Weekender

FINISTÈRE

Brittany's extreme west is a land of plenty, offering grand lighthouse landmarks and beachside restaurants celebrating some of France's finest seafood. **WORDS:** *Carolyn Boyd*

Where France hooks its Breton arm into the wild Atlantic, you'll find Finistère, the French equivalent of Land's End. Located on the northwestern shores of France, the waves here can be ferocious — but this coastline can also be temperate, gentle and exotic thanks to the Gulf Stream, which lends its warmer climate to golden-sand beaches, picturesque harbour towns and botanical gardens.

Off the coast there are the islands to explore. Most can be reached by foot-passenger ferries and are car-free, peaceful havens for cycling. From Roscoff, the Île de Batz is just a 15-minute boat ride away. Hire a bike on the quayside and pedal past granite cottages with gardens brimming with flowers. Off the west coast, the islands of Molène and Ushant (Ouessant in French) are two of around 20 islands and islets in the Ponant archipelago, which forms the westernmost bastion of metropolitan France. Île de Molène is rich in wildlife, with grey seals, otters and seabirds basking on its beaches. On the wild and remote Ushant, meanwhile, there are six lighthouses to protect ships from its rocky coastline.

Not so long ago, you'd have heard only Breton being spoken out here in northern Finistère. A stronger Celtic tradition — all lace bonnets and Breton bagpipes — is found in the south of the department, at Quimper and Pont L'Abbé, but locals here remain fiercely proud of their Breton identity and its seafaring, land-working heritage.

The region's proximity to Grande-Bretagne also has its influence: in Roscoff, people have a close relationship to England, made stronger by generations of onion sellers crossing the channel from Roscoff to peddle the town's delicate pink onions door-to-door throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. Anglo-Breton friendship is maintained these days by the hundreds of Brits rolling off the overnight ferry from Plymouth — by far the easiest way to arrive. While many pass through to destinations south, those who linger a while in northern Finistère will be spoilt by region's plentiful cuisine; there's a bounty of fresh vegetables grown in the red-hued soil and a decadent array of seafood and fish landed fresh each day. Just take a seat on the terrace of a harbour-front restaurant and tuck in.

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Old town, Roscoff; Roscoff Onion Festival; Île de Batz lighthouse; view from Hotel Brittany; seafood dish, Hotel Brittany's restaurant

IMAGES: LAMOUREUX-ALEXANDRE; ALAMY; PASCAL LÉOPOLD/HOTEL BRITTANY

Food, glorious food

The gentle climate on Finistère's north coast facilitates a bounty of delicious produce: try cauliflowers, globe artichokes and Roscoff's celebrated pink onions, which — thanks to the town's history of 'Onion Johnny' sellers — have their own museum. There's even an annual festival in their honour. The coastline offers a huge variety of seafood, from giant crabs and fat, juicy langoustines, to daily fresh fish and edible seaweed gathered from the rocky beaches.

Where to stay

Try the Hotel Brittany in Roscoff, which has an indoor pool and spa as well as an excellent Michelin-starred restaurant. At Brignogan-Plages, the eco-friendly Hôtel de la Mer opens out on to the beach and offers seaweed-gathering workshops. In Le Conquet, a seaside town on the far west coast, the Sainte-Barbe Hôtel & Spa is due to open later this summer, with spectacular views out to the islands of Molène and Ushant as well as a spa and restaurant.
hotel-brittany.com hoteldelamer.bzh

TROPICAL GARDENS

On the Île de Batz, the Georges Delaselle Garden was established in 1897 by Parisian insurer Delaselle. It brings together hundreds of plants from the southern hemisphere, many of which were brought back by sailors returning from Australasia.

TAKE THREE

lighthouses

ÎLE DE BATZ LIGHTHOUSE

The 144ft granite lighthouse on the enchanting island of Batz makes for the perfect end-destination when cycling around the island. Pedal past rolling farmers' fields and then climb the 198 steps to gaze back towards the Finistère coast.

CRÉAC'H LIGHTHOUSE

There are six lighthouses on or around the island of Ushant. The most striking is the mighty black-and-white striped Phare du Créac'h. The most powerful lighthouse in Europe, its beam shines almost 40 miles across the Atlantic below.

SAINT-MATHIEU

On the wild west coast, south of the harbour town of Le Conquet, the red-topped Phare Saint-Mathieu offers incredible views of the Iroise sea and its many islands. There's a small museum telling its history and, next to it, is the ruined and wonderfully atmospheric 11th-century Abbaye Saint-Mathieu de Fine-Terre.

Île de Batz lighthouse

EYEWITNESS

THE WILDEST WEST

As a habituated ferry passenger, I rarely bother with anti-sickness meds, anti-nausea wristbands, or keeping my eyes on the horizon. But as my family and I prepare to take the ferry to Ushant — or the Île d'Ouessant as the French call it — I'm not taking any chances. What I've read about metropolitan France's westernmost landmass is that it's wild. Cast out in the Atlantic, numerous lighthouses are poised on its peripheries to protect traffic in the busy Ouessant strait shipping lane. It's where thousands of sailors have perished.

As we set sail on the small foot-passenger ferry — which is packed with fellow day-trippers — from the quayside at Le Conquet, I realise I might have over-thought the potential for nausea in August. The sea is as flat as a pancake. We cruise past the many other islands in the Ponant archipelago, including the luscious, green Île de Molène, with hundreds of sea birds gliding above us in the clear blue summer sky.

After an hour, we approach Ushant, its blond, craggy cliffs embracing ships into the harbour. Our boat bobs and jerks against the sea wall as we step up and onto the dock. In winter, I'm told, waves here can reach almost 50ft, making it impossible to disembark. We pick up rental bikes and pedal off up the hill, keen to find out more about this mysterious island, a place that attracts the curious — just like us — who want to discover what France's western frontier is really like.

A tumultuous grey sky threatens overhead as we push on across moorland whose fragrant bracken and gorse is redolent of Dartmoor. It's then an easy freewheel down the hill into the village of Lampaul, as the sun peeps out of the shadows and the mighty Créac'h lighthouse towers in the distance.

The restaurants are busy in the village, but we manage to grab a table on a prime terrace and tuck into moules-frites. But all the while I'm craning my neck to glimpse the coast; I can just about hear the roar of the waves. Soon enough, we pedal out beyond the church and whitewashed houses of the village, towards Pointe de Pern, the westernmost point of the island, and thus Metropolitan France.

The smooth, open road wends between crumbling stonewalls, golden grassy meadows, small windmills and memorials to anonymous sailors who perished in the region's many shipwrecks. Ahead: the Créac'h lighthouse. As we approach, the landscape becomes wilder, with swaying grass and purple heather, a gravel path down to the sea with outcrops of granite that the children stop to climb. The sound of the waves crashing against the tumbling expanse of dark brown rocks is deafening. The lighthouses look on like chess pieces, protecting us pawns. There's nothing to do but sit and be still in the blazing summer sun, watching as the Atlantic proves that this is the wildest west there is.

When Napoleon Bonaparte was exiled to the island of Saint Helena, he stood on deck for several hours and watched as the island of Ushant disappeared into the distance; it was his last sight of France

Hotel Brittany in Roscoff has standard doubles from €125 (£108). *hotel-brittany.com*
Brittany Ferries has frequent crossings from Plymouth to Roscoff. Alternatively, fly to Brest or Rennes with Flybe. *brittany-ferries.co.uk flybe.com*
To get to Ushant, take the ferry from Le Conquet. Use the park-and-ride to reach the harbour, as parking is limited. *brittanytourism.com*

IMAGE: ALAMY