

Welcoming springtime 2009, many seniors are already booking travel schedules. What could be more meaningful than a visit to France's colorful Normandy region? Today it offers beautiful scenery, quaint historic towns and other great tourist delights. Many yesterdays ago, for those few of us still around who can remember back 65 years to D-Day on June 6, 1944, Normandy means nostalgia tinged with sadness.

On that day, I was more than 6,000 miles away at the Navy base on Treasure Island, California, an 18-year-old crew member of a Navy troop transport. We were soon to head out to the Pacific, where we'd land GIs in the Philippines in October 1944, and Marines at Iwo Jima and Okinawa early in 1945.

We knew what was ahead for us, and could relate to the GIs who struggled ashore in Normandy on June 6. Aboard our ship, we listened intently to news reports as the American, British and Free French troops fought their way inland toward Paris.

I never got to France during World War II, but many school friends and relatives fought there in 1944 and 1945. Some never came home. When I retired and started on my world travels nearly 50 years later, I made sure one of my first destinations was France, and particularly Normandy.

Since then we've been there several times, and find Normandy both a charming contemporary tourist area, with wonderful scenery, hotels, wines and cafes, as well as a place of great historic significance. On a group tour, we strolled reverently among the seemingly endless rows of white grave markers in the American, British, French and Canadian cemeteries.

I remember when another senior tourist whispered, "Look, there's cousin Morty. He never made it ashore from his landing craft." Another voice: "There's Wasil, that crazy high school kid who was going to open his own Greek restaurant after the war." Another voice: "And over there is Jack from the high school class ahead of us. He was a paratrooper who earned the Silver Star at St. Lo, but never lived to wear it."

Nostalgic visits to Normandy by many seniors are appropriate as their first priority, but there's much more to see and experience in Paris and other areas of France. On one trip to the ancient capital several years ago, our little hotel was across a very narrow street from the Sorbonne, the famed university that dates back to the 13th Century.

From our third floor room, we could look into the classrooms, just a dozen feet away, and see students studying, painting and listening to lectures. We also visited the hallowed halls of the Sorbonne, and enjoyed the outdoor cafes nearby in the Latin Quarter, the city's traditional hangout for students and artists.

We saw other famous Paris landmarks, including Notre Dame Cathedral (freaked out in the underground catacombs), the Eiffel Tower (rode to the top), the Louvre Museum (my art history prof would've never forgiven me if I hadn't), and the Arc de Triomphe (another cousin had marched through it when Paris was liberated on August 25, 1944).

When making your springtime travel plans, consider a visit to Normandy, Paris and the many other parts of beautiful France.

