

The Nantes-Brest Canal

(365kms)



This 19th century waterway was originally conceived to link the arsenals of Nantes and Brest and provide a safe inland route for supplies to the Atlantic port at a time when the English navy were blockading Breton coasts. The actual towpath today stretches in a continuous line from Ecluse 2 at Quiheix (20kms north of Nantes) to Guily Glas, near Chateaulin in Finistere, a distance of over 350kms. The truly adventurous can create a more complex journey by making their way up the Edre from the centre of Nantes to start with, and following the Aulne to the Rade de Brest and even to the Atlantic port itself at the end.

As most of the canal route consists of canalised rivers rather than artificial channels, there is an enormous variety of landscape and environment to enjoy, from the flat marshlands of Loire-Atlantique, to the stunning falaises on the Oust west of Redon, the forests of Quenecan and Branquily in central Brittany and the verdant hills of the Montagnes Noires in Finistere. Nature abounds, with wildlife flourishing both in and out of the water - otters, coypu, water rats, salmon, pike, kingfishers, etc. - and a magnificent range of trees and flowers along the way.

The canal passes through many interesting places, so a long-distance walk can also take in, for example, the chateau at Blain, the medieval towns of Malestroit and Josselin, and the Napoleonic grandeur of Pontivy, without the need for transport. Abbeys, churches and chapels are also to be found along the canal - abbeys at Redon and Bon Repos, the lovely Chapelle de Bon-Encontre by the water at Rohan, the church of St-Julien with paintings by Serusier at Chateauneuf-du-Faou are just a few of those worth visiting.

What will be of most interest to the walker, however, is probably the vast engineering feat of the canal itself with all its attendant locks, lock-keepers' houses, ladders of locks, bridges, feeder streams, lakes, etc. Even the straight man-made sections have their own distinctive atmosphere, especially that of the Grand Tranchée near Glomel, where prisoners housed in a nearby camp laboured for many years in terrible conditions to create a section of nearly three kilometres in length.

The advantage of the canal for long-distance walking is that the going is mostly easy underfoot and almost level, and there is little likelihood of getting lost! Walkers may like to plan for accommodation, however, as some parts of the canal are better served than others in this respect, and in season many places will be fully booked in advance. Sleeping rough is also quite possible, of course. Stocking up with provisions, etc. will also be helped by a little forethought to avoid too much extra walking at the end of a long day on the towpath.