

# A world away from Mickey Mouse

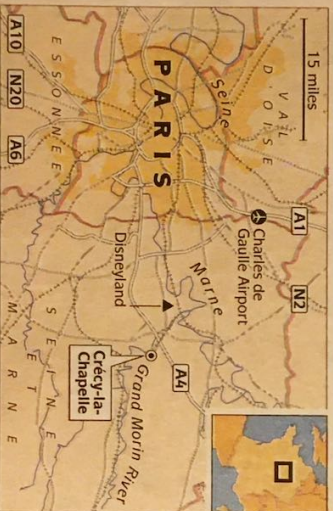
The small town of Crécy-La-Chapelle is an unassuming medieval delight five miles and centuries away from Disneyland. By **Annabel Simms**

**D**iscover a different kind of Sleeping Beauty five miles from Disneyland, Paris: a medieval town guarded by moats, towers and drawbridges where life is lived at a gentler, provincial pace.

Everyone knows that Bre cheese comes from France. But few people would associate it with Disneyland, Paris, which is in the Bre region, 27 miles east of Paris. Fewer still have heard of Crécy-la-Chapelle, a small town a stone's throw from Disneyland, which might as well be on another planet.

I first went there, lured by the description of the 13th-century Gothic church at La Chapelle in the green Michelin guide. Because I don't have a car, I looked up the nearest railway station - Crécy-la-Chapelle - and found that I could get there from Paris in less than an hour walk to the church a mile away and be back in Paris the same afternoon. The prospect of a country walk was a major attraction, as the town itself only rates six lines in Michelin. In the event, I was so charmed by Crécy that I went back - and then went back again. The little town is like an onion, revealing endless layers of meaning about life in provincial France, past and present, beneath its apparent simplicity.

This simplicity - of shape, size and architecture - is one of its most obvious and satisfying features. The whole town isn't much larger than a village, but one with a difference. Crécy was built inside a bend of the Grand Morin river, a tributary of the Marne, and in the Middle Ages, the river was extended to form not one, but three moats, completely enclosing the town and



## FACT FILE

AIR PARKS from various UK airports to Paris are entertainingly low.

For specimen fares, the following airlines were called and asked for quotes departing the UK on 16 October and returning 19 October: British Midland (0945 534554) from Heathrow (£79.50); Air France (0181-742 6600) from Birmingham (£136.30); British Airways (0845 222111) from Manchester (£90.50).

Debonair (0541 500 3000) will fly from Luton to "Paris Express" airport at Crécy-Pontoise from 16 November and promises a lowest flexible fare of £90 return. Ryanair (0541 569

589) is to start flights from Prestwick near Glasgow to Paris Beauvais on 19 November; minimum fare £70 return plus £8 for the bus into Paris.

The lowest fare on Eurostar (0345 303030) from London Waterloo or Ashford to Paris Gare du Nord is £89 if you book a week in advance and stay away a Saturday night. Note, though, if you book a package through Eurostar Holidays Direct (0870 167 67 67) you get a free upgrade to first class (see *Baggage of the Week*, below). From Gare du Nord, where Eurostar trains arrive, it is a short walk to Gare de l'Est, whence trains for Crécy depart.

moats are still standing, and finding the less obvious ones is a challenge to any visitor's ingenuity. The ruins of one mark the entrance to the town across the outer moat, another (in fact) houses the Underwater Museum, and I discovered the ruins of yet another sheltering someone's washing line.

The unselfconscious continuity of the past with the present is the most enduring impression Crécy leaves on a visitor. When I get off the train, the first thing I do is to go and sit on a bench overlooking the outer moat, before crossing the little bridge into the town from the station. Within minutes, the sight of the old houses overlooking the water, each with its garden and miniature bridge, the sound of birching, the ducks waddling past my bench, the quiet gossip of women watching their children play in the sandpit, a youth cycling past who calls out "Bonjour, Madame" - all these things combine in a deep breath as fresh from Paris. I start to adjust to the scale and the spirit of the place.

Out of curiosity, I once followed the outer moat in the other direction and discovered that the supermarket car park is next to it. Ten yards further on, the moat had become a country stream, with a leisurely game of boules going on in the meadow beside it. A man sat fishing from a weir across the stream.

Within the town proper, the impression of harmony persists and deepens. Everywhere, you can sense the secret presence of water. Overlooked by people's back gardens, crossed by private bridges, and reached by unexpected alleys, it leads to a tower here, a mill wheel there, a tiny public garden, a medieval wash-house (*lavoir*), a 12th-century short cut to the next moat,



Medieval high-rise in Crécy-la-Chapelle

and finally to the church within the inner moat and the river beyond. As for the more famous parish church which I had come to see, it was probably worth the walk. I say probably because I was reduced to squinting through the keyhole to appreciate the interior of what the tourist brochure calls a "monument admirable du XIII<sup>e</sup> et XV<sup>e</sup> siècles du plus pur gothique". The reason for

the squinting was that the church was locked and the lady in the tourist office (a mile away and now closed) had neglected to point out that she, and she alone, had the key. I discovered this useful fact from a sympathetic passer-by. Everyone in Crécy knows everyone else - and their business. It's a pattern of living that takes little account of international tourism, thank God.

And it helps to explain the general reactions of the inhabitants. People greet you as you pass them along the moats, an old lady waves from her window, when, realising you are being watched, you look up and smile at her. The touching assumption is that you must be visiting friends or relatives in the town. Why else would you be there? Why else, indeed?

Annabel Simms