



Audierne's brilliant white buildings and harbour are attractive



# France's finest

Pick up a favourite footpath at sensational spots around Brittany's coast to make the most of the beautiful scenery and rich heritage

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A popular bumper sticker in the French department of Finistère in western Brittany is '*Tout commence en Finistère*' (everything starts in Finistère). I contemplated this as I watched the Atlantic swell creating patterns in the aquamarine water off Finistère's remote Pointe du Van, where cliffs tumble into the ocean.

The name Finistère implies the end of the earth and, feeling the wind in my hair in this awe-inspiring spot, I caught a glimpse of endings and beginnings. This trip was my first to this outlying part of France.

The sweet smell of flowering heather mingled with the tang of salt as I turned south along the coastal footpath to the scenic cliffside chapel, the Pointe du Raz, looming beyond. The idyllic Baie des Trépassés (bay of the dead) huddles between these two mighty headlands, the bay so named because of the bodies that have washed up here from shipwrecks.

We had landed in Saint-Malo and headed west towards Finistère, only distracted by Ploumanac'h for a hot tip about ice cream from MMM Travel Editor, Helen Werin. ►



## US AND OUR 'VAN



*Carol Kubicki...*

and her husband, Anthony, use their Devon Tempest to pursue their hobbies of walking and cycling while exploring the historical and natural environments



2015 Devon Tempest on a Renault Master MWB 2.3-litre. This is our third blue campervan and we have called them all the 'Blue Bus'

**BELOW** Looking across Porz Olier near Guissény

As well as delicious cornets, Ploumanac'h introduced us to the GR34, France's favourite long-distance footpath that hugs the Brittany coast (and a tiny bit of Normandy) for nearly 2,000km (1,243 miles), from Mont-Saint-Michel to Saint-Nazaire. Known as the Sentier des Douaniers, the GR34 was created in the eighteenth century to follow every promontory and cove and help customs officers apprehend smugglers.

Driving through Finistère's farming landscape, the roads were pleasurably quiet. We chanced upon the delightful Brignogan-Plages, a charming village in a sheltered bay lined with mansions, and so began our morning beach stroll and coffee habit.

Under a blue sky and reunited with the GR34, we paddled through the clear water as tiny fish swam around my toes. Feeling in heaven, we drank our coffee whilst watching a group of children learning to sail. I wanted to cheer when they marshalled their small yachts into line.

At Camping du Vougot, near Guissény, we were shown to the largest pitch we have ever encountered. Lined with trees and hedges, there was room to turn our Blue Bus without reversing. We shared the space willingly with throngs of birds and the large beach nearby delivered dramatic sunsets; I knew I was falling in love with Finistère.

Ten minutes' walk inland, we explored the ponds and marshes of a nature reserve that teemed with flowers and wildlife. The GR34 climbs the dyke that protects these wetlands and we strolled with the sea to one

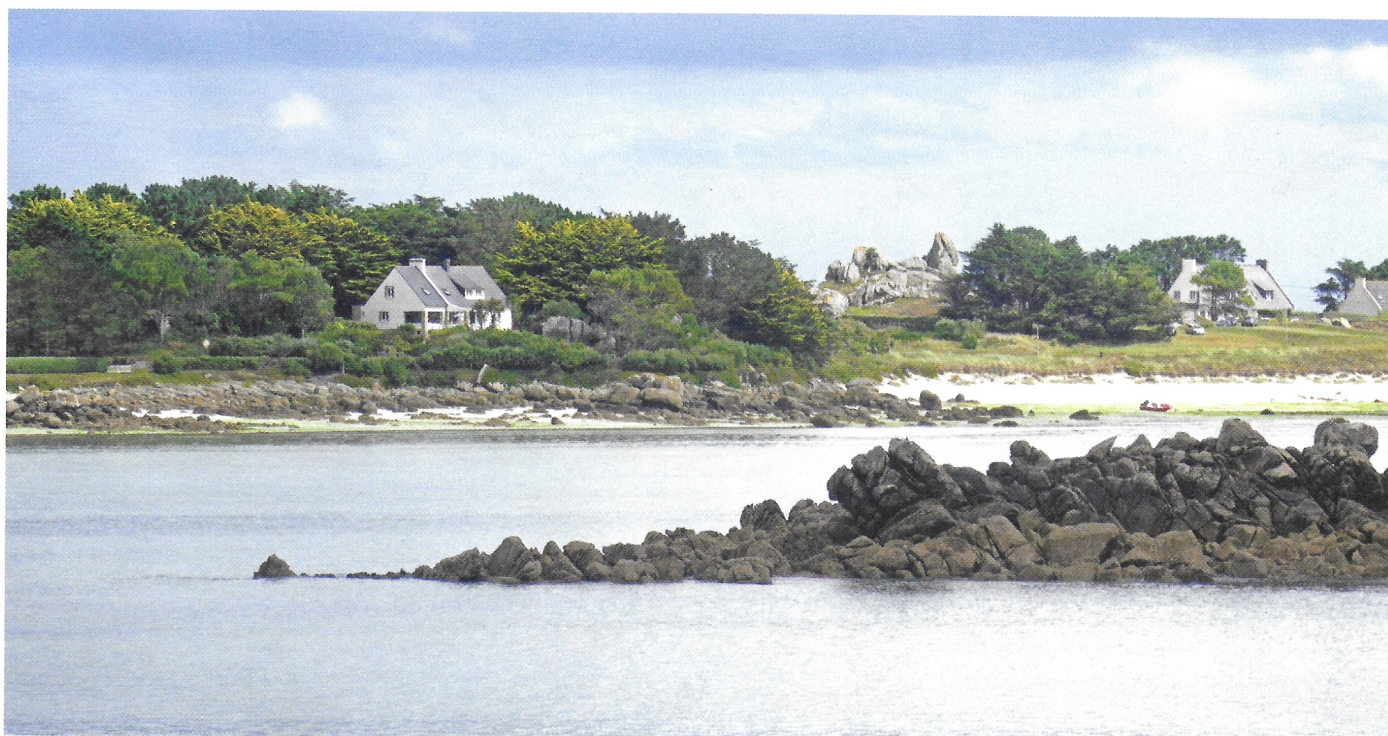
side and reed-lined ponds to the other.

Lanes along which we cycled meandered between attractive bays and headlands. Known as the Pays Pagan (Pagan Country), this part of Finistère is the setting for many legends. With craggy reefs crouching below the waves, difficult currents and sea mists, stories of shipwrecks abound. In the nineteenth century the people of these isolated communities were accused of being more interested in looting from shipwrecks than saving sailors' lives.

Rounding a headland onto the exposed northern coast, we stopped to watch surfers catching the waves. Sheltered coves were thick with the glistening seaweed that has long been gathered for fuel, fertiliser and food. Our lunch was eaten on a promontory beside a memorial to a Canadian boat torpedoed in 1944, looking over white sands where massive rounded boulders leaned on each other, making surreal shapes.

On the rugged cliffs of Pointe Saint-Mathieu a red and white lighthouse towers over the ruins of an abbey, weaving together different histories of this perilous and productive coast. Guarding the entrance to Brest's important harbour, the first lighthouse was installed here in the seventeenth century, although the monks maintained a light before then.

Of course, the GR34 comes this way and its red and white markers took us along the cliffs, passing WWII German defences and display boards with lists of ships and submarines that have been lost here. ►





## TOP TIPS

GR (Grande Randonnée) routes are marked clearly and regularly with a red and white stripe. This is painted on rocks, tree trunks and buildings. A cross indicates you have gone the wrong way and diagrams show right and left turns

The bois du Névet has a wheelchair-accessible path of about 1km (0.6 miles) accessible from the Kerlaz car park

Dogs are restricted on many of Brittany's beaches from 1 April to 30 September

**FAR RIGHT INSET** The lighthouse at Pointe Saint-Mathieu looms dramatically over the abbey

At the sombre National Memorial to Sailors we watched yachts navigating a safe course between the rocks.

Fort de Bertheaume, an island fort reached by steps and bridges, is nearby. Fortified by Vauban in the seventeenth century, the fort faces Vauban's tower in Camaret-sur-Mer to the south, both guarding the Goulet de Brest, the narrow strait between Brest and the ocean.

There has only been a bridge to the fort since 1817. Before then an aerial gondola was used and, these days, you can recreate that excitement by zip wire. We chose the bridge to reach the spectacular view from the fort and watched a succession of excited people swinging above the waves. The fort was used by the Germans in WWII and I was horrified to read that it wasn't cleared of mines and opened to the public until the 1990s.

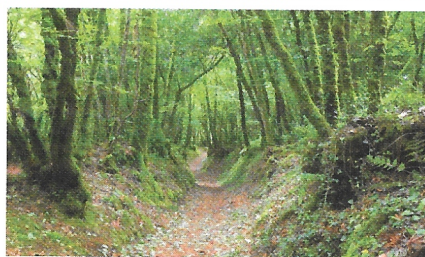
The Finistère coastline is a series of craggy peninsulas. As we both enjoy bracing walks along windswept cliffs, we weaved a serpentine route around them. On the Crozon peninsula we explored the appealing town of Camaret-sur-Mer, from the narrow

backstreets where bougainvillea trailed prettily overhead to the busy harbour lined with stylish restaurants. From the port we wandered along the shingle spit, passing the eerie wrecks of the boat graveyard.

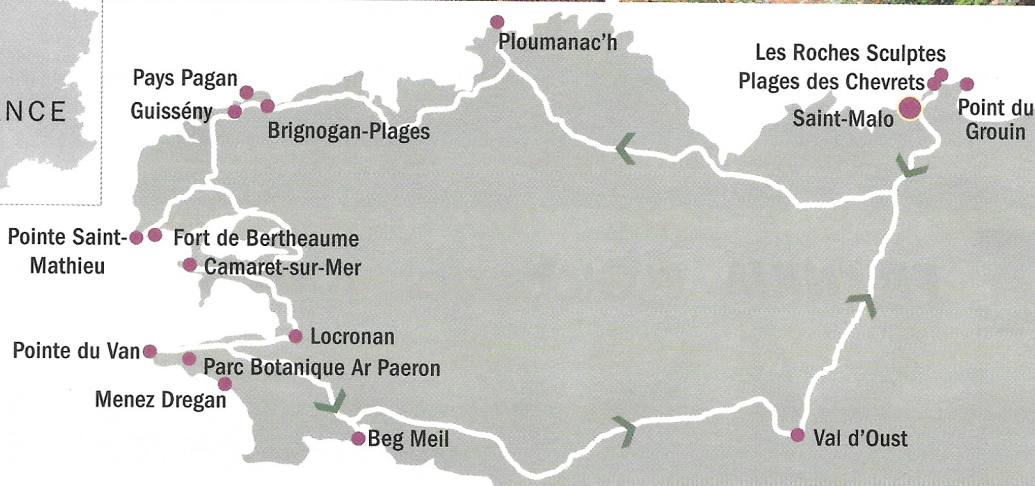
Scoured by salty waves, the exposed Notre-Dame de Rocamadour chapel has a delightful interior with model boats hanging from the ceiling. Beyond the chapel is the striking ochre-coloured seventeenth century Vauban Tower.

After a night on the sheltered east coast of the Crozon among maritime pine that felt almost Mediterranean, we pottered around the Baie de Douarnenez. "We seem to be the only people without a wetsuit hanging up to dry outside our 'van,'" I remarked to Anthony at our beachfront coffee stop. Although we are not water babies, on Brittany's magnificent shores we always found something awe-inspiring, such as sand yachts racing, cormorants drying their wings on an outcrop or a glittering rock pool teeming with ocean life.

Inland we visited the picture-perfect grey-stone village of Locronan during one of



**ABOVE CLOCKWISE** The rugged cliffs of the Pointe du Van topped with purple flowering heather; There are over 300 sculptures on the cliffs at Rothéneuf; The bois du Névet has wonderful winding sunken paths





## THE JOURNEY

We travelled from home in Lancashire to Portsmouth, catching the Saint-Malo ferry and returning the same way. We spent 24 days touring with 21 nights on sites in August

## THE COSTS

Fuel Average 34mpg.....	£189.83
Ferry Two adults: Brittany Ferries	
Portsmouth-Saint-Malo return with outside cabin.....	£864
Site fees (€422.72).....	£366.02
Road tolls M6, twice.....	£23.60
Attractions (€20) Two adults: Fort de Bertheaume, Parc Botanique Ar Paeron, Rochers Sculptés.....	£17.32
Parking (€3.60) Saint-Malo.....	£3.12
Public transport (€4) Two adults: bus from Pointe du Grouin-Camping des Chevrets.....	£3.46
<b>Total costs.....</b>	<b>£1,467.35</b>

1,193  
miles



the town's enticing night markets when stalls selling local food and crafts line the narrow cobbled streets and the medieval stone buildings are lit up by the setting sun and colourful lights. A pipe and drum band marched through the throng and played on the church steps and a harpist plucked in a quieter corner.


The nearby bois du Névet was valued by the Celts as sacred woodland and has a long history of human activity, with remnants of charcoal production and forestry. Today the expansive woodland is valued for its tranquillity and is criss-crossed with winding hummus-rich sunken paths and arrow-straight tracks, many lined with coppiced trees that drip with fronds of moss. We walked in the welcome shade of the trees and feasted on fresh blackberries under the dappled sunlight.

On the Cap Sizun peninsula we cycled to the attractive fishing town of Audierne, where dazzling white buildings line the pretty harbour. Fortuitously, we spotted the signs for the Parc Botanique Ar Paeron and made the effort to climb the steep hill and enter. We seemed to have the meandering paths of this colourful botanical garden to ourselves and, after the lively beaches, the peace was perfect.

From la Pointe du Souc'h the views encompass the length of the Baie d'Audierne. We had cycled here to see the ancient sites of Menez Dregan, mostly on grassy lanes lined with fragrant bushes, the lush landscape tumbling down to the jagged coastline. The oldest site here is a cave used 465,000 years ago in the Palaeolithic period when sea levels were lower and the cave overlooked grassland. More recent is Menez Dregan's fascinating large and complex Neolithic megalithic

## INFORMATION

Get away from it all

 [brittanytourism.com](http://brittanytourism.com)


Discover the flora of five continents

 [parcbotaniquearpaeron.fr](http://parcbotaniquearpaeron.fr)

What do you want of Finistère

 [toutcommenceenfinistere.com](http://toutcommenceenfinistere.com)

For information about seaweed gathering and identification

 [bord-a-bord.fr](http://bord-a-bord.fr)

The Bassin des Glénan has many busy resorts and among these is Beg-Meil, a quiet, end-of-the-road town. The GR34 was still with us, leading us onto the long white sands that stretch to Moustierlin and the maze of footpaths among the adjoining fertile wetlands. Around the point, the boulder-strewn shoreline is a succession of small coves between which paddleboarders leisurely navigated.

At the Plage des Oiseaux we descended steps onto the beach and experienced a moment of total silence; not a breath of wind, the lapping of waves, the pattering of fishing boats or screech of gulls. It felt as if the world had stopped. In a flash the coastal buzz returned. Anthony and I looked at each other, knowing the Sentier des Douaniers had gifted us something special. ➤

**BELOW** Photogenic Locronan





## WE STAYED AT

- Camping Tourony**, 105 Rue de Poul Palud, 22730 Trégastel  
 ☎ 0033 296 238661  
 📧 camping-tourony.com  
 📅 9 April – 24 September  
 £ Two adults, pitch and electric: From €15.50 (£13.32) for the aire and €19.20 (£16.62) for the campsite
- Camping de L'Espérance**, 86 Corniche de Goas Treiz, 22560 Trébeurden  
 ☎ 0033 296 919505  
 📧 camping-esperance.com  
 📅 2 April – 13 November  
 £ Two adults, pitch and electric: From €19.50 (£16.88)
- Camping du Vougot**, 1037 Route de Prat Ledan, Lieu-dit Le Vougot, 29880 Plouguerneau  
 ☎ 0033 763 525544  
 📧 campingduvougot.com  
 📅 April – September  
 £ Two adults, pitch and electric: From €21.80 (£18.88)

- Camping Les Bruyères**, Le Bouis, 29160 Crozon Morgat  
 ☎ 0033 298 261487  
 📧 camping-bruyeres-crozon.com  
 📅 1 May – 25 September  
 £ Two adults, pitch and electric: From €23.80 (£19.92)
- Camping Locronan**, 10 Rue de la Troménie, 29180 Locronan  
 ☎ 0033 298 918776  
 📧 camping-locronan.fr  
 📅 8 April – 25 September  
 £ Two adults, pitch and electric: From €16.55 (£14.33). Stopover in low season (6pm–10am), no electric: €11 (£9.52)
- Camping Kersiny Plage**, 1 Rue Nominéo, 29780 Plouhinec  
 ☎ 0033 298 708244  
 📧 kersinyplage.com  
 📅 1 April – 4 October  
 £ Two adults, pitch and electric: From €16.80 (£14.55)

- Le Kervastard**, Chemin Kervastard, 29170 Fouesnant  
 ☎ 0033 298 949152  
 📧 campinglekervastard.com  
 📅 1 April – 31 October  
 £ Two adults, pitch and electric: From €23 (£19.92) or €18 (£15.59) with ACSI
- Camping Domaine du Roc**, 17 Rue Beaurivage, 56460 Val d'Oust  
 ☎ 0033 297 749107  
 📧 domaine-du-roc.fr  
 📅 26 March – 31 October  
 £ Two adults, pitch and electric: From €18.50 (£16.02)
- Camping des Chevrets**, 38 Rue de La Guimorais, 35350 St-Coulomb  
 ☎ 0033 299 890190  
 📧 campingdeschevrets.fr  
 📅 8 April – 17 October  
 £ Two adults, pitch and electric: From €25.20 (£21.82)/ €18 (£15.58) with ACSI. Stopover from €13/ (£11.26)

My appreciation for Brittany may have begun on a breezy cliff, however the coastline near Saint-Malo – known as the Côte d'Émeraude (Emerald Coast) – sent me home truly smitten. Here we found secluded coves, rugged headlands and some unusual carvings. Camping des Chevrets sits between two promontories divided by the sandy crescent of Plage des Chevrets and the sheltered bay of Rothéneuf Harbour.

Rock samphire and purple sea lavender grew abundantly among the crags and wading birds fed on salt marshes at low tide. During the day, paragliders launched themselves from the grassy hillside above the beach and, in the evenings, spectacular sunsets wowed us.

We then headed to the amazing Rochers Sculptés, over 300 sculptures on a sloping cliff. With no safety rails, getting around the footways between the intertwining clusters of figures and animals can be tricky as you never lose sight of the sea crashing against the rocks just below.

It often happens that our last walk is our best. The coastal path took us to Pointe du Grouin, where the spectacular views included Mont Saint-Michel shimmering in the distance. This rugged shoreline has enough little bays for everyone and, between the coves, we were shaded by fragrant pine trees. Hordes of butterflies

flew among the wildflowers that flourished on sunny stretches. We rejoined other holidaymakers as we crossed the stretch of soft sand at Guesclin, which ends at a tidal island with an eighteenth century fort.

We then just had time to visit Saint-Malo and enjoy crêpes in a shady square of the walled city as we reminisced about our trip.

It took a while to brush all the sand out of our 'van when we got home, each grain bringing back a memory of the Sentier des Douaniers – and the beautiful scenery and rich heritage of Brittany. [www.brittany.com](http://www.brittany.com)

**BELOW** A spectacular sunset walk on the Plage des Chevrets

