



Thoroughly MODERN MINING

A green conversion of the remnants of northern France's mining industry has reinvigorated the region, as **Steve Mather** finds out

The next time I'm minded to complain about a small inconvenience in everyday life, I'll think back to Lewarde. Just hearing about the backbreaking work the miners of northern France endured – long shifts, squatting, crawling and crouching in the dark with heavy equipment and ear-shattering noise all around

you – is enough to make you see how comfortable a lot of our own working lives really are.

The last of the operational collieries of Nord-Pas de Calais in Oignies closed its final remaining coal extraction shaft on 21 December, 1990, and with it went three centuries of mining in the region. By that stage, the mining industry had long been in decline, with the most intense

activity taking place between the 1930s and 1960s when an average of 200,000 people were employed in extracting about 30 million tonnes a year.

For many years coal was king, with it being first discovered in Anzin as far back as 1734. The coalfield stretched from Valenciennes to Bruay, extending more than 120km in length, but never more

than 12km wide. The coalfield covered almost one-twelfth of the total surface of the region and two billion tonnes of coal were extracted from it.

In Lewarde, now the location of the largest mining museum in France, 1,000 miners were on site, digging to depths of 480m with 10kg jackhammers.

But the closure of the mines was not the end of the story, merely the conclusion of a chapter. That is because in the ensuing years, the people of Pas-de-Calais and Nord have been busy writing their own chapters

and breathing new life into what could have been allowed to become abandoned blights on the landscape.

Coal goes cool

There are several places to see the resurgence in action, including La Maison du Terril at Rieulay.

On my visit there this summer, we picked up some e-bikes and cycled through beautiful waterside surroundings, surrounded by green plants and a thriving wildlife reserve.

But this isn't just any old open space. Not too many moons ago, this land was nothing more than a slag heap.

Its transformation into what you see today is remarkable and owes much to the vision, resilience and resourcefulness of the region's residents.

My guide, Lisa Morel, explained: "When they dug to extract coal, they also extracted rocks. They had to go somewhere, so they went here."

"Historians say the first rock was laid in 1912 and until 1970, tonnes of rocks were placed here. But when it reached its limit and the mining industry was coming to an end, the then mayor thought it was ridiculous

to just leave it to be abandoned.

"He asked permission from the state, as after World War II, France owned every mining company to carry out work. He arranged for a fish pond to be dug out and that was the first step of the redevelopment. Later, a man-made island and beach were created."

Farmyard fun

Also on the site is Les Chevrettes du Terril, a goat farm where it's a friendly family affair, run by Julien Graf, his wife Paola and brother Olivier. Julien worked in an office as an ecological engineer until 2014 when he decided to change his life and take on a project he was truly passionate about.

In Rieulay, Julien grazes his flock on the shale heap, where during the day, the goats help to control the vegetation and return each evening to the ecological and sustainable farm where cheeses are produced, sampled and sold.

"This is a project that was made in the spirit and creativity of the north," Julien said. "The people here needed to rebuild the region and needed to take action to revitalise it after the closures of the mines and we wanted to be part of that too."

Above:
Waller-
Arenberg, now
a creative hub

Right:
Le Centre
Historique
Minier



PHOTOS: MARIE LAURE PICQUE; NORD TOURISME/JEROEN STAM



But the closure of the mines was not the end of the story, merely the conclusion of a chapter

The cheese is made from raw, unpasteurised goats' milk and they also make their own yoghurts and cottage cheese. The farm produces 25,000 organic goat's cheeses a year, using one litre of milk for every cheese.

Schools visit for free to meet the cute inhabitants and see them being milked.

Visitors can also pop in for a drink, with a selection of beers and wines on offer to accompany the *fromage*.

There are plans for expansion to allow people to enjoy a meal there too.

Julien added: "The goats play a big role in the biodiversity of the area. It is a new site so this landscape has an original biodiversity and has been colonised by pioneering plants

and insects. For example, there is a very specific type of grasshopper that is found only here."

Mining gets creative

Over in Wallers-Arenberg, there is another extraordinary conversion to see. Arenberg is known for being the setting for Claude Berri's film adaptation of Émile Zola's novel *Germinal*, when miners mobilised themselves to prevent the destruction of the site when industrial activity came to an end. Nowadays, it is also known for the Creative Mine project which was inaugurated by director Costa-Gavras and his wife Michele Ray-Gavras. The site is now centred around digital media and film-making, with an editing suite that a

Above:
All ages can appreciate the area's history

Below:
Julien Graf at Les Chevrettes du Terril

national television company would be proud of. Truly forward-thinking and a world away from the basic equipment used by miners long ago, it also has capacity for motion capture, green screen technology and CGI.



PHOTO CREDIT: SAMUEL DHOTE, STEVE MATHER

Blast from the past

France's foremost mining museum is based in Lewarde, and it was there I headed to really tap into the rich seam of coal mining. Based on the site of a major pithead, coal extraction here began in 1931 and reached its height in 1963 when 1,218 tonnes were taken out per day.

The pits closed down in 1971, with Le Centre Historique Minier opening 13 years later. The sprawling site covers eight hectares and was classified as a *Monument Historique* in 2009.

It is the place to come to see the life of a miner through their own eyes. Of course, the real mines here were sealed off long ago but a guided walk through a replica mineshaft is an excellent way to understand

the miner's lot. Walking out of the underground realm into the bright sunshine made me think how glorious that feeling must have been to those hard-working souls trapped underground for hours on end.

Caveated with the knowledge they would be doing it all over again in no time.

Among the more poignant experiences I found was the hanging room, where miners' clothes, boots and helmets would be hung up to dry using a rope and pulley system – there not being enough room for every miner to have his own wardrobe.

Nearby, row upon row of lamps were lined up, along with the different colour tokens used to indicate when they had been taken out, correlating to

what shift a worker was on. The museum is another success story emanating from the region's past and now employs up to 100 people and welcomes an average of 150,000 visitors a year.

It is sites like this that are keeping history alive and giving younger generations the opportunity to learn about how many of their ancestors lived and worked.

The people of this area remain proud of their mining heritage, and far from being hidden away like a forgotten relic, the pitheads and slag heaps are kept very much on show.

Decades after the mining industry fell silent, it is still playing an integral, if much changed role, in the heart of the region. ♥

Francofile

Get under the surface of Pas-de-Calais

GETTING THERE:

BY RAIL: Steve travelled on Eurostar from London St Pancras to Lille.

The journey takes just over 1hr 20min. Return tickets from £98. Go to eurostar.com for tickets. Local train services and buses can be used to reach surrounding towns and cities such as Valenciennes.

BY ROAD: Driving to Lille from Calais takes around 1hr 10min.

WHERE TO STAY

Royal Hainaut Spa & Resort

Tel: (Fr) 3 27 35 15 15
royalhainaut.com
Newly-opened elegant

and luxurious hotel with spa in Valenciennes, housed in an expansive former hospital. Rooms from €115.

Le Grand Duc

Tel: (Fr) 3 27 46 40 30
legrandduc.fr
Quirky, characterful, eccentric *maison d'hôtes* run by a skilled raconteur, which has welcomed David Bowie among other stars. Rooms from €97.

WHERE TO EAT

La Roselière

Tel: (Fr) 3 27 40 59 47
Formerly fed hungry miners and this simple café's hearty food and



TOURIST INFORMATION:

pas-de-calais-tourisme.com; jadorelenord.fr
Département: Pas-de-Calais (62), Nord (59)

regional style have changed little in decades. Menus from €17.

Pasino

Tel: (Fr) 3 27 48 19 00
hotelsaintamand.com
Includes a choice of restaurants and bars to fill your stomach before trying your luck at the on-site casino. Menus from €14.90.

WHERE TO VISIT

Les Chevrettes du Terril
Tel: (Fr) 6 73 54 49 52

chevrettesduterril.fr

Le Centre Historique Minier

Tel: (Fr) 3 27 95 82 82
chm-lewarde.com

