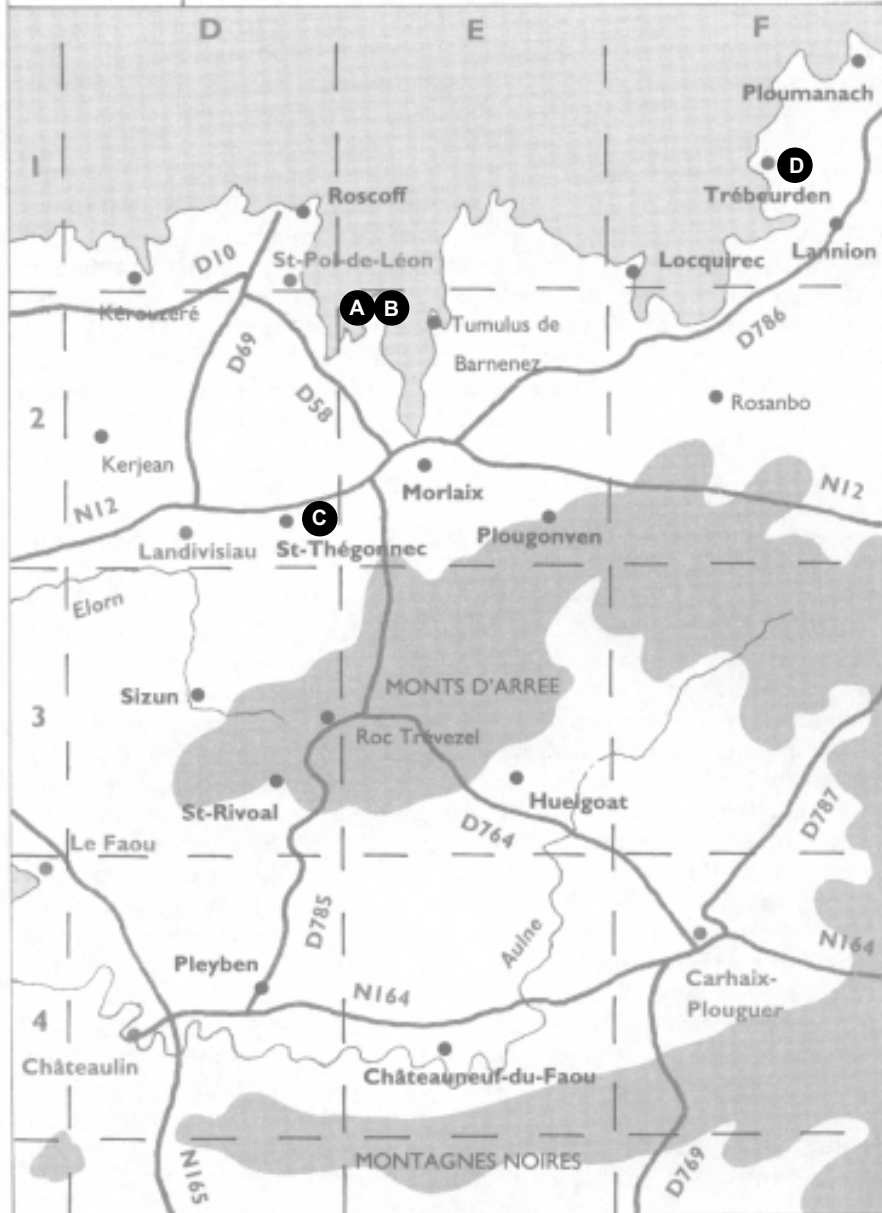


5

Argoat & Armorique; calvaries, myriad *musées* and 1,001 faces. Rhododendrons and azaleas. Pink Granite coast. *Moulins* aplenty Walkers' paradise. Yellow eiderdowns.



'Brittany has a thousand and one faces.' At first you smile and dismiss the claim as typical of any made by tourist boards the world over. Yet there's a ring of truth to the bold claim. This north-west corner of France is a land of patriotic people, proud to be Bretons, who guard their language with great fervour; and where the landscape, both natural and man-made, is always changing and always pleasing.

In the two Brittany chapters I shall lead you to many facets of the emerald called Bretagne. Inland Brittany is known as Argoat, 'the land of the woods'. The coast is Armor, 'the land of the sea'. Map 5 gives you a taste of the Argoat and the northern Armor coast.

I'll start at the very heart of map 5, in the **Monts d'Arrée** and the Parc Régional d'Armorique (D3/E3). To get your first sight and taste of the Argoat do one, or both, of two things: use leg power to make the short ascent of the **Roc Trévezel** (D3); or sit comfortably in your car and drive to the top of the Montagne St-Michel, further south, where you have a brief lung-testing hike to the chapel and observation table. In both cases your reward is a 360-degree panorama.

What do you see? To the east the terrain appears to be a shallow but massive crater, almost treeless and with a man-made reservoir at the centre (let's forget the nuclear power station); the western rim is a spine of rocky vertebrae. To the west, north and far east is refreshing wooded country. Now head east for some of the best, to **Huelgoat** (E3), beyond the crater ringed by a circle of *routes nationales*.

Huelgoat is a delight. The village sits contentedly at the eastern end of a small lake; beyond the granite houses is a most enticing forest. Oak, beech, pine and spruce blanket the hills and hide outcrops of granite and sandstone and a series of streams and springs. This is a walkers' paradise. Several woodland walks start at the eastern end of the lake, where there's a gurgling cascade; all have fanciful names. Further east, off the D769A, other walks entice (use the car parks): one is a safe and level path, alongside a narrow canal, built to connect the lake with old silver-bearing lead mines. Access to the mines can be made by car; use the track further east off the D769A.

Now back to the arc of countryside on the western side of the crater with its high landmark, the communications mast at the D764 and D785 crossroads (E3). As you criss-cross the Argoat, and use as many of the minor lanes as possible, you realise Brittany is a mammoth yellow eiderdown of broom and gorse where, in late spring, the landscape is illuminated by thousands of rhododendron and azalea spotlights. One man-made aspect will also stand out: the region is well endowed with newly-built roads. If only Devon and Cornwall were so lucky.

Brittany is full of reminders of prehistoric times, among them *menhirs*, standing stones, *dolmens*, cairns and passage graves. Of the latter none is more intriguing than Mougau-Bian (D3), near **Roc Trévezel**: a corridor 14 metres long with a roof of five granite blocks.

The Armorique Regional Nature Park is run as well as any in France. The

enterprise shows in various ways. Let me lead you to a handful of the dozen and more first-class museums and *maisons* managed with so much care. Start at the Maison de la Rivière de l'Eau et de la Pêche at the Moulin de Vergraon, north-west of **Sizun** (D3), between the D764 and the River **Elorn**. The fascinating displays dramatically and graphically tell the story of Brittany's water and the wildlife associated with the region's rivers, streams and lakes. Do ask for the excellent notes, in English, which help you to understand all the exhibits (every day June to September; otherwise p.m. on Sunday and Wednesday).

To the east, on the D764, are the Moulins de Kerouat (D3). The Argoat must have had thousands of working water mills in centuries past. Here, a collection of 15 buildings, in 15 acres, is the epitome of what a good *ecomusée* should be: houses, mills, bread ovens, washing pool, small waterfall and lake combine to illustrate precisely what the life of rural millers must have been like in times past. A new *accueil centre* was opened in the summer of 1994.

South through the lanes for a few minutes to the fish farming museum at the foot of the Barrage du Drennec (D3), east of Sizun and upstream on the Elorn: here there's a wide ranging exhibition of aquaculture throughout the world and the chance to observe salmonoids at various stages of their development. Continue south to **St-Rivoal** (D3), to the Maison Cornec, to see how a country family lived in the 18th century. Then climb through pretty wooded terrain to the Domaine de Menez-Meur (F3), a *parc animalier* where a range of different wild and farm animals are kept in open enclosures surrounded by woods.

One must: the quite exceptional Maison des Artisans (F3), alongside the D785 and just south of the Montagne St-Michel, where the brilliantly designed and crafted work of over 100 artisans is displayed; even if you cannot buy do still go (closed Tuesday and Wednesday).

Another facet of Brittany's heritage, religious architecture, is the great number of ornate *enclos paroissiaux* (parish enclosures). Built from the 15th to the 17th centuries, the finest examples consist of a church with granite calvaries containing most intricate sculptures of the Passion and crucifixion, triumphal arch and charnel house (ossuary). Seek out the most glittering: **St-Thégonnec** and Lampaul-Guimiliau (both D2); Guimiliau and Le Martyre (both D3); **Plougouven** (E2), south-east of **Morlaix**; and, further south, **Pleyben** (D4).

Before leaving the Argoat for the northern Armor coast let me highlight some scenic treats on the south edge of map 5. You'll notice the words **Montagnes Noires** south of **Châteauneuf-du-Faou** (E4). In reality the 'Montagnes' are no more than a long line of rounded hills noted for super woods and numerous viewpoints. The best of the latter are near Laz (45:E1) and the Roc de Toullaëron (E4). As you drive the steep, narrow lanes take in the tiny Notre-Dame du Crann chapel, enjoy the views across the River **Aulne** towards the Monts d'Arrée, and visit the château and park at the Domaine de Trévarez (E4), south of Châteauneuf-du-Faou: there's nothing to see in the dark red brick and granite château, but the

park, in late spring, when I had the good fortune to walk through the 200-acre grounds, is a wonderland of rhododendrons and azaleas. There's something to see at all seasons (all day July and August; p.m. April, May, June, September, except Tuesday; p.m. weekends October to March).

Why not approach the northern coastline by an alternative road to the main D785 to Morlaix (E2). Instead use the D769 from Huelgoat: the wooded valley, with so few houses, is a classic example of the dividends which accrue when you have the right large-scale maps to hand.

I'll describe the coastline in two parts: first east of Morlaix, then west. The eastern section has two parts: Corniche Armorique (west of **Lannion**: F1) and Corniche Bretonne (north of Lannion).

The **Morlaix-Ploumanach** (F1) coastline is dotted with what seems like thousands of spick-and-span cottages, most of which are whitewashed; some are exceptionally well designed. Broom and gorse are everywhere. There are many fine sandy beaches; those south of **Locquirec** (F1) are the colour of Cornish cream. The Corniche Bretonne is also known as the Pink Granite Coast where huge rose-red and almost purple-hued rocks have been worn by wind and tide into all sorts of weird shapes.

The terrain around **Trébeurden** (F1) is full of interesting sites: the headland at Ploumanach, a geological and botanical treat; the Ile Milliau, a mini version of the mainland (tel 02 96 23 68 28); the unspoilt cliffs at Trédrez (F1), west of Lannion; the Aquarium Marin at Trégastel (F1); and the Station Ornithologique and Nature Reserve on the Ile Grande (F1). There's more – a quartet round Pleumeur-Bodou, east of Trébeurden: the protected woodland of Le Bois de Lann Ar Waremm; the brilliantly laid out Musée des Télécommunication; the Planetarium; and Le Village de Meem Le Gaulois, a Gallic village built by youngsters to profit schools in Togo. The last three are grouped together.

Something different: admire the superb work by artist Bernard Louédin at his Atelier Louédin, on the west side of the D65 south of Trébeurden. Visit two man-made sites. North of Morlaix is a remarkable dry-stone cairn, the **Tumulus de Barnenez** (E2), an ancient burial site. South-west of Lannion is the sombre yet elegant Château de **Rosanbo** (F2) with handsome rooms and a small pepperpot tower.

The coast north-west of Morlaix has fewer attractions. The submersible road to Ile Callot (E1) fascinated us, as did the Jardin Exotique at **Roscoff** (D1), off the D58 to the ferry. This is a five-acre rocky outcrop garden, newly-created, covered with exotic plants. Seek out two châteaux: **Kérouréré** (D1) is a small building, perfectly proportioned and with capped turrets at each corner. **Kerjean** (D2) is at the end of a long tree-lined avenue. This structure, part fortress, part mansion, is certainly not perfectly balanced; but the owners work hard and hold all sorts of exhibitions, events and evening spectacles (every day July and August; for rest of year – tel 02 98 69 93 69).