

# Cream Cheese and Concrete

## A Cycle Tour of Normandy's D-Day Landing Beaches

by Paul Lamarra

After Normandy's most famous son, William the Conqueror, went off to conquer England in the year 1066, there wasn't much besides cheese and a bumper apple crop for the Normans to get excited about. For almost nine hundred years, the people of Normandy were left alone to milk their cows and catch fish.

On June 6, 1944, D-Day, Normandy's ancient peace was shattered when the biggest invasion force in history turned up on its eastern shores. Normandy nobly provided the toehold from which the Allied forces started the fight to rid Europe of the Nazis.

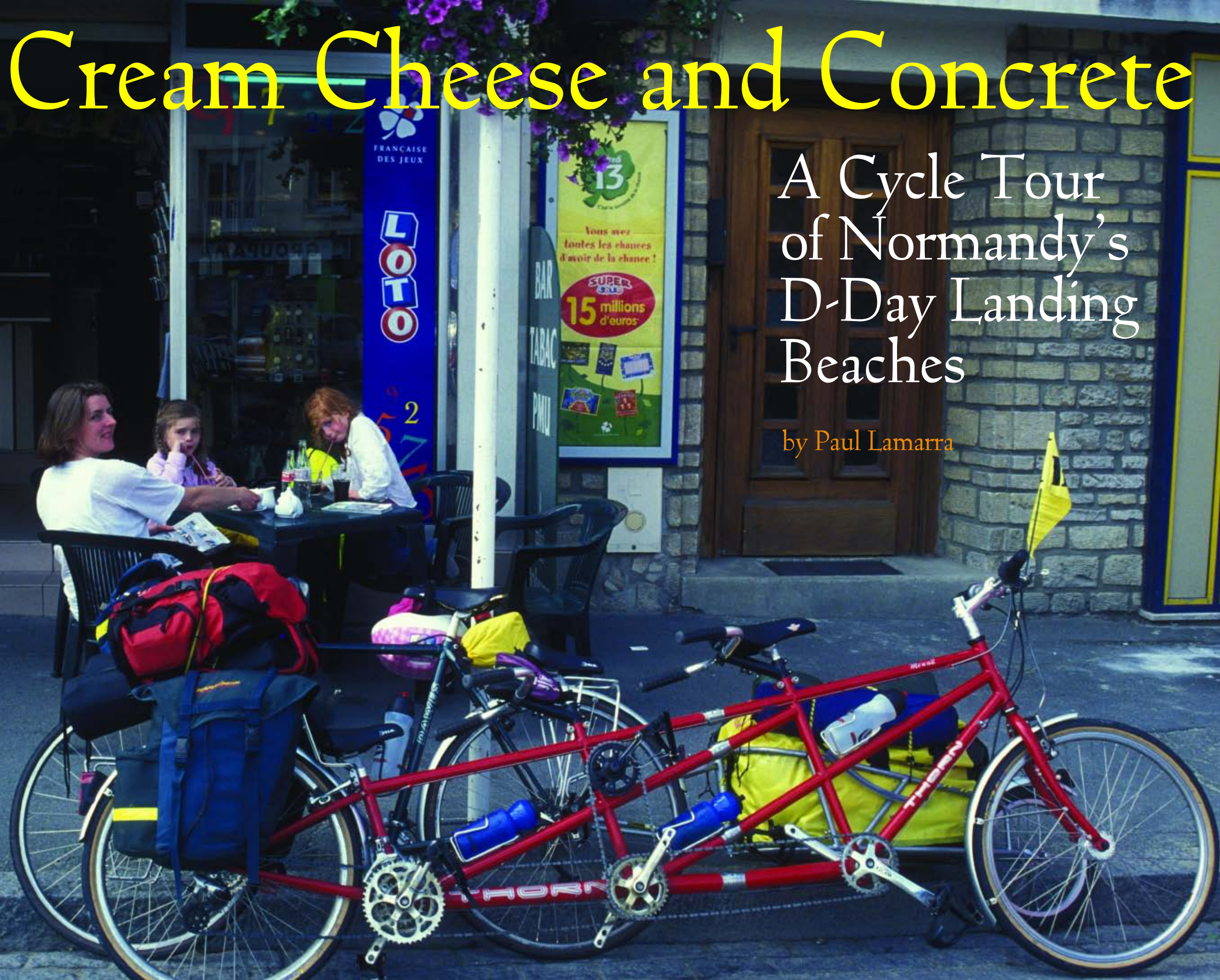
Concrete is the most obvious legacy of the dark days of the Nazi occupation. As the ferry approached the port of Cherbourg, we could clearly see the ominous outline of old concrete gun emplacements and bunkers on the hilltops and headlands. Guarding the entrance to the port were the cracked and broken remains of three huge forts.

The concrete is what's left of Hitler's Atlantic Wall — a network of defenses that stretched from Denmark to the Bay of Biscay. Concrete spotting may not be a typical holiday pastime, but it is the surest sign that you are in the D-Day zone.

We had set aside one week to cycle 150 miles from Cherbourg, on the northern tip of the Cotentin Peninsula, to Le Havre, at the mouth of the River Seine, taking in the five D-Day landing beaches as we went. The beaches are still referred to by their wartime code names — Utah, Omaha, Gold, Juno, and Sword.

It was also the first tryout for our new triplet, a bicycle built for three. Powered by my wife Catherine and our daughters Beth, six, and Claire, four, it was clear that it was going to take some getting used to.

I could hear Catherine, even when she was out of sight, regularly requesting and sometimes angrily demanding that the girls



sit still, hold on, lean in, and most of all — pedal. The triplet is the bicycle equivalent of a stretch limousine with a turning radius to match. Just for the record, I was carrying most of our luggage.

Fortunately, as we cycled east away from Cherbourg, the terrain was gently undulating with enough downhill thrills to keep the girls inside. The wind, what there was of it, was at our backs, and the roads were peaceful.

As the coastline grew rockier, the concrete became less of a feature. Hitler obviously had gambled that the shallow waters and swift currents around the tip of the Cotentin Peninsula would be the only defense required.

Now that there were no reminders, the events of June 1944 were temporarily forgotten. Normandy is considered by some to be the very essence of France, and as we cycled through hugger-mugger hamlets built of creamy stone and colored by burgeoning flower boxes and cherry trees in full blossom, we could only agree.

Soon the flowery scents were masked by the lunchtime smell of hot butter. Our appetites were stimulated, and the girls' claims of starvation were growing louder, so we picnicked, perhaps prematurely, by an old harbor. While we snoozed away the effects of an early start in the warm sun, the girls watched longingly as local kids jumped from the harbor wall into the green sea.

We continued to cycle at a leisurely pace, and the Fermanville lighthouse, the tallest in France, appeared on the horizon as we progressed. We broke up the afternoon with ice cream on the terrace of a bar in the village of Fermanville. For the girls, the pace was perfect, and the incentives kept their complaints to a minimum.

That night, we chose a campground in the shadow of an old wooden windmill overlooking a tiny bay. Beth and Claire, unable to find enough sand on the small beach, chased chickens, ran away from geese, and pushed leaves at rabbits.

The next morning, we managed one mile in the saddle before we stopped in the ancient fishing port of Barfleur. We wandered along the quayside and among the

stalls of fresh seafood. A butcher who was doing a roaring trade roasting chickens and legs of lamb on an open spit was very memorable.

Such is the nature of France that not many miles later we stopped again. This time, it was the sight of sandy beach on the edge of Saint-Vaast la Hougue that prompted demands to halt.

Right away, Beth and Claire got down to the serious business of moving sand from one place to another. Tiring of sand shifting, they ventured into the shallow sea, which had rows of oyster beds poking out of it.

Inevitably, they fell in fully clothed, but tears turned to delight when they realized that this delayed our departure, and they continued to play in the sea and roll in the sand while their clothes dried on the beach wall.

Saint-Vaast is also an ancient port, but its harbor was heaving with pleasure boats. Each of the stone buildings that lined the harbor seemed to be a restaurant, and all of their colorful signs boasted that they served the freshest Saint Vaast oysters. However, with all four of us in one tent, the ultimate aphrodisiac wasn't on our menu — no matter how fresh.

South of Saint-Vaast the concrete reappeared. The ancient quality of the townscapes, so prevalent up until now, was limited to just the occasional building.

Quineville, the village in which we stopped for our second night, was conspicuously modern. Clearly, we had reached Utah Beach.

The campground in Quineville was separated from the beach by the Atlantic Wall. Sixty years later, it still denies a sea view to the houses on the edge of the beach.

Access to the beach was through gaps made by enlarging the gun holes. Despite the wall, Utah Beach is a beautiful beach of deep golden sand, but the distance to the sea is striking.

Although the beach would have been littered with tetrahedral anti-tank devices, convincing cover would have been scarce. It is clear that the Allies' tactics must have been partly to land more men than the Nazis had bullets.

The D-Day beaches are a big visitor draw, but Quineville had obviously decided to keep things low-key. The village's museum was high quality; it did not merely display the litter of war, as others did that we encountered later. Rather, it was careful to explain the horror of living in occupied France and in doing so, left you with no doubt that the men who gave their lives on Utah Beach did not do so in vain.

Cycling the road by the beach, we were grateful for the stump of the Atlantic Wall that remained as it deflected the strong cool wind off the sea over our heads. But the regularly spaced pillboxes still managed to cause a shiver.

It was a sunny day, but warmth could only be found away from the coast, so we drifted inland and climbed to the gun batteries at Azeville and Crisbec. The four 150-millimeter cannons were gone, but their massive housings remained, like silent guardians. The bunkers, with their long machine-gun slits, had a sinister and alien look.

We returned to the coast road as soon as it sat low among the soft dunes. From now on, the memorials came thick and fast. The cycling became stop-and-start once again.

There were abandoned tanks for the girls to climb on, artillery guns to swing on, bunkers to explore, and gun turrets to climb out of. Our progress was slow, and it looked as if we might not achieve even 150 miles in a week.

The other end of Utah Beach was marked out by forests of flagpoles, the French flag, and the Stars and Stripes surrounding beach campgrounds. There is also a huge museum. With hamburger and hot-dog stalls and souvenir shops, this end of the beach has been ceded by France to the international community.

We all felt tired by the time we'd completed the climb from Utah Beach into Saint-Marie-du-Mont against a stiff head wind. Two days on the bike had taken its toll on the girls, and they were now complaining of sore bums.

We tried to buy supplies for dinner and the next day before heading off to camp, only to find that it was a French



**Genuine gear.** A French couple in a jeep that came ashore at Utah Beach in 1944.

national holiday. We then tried to get a table in the only restaurant and were very fortunate to get the last one — outside on the terrace.

It was a cool evening but we had a good view of Saint-Marie-du-Mont's twelfth century church. Its tall tower, added in the fourteenth century, was the point from which the frantic Colonel von der Heydte watched as hundreds of thousands of men poured onto Utah Beach.

The service in the restaurant was slow so we walked round the church, running our fingers into the many bullet holes in the stone as we went.

It was a morale-restoring meal. I plumped for seafood sauerkraut — a successful combination no doubt concocted to stress the friendship that France and Germany now enjoy. Sore bums were soothed with crêpes smothered in chocolate sauce.

The next morning, it remained dry just long enough for me to go off alone in search of Easy Company of *Band of Brothers* fame. I cycled along narrow sunken lanes lined with the hedgerows that grow thick and tall in Normandy's climate, which combines wet and dry in just the right amounts. So dense are the hedges that the enemy could be only feet away and you'd be oblivious to their presence. Apparently, four-inch shells barely shook the tree-covered embankments.

The War of the Hedgerows, as it came to be known, was a particularly

nerve-wracking experience, and soldiers had to fight from hedgerow to hedgerow without the aid of tanks.

The lanes between the hedges were the only place I encountered road cyclists using a map and compass to navigate. The bewildering network of lanes, few signs, and no view — except of the high walls of green — make it impossible to know where you are or what direction you are traveling.

From Stephen Ambrose's book, *Band of Brothers*, I thought I could work out the position of the four 105-millimeter cannons they took out in the early hours of D-Day. The land immediately behind the beaches was flooded by Field Marshall Rommel and could only be crossed via causeways. The cannons were pointed down Number 2 Causeway. I found a convincing candidate for Number 2 Causeway but, disappointingly, no sign of the network of trenches.

Under gray skies, and with low spirits, we set off for Carentan. The cycling was easy, but avoiding the busiest roads around Carentan proved difficult. Carentan itself was totally destroyed by the Allies before the Germans gave it up. The town has been rebuilt, but any charm it may have had is gone for good.

Things did improve beyond Isigny-sur-Mer, Normandy's cream capital.

We were back in an old Normandy of charming ivy-covered farmhouses and were cycling once again along peaceful lanes that made their way haphazardly between small farming communities. The farmyard ponds were full of noisy ducks, and lazy spaniels lay out on the warm flagstones. The grass in the fields was so long and lush that the cows looked short.

A day away from the beaches had been a good thing because next up was Omaha Beach. The mood around Omaha was different than the mood of permanent celebration that is found on Utah Beach.

No longer were we cycling along a level road between the beach and the coastal plain. Now we had to climb, and the girls were being asked to pedal hard to reach the top of each headland. Frequently it was necessary to get off and push.

On one such headland, the Pointe du Hoc, there was a formidable German battery that had threatened the troops landing on Omaha Beach below. The battleship Texas blasted the battery with six hundred fourteen-inch salvos, but there was still enough resistance to claim the lives of 135 of the 225 Rangers given the job of scaling the cliffs with ropes and ladders to silence



**Once active, now dormant.** One of the 150-millimeter gun housings at Azeville.



**A sobering sight.** Nearly ten thousand men died securing Omaha Beach.

the guns once and for all.

The grass has regrown on the Pointe du Hoc, but the landscape of hundreds of giant shell craters and caved-in concrete shelters is chilling.

It was a long and welcome descent to Omaha Beach from the Pointe. On June 6, 1944, Omaha Beach was probably the most dangerous place on earth. Mined and very well defended, it was here that the bloodiest fight of D-Day took place.

Backed by soft, sandy cliffs and fringed by just a handful of houses, it has a wild and unspoiled quality. We shared the extensive beach with a man exercising his trotting horse and a couple of sand yachts.

The scenes of carnage so vividly recreated in the opening minutes of the movie *Saving Private Ryan* seemed impossible.

However, the graves of the ten thousand men who died securing the beachhead remain as testimony for those who doubt.

The long approach to the cemetery is a cypress-lined avenue and the trees stand immaculately at attention on the manicured lawn. It had the feel of the entrance to a very exclusive golf club, and we felt self-conscious in our cycling gear. I imagined that at any minute the club president was going to jump out and quote the rule citing no brightly colored garb in the club-

house.

The cemetery is a shock. Nearly ten thousand white Carrara marble crosses and Stars of David stand in neat lines awaiting inspection. Men and women stood or knelt at graves. Some discreetly wiped tears from their cheeks while others wept openly. Most of the visitors, it seemed, were elderly French people who had come to pay their respects.

Over the next few days, we avoided the cemeteries and the evocative sites. Instead, we enjoyed the jolly atmosphere of the seaside resorts that fringe the remaining three beaches. We made fewer stops, preferring longer lunch breaks when the sun was hot and high in the sky.

Beyond the beaches, we returned to old Normandy and sought out the colorful markets, some still held in eleventh century market halls.

The triplet was a qualified success. The beaches were fascinating and beautiful, and Beth and Claire enjoyed them simply because they were beaches. It was the ideal family trip and a real education for us all. **AC**

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