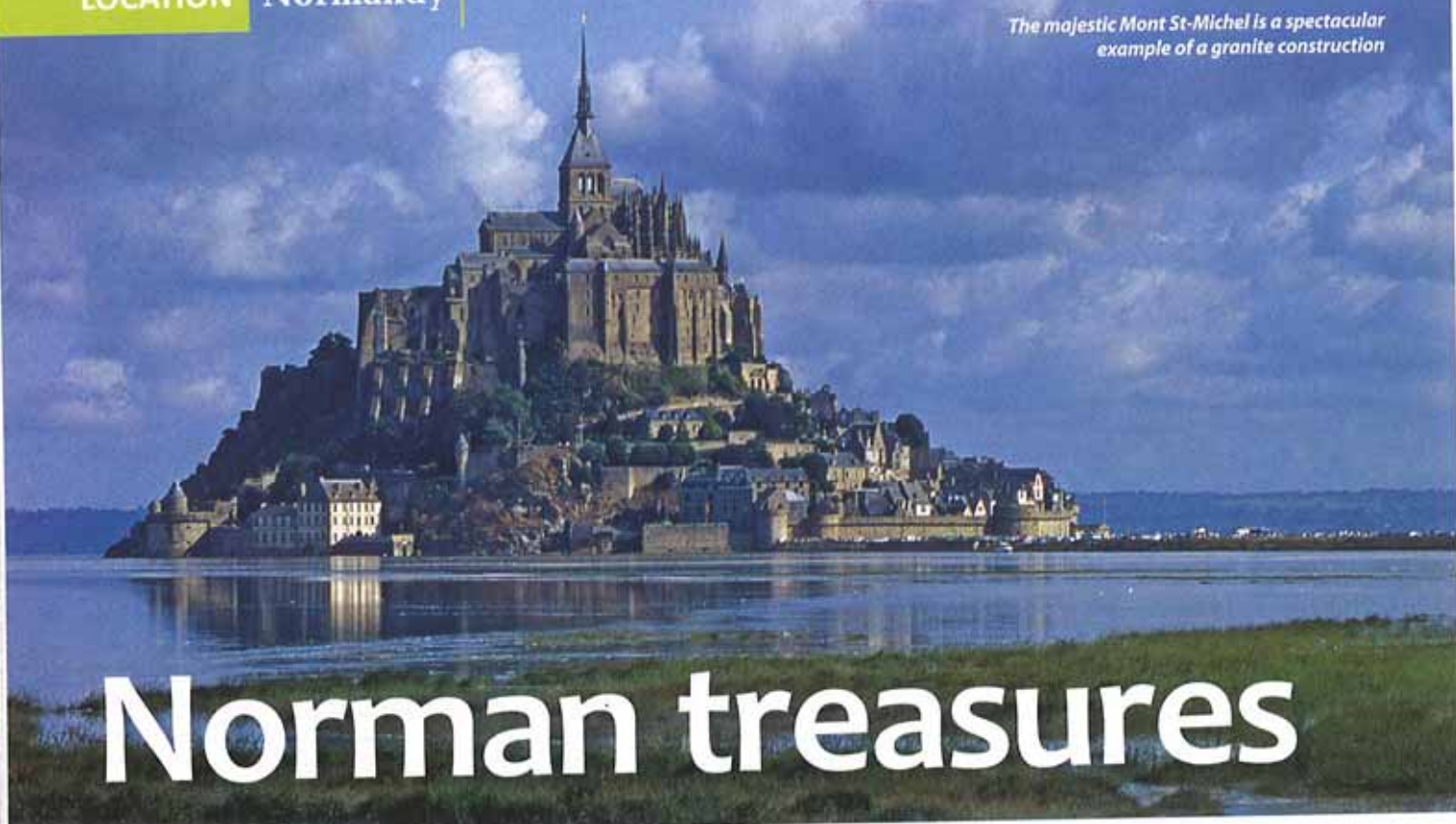


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Norman treasures

COMITE REGIONAL DE TOURISME DE NORMANDIE © DIETER BASSE

TAKE A MEANDER THROUGH NORMANDY WITH EWA SHEPHARD TO GAIN AN INSIGHT INTO THE ARCHITECTURAL TREASURES OF THIS DIVERSE REGION

Normandy is one of the most attractive and easily accessible regions of France for the lucky residents of northern Europe. Famous for far more than the D-Day invasion, cheese and cider, Normandy has a wide diversity of coastal and rural areas, a relaxed culture and lifestyle coupled with a well-developed transport infrastructure.

The unspoilt Norman countryside, with its lush green meadows, cool wooded valleys and beech and pine forests, remains a haven of tranquillity. Its villages, leafy lanes and clear streams are the ideal setting in which to relax and rediscover the joys of nature. One feels that time has been suspended, like a snow dome awaiting a shake to spark it into life.

But don't let first impressions fool you into thinking Normandy is a backwater of rural French life – being only 90 minutes by train from the capital, many Parisians are purchasing properties here thus giving a frisson of excitement to this otherwise calm and very French region.

The variety of architectural styles varies greatly from each part of this verdant region: from the romantically beautiful timber-framed (or half-timbered to use a more correct architectural term) *colombages* in the east, to substantial

stone-built properties in the west.

Much of the style has, understandably, developed from the materials available to artisans over the centuries with *colombage* construction being one of the oldest techniques known as a way to build wooden houses and barns.

With the pastures of Haute-Normandie being conducive to arable farming, and interspersed by woodland, timber was easily available to assist in the construction of an oak-framed property. An *hourdage* or infill of either cob (*tourchis*) – an easily

produced cheap building material combining clay and straw – or of brick – usually shallow profiled bricks as these were the most easily produced – was developed to save costs as timber prices rose.

Modern equivalents of these natural products are available through

specialist suppliers in both France and England, whether real earth products, or hemp-based material to work in with the cob for added strength.

The cob is then covered with a layer of lime render (or *crepi*) to allow it a good level of protection and weatherproofing. Sometimes the wood framing is coated in render; often not. When viewing properties of this type of construction, especially if it is an agricultural building for conversion

rather than a purpose-built house, look to see if the render has been replaced over time with cement. This is often used just to keep the building maintained but it can cause problems for the timber frame and will need replacing with traditional lime render at the earliest opportunity.

Leaving large areas of cement in situ stops the frame from naturally flexing and allows rot to creep in so that structural uprights need to be replaced. However, timbers can sometimes be left in place with supporting wood being cut in to add structural strength.

POPULAR CHOICE

The *colombage* method of creating a home for both the family and for the animals that were a vital part of everyday life reaches back to Roman times and was common within France until the 19th century, with many timbered houses remaining across Europe. It is the similarity with the British medieval building construction that is still readily seen throughout mid- to southern England that makes *colombage* houses a popular choice among British buyers.

The traditional topping to the thatch, or *chaume*, in many parts of this area is a ridge of irises. Stunning in late spring and early summer, these plants were more than just the icing on a very pretty cake: the root system of these creeping rhizomes mesh together with the thatch and protect the ridge line from weather and wildlife. Although thatch needs replacing far more often than slate or stone – anywhere between 20-40 years of life is the norm for this traditional roof covering – it has a

MUCH OF THE STYLE HAS DEVELOPED FROM MATERIALS AVAILABLE TO ARTISANS OVER THE CENTURIES, WITH COLOMBAGE BEING ONE OF THE OLDEST TO BE FOUND



The much-photographed Honfleur harbour is stunning, and a visit to the Ste-Catherine quarter is also recommended



A colombage renovation project in Eure. When renovating such a property, it is important to make sure that any cement render is replaced as soon as possible

beauty that many people love.

Fine examples of this storybook architectural style can be found in the capital of Haute-Normandie, Rouen, areas of which were lucky to escape the ravages of the Second World War. Or take a meander among the backstreets of the much-photographed Honfleur, a stunning little town at the junction of the English Channel and the River Seine. The Ste-Catherine quarter is particularly stunning and yet often overlooked when compared with the beautiful ancient harbour below it. The 15th-century L'Église Ste-Catherine is a magnificent timber-framed church, the largest wooden church in France, where the bell tower is sited across the square from the main building so as not to weaken the timber structure.

Bernay and Corneilles, both further south, are lovely examples of timber-framed towns that are well worth a visit. The Marais-Vernier area, close to Pont-Audemer, is where you can see many delightful iris-topped thatched properties on your drive through the countryside.

However, thatch is not for everyone. The knowledge that it will need more maintenance than slate is a turn-off for some; the thought of a higher-than-average influx of creepy crawlies into the home is a repulsion to others. Speaking from personal experience, we have found the variety and quantity of our multi-legged friends no greater in our thatched home than when we lived in a similar aged property roofed in slate, but perhaps we were just lucky!

SKILLED ARTISANS

The traditional construction used to create *colombage* properties – still an oft-found skill utilised by skilled artisans – starts with a low perimeter wall built of stone and lime mortar. This is a vital element of the build as this masonry protects the wood from moisture in the soil. On top of this the timber frame is sturdily constructed and then protected with a blend of linseed oil (*huile de lin*) and turpentine (*térébenthine*) at a ratio of 3:1.

This concoction is also the traditional protection used for terracotta floor tiles and dries to a solidly hard finish with the fluid penetrating the 'pores' of the wood or tile. But beware: linseed can be combustible on a cloth if it is left scrunched up for any

length of time – so make sure you spread open the cloth if you are breaking for lunch or for the night.

TEST OF TIME

Normandy is a region of contrasts as the less clement weather of the western Basse-Normandie area testifies. Easy access to suitable granite led to the development of solidly built stone cottages, farms and barns in a far more protective and less open style than in the east. Indeed roofs were also covered in stone tiles, rather than slate or thatch. You will often spot in the Cotentin peninsula in the north-west of the region the use of blue-green schist: a stone that splits easily into layers, in a similar way to slate, often in a roughly circular shape. This stone is known for its quality and durability, and a property with this type of roof covering in a good condition is likely to outlast you.

The stone used predominantly throughout lower Normandy takes the

form of granite, an easily sourced material in this area. A wonderful example of a stunning granite construction is Mont St-Michel, where the granite was sourced from quarries on the Isles de Chausey in the Channel Islands. On a more human scale, the town of Granville in the Manche department boasts many fine examples of stone-built properties that may fit the bill of a stylish second home. With more than half of properties in this town being apartments, you may find a well-maintained gem in which to invest.

Granite is a unique and elegant natural stone – one of the oldest, hardest and strongest known to man. It is characterised by a blend of small and large grains of crystalline quartz. Often compared to marble, granite is more resistant to acids, hence its use for kitchen worktops. It is also resistant to fracture, which makes it an ideal building material, one that will withstand centuries of weathering.

SAFE AS HOUSES

The weakest point in the construction would be the 'glue' holding the stone together. Traditionally this would be a lime mortar, a material that has soft, porous properties that provide certain advantages when used with granite. However, if a lime mortar is incorrectly blended, it can deteriorate over time and it is a matter of replacing the old with the new. Easy blended lime-based products are readily available from building merchants. A distinct advantage of lime mortar is that, if it cracks, mortar deeper within the joint is exposed and reacts with the air to crystallise and bond across the fissure, reducing the potential loss of strength.

Another key area to investigate is the roof structure. This is especially important if the slates are stone as they will place considerable weight on the timber beams. The first thing French people examine in a prospective house purchase is the roof. By contrast, many Brits hunting for their rural idyll are blinkered on this very same point. Yet without a sound, watertight roof, the rest of your much-dreamed-about new purchase could suffer drastically.

As a final point, it is uncommon for structural surveys to be undertaken during the French property process, yet these are readily available and recommended if you are in any doubt over your dream find. ■

FACTFILE



Region: Basse-Normandie

Departments: Calvados, Manche, Orne

Prefecture: Caen

Land area: 17,589km²

Population: 1,453,000

Population density: 82.6/km²

Region: Haute-Normandie

Departments: Seine-Maritime, Eure

Prefecture: Rouen

Land area: 12,318km²

Population: 1,815,000

Population density: 147.3/km²