

Author Angela Bird investigates:

### What to do and see in and around Montreuil

Apart, of course, from The Society's showroom what makes Montreuil such a popular short-break destination?

For a start, this historic walled town is full of hotels and B&Bs to suit all pockets, excellent restaurants, interesting shops, and a good Saturday-morning market. And there is plenty more – both inside the town and beyond – whatever time of year you decide to visit.



When you have finished an hour-long walk around the ramparts, enjoying the fresh air and fine panoramas, you will have had an excellent overview of Montreuil's twisting medieval lanes. The steep, cobbled street known as Cavée St-Firmin, just down the road from The Society's showroom, inspired a key scene in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* in which the hero, Jean Valjean, lifts a heavy wagon to release a man being crushed to death beneath it. By his action, he inadvertently draws the attention of the policeman who is pursuing him. Now, for a few days each summer, the town stages a *son-et-lumière* production on the theme of Hugo's book. *For dates and reservations, contact Montreuil tourist office [www.tourisme-montreuillois.com/](http://www.tourisme-montreuillois.com/)*

#### SHOPPING

There are plenty of shops in Montreuil, especially around Place de Gaulle – the commercial heart of the town. A short walk north along Rue Pierre-Ledent brings you to Place Darnétal, where the most divine chocolates are on sale from **Chocolats de Beussent**. (Their tiny factory can be visited in the village of Beussent, just 10km north of Montreuil by the D127.)

Pedestrianised Rue des Cordonniers leads off Place de Gaulle into a warren of side streets, where you will find several attractive interior-decoration, flower, *brocante* and crafts shops.

The **Saturday-morning market** in Place de Gaulle is a big draw; however, if your plans do not coincide with this, there are other good markets in the area: Tuesday, Étaples (14km north-west of Montreuil); Thursday, Hesdin (26km south-east) and Marquise (40km north); Friday, Étaples; Sunday, St-Valéry-sur-Somme (40km south-west).

Outside town, you can find a large selection of crafts at the **Cité des Artisans** in the village of Buire-le-Sec, 10km south-east of Montreuil. Open April-September, & December, afternoons; October and November on Saturday and Sunday.  
[www.lacitedesartisans.com](http://www.lacitedesartisans.com)

For **designer clothes shopping**, it has to be Le Touquet; smartest boutiques are located around Place de l'Hermitage, near the tourist office.

And if you can't resist a last-minute bargain, stop at the **Marques Avenue designer-outlet store** near the Tunnel exit at Calais, on the way home; it's at junction 41 from the A16 motorway.

#### GARDENS

The climate of northern France – similar to that of the UK – is conducive to gardening, and there are some splendid ones to visit in the area. Pick of the bunch are those classified as *Jardins Remarquables*, four of which are within easy reach of Montreuil, by car.

The **Jardins de Valloires**, near Argoules, 14km south of Montreuil, adjoins the picturesque Abbaye de Valloires. Its gravel walks are a riot of roses in summer; there is also a bog garden and a wildflower meadow, plus a plant-sales area and a small restaurant serving dishes based largely on vegetables and flowers. *Open daily from mid-March to mid-November.* <http://www.jardinsdevalloires.com/>

At the **Jardin de Séricourt**, near Frévent, 50km south-east of Montreuil, Yves Gosse de Gorre has created a symphony in green. This magical garden is full of carefully-calculated vistas, contrasts of light and shade, of textures, sounds and colours. Witty topiary evokes warriors, waves and garden 'furniture'. *Open all year; closed Sunday and Monday mornings.* <http://www.jardindesericourt.com/>



In contrast, the **Jardins de Maizicourt**, near Auxi-le-Chateau, 54km south-east of Montreuil, majors on dazzling colours, pretty pavilions, and a beautiful structure of garden ‘rooms’. *Open from May to October, Monday to Friday afternoons (daily in June and September).* <http://www.jardinsdemaizicourt.com/>

The **Herbarium des Remparts**, high above the attractive port of St-Valéry-sur-Somme, 40km south-west of Montreuil, is far more colourful than its name implies. Hidden away in the ancient upper town, this walled garden was formerly part of a convent. Plants are grouped by themes such as medicinal, food, dyeing, toxic, and there are some imaginative decorative touches. *Open May to September; closed Monday.* <http://www.jardin-herbarium.fr/>

The owners of **Jardins du Manoir d’Hénocq**, in the village of Enocq, 6km north-west of Montreuil, have laid out lawns, arbours and low hedges in a charming medieval design. *Open June to September, Friday to Sunday 2.30-6.30pm (August, Tuesday to Saturday).* <http://www.jardinsdhenocq.com/>

## HISTORY

In a commanding position overlooking three valleys, Montreuil has had a strategic value since the ninth century. Indeed, until 1678, its position marked the northern frontier of France.

Holy items brought back from the Crusades drew thousands of pilgrims to Montreuil during the Middle Ages to venerate the relics of various saints, resulting in the fine churches that still stand today.

The Hundred Years War raged through France spasmodically from 1337 to 1453, with two of its most memorable battles fought in this area. The village of Azincourt (known to the British as **Agincourt**), 27km east of Montreuil, has a modern visitor centre near the battlefield that clarifies the events of 25 October 1415, and of the rest of that troubled period. The battlefield of **Crécy**, a rather more low-key visit, can be seen just north of Crécy-en-Ponthieu, 26km south-east of Montreuil.

A fine **statue of Field-Marshal Haig**, near the south end of Montreuil's market square, is a reminder that from March 1916 this was a British garrison town. From the run-up to the Battle of the Somme until the end of World War I, some 5,000 military personnel were based here. Their all-important communications centre was deep below **the Citadel**, in a string of now-empty galleries. *Citadel open all year; closed Tuesday.*

There are further echoes of World War I to be felt in the fishing-port of **Étaples**, 13km to the north-west of Montreuil. As well as its notorious 'bullrings', where recently-arrived Tommies were trained up for the horrors of trench warfare, Étaples held nine military hospitals, installed just to the north of the town between the railway line and the sea. This vast site has been transformed by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission into a magnificent focus of remembrance; the 11,000 burials here make this the largest British military cemetery in France.

#### SEASIDE

Its official title may be Montreuil-sur-Mer, but you will have to drive 17km north-west to **Le Touquet** to find the nearest beach. The resort's sea-front area is a little less glamorous than that around its main tourist office, 1km inland. Here, in the casino building, you can obtain a map to lead you around the elegant 1920s villas that nestle among secluded gardens.

Farther up the coast, 30km north-west of Montreuil, **Hardelot** has some impressive villas, too, and equally wide stretches of sand. The other large resort is that of **Berck-sur-Mer**, 19km south-west of Montreuil, which today has a rather downmarket flavour— though in its glory days it was a favourite of the Empress Eugénie and her entourage.

Between Berck and Le Touquet, the small resorts of **Stella-Plage** and **Merlimont-Plage** have dunes, beaches, colourful apartment blocks and fast-food outlets. If you seek more tranquility, try **Ste-Cecile** and **St-Gabriel**, a couple of tiny seaside places among the dunes, 21km north-west of Montreuil.

Along this whole coast, the flatness of the beaches means that at low tide the sea can be so far away that it is almost out of sight. Unless you enjoy a lot of walking between bathes, aim to arrive when the tide is reasonably high.

#### ATTRACTIVE SCENERY AND VILLAGES

**La Madelaine-sous-Montreuil**, to the west of the town and just below its walls, is a pretty spot for waterside walks, as well as for Michelin-starred eating at Alexandre Gauthier's celebrated Auberge de la Grenouillère. Flower-filled **St-Josse**, 6km farther west, has an unexpected maritime tradition for such a land-locked village. Fishermen have come here for centuries to seek divine protection for their boats, carving their crafts' names or registration numbers into the outside of the church's north wall.

Montreuil is at the western edge of the picturesque '**7 Vallées**' area. The 'Seven Valleys' are those of the river Canche (which runs past Montreuil); the river Authie to the south; the Lys to the north-east; plus the Canche's tributaries – the Créquoise, Planquette, Ternoise and Bras de Brosne.

The roads alongside the smaller rivers meander through peaceful farming hamlets, or pretty villages such as Sempy, Lebiez and Fressin. Between the valleys you can take some **scenic drives** over the uplands on roads such as the D129 towards Fauquemergues, or on the D108 from Hesdin to Hucqueliers.

Don't head home without allowing time to drive along the spectacular **D940 coast road** between Boulogne and Calais. Hairpin bends take you up and down between the two famous capes – Cap Gris-Nez and Cap Blanc-Nez – offering mind-blowing views over the downs (and sometimes across to England).



## NATURE

Maps showing **walking routes** around neighbouring villages are available from Montreuil tourist office. There are several lovely woodland walks near the château of Harellet, 30km north-west of Montreuil. The more energetic can follow paths up the 151-metre-high Mont St-Frieux, near Dannes, 8km south-east of Harellet.

For **bird-watchers**, there are storks, herons, grebes and other wetland birds to be encountered at the excellent Parc Ornithologique du Marquenterre, 30km south-west of Montreuil, near the little town of Rue. <http://www.baiedesomme.fr/parc-du-marquenterre-en-baie-de-somme-parc-ornithologique-oiseaux-migrateurs-animation-et-voyage-nature--fre3.html>

*Open daily all year; closed early January.*

## MUSEUMS

As well as several splendid churches to visit, Montreuil has a couple of elegant mansions that are occasionally open. The **Hotel Acary de la Rivière** houses temporary exhibitions, with artworks on show among the 1920s furniture and architectural fittings that date from the time when this was a private home. *Open July and August, Wednesday to Monday afternoons.*

The **Musée Roger Rodière** [http://www.tourisme-montreuil.com/patrimoine\\_culture.php](http://www.tourisme-montreuil.com/patrimoine_culture.php), in the Hôtel Walloy, is the setting for interesting changing exhibitions on different aspects of Montreuil's history. *Open 1*

February to 23 December, Wednesday to Monday.

On the coast, the **Musée du**

**Touquet** [http://www.letouquet.com/web/tourisme\\_saisons/divertir/culture/musees.aspx?id\\_langue=2](http://www.letouquet.com/web/tourisme_saisons/divertir/culture/musees.aspx?id_langue=2) is housed in one of Le Touquet's 1920s villas, and features many works by members of the 'École d'Étaples' – an international group of artists who 'discovered' the fishing port in the late-19th century, and depicted many aspects of the area. *Open afternoons all year, Wednesday to Monday.*

Some of these artists' work can also be seen in Étaples itself, in the **Musée Quentovic** and **Musée de la Marine**. *Both open Tuesday to Sunday afternoons all year.*

Another good port of call in Étaples is **Maréis**,

<http://s247376761.onlinehome.fr/mareis/index.php?file=News> a brilliant modern visitor centre devoted to the fishing industry that is still so important here. Once you have seen its fascinating displays, you will never think lightly of fish again! *Open daily all year; closed Sunday morning from October to March.*

Some wonderful artistic evocations of fishing in earlier times are to be found in the **Musée Opale-Sud** at Berck-sur-Mer, 19km south-west of Montreuil. Housed in a former police station at 60 Rue de l'Impératrice, this delightful modern museum has a collection of paintings by 19th-century artists who were fascinated by the local fishing families, and by the flat-bottomed boats that were hauled up onto the beach at the end of each day. *Open all year; closed Monday morning and all Tuesday.*

<http://www.musenor.com/Les-Musees/Berck-sur-mer-Musee-de-France-Opale-Sud#>

## SPORT

No fewer than seven golf courses lie within 31km of Montreuil, so don't forget your clubs! Courses almost always have a restaurant attached, or at least the possibility of bar meals, so even non-golfers can drop in just for a meal.

**Hardelot**, 30km north-west of Montreuil, two courses.

**Le Touquet**, 18km north-west, three courses (one is nine-hole).

**Namport-St-Martin**, 14km south, two courses.

**Belle-Dune**, near Quend-Plage, 31km south-west.

A **Côte d'Opale Golf-Pass**, valid for 15 days, allows play on a selection of six, out of nine top courses in the area, for one person at €250 (2010 price).

<http://www.golfencotedopale.com/>

There is **canoeing** close at hand on the Canche, below Montreuil's ramparts. The tourist office can advise on this, and also on local **riding** centres and places for **cycle-hire**. Anglers can also go **fishing** in the Course and the Canche rivers (consult Montreuil tourist office about a permit), or cast their lines for trout in some of the specially-stocked lakes in the area.

**Horse-racing** takes place at Le Touquet, from late-May to late-August

<http://www.hippodrome-letouquet.com> on some Saturdays or Sundays. It is also possible to play **tennis** at Le Touquet tennis club, or to practise **sand-yachting** on the resort's vast beach. Information on these may be obtained from Le Touquet's tourist office. [http://www.letouquet.com/index\\_en.aspx?id\\_langue=2](http://www.letouquet.com/index_en.aspx?id_langue=2)

## WHAT'S ON?

There's plenty going on all year in Montreuil. Here are some of the highlights in the town's calendar.

April sees the **Brocante de la Ville-Basse**, an antiques fair held outside the walls, in Montreuil's lower town. Later in the month is the **Journées des Villes Fortifiées**, a weekend of special tours and events in many fortified towns.

For the **Nuit des Musées**, in mid-May, some museums open out of hours to present their collections under an unusual light. Late May/early June sees the **Rendezvous aux Jardins**, a weekend on which many private gardens throw open their gates to visitors. <http://www.rendezvousauxjardins.culture.fr/>

On a Sunday in mid-June, the **Journée du Patrimoine de Pays** draws attention to smaller historic sites and their features, often no less fascinating than the major ones.

The **Fête de la Musique**, later that month, gives an opportunity for professional and amateur instrumentalists to fill the town with music.

Antiques-hunters hit town for Montreuil's annual **Brocante Fair** on 14 July, with 300 exhibitors setting up shop in the main square.

In late July and early August you can catch Montreuil's **Les Misérables-themed son-et-lumière**, performed inside the walls of the citadel. On 15 August the streets are full of artists vying to choose the most picturesque location to fix on canvas during the **Journée des Peintres dans la Rue**.

Mid-September is the time for the **Journées du Patrimoine**, a nationwide weekend event when historic sites put on special events, and some private owners welcome visitors to view lesser-known bits of architectural heritage.

The year draws to a close with Montreuil's annual **Marché de Noël**, a week-long Christmas crafts market, from late November into early December.

<http://www.tourisme-montreuillois.com/uk/actualite.php>

## USEFUL LINKS

[www.tourisme-montreuillois.com/](http://www.tourisme-montreuillois.com/) for Montreuil's tourist office.

<http://www.2p2m.org/> for details of current exhibitions in and around Montreuil and Le Touquet.

<http://www.letouquet.com/> for Le Touquet tourist office.

Angela Bird's guidebook *Northern France: What to do and see within 90 minutes of Calais* is published by Malnoue Publications, London.

More information on the area is available on [www.northernfrance-within90minutesofcalais.co.uk](http://www.northernfrance-within90minutesofcalais.co.uk)

Photos: Angela Bird