

About Brittany

A Rough Guide to Brittany

Brittany is about the size of Wales, with around the same population (roughly four million).

A place of huge contrasts in landscape and with more than a thousand miles of coastline, Brittany is divided into four départements or counties, and we live in north Finistere.

As the name (‘end of the earth’) suggests, Finistere is about as far as you can get in western Brittany without falling in to the sea. It is always dangerous to make comparisons, but what the hell. For us, our part of Brittany is very like Cornwall of fifty years ago.

By that I mean the rugged landscape with low population levels, the sort of often artistic (i.e. weird) people who are attracted here...and the old-fashioned property prices!The Land of CraggsWe used to live in the regional park of the Monts d'Arrée, and the track from our home leads directly up to the Land of Craggs. A thousand feet or so above sea level, we were surrounded by many hundreds of acres of moorland, pierced by great shards of craggy granite. The authorities are very proud of the natural splendour of the area and keen on people using it, so the moors are laced with well-made and maintained tracks for walking or cycling. But it is a very big place with room for all. On a busy day in summer, I might meet as many as two people while walking up to the twin peaks above our home.

Village Life

Our 18th -century farmhouse we stayed in was one of five habitations and two farms in the hamlet of Lesmenez, and a recent statistical analysis (conducted by me in the local bar) revealed that the total population comes to nine people including us... and the average age (not including us!) around eighty. Our home is called Ar Bihan Baradoz, which is Breton for 'Little Paradise'. For us, it certainly lives up to its name... Our neighbours could not be friendlier in spite of the language barrier, and my Scots and Irish ancestry and Donella's Breton roots make us even more welcome. Although our French is not as bad as it was, all our neighbours speak Breton as a first choice, and their French is not at all like that used in the rest of the country. The Bretons are particularly proud of their own culture and history, and seem to like maintaining their 'apartness' from the rest of France. This is another reason that Brits are particularly welcome here, as I think the Bretons think of us as less foreign than French visitors, particularly if they come from ParisWeather and Food and DrinkAs to the weather, it is around the same as one would expect in the South of England. ..only a tad more extreme where we were in the moorlands. Last summer it hit 40 degrees C on the hottest day, and in the depths of a recent cold snap the thermometer on the terrace registered minus five. But we were surrounded by forests and thus have a ready supply of heating fuel, and we like variety in climate. The air is also very clear and clean here, which is good for the lungs but dangerous if you have an already healthy appetite. Bretons like hearty food. They also like moonshine apple brandy (calva), home-brew cider and beer, and it is another interesting statistic that there are more small independent breweries in Brittany than the rest of France put together. Getting the picture of why we like it so much there? For some reason, the Bretons seem keener on the arts and crafts than in other regions. I suppose it may be because of the Celtic connection. Within a mile of where we lived there are three writers, four sculptors and at least a dozen musicians. And remember, that is in a population of less than you would find in an average street in Britain. At the end of our lane, there is a testament to the Breton love of earthy humour, art and 'differentness' in the shape of a life-sized plastic elephant, created by a neighbour to amuse himself and passers-by. I do not know of a single day of the year when there is not some form of creative social gathering going in in that or any other area of the region, and where else but in Brittany would farmers spend the time and trouble to create roadside tableaux from hay bales?Town and CountryBut there is a more sophisticated side to life in our neck of the Breton Woods. Just ten miles to the north is the inland port of Morlaix. This lovely medieval town sits on a huge bay famed for its oyster farming. The town also prospered on the barge trade, and the inland port is now a swish marina. In the ancient quarter is the market place, surrounded by stunning and (mostly) immaculately maintained examples of ancient colomage (exposed timber frames and plaster) buildings. And you can still buy one for the price of a one-bed flat in southern England. Sitting at the end (or should that be beginning?) of an estuary, Morlaix is in a valley and is famed for the steep cobbled alleyways or venelles leading up from the main square. But there is a more bustling and modern side to our favourite large Breton town (population around 17k, which is large for Finistere). Morlaix is a principal shopping and socialising centre, and well-stocked with a range of restaurants and bars and classy shops. The town also holds the largest weekly market in the area, and has a thriving artistic community. Where else would you meet an Irish-American poet (in the only beret I have seen in Brittany), who lives in Morlaix ..and teaches in Korea. 'Nuff said? Our favourite small towns in Brittany lies just ten miles south of where we lived in the mountains. Huelgoat ('High Woods' in Breton) is ringed by thousands of acres of forest, and skirted by a huge lake which empties into a spectacular area known as The Chaos. Here, the riverside walk is literally littered by huge house-sized boulders, said to be scattered there by the giant Pantagruel in a rage after he stubbed his toe on one. Personally, I think he was just on the way home after an extended pub crawl in the town. With a population of just over a thousand and composing of little more than a large square ringed with houses, there are seventeen (I have visited and counted and checked out every one) licensed premises in Huelgoat. Both bakeries have a bar for those customers overcome by thirst while waiting for their daily bread, and even the camping gaz shop has its own alcoholic refreshment area. Now can you see why we were so enamoured of this wonderful

part of France? Our home here is called Little Paradise in Breton, and we concur exactly... For more information about Brittany and France: Travellers guide to France - A wide range of practical and tourist information for visitors to France, from About-France.com. Brittany Property
For more information on the town of Morlaix, go to: <http://france-for-visitors.com/brittany/finistere/morlaix.html> For a satmap of Morlaix and surrounding area and coastline, click to go to maplania.com For all tourist information about brittany www.tourismebretagne.com Book your holiday now- www.bretagne-reservation.com Central France Information An information site for tourists and residents of the Indre, Creuse, Allier and Cher departments of Central France. <http://www.central-france.com>

...a place of huge contrasts.....room for all...'Little Paradise'Friends and Neighbours..Rush hour in our hamlet.. Art for art's sake.....sunset over the Bay of Morlaix...The price of a one-bed flat...Our kind of Town- HuelgoatStunning- the lake at night