



THE ROMANCE OF NORMANDY

Martin Ferid reveals why Bagnoles-de-l'Orne is a perfect Gallic getaway

One of the biggest unseen challenges for many pilots is convincing their partner that all the hours they spend on aviation are truly worthwhile. If an aviator's passion isn't shared by their partner, it can either remain a solitary pastime, be seen as something to be tolerated, or become a serious bone of contention.

On a personal level, I'd much rather attend events where there's a mixture of the sexes, which provides a balance and, most certainly, a differing viewpoint.

Of course, the solution would be to take your partner with you and get them involved, although that may not be as easy as it sounds. Whizzing your partner up on a bumpy day, to showcase how well you can do steep turns probably isn't a good idea, whereas flying them somewhere really nice for a weekend just might do the trick.

The latter is a good idea if your 'significant other' is to develop an interest in the passion that dominates our lives. Suffice to say, a 'Le Touquet' lunch probably possesses much more appeal than a 'homebuilder fly-in'.

If your partner is to enjoy the experience, it's best to choose a time when you can expect benign weather, and to book

(Above) The gardens around La Veé, the lake in the town centre, are a perfect picnic spot.

a nice hotel at a romantic destination that isn't too far away. In my view, a weekend at Bagnoles-de-l'Orne fits the bill very nicely.

REJUVENATING WATERS

Sited in northwest France, the charming town of Bagnoles-de-l'Orne is just across the Channel, in the recently created Basse-Normandie region. It's the capital of the region's Orne *département* and situated in the Alençon *arrondissement*. Known for its thermal spa waters, Bagnoles also has the River Vée, a tributary of the Mayenne, running through its centre, with a beautiful lake serving as the town's focal point.

The healing powers of the spa waters are steeped in legend, and there are at least two different versions of the backstory. The first has it that, during the Middle Ages, after many years of faithful service, Lord Seigneur Hugues de Tessé let his aging stallion, 'Rapide', loose in the nearby Andaines Forest, essentially letting him roam free till the end of his days. However, some time later, to the nobleman's

surprise, the horse returned home and was full of youthful vigor. Upon seeing this, De Tessé got Rapide to lead him to the same spot and, after drinking from the waters, he too ended up equally rejuvenated.

The second version of the origin is that a very old Franciscan monk who drank from the waters became so revitalised by them that he managed to leap over the highest rocks above Bagnoles, which are still called Le Saut Capucin (The Monk's Leap).

Further adding to the mystery and romance of the place, folklore has it that this is also the area where Sir Lancelot, of King Arthur and Guinevere fame, had his origins. Quite how a knight from Normandy ended up at King Arthur's court, never mind speaking the English language, is an interesting question, but as it's the stuff of legends, the tale probably doesn't bear too much scrutiny.

I first discovered Bagnoles by sheer chance, years ago, when returning from a trip further south. There was a particularly strong northerly and I was looking for a night-stop, with an airfield not too far from the town and a runway into wind.

In those days, every European flying trip was fraught with uncertainties, on many



(Left) The Eglise du Sacré-Coeur (Church of the Sacred Heart) dates from 1934 and its stained glass windows reference the town's famous thermal waters.

(Top) The Château de la Roche, built in 1859 in the neo-Renaissance style by the Goupil family, is now the town hall and also has an arboretum with over 150 varieties of trees.

(Above) You can try your luck at the Casino, which is seen here from across La Véé.

levels, but also full – in equal measure – of wonderment and discovery. In order to gain that ever-elusive ‘experience’ and confidence in anything one does, all we have to do is keep at it, which I know can at times be more than a touch overwhelming, but I assure you that it’s worth the journey.

APPROACHING LFAO

When approaching the Aérodrôme Bagnoles-de-l’Orne – Couterne (LFAO) from the north or west, the runway is quite difficult to spot as it’s hidden behind a line of trees which help form the beautiful local forests, which are well worth exploring when you’re on the ground.

However, from the south or east, on a nice day, the airfield is clearly visible from miles away. The aforementioned line of trees make for what pilots might call an ‘interesting’ approach, particularly in a crosswind. The view of the town from the air is ‘picture postcard’ lovely and a promise of the pleasures to come.

The nearest airfield with French Customs is the GA-friendly and reasonably priced Aéroport de Caen-Carpiquet (LFRK), which requires two-hours’ notice to land and lies about fifteen minutes to the north of Bagnoles. With the demise of the Aérodrôme Abbeville (LFOI) as

“The view of the town from the air is ‘picture postcard’ lovely and a promise of the pleasures to come”

a Customs stop, Caen-Carpiquet would be my airfield of choice. Aéroport Le Touquet Côte d’Opale (LFAT), which also requires two hours’ notice, is around an hour eastwards. And the Aéroport de Cherbourg-Maupertuis (LFRK), which now requires 24 hours’ notice about 45 minutes to the northwest.

Bagnoles has a long tarmac runway plus a recently created, parallel grass one, which is primarily for gliders. If gliders are active, I’d stick to the tarmac as you can never tell exactly where the winch cable is and it’s more-or-less impossible to spot from the air.

As is the norm for anywhere in France without its own dedicated radio frequency, Bagnoles operates on a self-announce basis via their Unicom channel, 123.5. Fuel is available from the Aéroclub d’Andaines (www.aeroclubdandaines.com), and if you arrive at a time when there’s no-one around, you’ll find phone numbers posted outside the clubhouse, and they’ll come out just for you – yes, really!

A WARM WELCOME

The small bar in the clubhouse is a welcome sight to start off your weekend. Over the years, I’ve seen various build projects develop and fly at Bagnoles, in particular several RVs built by one of the Aéroclub’s members, who sadly passed away recently. Their resident instructor is a friendly, helpful guy who owns a Yak, which he has serviced at Pent Farm near Ashford in Kent.

If you can time it right, on the last Sunday of each month they have a club ‘open day’, which sees members, guests and anyone who’s interested in aviation meeting-up. You can be sure that you’ll be made to feel welcome as aéroclub members throughout France take the social side of aviation almost as seriously as the flying itself – they eat, drink and ‘chew the fat’ in true French fashion on a regular basis. ➤

TOURING ADVENTURE

Last time 'the blonde' and I were at Bagnoles, a few members of the Aéroclub brought a load of typically local fare which, with a helping hand from everyone, made a superb lunch – it's something I've rarely seen in the UK.

One of the main reasons for this is the different approach that the French have to flying. In the UK, nearly all flying clubs are run as commercial organisations, whereas in France they're members' clubs. This has the effect of making flying much more affordable, thus attracting youngsters, who are sorely lacking this side of the Channel.

At French aéroclubs you'll find plenty of pilots in their twenties with no intention of becoming commercial pilots. In contrast, every UK club pilot I know is either balding or going grey. If a UK club pilot is still young enough to have acne, in a few years, they'll probably be the First Officer on your holiday flight to Spain.

I know it's easy to criticise but, in general, France's airfields are supported by the local authorities and Chambers of Commerce, who regard them as a definite asset. As a result, French aéroclubs can operate with far lower overheads than is typical in the UK.

Camping under the wing is for the diehard but I've seen people do so at Bagnoles on a number of occasions. However, do be warned that when the Aéroclub is closed the field doesn't offer any facilities at all, not even a loo.

GETTING INTO TOWN

The charm of Bagnoles is in the town itself and to get there you've essentially got three choices. If you're lucky, one of the Aéroclub's members will offer you a lift; there are taxi numbers on the clubhouse door (the fare's about €15); or you can walk, as the town really isn't very far away.

If you do decide to go on foot, don't follow the road, it'll take forever. Just walk to the far end of runway 30 (the clubhouse is at the near end) and take the pathway on the left-hand side, through the trees. You'll emerge onto a road by a Casino supermarket which, unusually for France, is open until midday on Sundays.

A few hundred metres further on and you'll be on the edge of Bagnoles, from where you can either take the bus, or simply turn to the right, walk along the main road, then turn left, on to the Boulevard Paul Chalvet, and it's about a kilometre to the town centre.

ACCOMMODATION & CUISINE

In truth, there is a fourth way to get to and from the Aérodrome, but it's only available if you choose to stay at the Nouvel Hôtel (+33 2 33 30 75 00, www.lenouvelhotel.fr), a converted, late-Edwardian mansion. The owner happens to be a microlight pilot and, on numerous occasions, he's picked me up from and dropped me off at the airfield, but it's best to check with him if this is possible when you make a booking.

Bagnoles has no shortage of hotels or restaurants to suit every budget. Hotels in France are charged by the room, not per person, and start from around €45 per night, away from the town centre, rising to €200 overlooking the lake during high season.

Food-wise, at the affordable end there's a nice pizza restaurant in the town centre, next to the fountain (Le Lido, 2 Place de la République, +33 2 33 37 81 66), while at some of the more prestigious hotel-restaurants the price for a set menu meal without wine is around €35.

Straying slightly from the romantic theme, when teaching I often take the 'fledgling touring pilot' to Bagnoles in my quest to get them to fly a bit further afield and make use of this amazing privilege we have. Before now, I've shared a room with LA's editor when we've visited in two Jodels, regularly been on my own, gone in a group, taken 'the blonde' and even undertaken a biennial renewal in a Taylorcraft for an Englishman living further south.

LOCAL ATTRACTIONS

If you fancy taking advantage of Bagnoles' status as the only thermal spa town in northwest France, head to the B'o Spa (+33 8 11 90 22 33, www.bo-spathermal.com) to enjoy a range of treatments that utilise the area's 25°C waters.

Happily, Bagnoles has so much more to recommend it, not least having been awarded



La Residence du Lac, a private apartment house, was once the Grand Hôtel. Built in 1898, it was the town's first luxury hotel and boasted electric power, central heating and hot water.

the exceptional accolade of 'four flowers' in the seriously taken, national Villes et Villages Fleuris (Towns and Villages in Bloom) competition, for the care and effort out into the floral displays which can be seen all around town.

You can take a pedalo out on the lake for €2 per person for fifteen minutes, which may seem a short amount of time but, take my word for it, unless you're very fit it's enough. On one occasion, four of us 'macho' guys took out a pedalo each, charging around like teenagers – after our time was up, we gratefully retired to one of the bars to give our aging legs a rest. Pedaling is taken at more leisurely pace when I'm accompanied by 'the blonde', who also helps power the machine, and it's only the swans I have to keep pace with.

Around the lake there are some nice spots for a picnic – for me, this is where the aforementioned supermarket comes into play – if you don't want to eat a full lunch and then have dinner.

Although it isn't my 'cup of tea', there's a Casino overlooking the lake (+33 2 33 37 84 00 www.casino-bagnolesdelorme.com). With your back to the Casino, taking a walk up the hill will reveal the lovely Château de la Roche, which was built in 1859 and is another good picnic spot. The Château de la Roche houses the town hall and is the venue for many local weddings – in fact, most of the times I've visited Bagnoles, someone seems to be 'tying the knot' at the Château,

which further highlights the romance of the place. You'll soon know when someone has just got married as a cortege of cars will suddenly appear, with their lights flashing and horns honking, all suitably adorned with lace.

Continuing further up the hill brings you to Tessé-la-Madeleine, a separate village until the year 2000, when the two places amalgamated, bringing Bagnoles' population to around 2,500.

The Nouvel Hôtel is situated on the left-hand side, just after another, more affordable berth that's worth mentioning. Les Camélias (+33 2 33 37 93 11, www.cameliashotel.com) offers an 'étape' deal (dinner, bed and breakfast) for 'professionals' if you talk to them direct. If you've taken the road to get up the hill, on your return, cut through the Château's grounds to enjoy a charming route down umpteen, tree-lined steps.

To get back to the airfield, the taxi rank is just off the roundabout near the fountain – a word of warning, they're difficult to find on a Sunday. Alternatively, take the bus that says 'Centre Commercial', which costs around €1 during the week and, surprisingly, is free of charge on Sundays. For reasons that I have yet to fathom, many of my more energetic friends still seem to prefer the walk back to the airfield.

I consider Bagnoles an excellent place for a weekend break, but if I did intend to stay longer then I'd probably want to hire a car, in order to explore the surrounding area. ■



The picturesque Place de la République



The citizens of Bagnoles take their fleurs very seriously

AMIENS FLY-IN UPDATE

THE BRITS are coming! With only a few days to go to the Amiens Open Day and Fly-in (12-15 May), we have over 40 LAA aircraft, with more than 60 pilots and crew, registered from up and down the country. We have at least four LAA Inspectors attending, and LA's Editor.

Experienced pilots will be flying into Rochester on Friday and Saturday mornings, to help those who need a hand with any aspect of the trip. We intend to fly over in loose formation, while others will be driving across. Let's hope for good weather.

Unfortunately, arranging Customs directly at the Aéroport Amiens-Glisys hasn't been possible. However, the event's organiser, the Aéroclub Picardie Amiens Métropole, is trying to negotiate reduced landing fees for those wishing to clear Customs at Aéroport Albert-Picardie (LFAQ), which has both grass and tarmac runways, and is around 30km away.

The plan is a meal by the River Somme for those who can get there on the Friday. The hanger dinner on Saturday evening will be available on a first come, first served basis due to number, the remainder of our party will again eat in town.

Should you want more detailed info about Amiens, have a look at the article in the February's LA. If you've already notified me that you're attending, please keep in touch via stonecraftaviation@yahoo.co.uk so I can keep you fully informed.

Please note: as we go to press, the event is fully booked but we'll be organising another, similar outing later this year.

Next month: Martin visits Heveningham Hall in Suffolk, the venue for an annual fly-in that's part of its Country Fair (8-9 July). You can contact Martin via stoneacreaviation@yahoo.co.uk

If you think that an event of yours would be of interest to LAA members and would like to see it featured as part of the Touring Adventures section of LA, just drop us a line via the email address shown above. It doesn't matter whether it's a small event at a farm strip or something much bigger, in the UK or abroad. If we can, we'll drop it in.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MARTIN FERID is a Class Rating Instructor and Revalidation Examiner, with over 2,000 hours (roughly an even amount of tail- and nose-wheel time) and a similar split of touring and farm strip flying.

He specialises in helping qualified pilots expand their horizons. Many summer weekends are spent introducing UK aviators to the splendours of flying in Europe, using their own or hired aircraft.

If he can be of help with any aspects of touring or flying in general, please drop him a line at stoneacreaviation@yahoo.co.uk or, indeed, if you've any tips, advice or comments of your own, they'll be gratefully received.