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DOVER - DUNKERQUE FERRIES



Dunkerque

REVEALED

by Simon Calder



Simon Calder discovers

NORFOLKLINE & DUNKERQUE



Simon Calder, popular TV and newspaper journalist, reports on his visit to Dunkerque.

One of the joys of travel is to discover places that you had previously overlooked. Over the years I have travelled via Dover and Dunkerque into Europe on a dozen occasions. But only in the past few months have I had the good sense – and good fortune – to devote time to the town and its surroundings. The result is a revelation: I feel I have discovered a hidden corner of France, and can't wait to reveal the secret. The magic ABC of art, beaches and cuisine are in ample supply in Dunkerque, along with a rich history and a beautiful hinterland – not to mention plenty of retail opportunities. I promise you a rewarding visit.

Getting your bearings

Dunkerque's ferry terminal (Port Rapide) is 18km (11 miles) west of the city, with easy access to Dunkerque on the RN1 or the toll-free autoroute, the A16. Dunkerque is planted on an intricate network of waterways, with the centre technically on an island. A focal point is the *Bassin du Commerce*, the former commercial port, now the venue for historic ships – and an outstanding museum, the *Musée Portuaire Dunkerque*. The shore to the north curves east to the Belgian border, an unbroken arc of beautiful beach colonised by surfers, kite flyers and families. Inland, it takes little time to shrug off the suburbs and find yourself in French Flanders: a land of



Image: Office du tourisme Dunkerque

gentle scenery speckled with church spires, with villages huddled around them.

Dunkerque past

The name Dunkerque was originally Flemish, and means simply 'the church on the dunes'. But since its foundation in the eighth century, the port's geographic location – at the point where the North Sea narrows to the Strait of Dover – has long made Dunkerque a strategic prize. It was squabbled over by the British, Dutch and Spanish, but it has remained resolutely French since the late 17th century. That was the time that the local hero, Jean Bart, made his name. During the reign of Louis XIV, privateers – little more than state-sponsored pirates – were given free rein to attack enemy ships. Monsieur Bart

proved particularly good at the task, particularly in capturing Dutch cargo ships laden with food, and his name is commemorated everywhere. Imagine a cross between Sir Francis Drake and Robin Hood and you may understand the admiration felt for him.

The place to get to grips with the story of the port is the marvellous *Musée Portuaire Dunkerque*. The town's startling history is brought to life in an echoing former warehouse, where you can find relics of maritime heritage – as well as the fateful days of World War II. In early summer 1940, the overstretched British Expeditionary Force and part of the French 1st Army were facing annihilation in the face of a rapid German advance. A corridor for the retreating



Image: Simon Calder



Eat Dunkerque

Guess what: 'French Flanders' translates beautifully to the table as 'superb seafood and the best of the land'. A substantial fleet brings fresh fish direct to Dunkerque, while locally sourced *moules* and scrumptious *frites* provide an ideal lunch. For something more exotic, seek out *potjevleesch* – only marginally easier to eat than it is to pronounce, being a jellied composition of meats such as pork, veal and rabbit. Where's that menu again? Mediterranean wine has gravitated to the far north of France, but if you prefer to keep your drink-miles down, then excellent Flemish beer is easily available.

troops was kept open to the sea at Dunkerque, where a makeshift fleet of around 700 vessels shuffled over one-third of a million soldiers back to Britain. Thousands died during Operation Dynamo. But thanks to the heroism of the rescuers and the evacuees, the end result was the conservation of a much-needed fighting force that helped to turn the war. During and after the evacuation, the port was comprehensively bombed.

One of the miracles of Dunkerque is that so much has been so lovingly restored, and extra atmosphere is added with the help of the historic ships moored outside the museum, such as the majestic schooner *Duchesse Anne*, dating from 1901.

For a closer investigation of the maritime heritage, take a tour of the port aboard a more modern vessel, *La Bazenne*.

Dunkerque present

Twenty-first-century Dunkerque is unashamedly modern, but punctuated with great monuments. My favourite is the mighty Belfry, where the 48 bells ring out vigorously on the hour and half-hour regardless of whether any tourists are on the roof at the time – as I was, and I must say that as an earthquake simulator the experience is unmatched. But wander along almost any street in the centre and you will encounter a neat architectural surprise or two; the *Hotel de Ville*, or town hall, is a masterpiece of decoration. To be truly startled, just aim

a short way north and east of the city centre. *Le Laac* is a combination of a dramatic outdoor sculpture garden and a modern art museum that seems rooted in the second half of the 20th century. Fascinating.

Dunkerque shopping

While I, like many men, possess only a faint grasp on the concept of shopping, I must say Dunkerque has several retail dimensions. Many visitors will be satisfied with the trio of out-of-town hypermarkets that offer delicious bargains. Those of us who like the rustic things in life will make sure to be in the centre of Dunkerque on Wednesday or Saturday, when the outdoor market takes over. People who seek out specialist shops should be delighted with

the *Crèmerie La Ferme* at 22 rue Poincare – you smell the ripe and wonderful cheeses before you see the shop – and the confectioner named after the local hero, *Aux doigts de Jean Bart* at 6 rue du Sud, where the sweetest tooth can be satisfied.

You can also enjoy a couple of superb retail set-pieces. Make your way to Dunkerque on 15 August and you can witness the amazing *Braderie* – the flea market that infiltrates the centre of town and resembles a vast car-boot sale. And from a few days before Christmas to mid-January, the biggest winter fair in French Flanders takes place. By February, Carnival has taken over: on the Sunday before Shrove Tuesday, Dunkerque goes wild. ➤





Beyond Dunkerque

Many visitors will be content to define 'Beyond Dunkerque' as the temptingly wide, soft and long stretch of sand that dissolves beautifully into the horizon. But trust me: head a short way inland, to the town of Bergues, and you will be glad you made the journey. Anyone who has visited the medieval Belgian city of Bruges will recognise a rugged wall wrapping around the gorgeous blend of handsome-but-tottering, brick-built houses perched on the water's edge or clustered around the central square. The difference: relatively few tourists venture to this pretty-as-a-picture town. Monday morning is the ideal time to be there, when the market takes place. And on carnival day, the mayor still throws pork sausages to the hungry peasants.

5 THINGS

you didn't know about Dunkerque

- 1 The ties with Britain are strong: the port was part of England in the 17th century, until it was sold by Charles II in October 1662.
- 2 Until the 1970s the Night Train from London to Paris came through here – but the passengers could stay asleep, because the entire train was loaded on to the ferry from Dover.
- 3 If you go just across the border to the Belgian town of De Panne, you can climb aboard a tram that trundles all the way along the coast of Belgium, via Ostend and Zeebrugge, almost to the Dutch frontier.
- 4 From here you can reach Paris in 80 minutes thanks to the TGV express train.
- 5 Dunkerque is so far north that, as the crow flies, the Scottish city of Inverness is closer than the French resort of Biarritz.

FACT FILE

Tourist information

The excellent Dunkerque tourist office is located in the Belfry (*Le Beffroi*), in the centre of town at rue de l'Amiral Ronarc'h (00 33 3 28 66 70 21; www.ot-dunkerque.fr). In Bergues, the Belfry on the main square is also used (00 33 3 28 68 71 06; www.bergues.fr).

Dunkerque City Pass

For just €12 (£9), the City Pass buys admission to up to four attractions, including a boat trip around the port. Valid for three days, it also provides free public transport – very useful if you want to give the car a rest. Children aged 7-12 inclusive pay half-price, and one under-7 is allowed for each adult City Pass holder. You can buy it at Dunkerque tourist office.

Bergues has a similar scheme, the Tourist Pass, which provides access to the Belfry, the town's museum and a ride on the tourist tram for €7.50 (£5.50).

