

D-Day at 80: What to Know About the Commemorations

France plans a series of events geared to remember those who gave their lives for world peace.

Kevin McGoff

Waves crash on the now peaceful beaches, enjoyed by families passing a summer afternoon on the same sand where young soldiers once fell in the quest to liberate Europe. The ocean occasionally reveals a rusted artifact, offering a stark reminder of the long-ago battle that began on the beaches of Normandy.

Eighty years ago, on June 6, 1944, 156,000 soldiers of the Allied forces struck out across the English Channel to storm the beaches on the coast of France. They arrived in the early morning, bobbing toward the French coast carried by an armada of more than 5,000 ships.

On the bluffs above Omaha Beach, and in the fortifications along the coast's other landing zones—Juno, Sword, Utah, and Gold—awaited the defenders and Hitler's Atlantic Wall.

The landscape has mostly been restored, yet scars from the battle that ultimately involved more than 1.5 million soldiers are visible today. Craters from the Allies' bombardment surround the massive German gun batteries that are still in place 80 years removed from D-Day. The narrow roads and lanes connecting villages that witnessed the conflict bear testament to the fierce battle that took place in 1944. Memorial markers, cemeteries, museums, and signs directing tourists to battle sites and points of interest abound. The region is a history buff's dream.

The Normandy Invasion, *le débarquement* to the French, was the largest amphibious assault ever undertaken. "The most difficult and complicated operation ever to take place," according to British Prime Minister Winston Churchill.

On June 6, the participants will be honored in ceremonies throughout the region. It will likely be the final monumental commemoration that will host those who fought on the beaches of Normandy. If you're interested in participating, you may still have time. Here's what to expect.

The June 6 main event

On the decennial and quinquennial anniversary of the landings, more lavish ceremonies are held. Once again this year, governments of the nations involved in the conflict are planning a range of programs, celebrations, and commemoration ceremonies to mark the 80th anniversary of *le débarquement*. The events began in mid-May and will continue throughout the summer.

Normandy will host ceremonies commemorating the landings and celebrating the anniversary of the liberation of its towns and villages. The most renowned ceremony for Americans will occur on June 6 at the Normandy American Cemetery at Colleville-sur-Mer. The American and French presidents will address those in attendance at the resting place of 9,387 military personnel who lost their lives in the landings or operations in the area.

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The ranks of survivors of the landings have thinned over time, but some of these old soldiers will be present to be honored. My friends and I had the memorable experience of meeting several veterans of the Battle of Normandy during the 75th anniversary commemoration in 2019.

The ceremony at the Normandy American Cemetery is open only to ticketed guests. If you wish to attend, use [this link](#) for information to find out whether you can still secure a seat at this event. It's a stirring experience.

Events open to the public

This is a solemn occasion, so employing the term “festivities” to describe some events may seem insensitive. Many come from afar to honor those who sacrificed in battle.

But for the French, it's also a moment to celebrate the liberation of their country after four years of occupation. As a result, there's an incongruous combination of reflective ceremonies featuring sobering speeches and festive and cultural events all going on at the same time.

A reserved seat at the major ceremonies can be a difficult ticket to secure. However, multiple events are being organized by Normandy Region Tourism, and those are geared to provide visitors with a memorable experience during the anniversary week.

Beginning in this month, the region's tourism office is hosting D-Day Festival Normandy, with more than 100 events throughout the region. There will be parachute jumps and flyovers by squadrons of vintage aircraft. You can tour a reenactment camp and experience a taste of life in a WWII bivouac. There, you'll come upon reenactors in authentic military uniforms portraying soldiers and others dressed in period clothing.

Parades of tanks and other restored vehicles are scheduled in some venues. On our way to lunch in a small town during the last quinquennial celebration, we had the sensation of being on the set of a movie. A string of WWII vintage U.S. Army vehicles, noisily shifting gears, lumbered through the small town of Arromanches. The trucks and jeeps were accompanied by Allied soldiers, French Resistance fighters, and townspeople in '40s attire. The troupe included a “mayor” welcoming the “liberators.”

The towns first liberated, such as Sainte-Mère-Église and Bayeux, will be festooned with flags of the allied countries during the weeks leading up to the festivities. There are also a Battle of Normandy book fair, a sound and light show at the Merville battery, and fireworks at several locations.

You can pause from commemorating the landings and get a bit of exercise by signing up for a triathlon. The swimming leg will take place among the remains of the Allies' artificial port at Arromanches. Join a historian on an 8 km walk following the footsteps of the 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment. The region is popular among hikers and cyclists. Or pack your hiking boots and strike out on your own.

Outside of the commemoration events five years ago, we found the atmosphere lively and festive.

The week of the 6th is busy

The region will be crowded in the week leading up to June 6. If being a part of the ceremonies is your goal, the tradeoff for being a part of this event is worth the inconvenience of long lines, traffic jams, and restaurants requiring reservations. If you have a keen interest in honoring those who fought on D-Day, you won't be disappointed if you visit Normandy during the week of the commemorations.

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The crowds thin out once the dignitaries have departed. If you're looking for an in-depth and more leisurely tour of the landing beaches and surrounding sites, you'll find Normandy far easier to tour by planning your visit for a week other than that of the anniversary. The cemeteries, sites, and museums associated with the landings can be explored at any time of year.

Make the trip: You won't regret it

Not everyone has a passion for standing in places where history was made. Visiting the landing beaches evokes emotions and triggers a reflective mood. After numerous visits, I still choke with emotion when gazing up at the bluffs above Omaha Beach. The vast expanse of sand that stretches from the ocean to the hillside always provokes the question: How was it possible that anyone made it off the beach alive?

Observed from another perspective, one can only imagine the awe that must have overcome those soldiers, peering at the Atlantic from the slit of a German bunker, as the vast and unanticipated armada steamed toward the coast of France as dawn broke on June 6, 1944.

I've toured Normandy with WWII enthusiasts and others with nothing more than a casual interest in the events of 80 years ago. Every person with whom I've visited Omaha Beach has been moved by the experience. I never pulled away after a visit when the mood in the car wasn't somber and quiet as all passengers continued to try to comprehend what they'd just experienced.

Want in on ceremonies? Book a tour

If you're interested in experiencing Normandy during the week of the commemoration, your best bet may be a company with a package tour. If space is still available, you'll be assured of accommodations, transportation, and access to events.

Act fast if you wish to book a tour for the week of June 6. This may be the last commemoration where veterans of the battle are present, and interest in being part of it is high. Here are three companies offering package tours.

[Stephen Ambrose Historical Tours](#)
[Commemorative Air Force 80th Anniversary of D-Day tour](#)
[The National WWII Museum tour](#)

It's possible to organize your own program for a visit during the peak of the festivities. But you may need to stay a bit farther out from the hub of activities.

Packing a dose of patience will serve you well. Once off the main arteries, the roads narrow and can be congested. Due to the number of dignitaries, including heads of state, security is tight, and traffic patterns disrupted. When attending the ceremony at the Normandy American Cemetery for the 75th commemoration, we struck out in the early morning, struggled to find parking, and walked several miles to our seats. It was worth every step.

You'll find helpful information about the D-Day events and the region in general on the well-done [Normandy Tourism Office](#) webpage.

If you plan to drive, rent a car in Paris or elsewhere in Europe and drive to Normandy. The Normandy beaches are 163 miles west of Paris, an easy four-hour journey. Most U.S. car rental companies operate in Europe. [Auto Europe](#) provides quotes from major vendors and has the benefit of allowing cancellations with no fees up to 48 hours before pickup.

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The French rail system is a comfortable and efficient alternative to the highway. Booking rail tickets is easy using [Trainline](#). Another resource is [SNCF](#), the French rail system's site.

VRBO and Airbnb have many options if you're visiting for more than a few days. A hotel in Caen, Bayeux, Arromanches, or Sainte-Mère-Église will place you in the center of D-Day sites. These will be at a premium during June, so staying a bit farther out may be a better bet. You can resort to camping on Utah Beach if that's your preferred style of travel. There are multiple sites on which to locate a bed and breakfast, including [this helpful site](#).

What to review before you go

If you want to dig into the details of the Normandy landings, invest the time to take on Steven Ambrose's account in his book, *D-Day*. If you're not inclined to weave through 583 pages before your trip, you can get an overview of the events of the summer of 1944 from the comfort of your couch in one afternoon.

Our 10-year-old grandson is interested in WWII, so Colin and I took on the film *The Longest Day*. At nearly three hours long, a screening can make for the longest evening; some will find the black-and-white cinematography a bit dated. But the movie is a respectable overview of the preparations for and the battle that unfolded on D-Day. The cast of this 1962 epic includes John Wayne, Sean Connery, Richard Burton, and Clint Eastwood, also justifying an afternoon in front of your big screen.

Though *Saving Private Ryan* isn't a story about the landings, the movie's first 24 minutes provide an intense cinematic take of that morning on Omaha Beach 80 years ago. For another perspective, check out *D-Day Through German Eyes* by Holger Eckhertz.

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