



Bud and I have always been captivated by the history of World War II. We devoured books, both true accounts and historical fiction. We followed documentaries and were the first to see commercial movies, whether they depicted the European or Pacific theaters.

Central to this interest has always been June 6, 1944. D-Day. The Allied invasion of Nazi-occupied France along a 50-mile stretch of the Normandy Coast. Still, though we’ve traveled through almost every European country, including France, we never hit the Normandy Beaches. It was high time!

History was a motivating factor for us, but I won’t focus on numbers and historical facts here. The Normandy Beaches are a visual experience — stunning, emotional, evocative. Pictures can inspire you, but an in-person visit connects you through time and space. You are there.

So...how to create the perfect visit for us? Choices included land tours (either independent with a driver or organized/bus); river cruises with land extensions to Normandy; or coming by sea, an ocean-going cruise ship. Each has advantages and disadvantages (that’s another article!). We selected a 10-day cruise on the Oceania Vista, beginning in Southampton, England and ending in Bilbao, Spain. The itinerary included two days in Normandy (the biggest draw for us) and two days in Bordeaux as well as other stops in France and Spain.

Barring some choppy seas, the trip was perfect. We’ll remember the lovely upscale ship, the incredible food, and the great fun with travel pals Erle and Linda Pierce and Ted and Lucy Mottola. But most of all, we’ll remember the sense of standing on almost sacred ground in Normandy. The soaring cliffs at Pointe du Hoc. The deeply emotional sight of the white crosses in the American Cemetery above Omaha Beach and so much more. When we see the movies now, new or old, we’ll watch with vastly different eyes.



Army Rangers from Lieutenant Colonel James E. Rudder's 2nds Ranger Battalion scaled these 100-foot cliff at Point du Hoc, the first assault along the 50-mile Normandy Beaches and met rolls of barbed wire. The German wire had barbs every 2", designed to thwart attempts pull it aside.



The Pointe du Hoc Ranger Memorial was erected by the French to honor Lt. Col. James Rudder’s Second Command Ranger Battalion. The granite monument sits atop a German concrete artillery bunker and faces the cliffs and seas where so many Rangers were lost.

Grave markers at the Normandy American Cemetery are made from white Italian Lasa marble. From a distance the deeply engraved names and ranks are virtually invisible to respect each life lost, no matter the rank. But when loved ones visit, a bucket of sea-soaked golden sand from Omaha Beach is provided to rub into the lettering for clear memorial photos. Over time, rain and wind remove the sand and the sense of brothers-in-arms.



About 150 Jewish soldiers graves are marked with the Star of David. Visiting loved ones place stones on the headstones in keeping with Jewish tradition.

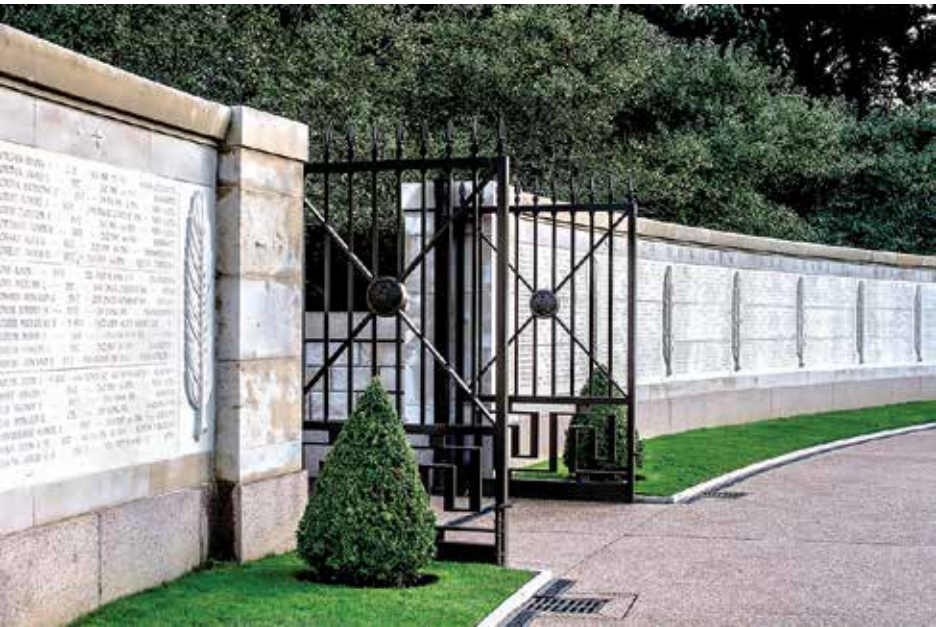
There are many Jewish soldiers graves marked with Christian crosses, but there is a large ongoing project to identify those graves and replace them with the star of David.



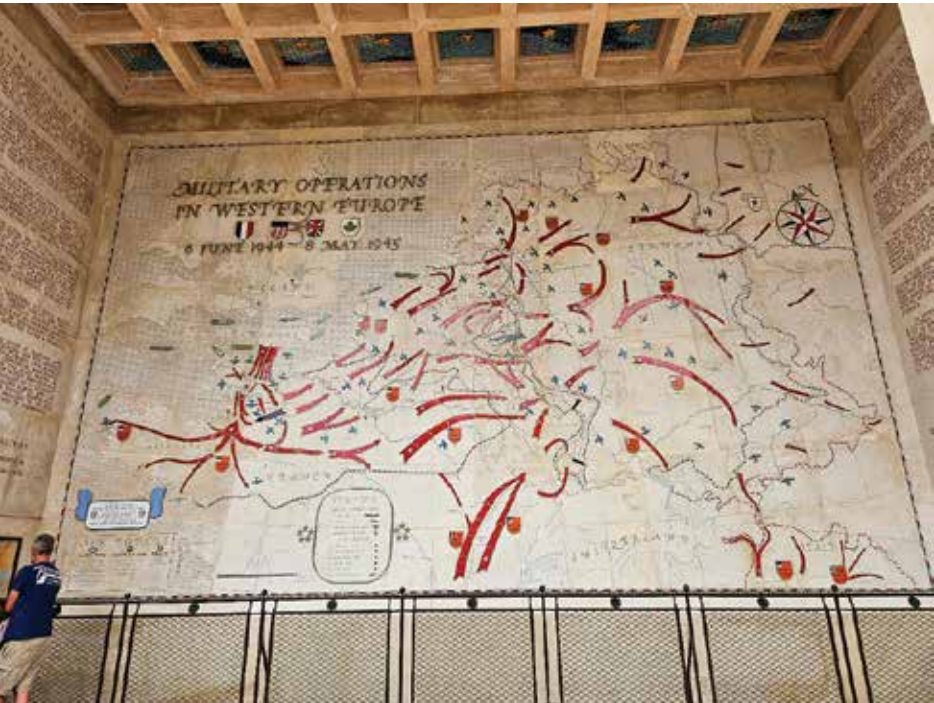
"The Spirit of American Youth Rising from the Waves," a bronze statue by Donald Harcourt De Lue, serves as the central feature of the Cemetery.



One of our guide's favorite views is the rear perspective which highlights the sculpture and her favorite Eisenhower quotation: "To these we owe the high resolve that the cause for which they died shall live."



The Wall of the Missing Garden memorializes the 1,557 American soldiers who were deemed missing in action after the D-Day Invasion. The US Department of Defense and volunteer groups are still finding and identifying remains today.



Some have the impression that Allied Forces arrived on June 6, 1944, Americans acquired the beach head at Omaha Beach and the invasion was set. Huge maps at the the memorial show the complexity of the invasion and the number of allies that were involved.



As soldiers are identified, a bronze rosette is installed next to their name. American family members are then informed and can choose whether to have the remains returned to the US or interred at the American Cemetery at Normandy.



We chose a private guide for our party of six from ToursByLocals.com, with vetted guides from local areas. Eva, who grew up nearby, took us to the actual sites instead of focusing on museums. Here she stands in front of a German bunker with photos illustrating how the invasion unfolded.

IF YOU GO

To get the most out of your Normandy trip, focus on connecting with most personallaccessible guide. Our party of 6 wanted to avoid bus trips and having to elbow our way through a crowd to hear the guide. We chose ToursByLocals.com, relying on our years of experience with selecting their guides around the world. Each guide is vetted and local to the area, with online photos, intros, and verified reviews of guest. Read through your options and pick one. Per-person prices for parties of 4-8 virtually always beat the cruise shore excursions. Our guide Eva, was just what we hoped for — charming, full of interesting stories to bring the facts and numbers to life and extremely responsive to our needs and wants.