

## Walking in Eastern Brittany: Myths, magic and megaliths

Mention Brittany and the mind will immediately conjure up images of granite cliffs, sheltered coves and rock pools, lighthouses, fishing villages and unexploited sandy beaches where the family can play all day. Coastal Brittany is superb, but there are many more treasures to be discovered inland. Prehistoric man has left more evidence of his presence in Brittany than anywhere else in Europe, and the countryside is liberally scattered with menhirs (standing stones), dolmens and gallery graves. In addition to this, Brittany is essentially a Celtic country, a land steeped in folklore, a place where fervent religious belief goes hand in hand with deep-seated superstition.

And what has all this to do with walking? Well of course there is lots of fun to be had in tracking down these legends and many of the associated sacred, mystical or mythological sites are places that are accessible only to those on foot. It might well be expected that the 'Celticness' of Brittany would increase towards the west, and maybe it does - but visitors to these parts won't be in any doubt that they have reached a land of magic as soon as they have left Normandy. Fougères, just 20km over the border, says that its history is 'engraved in the stones' which sounds curious in itself. And you could not find a more curious mixture of history and legend anywhere than that in the countryside around Fougères.



Anyone coming to Fougères is going to want to visit the château, which is certainly an impressive piece of medieval military architecture, yet the effect is softened by the numerous pepper-pot towers, a host of sharpened pencils all pointing to the sky. The best place for a photograph of the château is from a tiny garden beside the Rue de la Pinterie, which climbs up the hill behind – and from here, it's just a few steps farther to the

top and the Office de Tourisme. Here it is possible to get a map of the Forest of Fougères, which lies just a few kilometres north of the town. Several trails are marked out in that forest, and in taking them you will come across a fine line of standing stones, two enormous dolmens, the remains of a Gallic oppidum and a cross marking the site of a tree where rituals were once performed to procure recovery from illness. The map also gives sound and serious advice on what to do if you meet the forest goblin!

All this is just a foretaste. In the surrounding countryside can be found a rock that bears the imprint of a saint's knees and one that was scored by the shoe of a horse as it made a fatal leap; there are rocks that conceal treasure and get up and walk on Christmas Eve, trees that heal and menhirs that bring bad luck to any who gaze on them, stones that enhance fertility, a rock that smokes as the Devil fries his pancakes and a lot more. Most of these stories are detailed in a book that can be obtained from the Office de Tourisme in Fougères, many of the sites are on waymarked walking circuits and all of them are decidedly 'off-the-beaten-track', and well hidden from the casual holiday maker.

For those who enjoy seeking out those sites there's a lot more. For megaliths, nothing can surpass the site at St Just, 20 km north-east of Redon. In fact it is ranked second to Carnac, but there is a lot more variety here (menhirs, dolmens, gallery graves, even a 'prehistoric calendar') than at Carnac, and the wild heather-clad moorland is a setting far more mysterious and evocative. The other bonus is that the crowds are absent! Enthusiastic megalith hunters could go on to a vast site



at Monteneuf (north-west of St Just, towards Ploërmel) where around 400 menhirs, once pulled down in religious frenzy, are slowly being erected again in their former positions. Both at St Just and Monteneuf, a little legwork is necessary to reach the most interesting places. At Monteneuf, four circuits are signed – and it is a good idea to make sure you stick with the colour you started with or you could find yourself taking a very long walk indeed!

There is one more enigmatic place in eastern Brittany that just has to be mentioned because it is one that romantics will love. The Forest of Paimpont is said to be Brocéliande, the scene of the stories of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. In its depths are many designated sites associated with the legend, some of them much easier to find than others. Merlin's tomb (a megalith) is just off the road, but both energy and inspiration are needed to find the Fountain of Barenton, where Merlin met his beloved fairy Viviane and where she imprisoned him in nine circles of air. At the site of the Château of Comper (where Sir Lancelot was raised in a crystal palace by the Lady of the Lake) there is now a permanent Arthurian exhibition – and the church at Tréhorenteuc has stained glass windows (and much more) blending Christianity with the legends. There are many glorious walks in this forest and the Tourist Office in Tréhorenteuc gives out maps and directions. The best walk of all is through the fairy-haunted Val sans Retour (Valley of No Return) to the hillside where a Neolithic burial site known as the 'Hotié de Viviane' hides amid gorse and heather. On the way back from here along the rim of the valley, a rock known as Merlin's seat is the spot where the sorcerer liked to sit in contemplation as the evening shadows crept through the deep bowl below. If you come to this place, perhaps you, too, will feel the magic of Brocéliande – and beyond it, the whole of Brittany!

Judy Smith is the author of WALKING BRITTANY (see books) and walking guides to other areas of France, including the Loire, Normandy and Provence.