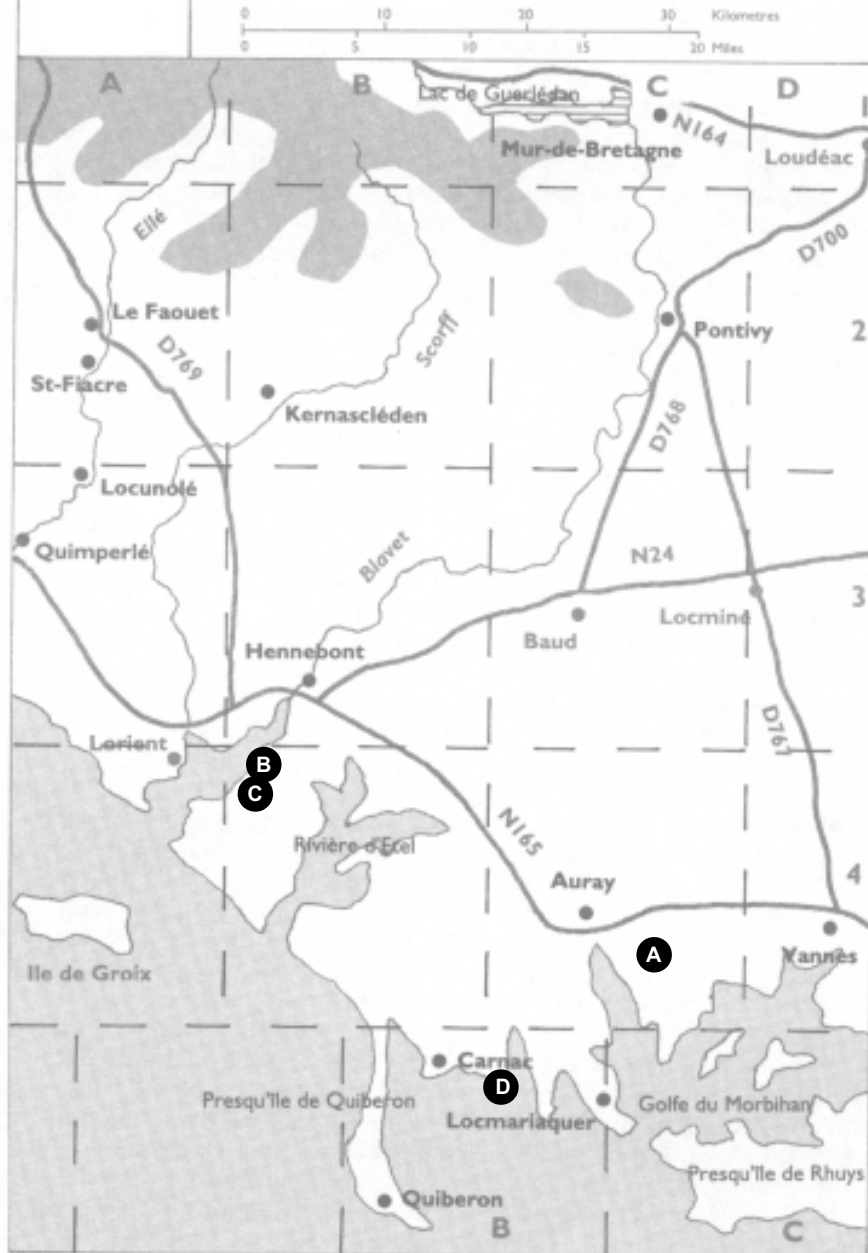


8

Morbihan: mystical megaliths and a magical 'Little Sea'.
A magical island too: cycles, figs, palms and lilacs. Churches
with a difference. (Refer also to *Morbihan* on website.)



This chapter will add even further weight to the regional board's claim that 'Brittany is a land of 1,001 faces.'

I shall start with the **Golfe du Morbihan** (square C, bottom of map) which, in Breton, means 'Little Sea' – an inland lagoon, dotted with scores of islands. The protected gulf has an almost sub-tropical climate; the islands and coastline are ideal for birdwatchers; and the calm waters are perfect for sailing enthusiasts, especially beginners.

Fate treated me kindly when I revelled in the captivating beauty of the 'Little Sea'. On two glorious days in May the sun shone from an azure sky and the landscape sparkled. My most magical highlight was the day I spent on the Ile aux Moines (square C).

The ferry from Port Blanc takes just five minutes to make the crossing to the island. Within 100 yards of the landing stage you have the chance to hire a bike. Do just that. The island is not quite flat, but almost so. What an island: peace and quiet, narrow lanes and alleys, palm trees, camellias, wisteria, fig trees, lilac, old roses (climbers are particularly vigorous) and flowers of every kind. I had laser-sharp views of wooded inlets, whitewashed cottages and myriad small craft moving to and fro on the calm blue waters. There's only a single entry to the gulf and that, in turn, is protected by the headland of the **Presqu'île de Quiberon** (square B). Magical is the word.

A second short ferry crossing from Larmor-Baden, just west of the Ile aux Moines, took me to the tiny Ile Gavrinis, famed for an exceptional tumulus (burial mound). The intricate patterns of carved lines on the supports of the cairn are fascinating. I voted Gavrinis the most intriguing of the megaliths I've seen in Brittany; perhaps because of the site and the mystical remoteness of the cairn.

Now explore a kite-shaped piece of *pays* with **Quimperlé** (A3) at one end and **Kernasclédén** (B2) at the other.

Start at the Manoir de Kernault, a *domaine* owned by the Finistère *département*. From Mellac (A3), north of Quimperlé, head west, cross the railway and keep going right. The 15th to 19th century *manoir* is in a 50-acre park: differing exhibitions are laid on (p.m.); there are walks in the grounds; *goûter Breton* tastings are held on Sundays; and horses feature in some of the summer's events (tel 02 98 71 90 60).

Head east, to an unassuming quartet of churches, just four among thousands of Brittany's rich heritage of religious architecture. First, the tiny church in Tréméven (A3), just north of Quimperlé: miniature in every respect, including the spire; and the bells are easily seen. (Just south of the village is Loc-Yvi: 100 metres from the *chapelle* is La Fontaine de Sant Diboan, a regular feature of Brittany's churches.) Next the Renaissance-styled church at Arzano (A3), east of Quimperlé: there's an Italianate look about the octagonal-topped tower with an accurate clock. The *église* at Guilligomarc'h, north of Arzano, is as tiny as the version at Tréméven: the porch is shaded by a solitary yew tree and note the stone carvings. **Locunolé** (A3),

to the west, has both an *église* and *chapelle*, sitting side by side; note the bell towers.

Immediately north of Locunolé are the Roches du Diable. The rocks are high above an especially alluring wooded valley. Use the road to drive to the top of the hill; park and then scramble up, through the oaks, to the rocks. Far below you is the River **Ellé** which, in May, made quite a roar. Other walks in the woods require more time.

Two churches near **Le Faouet** (A2) are more spectacular than the earlier quartet – for different reasons. First, the triple-spired 15th-century chapel at **St-Fiacre**, south of Le Faouet: the lace-like wood carvings of the rood-screen are marvellous. Note the old bread oven on the village green; and, more than welcome, the new modern toilets. (A caveat: the church is only open from 10-12 and 14-18 hours.) The chapel at Ste-Barbe, north of Le Faouet, can be reached in two ways: the energetic can park on the D132, where the road crosses the Ellé, walk *par la fontaine* and then climb the steep cliff; others, like me, can approach by the access road off the D769. The flamboyant chapel is hidden when you park the car; the small structure clings to a ledge at the top of a cliff, 100 m above the wooded Ellé Valley. Note the bell tower: will you be able to resist pulling the rope?

Finish your exploration of the ‘kite’ with a visit to Kernascléden (B2). The 15th-century church is a stunner, for me the best in Brittany. The overall balance of the building, statuary, rose carvings and frescoes; all are a celebration of medieval man’s superb skills. Nature, too, lays on an exuberant show: the D110, heading south from a point just west of the church, passes through an unspoilt wooded valley. For five km the road runs alongside the River **Scorff**; for me a blissful drive.

I’ll give you another example of terrain rarely seen by tourists. Start at **Mur-de-Bretagne** (C1). (Bibendum says: ‘one of the liveliest towns in the interior of Brittany’. Is that his idea of a joke?) To the west is the 1,000-acre man-made **Lac de Guerlédan** and, south of the lake, is the Forêt de Quénécan *massif*. Mixed woods, with some beautiful beech trees, views to the east and west, and leisure facilities on both banks of the lake combine to please. I liked the hamlet at Les Forges-des-Salles where, until 100 years ago, iron ore was smelted in several furnaces. I also loved the River **Blavet** vista at Bon Repos to the north. The Gorges de Daoulas (C1) is a wooded valley where the torrent has many stepped falls. Beneath the high barrage at the eastern end of the lake, at St-Aignan, there’s a small Musée de l’Electricité which tells the story of the dam’s construction.

Head south to **Pontivy** (C2). Here *la vieille ville* appeals, as does the 15th-century fortress with two cone-topped towers. (Why do Michelin call them ‘pepperpots’?) At Stival, on the D764 to the north, the Chapelle St-Mériadec has fine stained glass windows and 16th-century paintings. St-Tréphine, just west of Pontivy, is an unassuming stone-built hamlet with a *chapelle*, two *manoirs*, houses and old bread ovens. Don’t use the D768 to the coast; instead enjoy the Blavet Valley, with villages, churches and river views.

Brittany’s **N165 Voie Express** cuts across the southern half of the map. Like all similar roads, the highway has attracted a ribbon of industrial and commercial sites – none of which has any scenic merit. However, there’s much to see within a few minutes drive of the motorway.

Leave the N165 at the **Auray** east exit (B4): ignore the town and head instead for St-Goustan, on the east bank of the river, a maze of alleys and old houses and once the busiest port in Brittany. The quayside is where Benjamin Franklin landed in 1776 to seek help from France. The traffic in **Vannes** (D4) can be hell: persevere and nose out the old town, the Cathedral of St-Pierre and, nearby, the ramparts, gardens, and ancient half-timbered wash-houses alongside a stream. The Aquarium de Vannes, in a huge purpose-built building, is reckoned to be unique in France; the site is on the road to Conleau. The old town in **Quimperlé** (A3), at the confluence of the Isole and Ellé, is a mix of old houses, narrow lanes, unusually-shaped church, brick-patterned covered market and much else besides – including swooping swallows.

The **Rivière d’Etel** (B4) is a land-locked bay with many inlets. St-Cado is the best treat: reached by a causeway the cottages and houses on the tiny island are pretty sights. There are also nature reserves, megaliths galore, churches and fountains. Typical of the last two are the 16th-century chapel at Locador, south of **Hennebont** (B4), hidden behind houses; further south, at St-Efflam, is *la fontaine*.

South of the Etel is an amazing world of megaliths: thousands of *menhirs* (standing stones) in serried ranks; *dolmens* (burial places of standing stones and stone caps); *allées couvertes* (covered stone passageways) and, here and there, a tumulus (an earth covered cairn, or burial monument, where stones form underground passageways). Visit the Prehistoric Museum in **Carnac** (square B) and also the new ArcheOscope (on the D196): the latter, in a semi-subterranean building, makes use of screens, film, slides, lasers, mirrors and lighting to lay on a dramatic spectacle to explain the theories behind the megaliths.

I was taken with the Dolmen de Crucuno, north-west of Carnac: nine pillars support a capstone of 40 tonnes (two other broken stones give no help). Also impressive was the massive St-Michel Tumulus, east of Carnac; here a guide leads you through a maze of tunnels buried beneath a site 390 ft long, 189 ft wide and 37 ft high. The Table des Marchands, a *dolmen* at **Locmariaquer** (square B), also captured my interest.

What remains to be seen? All I have space to tell you about is the **Quiberon** peninsular (square B). I saw the Côte Sauvage (D186) on a wild, wet and windy day; ferocious Atlantic breakers crashed against the rocks, throwing spray across the road. Another *presqu’île* is south of the Golfe du Morbihan, the **Presqu’île de Rhuys** (square C): don’t miss Port Navalo; the point north of Arzon; the ruined Château de Suscinio with moat and towers, a Welsh castle look-alike; and the views, both east and west, from the Pointe de Penvins.