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Gîte: Home away from home

On the third floor of a 19th-century building in Normandy, a hotel-weary pair find 'la vie en rose.'

By Ellen B. Cutler
For The Inquirer

We are tired of hotels. When you're traveling in Europe on a budget, "affordable" gets to mean "barely adequate." On a trip to Normandy, France, we decided to rent a *gîte* - our very own apartment - instead.

The prospect of a home away from home fired my imagination. I planned to jump out of bed in the early light and trot out for a fresh baguette while my better half put on the kettle. Day trips to Mont Saint-Michel, Omaha Beach and Rouen were added to the itinerary. I envisioned strolls down winding streets and quiet suppers *chez nous*, followed by a glass of calvados. Jacques Brel and Edith Piaf played on the soundtrack to my fantasy.

It would be, as it were, *la vie en rose*.

We settled into the small town of Honfleur, at the confluence of the Seine and the English Channel. Our *gîte*, Le Hobelin, was located on the third floor of a 19th-century building.

The front windows framed the wooden bell tower of St. Catherine's church; from the back windows we could see over rooftops and walled gardens to the countryside beyond. The nearest *boulangerie* was two flights down, and the fragrance of baking bread permeated the stairwell each morning. A few cobblestone streets away were pastry shops, butchers, greengrocers and wine merchants.

Saturday is Honfleur's market day. Our expedition through the stalls produced a roasted chicken, peas still in the pod, new fingerling potatoes, slightly effervescent Normandy cider, and the most flavorful eggs I have eaten in my life.

The iconic locale in Honfleur is the old harbor, with its pleasure craft moored along quays lined by houses, some dating to the 17th century. Not far from the harbor are four wonderful museums.

The Maritime Museum is in the old church of St. Stephen. Just beyond it, the Museum of Old Honfleur displays furniture, artifacts and traditional costumes.

The Arthur Boudin Museum, named for the city's most prominent artist, has a collection of impressionist and regional artists. The Maisons Satie is a surprising and delightful mixed-media installation in the former home of composer Erik Satie, a leading member of the French avant-garde in the early 20th century.

On our last afternoon, in an effort to put our imminent departure out of mind, we went to Naturospace. It was magic. Butterflies in every hue and shape fluttered in the greenhouse heat among banana plants, philodendrons and orchids. They clustered at feeders and searched the flowered pattern of my shirt for nectar. Golden koi sparkled in small ponds, and waterfalls played their soothing music.

Finally, we had to go home and back to a life where teaching, yardwork and bills figure prominently. But we still have a bottle of calvados; the music of Brel and Piaf, Charles Trenet, Jean Sablon, and Mistinguette - and a memory of *la vie en rose*.

Ellen Cutler savors her sips of calvados at home in Maryland.