

Mont Saint Michel and a longer-than-should-have-been drive to Azay le Rideau



There's nothing quite like Mont Saint Michel. Actually, there is. Disneyland. Both have a castle, both have huge crowds, and both have far-removed parking lots (although Disneyland has got a much-better shuttle system for tired legs).

On the other hand, Mont Saint Michel is quite literally larger-than-life. You see it from 30 miles away. Seriously! It's that big. And when you consider that the Abbey (the Cathedral up on top) was built in the 11th & 12th centuries, you start wondering about all that "modern" building techniques have really accomplished. However, once you understand that, at its core, Mont Saint Michel is basically one huge granite rock and that everything has been built around that rock more than on top of it, you start worrying a bit less about whether a 1000-year-old building can support so much weight.

If you go, best to get there early. Anything up to 9am will avoid the heavy crowds as you climb to the top, although you'll see them swarming in as you leave. Make sure you've got too hiking shoes, because the walk from where you park your car to the shuttle is easily half a mile, and that's assuming you parked close-in by getting there early! And when the shuttle drops you off, you have yet another long hike to the rock itself.

There are lots of places "inside" for food & drink, and, unlike what some of the guidebooks say, they're not all outrageous. However, your best bet is to get something at the Brioche Doree you'll pass on your way to the shuttle.

And finally, the parking ticket payment machines, which you have to deal with when you leave, don't take anything but chipped-style credit cards. The type used in Europe but not issued by banks for US customers. They do take bills, however. Half a day of parking ran 8.50 euros.

More soon; time to get to sleep. About 12:20am Thursday here, and if I get off this soon, I might get 7 hours of sleep. Radical! Fill you in on the details regarding the longer-than-should-have-been drive later on, but will let you know that I now know where my son gets his navigational skills from. --Mike--



Heading towards Mont Saint Michel on the shuttle



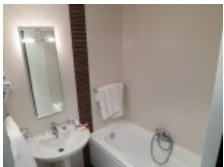
A bacon scone. Who knew? Great and inexpensive dinner in Azay le Rideau.



Pretty amazing to see how things were built back in the day



A cattle crossing on a back road as we headed to the Loire Valley



In Pontorson, near Mont Saint Michel, we encountered the classic French bathroom where you have a tub with no shower curtain whatsoever, and a hand-held shower head that you've got to figure out how not to spray water everywhere with. It's almost a two-person operation!



As you can see, the crowds increased a bit as we wind our way back down! This is why you get there early.



Sad to see so many young people smoking. Thankfully it's less than I've seen in years past.



Vive la Tour! A helicopter was hovering closely, taking crowd shots while we were there. Very much reminded me of the Tour de France.



Very much looking like Disneyland



See that blue arrow? That's where we're heading. WAY up there! If you don't like steps, this expedition is not for you. Hard to believe they do concerts up on top with a complete orchestra.



One last look before leaving



Arrive early at Mont Saint Michel and the crowds aren't bad at all!



A nun reverently listening to the audio commentary in the Abbey



This is only about a third of the way up!



Proof that Karen made it all the way to the top!



The free shuttle that picks you up and drops you off quite some distance from the island. There's no rhyme or reason to it; they most certainly could get you in quite a bit closer. But they don't.



Sunflowers on the altar in the Abbey. This is France, after all.



My daughter would say photos like this are 'creepy'; I think they're fun. Getting a photo of someone whose badge says they're on the 'surveillance' team. Spies!



They haven't quite figured out the women's vs men's bathroom ratio yet