

# WALKING IN BRITTANY

Brittany has more waymarked walking trails than any other part of France and provides an extraordinary variety of landscape and history to enjoy en route. The exceptional coastal path is well-known, but walking the wild interior can be just as dramatic, and there are also many interesting towns to explore on foot. On a practical note, it is important to take the sensible precautions of carrying water, wearing proper walking shoes or boots and taking a hat for protection from the sun on exposed routes. Even experienced walkers can underestimate the risks, which are not necessarily alleviated by a constant sea breeze!



The main footpaths are designated Grandes Randonnées (GRs), shown by red on white waymarks (balisage) and these are long linear routes, passing sites of major interest. Shorter and usually circular routes of up to 6 hours walking are Promenades et Randonnées (PRs) and the signage is yellow, but other locally marked walks may be shown in green, red or blue. The quality and consistency of the directions is very variable, from excellent to absent, and it might be wise to carry one of the detailed maps (1:25,000) from the IGN Série Bleue, which are readily available and currently being updated.

It is possible to walk fairly freely in the countryside as most tracks are still communal land (having been the old routes of communication for rural outposts) and the private property issues so well-known to walkers in England are rarely a problem here. There is, however, quite rightly a strong assumption of personal responsibility and, as well as respecting local notices, generally walkers are expected to stick to the many paths available, if only to avoid erosion in fragile environments such as dunes, marshes, cliff-tops and heathland.

Nowhere in Brittany is too far from the coast, and its earliest name was Ar-mor, the land of the sea. The GR34 is the coastal path going right round the region, a distance of over 1000kms, providing spectacular views of sea, estuaries, islands, lighthouses and sea-going vessels. There is great variety to be found here – try the Pink Granite coast in Côtes d'Armor by following the Sentier des Douaniers (near Perros-Guirec) with its extraordinary and colourful rock formations, the high cliffs of the Crozon peninsula in the far west, pounded by Atlantic breakers, or a walk around the Pointe du Raz on a blustery winter day - quite an experience, but not for the faint-hearted! To the south, enjoy less challenging routes along a gentler coastline, indented by the many attractive rias (estuaries), such as that of the Belon, or, further east, the Gulf of Morbihan with its 365 islands and Neolithic remains.



The interior of Brittany was originally truly a land of the forest (Ar-goat), but much of the ancient woodland has been cleared for ship-building and agriculture over the centuries. Fine forest walking still remains, however, and such routes are usually good choices for family outings, with well-made tracks and clear signage. The most impressive of these areas is around Huelgoat in Finistère, where the River Argent pours over and under the giant granite boulders of the famous Chaos amid glorious woodland, with many less-frequented trails around the old mining site on the other side of the D769. The stunning beech forest of Fougères in Ille et Vilaine has walks to suit any level of fitness with easy colour-coded trails, whilst the Forest of Paimpont, in the same department, has more than twenty circuits and an atmosphere heightened by its association with the Arthurian legends.



For relaxing inland walking near water, try Lac de Guerlédan, in central Brittany, where the forest presses down to the edge of the water and GRs circumnavigate the lake, or in Finistère a 7km fairly level circuit of Lac du Drennec with its swimming beaches and fine views of the Monts d'Arrée. Canal paths are also a good choice for gentle, uncomplicated walking. The Nantes/Brest canal at Châteauneuf-du-Faou is easily accessible, its huge bends and many locks facilitating various circular walks, or the canal of the Ille and the Rance, with a particularly attractive stretch near Hédé, north of Rennes.



For those who prefer hillier walks, there are plenty of dramatic gorges in Côtes d'Armor, such as those of Corong and of Daoulas, where circuits include places of historic interest like the Abbey of Bon Repos and various megalithic sites. To the west, the landes (heathland) of the Monts d'Arrée - the highest hills in Brittany - are unbeatable for breathtaking scenery and the hovering forms of birds of prey, with a series of quartz peaks offering walks with outstanding views as far as the ferry at Roscoff in the north and the Montagnes Noires to the south. The 14km Landes et Tourbières circuit will take you along these ridges as well as across the peat-bogs of the Yeun Elez, ending up at the top of Ménez-Mikel with its tiny landmark chapel on top. Whilst in this area, do not miss a stroll around Ménez-Hom, not far from Châteaulin. From the summit there are views of the sea, the Pointe du Raz, the Crozon peninsula, the Rade de Brest, the suspension bridge over the Aulne and almost all the hills of Finistère.

Town trails are a good way to actively find out more about the history and architecture of Brittany. This is obviously so in large places like Rennes, Vannes and Quimper, but there is also much of visual interest in, for example, the stepped passageways (venelles) of Morlaix, the medieval and Napoleonic streets of Pontivy, the busy port of Douarnenez and the old walled city of St-Malo.

And finally, it is worth remembering that many secret places in Brittany – lonely menhirs, sacred healing springs, medieval ruins, isolated chapels, rare flora and fauna, hidden river valleys and tiny islands across narrow causeways that vanish at high tide – are only accessible on foot. The landscape of Brittany welcomes those with a spirit of adventure.