

Travels with Anzie: Mont St. Michel or St. Michael's Mount?

April 2014



Way back in 1960 I traveled with a group of American and French kids through France on bicycles. We biked through Brittany, Normandy, the Loire Valley and Provence. In Normandy we biked to and climbed up Mont St. Michel. I remember approaching the Mont. It seemed to take forever to cross the sands to reach the island. Legend has it that the tide rises faster than a man on horseback can gallop. The Mont loomed in the distance, like a fairy tale castle atop a rocky peak.

And now – surprise, surprise – after 54 years I discover that Mont St. Michel has an English sister, in Marazion, Cornwall.

As you probably know, we're swapping houses with English friends, Bea and David, for the month of April. Their lovely house is located just across the river Mersey from Liverpool. We're taking advantage of our time here to explore as much of Great Britain as we can. We spent a week in Cornwall, the southwestern-most county in England. We were amazed to find tropical plants – palms, orchids and such – thriving there, although the temp didn't get much over 50 degrees.

We decided to spend our first full day exploring the Atlantic Coast. We heard that the crowds at "The Mount" can get busy, so we took off early and made The Mount our first stop. A good thing, too, because the site can be reached only on foot, and only during low- and mid-tide. This meant that the island would be virtually closed after 1:30 PM. It's about a quarter mile walk over a large rocky causeway. Anzie and I wore sturdy shoes. I regretted that I hadn't brought my hiking boots to provide better ankle support. We couldn't believe that some people wore only flip-flops.

Reaching the island is only half the fun. Then you must climb a serpentine rocky path to reach the castle. You must pay \$10 for the privilege. All the way up I kept mumbling: "This better be worth it."

It was. First of all was the 360 degree view. It's high enough to view a beautiful crescent coastline that extends for miles. Second is the castle. It's still inhabited, by the St. Aubyns/Levans family. Most castles we've visited are empty shells. The interior

of Mount St. Michael is furnished in 19th century décor. The “chapel” is actually a fair-sized church with exquisite stained glass, statuary, richly carved woodwork.

Third is the history. In the 11th century the Castle became a Benedictine abbey, and was placed under the jurisdiction of the Benedictine Abbey of Mont St. Michel. Cromwell threw the Benedictines out in the 1600's. He then gave it to Lord St. Aubyns for his assistance in subduing a local uprising. The Levans are an offshoot of the St. Aubyns family. We asked a docent about the family. The docent explained that the Levans side of the family is still in residence.

Queen Victoria once stopped by unannounced. Unfortunately the family was away. The cook entertained the queen, sharing tea with her. The cook commented later that she was an easy person to talk to. Queen Elizabeth II also visited. She was driven up the Mount in a converted golf cart. She commented that the ride “was awfully rocky”. I'll bet it was.

We asked about the large third-floor terrace that looked perfect for cocktail parties. The docent responded that, yes, the two sons in their 20's loved to party. The employees occasionally arrive for work to find the terrace strewn with broken glasses and bottles. For those interested in more info and history go to: <http://www.stmichaelsmount.co.uk/>

I'm just glad that I lived long enough to visit these two island mounts with such similar histories.

Chuck & Anne