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# Weekend

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## A weekend in... Le Havre, France

It's hard to believe that a 100m concrete edifice could feel remotely spiritual, but as I sit in Le Havre's mighty St Joseph's Church staring up into the tower — a kaleidoscope of 12,000 panes of coloured glass — I can't help but feel moved. It's usually the grand cathedrals of France, with their ornate sculptures and soaring arches, dripping in gilt and crucifixions, that inspire such existential pondering. However, this unusual city at the mouth of the River Seine merits its own contemplative pause, rather than the usual dash for the ferry.

Built in the 1950s, the strikingly geometric St Joseph's rose from the rubble of a city destroyed by carpet bombing at the end of the Second World War.

Like the rest of the city's Unesco-listed architecture, the church's giant concrete pillars, beams and mesmerising tower were the work of Auguste Perret, a pioneer of building with concrete and mentor to the Swiss modernist architect Le Corbusier.

Perret's task was to rebuild the city and rehouse 40,000 people after the entire centre was destroyed in a few days in September 1944. Perret's project was an architectural revolution and the result is still impressive: 150 uniform blocks stand in leafy avenues that run down to a pleasant shingle beach, the skyscraping church in a place that looks as if it has been built in grey and beige Lego, and inspired by Fritz Lang's seminal film *Metropolis*.

The original city isn't that old by French standards. This year it celebrates a significant anniversary — it's 500 years since King François I established it as a port, using the strategic position at the mouth of the Seine. Dozens of events are planned, including a street parade by the Royal de Luxe giant marionettes (which came to London in 2006 and Liverpool in 2012), regattas in the harbour and street art exhibitions, which could have no better canvas than the wide cobbled streets that cry out for a bit of colour.

A wander through the city is a curious experience, like a glimpse into a post-apocalyptic world, albeit with a 1960s vibe. The flats perch above rigid lines of arcades, with shops set back from the streets. So uniform are their large windows, it's hard to recognise the individual stores' branding.

Just as I'm getting used to the otherworldly feel of the place, I come across Le Volcan, "the Volcano" arts centre, which jolts me out of my reverie; its enormous sweeping form rises like a wave in the centre of a Lego-sided square, while a second, lower tower looks like a UFO, with narrow oval windows. Designed by the Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer, Le Volcan opened in 1982 and is a contrast to the



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The François Le Chevalier Bridge in Le Havre

today, such is the trend for mid-century style. In the bright, airy apartment there are two mid-century chairs set out for cocktail hour, a cheese plant, and an Atomic Sputnik wire coatstand.

At the time Perret's design was revolutionary, offering indoor toilets and an open-plan style that aimed to bring families together. "People always like it," says Lise Legendre, my guide. Mod cons such as fridges, vacuum cleaners, washing machines and central heating show how revolutionary the flats were at the time. The most striking thing is the light, as you enter from the dark corridor, it's a surprise to discover how bright it is.

This is Le Havre, though, and its light is what put it on the map. One of the main events for the 500th anniversary is the return (on loan) of Claude Monet's painting *Impression, soleil levant* (*Impression, Sunrise*) from the Musée Marmottan Monet in Paris. Monet painted his dreamy depiction of Le Havre's port in 1872 and it heralded the start of the impressionist art movement, which Monet and his peers continued in many locations along this stretch of the Normandy coast, including Étretat, Honfleur and Trouville.

The painting will be on display in the



St Joseph's Church

geometric design of the city, yet it complements it perfectly. Inside, there's a stylishly retro auditorium and bar, and a library where a glorious curved staircase rises against a concrete backdrop.

If Le Volcan gives me an appetite for retro design, it's entirely satisfied by a visit to the Perret apartment. The city has decked out one of the flats in 1950s style to show how the residents of the newly built city lived, so I join a guided tour to glimpse inside. As soon as I step through the door, my heart swoons at a scene that wouldn't look out of place in a magazine

André Malraux Modern Art Museum (known as MuMa) in September, alongside the permanent collection of impressionist art by artists including Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Camille Pissarro and Alfred Sisley. All the artworks are beautifully displayed in this steel and glass gallery, a bright white space that features walkways reminiscent of a cruise ship.

Inside, I bask in the glorious light that pours in through the windows and gaze out to sea. Against a long gallery wall a collection of small, gilt-framed works by the Normandy-born impressionist artist Eugène Boudin is set out in a beautiful composition, each giving a glimpse into a world of blue skies and rocky coastlines. The delicate paintings are a contrast to the robust architecture of Le Havre, which has its own beauty. You've just got to stand back, breathe deeply and admire what an incredible undertaking it was.

Carolyn Boyd

### Need to know

Brittany Ferries operates daytime and overnight crossings from Portsmouth for £213 return for a car plus two people, including an en suite cabin on the outward overnight trip. (0330 159 4500, brittanyferries.com).

Alternatively, fly to Deauville with Ryanair (ryanair.com). For more information visit lehavretourisme.com and normandie-tourisme.fr

### The budget hotel



Hotel Oscar

This cheap and cheerful hotel has 14 rooms and is next to Le Volcan. It is decorated in 1950s style and offers a friendly welcome. The rooms at the back of the hotel are the quietest. Doubles cost from €57, breakfast €9 (00 33 2 35 42 39 77, hotel-oscar.fr)

### The luxury hotel



Hotel Vent d'Ouest

The four-star Hotel Vent d'Ouest has 35 rooms decorated along seaside and seafaring themes and is close to St Joseph's Church. It has a spa with treatments using Nuxe products. Doubles are from €120, breakfast €15pp (00 33 2 35 42 50 69, ventdouest.fr)

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Advised price is for Grand Hotel De La Ville, Sorrento, departing 18th October 2017 for 7 nights on a half board basis with flights from Gatwick. Price correct at time of print.

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