

A river runs through it

Away from the bustling Breton beaches **Jane Gifford** discovers the rivers around Pont-Aven and Quimperle are a source of calm beauty



While most people head to the beautiful beaches of the Brittany coastline in the summer, there's another side of the region worth exploring. Deep in the heart of the Breton countryside in southwest Finistère, the River Aven and its tributary the Bélon, meander through the lush countryside away from the crowds before flowing down to the coast at Port-Manech. I set off driving down single track lanes heading for Pont-Aven, mist still hanging in the valleys and dew sparkling in the early morning sun.

Pont-Aven is an attractive little town and an important river crossing, hence the name. It is situated at the high point of the tidal estuary, where the sea meets the freshwater river. The Aven arrives fast flowing over granite boulders and in the past proved an ideal power source to drive mill wheels, particularly for grinding corn. As the Aven approaches the town, the river has been divided to supply power to as many mills as possible. Reunited, it passes under the road bridge and is then controlled by the old sluice gates which once governed the flow to the surrounding waterwheels.

Further downstream on the other side of town the river deepens and widens. Prior to the 20th century this was a busy commercial port for the transport of flour, firewood and fish. Now it is busy with pleasure boats. From here you can take a river trip on *les vedettes* between Pont-Aven and Port-Bélon, past the fishing harbours of Kerdruc, Rosbras and Port-Manech. Departure times depend on the tides, so check in advance. You can pick up a tide table from the kiosk on the quay.

Gauguin came to paint here from the mid-1800s – *Le Moulin* is the title of one of his Pont-Aven paintings from 1894. His time spent in the region inspired l'École de Pont-Aven. There is a lot of tourist hype surrounding the Gauguin connection but sadly no permanent collection of his works. But if it's a Breton hat, jumper or painting you are after, you will be well catered for as there are plenty of shops as well as cafés, bars and restaurants to visit. La Maison Larnicol, next to the bridge, bakes Breton biscuits and cakes, in particular *galettes* and *kouignettes*, small buttery cakes in many flavours, which are fabulously rich in calories. They are reputed to be the best of their kind in France.

While I was in Pont-Aven, it started to pour with rain and I was delighted to find Le Fournil, a bar and *bistrot* tucked away down an alley off the main street, right by the river, with a covered terrace virtually suspended over the water. Surrounded by colourful local paintings and freshly cut flowers, it proved the perfect place to indulge in some excellent prawns and a glass of wine.

I headed for Pont-Aven. Mist was hanging in the valleys and dew sparkling in the early morning sun



From here you can cross the Aven over little wooden bridges and follow the short riverside walk, *La Promenade Xavier Grall*, dedicated to the much-loved Breton poet, writer and journalist, whose lifelong mission was the revival of the language and culture of Cournouaille. Throughout the region, signs are given in both French and Breton.

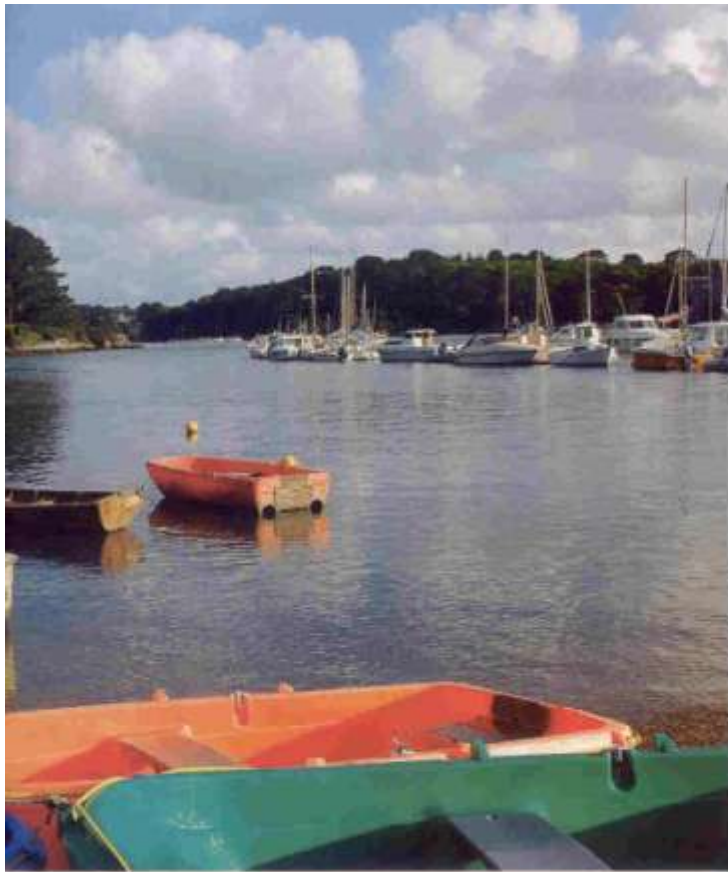
The romantically named *Bois d'Amour* is a longer, very popular, riverside walk on the other side of town. But I was looking for a more tranquil spot to explore. Further downriver, the *Moulin à Marée du Hénon* was

the perfect location; close to the busy holiday centre of Névez, with its large campsites and holiday accommodation, but still quiet. Hénon Forest is a nature reserve and arboretum while Hénon Woods, another nature

reserve which surrounds l'Étang du Hénon, makes a lovely detour. Concealed springs feed the lake, which has been dammed to provide power for the tiny mill. From Hénon Forest you can walk two kilometres down the bank of the Aven round to Kerdruc and a further nine kilometres to Port-Manech. On the opposite bank from Kerdruc, the *Bistrot de Rosbras* catches the evening light and is a great place for a sun-downer, seated outside enjoying the extensive river views. I passed nobody on my walk except the nature reserve warden who recommended the footpath which runs along the other side of the river, the left bank of

PREVIOUS PAGE: Pont-Aven
THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: The River Aven at Rosbras; Bar Le Fournil, Pont-Aven; Port Manech; La Pointe de Trevignon from Kerisdan Plage; Line fisherman shows off his catch at Raguénès

PREVIOUS PAGE: PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMES WATSON. ALL OTHER PHOTOGRAPHS: JAMES WATSON



BRITTANY

Nos Apéritifs	
Kir Blanc ou Breton	3,00
Kir pêche haut	3,70
Partou	3,00
Pêlo	3,00
Bananeau	3,30
Whisky Breton	5,20
Whisky Jack Daniel	5,70
Cicard - Pêche	3,90
Américain	5,20
...	3,80
...	3,30





CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Chez Jacky and the BÉlon; A platter of *fruits de mer*; Pont-Aven; Asparagus on sale in Quimperlé

the Aven, passing through Rosbras and following the coast along the cliff-tops around the Fort de BÉlon on la Pointe de Penquémé. It was sound advice. You overlook the confluence of the Rivers Aven and BÉlon with a wide panoramic view out to the open sea. This is another nature reserve, established to protect the huge variety of coastal flowers and some rare ferns. Filling my lungs with sea air and the scent of pine woods, I carried on to the beach. The path continues down the edge of the BÉlon.

Fruits from the sea

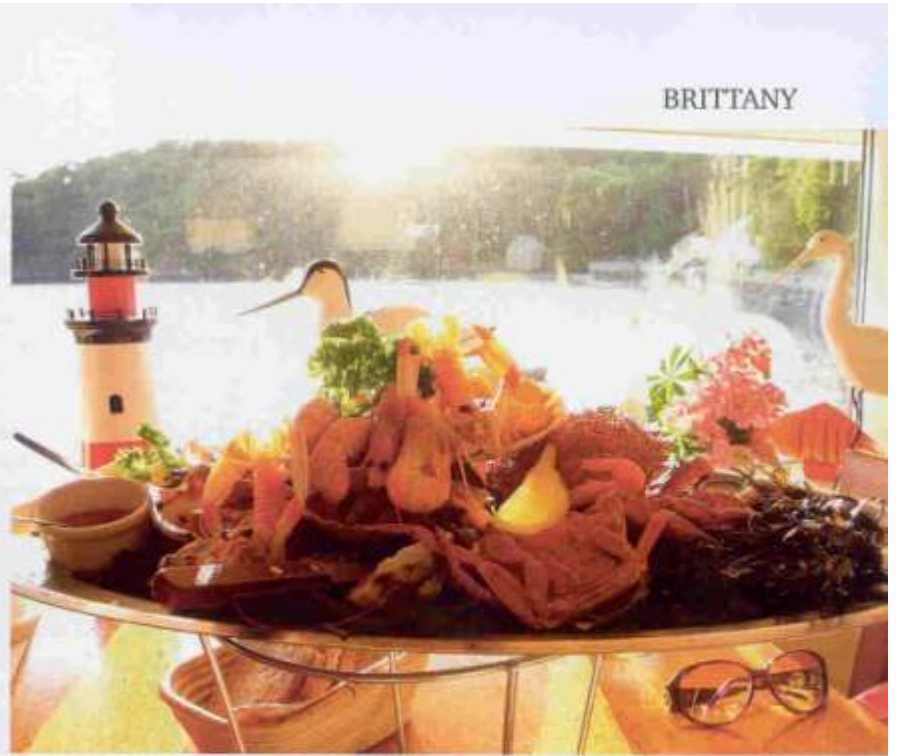
If you love seafood, then seek out Chez Jacky on the riverbank opposite Port-BÉlon. It is signposted from the main road (D783) out of Pont-Aven. While it is tricky to find, it is really worth the effort, both for the food and the views. Try the *plateau de fruits de mer*, which is comprehensive, enormous and stuffed with oysters and crayfish, or king prawns in a sauce of cream, brandy and lobster roe. If you fancy preparing some seafood yourself, the BÉlon boasts its own species of oyster which can be bought from Jacky's. There is also an international delivery service. While driving over this way, it's also worth trying to find the prehistoric covered alley and standing stone on the D216 not far from Moëlan-sur-Mer.

My exploration of the area did not end here, there were coastal delights yet to discover. Across the estuary, where the BÉlon joins the Aven, is Port-Manech, a popular harbour with a large waterside car park and a sandy cove with beach huts and a small château behind.

Heading west about five kilometres you'll find Raguénès – a favourite beach of line fishermen for centuries. There is a boat-ramp and a small island just off-shore with a lone white-washed cottage. A couple of local fishermen were busy hitching their little wooden boat to a trailer after an early morning fishing trip. I was proudly shown the best of the day's catch – it would be on the fishmonger's slab within a few hours.

The road follows the coast west from here where you will discover stretches of silvery sand interspersed with dunes and grassy granite boulders, together with distant views to La Pointe de Trévignon. Here I visited Le Suroît where *palourdes* are a speciality – shellfish traditionally baked with butter, garlic, parsley and breadcrumbs, served with ice cold dry local cider and lots of crusty bread to soak up every last drop of sauce.

This is a popular coastal route. For a more peaceful bathing beach, head back towards Port-Manech and find l'Anse de Rospico, an idyllic cove tucked away from the main drag. This lovely beach comes with the added benefit of a cliff-top bar, the Café de la Plage, which has





ABOVE: Coming ashore at Raguénès with the morning's catch

excellent food and accommodation, as well as a perfect view across the cove. This time I indulged in mussels served with ratatouille, chips and another mug of cider.

Close by is Les Jardins de Rospico. This private botanical collection was established in 1998 by Anne Renault and Raymond Kaczmarek. The layout is informal and you are encouraged to wander wherever you like. Much of the inspirational planting is based around garden varieties of local wildflowers such as cow-parsley, dog roses, arum lilies and broom – one of Brittany's emblems along with the hydrangea. When the blue hydrangeas are in full bloom you are encouraged to follow the 'blue trail'. There is a very noisy frog pond which delights all small children and a Japanese summer house among the dunes.

So my journey, like the rivers', ended with the sea. But I will be travelling back inland again to discover more of Brittany's hidden heartland. 🍷

Quimperlé

Quimperlé (Kemperle in Breton) is beautifully situated at the confluence of the Rivers Ellé and Isole which combine to become the Laita. This medieval town does not pander to the tourist trade. The older, lower quarter sits in the river valley surrounding the thousand-year-old abbey and the more modern part can be found on the hill above, massed around Place Saint-Michel and overlooked by the 500-year-old church, l'Église de Saint-Michel. Try to visit on a Friday for the market that is held in the square. Residents of Quimperlé have long been firm champions of Breton culture. The town first came to prominence with the foundation of the Romanesque Abbaye Sainte-Croix in the 11th century. Built in the form of a cross, the abbey has a huge circular domed tower in the centre which dominates the lower town. Nearby, a narrow side-street leads to the Pont Fleuri, a medieval bridge over the Ellé. Originally called Pen-Pont-Ellé, it was one of three gates to the old fortified town, renamed today for the flowerboxes which decorate its ramparts.

Quimperlé's situation at the confluence of two rivers led to wealth through its mills. The Quartier Noble is a legacy from those days with grand houses lining the Ellé upriver from Pont Fleuri. One of the oldest houses in town is the Maison des Archers built in 1570. Black-timbered with white-washed walls, it is on a charming little cobbled side street, Rue Dom Morice. Just around the corner on Rue Brémont d'Ars, the Bar du Ciné is a great place to sit outside and enjoy a snack.

FRANCOFILE

Plan your own trip to explore inland Brittany

GETTING THERE

Jane Gifford travelled from Portsmouth to Saint-Malo with Brittany Ferries and took the scenic route to Bannalec via Moncontour. The total distance is 222 kilometres which takes around 3 hours.

Brittany Ferries

Tel: 0871 244 0744
www.brittany-ferries.co.uk

WHERE TO STAY

Le Manoir du Ménéec

29380 Bannalec
Tel: (Fr) 2 98 39 47 47
www.manoirdumeneec.com
Arranged through Brittany Ferries, Le Manoir du Ménéec



offers bed and breakfast in the 15th-century manor house plus beautifully appointed self-catering cottages and an indoor pool.

WHERE TO EAT

Le Fournil Restaurant

off Rue du Général de Gaulle
29930 Pont-Aven
Tel: (Fr) 2 98 06 11 83

Le Suroit Restaurant

29910 Trégunc
Tel: (Fr) 2 98 50 04 63

Les Vagues

Rospico Plage
29920 Nevez
Tel: (Fr) 2 98 06 82 52

Chez Jacky

Port du Bélon,
29340 Riec sur Bélon
Tel: (Fr) 2 98 06 90 32
www.chez-jacky.com

Crêperie Ty Billig

2 Place Saint-Michel
29300 Quimperlé
Tel: (Fr): 2 98 96 40 91

Bar du Ciné

9 Rue Brémont d'Ars
29300 Quimperlé
Tel: (Fr) 2 98 96 29 96

WHAT TO VISIT

Les Jardins de Rospico

Kerangall
29920 Névez
Open from Easter to Halloween

2pm – 6pm

Tel: (Fr) 2 98 06 71 29
www.jardins-rospico.com

Les Vedettes Aven Bélon

Port Bélon
Tel: (Fr) 2 98 71 14 59
www.vedettes-aven-belon.com

TOURIST BOARDS

Bannalec Tourist Office

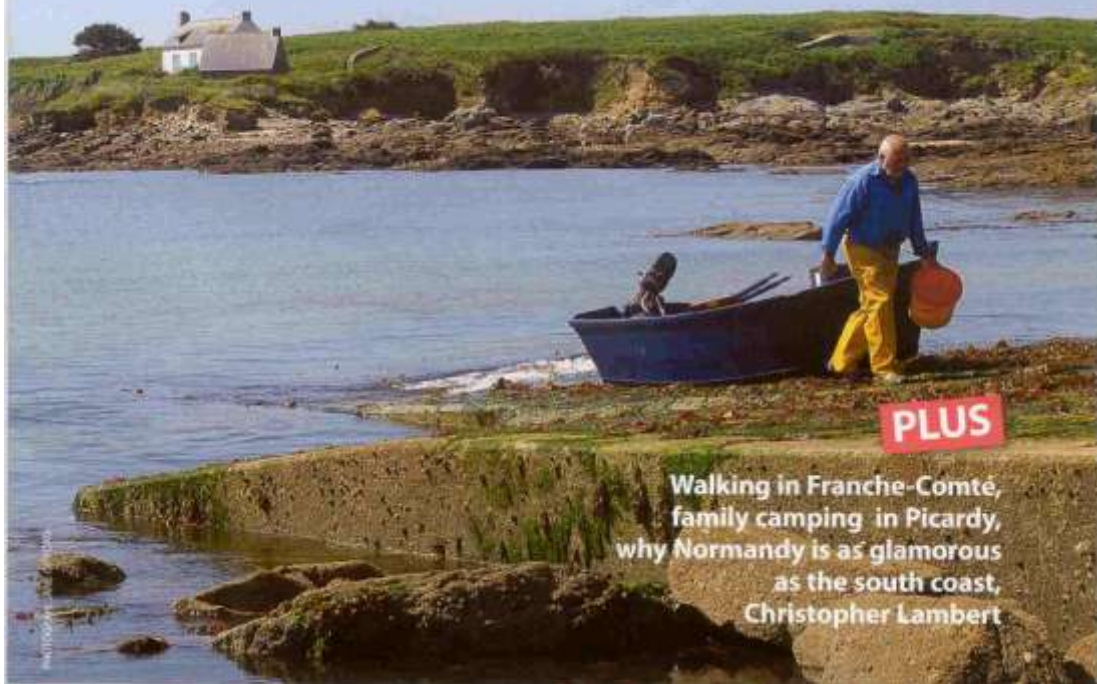
1 Rue Nationale
29380 Bannalec
Tel: (Fr) 2 98 39 43 34
www.tourisme-bannalec.com

Quimperlé Tourist Office

45 Place Saint-Michel
29300 Quimperlé
Tel: (Fr) 2 98 96 04 32
www.quimperletourisme.com

Taking it easy

Enjoy a trip along the River Aven in Brittany and experience life at a slower pace



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