# From the Insight *Northern France* Guide

Insight Guides, 2011

# Vauban and France's Frontier Walls

## As Louis XIV established the borders of France, they were marked out with an unmistakeable architectural style

Sébastien Le Prestre de Vauban, Marshal Vauban (1633–1707), is one of the most visible of French architects, if not the most famous – although perhaps the term military engineer fits him more accurately than architect. As *Commissaire Général des Fortifications* for Louis XIV he built or rebuilt more than 300 fortifications around the edges of France, and though some have been demolished they are still a ubiquitous presence, especially along the northeast and eastern borders and around the coast, from the giant citadels of Lille or Neuf-Brisach in Alsace to isolated coastal *Tours Vauban* such as Ambleteuse near Boulogne or Camaret-sur-Mer near the westernmost point of Brittany.

Vauban began his career not as a builder of fortifications but as an expert in breaking into them, a specialist in sieges. From this he developed his ideas on fortress-building. His services were required because of a peculiarly French dilemma. In the south, on the Pyrenees and in the Alps, France had clear and easily defended borders. Things were much less clear in Flanders, or on the Rhine in Alsace. France was acquiring large territories in the north and east, and Louis XIV gave Vauban huge resources to ensure they would stay French forever. Later, as the threat of English or Dutch attack from the sea increased, he turned his attention to the coast, including whole ports like St Malo.

A Vauban fortress is a far more scientific construction than old-style castles. Many are star-shaped pentagons, with angled bastions to ensure that any attacker would be caught in a crossfire. Among his greatest works is his "queen of citadels" in Lille, part of his *pré carré* or "squared field" of 28 fortresses on the Flanders border, from Dunkerque down to Charleville, built with the idea that any attacker would be trapped between them. He established a whole school of French military engineers, such as Siméon Garangeau, chief architect of St Malo.

Glowering Vauban fortresses were not the only architectural means by which frontier territories were made more French. A clear example is Lille. Before 1667 it had been a Flemish city oriented to the northeast, to the *Porte de Gand* or Ghent gate. Louis XIV's planners redesigned it to point it southwards, to the *Porte de Paris*, with a Baroque triumphal arch with image of the Sun King to celebrate the city's conquest. Everywhere, restrained *ancien régime* Baroque was the prescribed style for new public buildings, and with the Mansard roof became an indispensable stamp of Frenchness.

Near the end of his life some of Vauban's fortresses were overrun, and some suggested they were a waste of money. Nevertheless, fortress building, and the idea of building solid defences around France, remained a French military habit, seen most vividly in the attempt to seal the German border with the Maginot Line in the 1930s.

# The Invention of the French Seaside

***Belle Epoque* villas, grand hotels, promenades and seafood brasseries have been assembled over the years to create a genteel but seductive cocktail**

In 1824 the Duchesse de Berry, niece of Louis XVIII, caused a stir by visiting Dieppe to go bathing, in the way already fashionable across the Channel in Brighton. For French royalists she was a tragic heroine, whose husband had been assassinated when she was only 19. Bright and vivacious, the Duchesse was also an arbiter of fashion. She returned to Dieppe every year until her father-in-law Charles X was deposed in 1830, and by then its status as France's first *station balnéaire* was firmly established. Nearby Etretat was also recommended for longer stays due to its balmy climate, and saw the first large-scale appearance of the seaside villa as an opportunity for whimsical architecture, with extra curlicues and other touches of neo-Gothic fantasy.

Dieppe maintained its position for several years, and remained popular with the British – it had the first regular Channel ferry service, in 1825 – but as rail links developed Parisians discovered that the long sandy beach of Trouville, to the west at the mouth of the Seine, was much nicer for swimming than the shingle of Dieppe. Its success was ensured under the Second Empire, when Napoleon III visited regularly, along with Impressionist painters and growing crowds, who all mingled along its newly-created promenade or *planches*.

Then in 1860 Napoleon III's half-brother the Duc de Morny, notorious for dubious business ventures, looked across the River Touques with his associates and saw in the empty dunes a perfect location for an entirely new, more profitable, resort, and Deauville was born. Its development took time, interrupted by the Empire's fall in 1870 and its promoters' lack of cash, and it was not until the 1900s, under a new promoter called Eugène Cornuché, that it took definitive shape with the completion of its vast grand hotels. Purpose-built, Deauville brought a much more defined sense of style and exclusivity to the French resort, a clearer distinction between society spots and others for the hoi-polloi. Another feature of Deauville is that, since it was an artificial town, its promoters could insist on a building style, the fantasy variation on traditional Pays d'Auge manors called *Anglo-Normand*, producing giant mock-half-timbered "cottages" that brought a new level of extravagance to the seaside villa.

Cornuché also highlighted Deauville's casino as the centre of town, and now hundreds of French resorts have them, from luxury venues to the slightly shabby places in modest resorts like Luc-sur-Mer. Another essential feature of the French seaside is that one goes there, as much as for the beach, to eat. It would be very sad to visit the sea without sampling local fish or *fruits de mer*, and so a resort without its seafood brasseries, chic or homely, is inconceivable.

One last, specifically French, element is *Le Thalasso*, the thalassotherapy centre. Thalassotherapy, essentially high-pressure bombardment with seawater and similar treatments, was first identified by a Dr De la Bonnardière in Arcachon, near Bordeaux, in 1865. It's a very French fad: it has an aura of science and medical rigour, but is also very much to do with toning the skin, and looking good. The women who greet you at top-end *thalasso* centres consequently emit a suitably perfect, slightly unearthly glow.