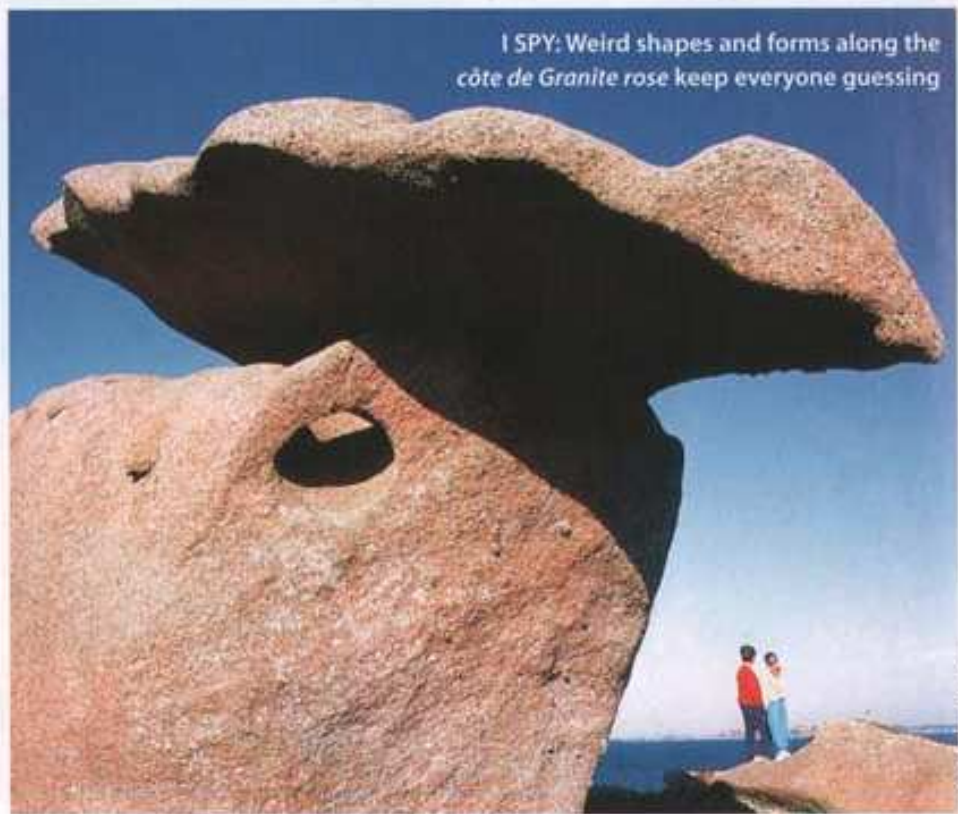


NORTHERN BRITTANY



Famed for its emerald seas and pink granite rocks, this beautiful part of Brittany never fails to inspire. **PENELOPE PARKIN** and **ALISON HUGHES** fall under its spell





I SPY: Weird shapes and forms along the côte de Granite rose keep everyone guessing

A PRIVATEER'S PARADISE

ON A CLIFFTOP HIGH ABOVE THE plage de Trestrignel, the Manoir du Sphinx provides an ideal starting point for a seafaring adventure along the Northern Brittany coast. With a few straggling holidaymakers claiming the remains of the afternoon sunshine, a leisurely stroll before dinner led our party of five to thoughts of smugglers' coves and scenes from poems such as John Betjeman's *Trebetherick*:

*"Waves full of treasure then were roaring up the beach,
Ropes round out mackintoshes, waders warm and dry,
We waited for the wreckage to come swirling into reach,
Ralph, Vasey, Alastair, Biddy, John and I."*

That a Brittany cove should inspire thoughts of a Cornish poem isn't that unusual when you consider that many Cornish and Welsh migrants settled in the area during the 5th and 6th centuries due to the area's proximity to the British mainland. Much Arthurian legend also exists in the area. Consequently the whole Northern Brittany coast has an air of folklore, legend and fantasy as well as a spiritual feel that makes one feel refreshed and rejuvenated.

The next morning, we took to the water for real, heading down to the *gare maritime* in Perros-Guirec to catch the 11.30 Étoile Maritime Cruise to explore

the côte de Granite rose, which runs between Paimpol, a working fishing port, and Trébeurden. Acclimatising to the steady hum of the boat's engine and the buzz of the comprehensive French commentary, we sat back to admire the beauty of this five-and-a-half-mile-long stretch of coastline formed of blocks of 300-million-year-old pink granite.

Weathered into submission by the elements, many of the individual boulders of this volcanic outcrop have taken on weird and wonderful shapes such as the *Sorcière* (witch), *Bouteille renversée* (upturned bottle) and *Tortue* (turtle). A party of French school children readily spotted the various shapes, whilst simultaneously feeding the hungry seagulls wheeling above our heads. Nevertheless, I was a little worried that despite a great deal of magic-eye picture manoeuvring, the only face shape I could make out was Father Christmas.

At the heart of the côte de Granite rose the small, natural port of Ploumanac'h makes a serene contrast to the bold jutting granite scenery and encompasses several interesting landmarks such as the Mean-Ruz lighthouse, the château de Costaères, Gustave Eiffel's House and the Saint-Guirec oratory. Along the meandering cliff path we also spotted groups of rambles in brightly coloured *cagoules* walking along the three-



EVENING SKY:
The sun sets over Ploumanac'h

PORT BLANC, A JEWEL IN THE CÔTE D'ARMOR

Sitting in my mother-in-law's kitchen, listening to the local gossip, I begin to realise what an intriguing part of the world I live in. Her kitchen is *the* place to learn gossip and an excellent place to experience one of Brittany's spectacular views.

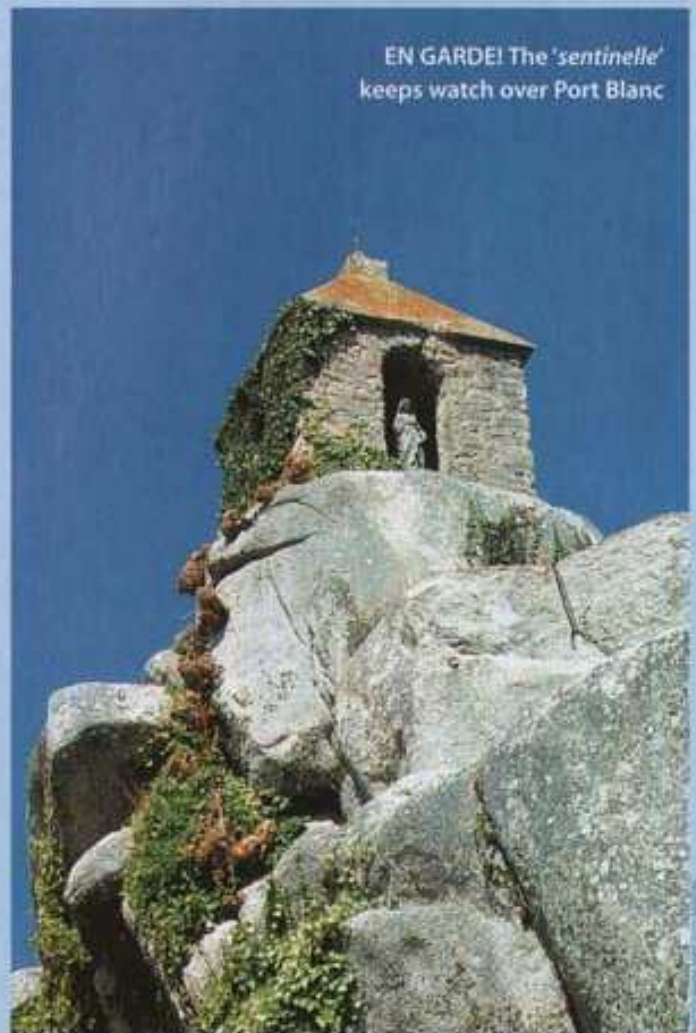
Port Blanc is part of the *circuit de la côte des ajoncs*, a coastal trail notable for the abundance of yellow gorse, and the famous *granit rose* area of Perros-Guirec. From the window you can see the sea in its various moods swirling around the numerous granite islets, and, stretching out in the foreground, the *marais du Launay*, a piece of wetland which members of the family have exploited for generations.

In the distance we can see some of the Sept-Îles nature reserve, another of the area's visitor attractions. One of the neighbouring islands, the *île Tomé*, was once inhabited by peasant farmers who eked out a living as sheep farmers and *goémoniers* (seaweed collectors). Now, however, the islands are protected areas and are deserted, except briefly on summer days when they are host to visitors on boat trips.

As for Port Blanc itself, many stories abound. Indeed, this little place is steeped in history. Unlikely as it seems now, the tiny bay was actually an important port from the Middle Ages on, and during times of war a constant watch was kept from its easily accessible shores to warn of approaching enemy vessels. An ancient guard-room at the foot of the rock known as the '*sentinelle*' is evidence of this, as is the sentry box that was later added on top. Mention is even made of Port Blanc by our own renowned bard in Richard II: "Then thus: I have from Port le Blanc, a bay/ In Brittany, receiv'd intelligence/ That Harry Duke of Hereford, Rainold Lord Cobham/... /Are making hither with all due expedience/..." (Act 2 Scene 1).

Legend has it that centuries before this, a miraculous intervention on the part of the Virgin Mary thwarted an invasion by the English (who have since made up for it by coming in droves on

EN GARDE! The '*sentinelle*'
keeps watch over Port Blanc



mile-long *Sentier des Douaniers*, a coastal footpath that sees over 80,000 visitors per year and offers spectacular seaviews.

Heading further out to sea, we encountered the Sept-Îles nature reserve, a group of protected rocky islets that hosts 13 species of nesting seabirds. Set up in 1976 by the League for the Protection of Birds, the reserve halted regional puffin hunts when the number of nesting pairs dwindled to 400. Nowadays, the many hundreds of protected puffins, gannets, guillemots, razorbills and herring gulls certainly cut an impressive swathe of black and white across the steely blue water and dark grey rocks, whilst their healthy, territorial cries pepper the air and make it difficult to hold a conversation!

The sculptor Pierre Manoli (1927–2001) produced many sculptures of soaring seabirds and even pioneered a method of melting granite to produce a medium for many of his environmentally friendly sculptures. The Manoli Gallery in La Richardais, part of the Emerald Coast, of which more later, explores his work and is well worth a

Puffins on the Île Grande near Trégastel



visit. Other bizarre but ingenious studies include flocks of sheep made from golf balls, sculptures of curious owls and cleverly balancing trapeze artists that wheel around a central metal frame.

Back on dry land, we headed ravenously for the Crêperie de Kervélégan before embarking upon a leisurely afternoon drive through Lannion to Guingamp and St-Brieuc and finally to Dinan. Having chosen to journey inland rather than enjoy the

beautiful beaches of the côte du Goëlo and the côte de Penthievre we settled in for an overnight stay in Saint-Servant. Next morning we headed for the most famous section of the Northern Brittany coastline, the côte d'Émeraude.

The beautiful walled town of St-Malo is the undoubted highlight of the Emerald Coast, which runs between Le Val-André and the pointe du Grouin near Cancale. Inside the town gates a bustling courtyard boasts many attractive restaurants, souvenir shops and cafés where one can easily while away a few hours, absorbed in the local comings and goings. A couple of minutes away from the hustle and bustle however, one is struck by the peace of Intra Muros's steep-sided 18th-century stone streets on a busy weekday afternoon.

During the 17th and 18th centuries St-Malo was one of France's most important ports and consequently a popular looting target for English marauders. La rue du chat qui danse, a steep cobbled street in the old town, commemorates a famously unsuccessful attempt by English sailors to destroy the


STRICTLY FOR THE BIRDS:
Sept-Îles nature reserve



holiday). The would-be invaders mistook ferns growing on a watchtower to be the town's massed forces of defence and took fright! The story goes that the Madonna created this illusion to protect the people of the port, and they thanked her by building the pretty chapel, Notre-Dame de Port Blanc, on the site of the fort.

Port Blanc's attraction is still recognised by thousands of people, as visitor numbers attest. But the place doesn't lose its charm. Among the most famous visitors who later became residents have been aviator Charles Lindbergh and the writer Anatole le Braz, who wrote that the Port Blanc landscape was "*un des plus beaux paysages de mer que je connaisse*". He found his inspiration in the stories and legends

surrounding Port Blanc and made his name with their re-telling.

But, for me, legends and stories are definitely a thing of the present, and history is in the making, as I sit in my mother-in-law's kitchen, drinking *jus*, admiring the beautiful view and—most importantly—listening to that half-understood Breton gossip. 

JENNY LEES GRATIET

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RESTAURANT GUIDE

There are many excellent restaurants in both St-Malo and Perros-Guirec. Here are just a few to whet your appetite:

MANOIR DU SPHINX

The Manoir's excellent restaurant overlooks the sea and serves boat-fresh smoked salmon and John Dory, and fabulously fresh French vegetables including deliciously sweet vine-ripened tomatoes. The extensive cheese board and a three-berry tart are also excellent...and the view over the sea at sunset is breathtaking.

67 chemin de la Messe
Plage de Trestrignel, Perros-Guirec
Tel: (Fr) 2 96 23 25 42

CRÊPERIE DE KERVÉLÉGAN

A beautiful flag-stoned crêperie kitchen, serving both savoury *galettes* and sweet dessert crêpes. The crêperie is recently renovated and you can stay in any of three beautifully decorated rooms, each with a different theme, a double bed upstairs and a downstairs living area.

La Closerie de Kervélégan Crêperie
22700 Perros-Guirec
Tel: (Fr) 2 96 49 03 91

LA CORDERIE

La Corderie is run by Anne and Denis Gerbert and offers a restaurant terrace with a terrific harbour view. Service is well mannered and pleasant and the restaurant draws an amiable crowd on a cool summer's evening. If you like mussels, they are a must here, as is the shellfish platter, including snails and whelks.

Chemin de la Corderie
St-Servan, 35400 St-Malo
Tel: (Fr) 2 99 81 62 38
www.lacorderie.com

LE CORPS DE GARDE CRÊPERIE

This cheerful beer-garden style crêperie has a great view over St-Malo harbour and offers a chance to try a variety of local crêpes, many of which are named after the town's entrance gates including the *Cronchée* and the *Guillon de la Port* or 'Idiot of the Gate'. Alternatively, the local Breton *salidou* is made from toffee and salted butter. If you have an ultra-sweet tooth, you'll be in heaven, although not many of our party could manage a whole one! 3, montée Notre-Dame, 35400 St-Malo
Tel: (Fr) 2 99 40 91 46

Tower of St-Malo, the port's gunpowder store. The attempt produced only two casualties, both of which were speedily despatched to the English king with a typically scornful note, which read: "We give you your dead and our dead, only one pussy cat!"

A guided walk along St-Malo's 12th-century stone ramparts is an excellent way to unscramble the town's military history and get up on the swashbuckling antics of its notorious pirates and privateers. A statue of Robert Surcouf (1773-1827) towers above the harbour's many natural rock pools and outlying islands and pays homage to its last and most famous privateer. A legitimate servant of the king (privateering was outlawed in 1856), Surcouf plundered foreign cargo vessels, sharing his proceeds legitimately with the Breton ship-owners and the sovereign.

Many of Brittany's great ship-owners' mansions or *malouinières* were built on the proceeds of such voyages and can still be seen today. Le château de Montmarin, in Pleurtuit to the south-west of St-Malo is well worth a visit and is the only *malouinière* on the left bank of the River Rance. With a roof the shape of an upturned ship's hull the Louis XV mansion was built in 1760 and commands a magnificent view across the estuary. Its 15-acre park, which slopes gently down to the River Rance via a series of terraces, was highly praised by the famous French Romantic writer and poet François-René de Chateaubriand (1768-1848).

Chateaubriand was born in St-Malo and is buried on Grand Bé Island, just off the coast. Famous for works such as *Atala*, a doomed romance, and *Les Martyrs* a poem extolling the virtues of Christianity, it is nevertheless Chateaubriand's yen for thick beefsteak that captures the attention in the mid-afternoon haze of a holiday stroll. Legend has it that so strong was his craving for tender meat that he had it cooked between two raw steaks to ensure that it remained very bloody and very hot. The nearby Hôtel du Château in Combourg (take the N137 from St-Malo and turn left when you hit the D3) still serves the dish today.

The final leg of our journey took us 10 minutes south-east of St-Malo to the Jacques Cartier museum, which celebrates the life of one of the earliest Breton sailors. Born in Rothéneuf, Cartier discovered the mouth of the Saint Lawrence River in



1534 and claimed Canada, or Gaspe as he knew it, for the French. Erecting a Christian cross on Canadian soil, in honour of François I, he managed to convince the native Canadians that it was simply a navigational aid, avoiding its more religious and territorial connotations.

I like to think that it is this sort of pioneering spirit on which much of Northern Brittany is based. Perros-Guirec and St-Malo are both full of character and are areas to which I'd love to return for a longer stay. The seafaring traditions of both towns certainly make for a relaxing holiday away from the stresses of modern city living. ☛

PENELOPE PARKIN

Erecting a Christian cross on Canadian soil, he managed to convince the native Canadians that it was simply a navigational aid...



ST-MALO: Poet and writer, Chateaubriand was born in St-Malo—today he is remembered more for his predilection for thick juicy steaks than for his writing

HOW TO GET THERE

By ferry: Brittany Ferries operate from Plymouth to Roscoff and from Portsmouth to St-Malo. Tel: 08705 360 360, www.brittanyferries.com
Condor Ferries has sailings from Poole and Weymouth to St-Malo via the Channel Islands. Tel: 0845 345 2000, www.condorferries.co.uk

By air: Ryanair has flights from Stansted to Dinard and Brest. Tel: 0871 246 0000, www.ryanair.com

WHERE TO STAY

L'Ascott Hôtel 35 rue du Chapitre, 35400 St-Malo
Hotel du Château place Chateaubriand, 35270 Combourg
Tel: (Fr) 2 99 73 00 38

CONTACTS

Gare Maritime Perros-Guirec, Étoile Marine Cruises Tel: (Fr) 2 96 91 10 00
Jacques Cartier Museum Musée-Manoir Jacques Cartier
Rue David MacDonald Stewart, Lamoignon-Rothéneuf, 35400 St-Malo
Tel: (Fr) 2 99 40 97 73

(Tours of St-Malo and St-Malo Bay)

Office de Tourisme Esplanade Saint-Vincent, 35400 St-Malo
Tel: (Fr) 2 99 56 64 48, www.ville-saint-malo.fr

CDT Côtes d'Armor 7 rue Benoît, BP 4620 22040 St-Brieuc cedex 2
Tel: (Fr) 2 96 62 72 00

Côtes d'Armor information pack: www.cotesdarmor.com

Haute-Bretagne Ile-et-Vilaine information pack: www.bretagne35.com

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