



# To the ends of the earth

TRAVELLING TO ONE OF FRANCE'S MOST REMOTE CORNERS, **ROBERTA MUIR** DISCOVERS A HIDEAWAY FULL OF HISTORY, CHARM AND FOOD TO DIE FOR

PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRANZ SCHEURER



**8AM**

Explore the 15th century Chapelle St Anne la Palud



Brittany, France's windswept northwestern peninsula, has always been a world apart. Even today, it maintains its distinctive Breton cuisine, traditions and language. Its long, rugged coastline dotted with sheltered bays provides rich fishing grounds and the Bretons have always relied heavily on the sea.

In 1924, a young Augustine L'Helgouac'h (pronounced lel-gwash) bought a small auberge on the beach just outside her village of Sainte-Anne-la-Palud. She took the lobsters and turbot that her father and brothers caught and prepared them *au beurre blanc* for her guests.

The auberge thrived and expanded until, in the 1940s, the Germans came and stripped it bare, using the floorboards and roofing material to build bunkers in the dunes.

After the war, a determined Augustine and her husband rebuilt. Today, their grandson and his family operate what is now known as the Hôtel de la Plage. It sits on a stunning sweep of wide beach in the *département* of Finistère (literally meaning 'world's end'). As the name suggests, it's remote – even by Breton standards.

The local countryside, peppered with quaint stone churches, thatched cottages and deserted beaches, is utterly enchanting, and the hotel is the perfect base for a magical day out.

**8am** Wake to the sound of water lapping outside your window, grab a quick coffee in the breakfast room, then head up the road towards the village of St Anne.

Beside the church is an old thatched cottage, now a bakery, where you can buy the local sweet bread, *kouign-amann* (pronounced kwin-aman). This crusty, layered bread, rich with butter and caramelised sugar, makes the perfect breakfast.

Once you've dusted the sugar off your face, stroll next door to La Chapelle Sainte Anne la Palud, which dates back to at least the 15th century. The church itself is quite simple, with beautiful stained glass windows, but the distinctive crucifixes, or *calvaires*, that dot most Breton churchyards are fascinating, with their three-dimensional figures of Mary and other saints surrounding Christ and often decorating the base of the crucifix.

You'll see a number of them, some more elaborate than others, as you drive around Finistère.

**9.30am** A 45-minute drive north brings you to the Lagatjar menhirs, a series of 142 standing stones arranged in one horizontal and two vertical lines. They stand in a windswept field facing the sea just outside the town of Camaret-sur-Mer. These prehistoric megaliths, thought to be over 5,000 years old, aren't as extensive as others in Brittany, such as those at Carnac, and therefore aren't fenced off, nor as visited. You can wander freely amongst the stones, often without another person in sight.

Opposite is the ruin of Manoir de Coecilian, the home of French symbolist poet Saint-Pol-Roux. It burned down in 1940 with his unpublished manuscripts inside,

which is said to have caused his death from a broken heart.

Pointe de Pen-Hir (Beg Penn Hir in Breton), just a few minutes drive from the menhirs, offers a spectacular panorama, with views across the Bay of Douarnenez to Pointe Raz. This craggy headland is quite otherworldly, with huge granite outcrops rising up at all angles and waves crashing at the base of the 65-metre-high cliffs.

A huge, double-armed cross by sculptor Victor-François Bazin, and the Musée Memorial de la Bataille de l'Atlantique (Museum of the Battle of the Atlantic) on the road around the point, commemorate the Bretons who fought against the German invasion.

**11.30am** Back towards St Anne, we come to Locronan, a well-restored medieval town and deserved member of the association Les Plus Beaux Villages de France (the Most Beautiful Villages of France). It caters for the thousands of tourists who visit the pedestrian-only old town centre each year, and craftsmen and galleries occupy many of the shops.

The goods are high quality and the charming cobbled streets and granite buildings are authentic. Roman Polanski fans may recognise it as the setting for his film *Tess*, and the 15th century Church of St Ronan in the town square is well worth a visit for its stained glass and wooden and stone carvings. Avoid the more touristy *crêperies* around the square and visit Crêperie Le Temps Passé, down one of the cobbled side streets. Dine on huge, thin,



**9.30AM**  
Marvel at the 142 standing stones

**11.30AM**  
Enjoy local crepes and cider in Locronan

## 24 HEURES Á ... ST-ANNE-LA-PALUD

buckwheat crêpes and a glass of local cider, drunk from traditional ceramic bowls.

**2pm** Drive out to Pointe du Raz (about an hour), where the gorse and heather-covered coastal pathway is a perfect way to walk off lunch. Standing on the rugged headland looking out towards Phare de la Vieille, a lighthouse perched on the last of a chain of semi-submerged rocks, you can truly understand why the place is called Finistère.

Godebski Cyprian's marble statue, Notre Dame de Naufrages (Our Lady of the Shipwrecked), keeps watch over sailors navigating the treacherous Raz de Sein between the headland and the Île de Sein, eight kilometres off the coast, where the 300 or so inhabitants still make their living from fishing. Minibuses run back to the car park from nearby, or the energetic can continue along the walking track.

**4.30pm** A 40-minute drive brings you to Douarnenez, an important fishing centre since Roman times – as is evidenced by the remains of a garum factory discovered nearby (garum, a fish sauce, was a popular Roman condiment). Park along Port-Rhû, a narrow channel which serves as a 'boat cemetery', with many old vessels, dating back to the early 20th century, in various states of repair.

There's also the Musée du Bateau in a former sardine cannery, which preserves the area's maritime history. From there you can walk along the waterfront, over the Passerelle Jean Marin, through parkland to the marina at Port de Plaisance and, at low tide, out to Île Tristan at the mouth of Port-Rhû. Alternatively, follow the Sardine Route (Chemin de la Sardine), a trail through the town marked by panels (in French, English and Breton) explaining the history of the town and its sardine trade. In summer, there are boat trips to nearby sea caves.

**6pm** It's only a 20-minute drive back to the fine, soft sand of *la plage* at Sainte-Anne-la-Palud. When the tide is out, you can walk hundreds of metres towards the water. When it comes in, it almost reaches the hotel's walls and washes around into the inlet out front. Either way, the beach is flat and the water shallow, and it's lovely to stroll along with trousers rolled up, splashing at the water's edge.

Watch the sun drop into the Bay of Douarnenez, then head back to the hotel to change for dinner.

**8pm** The dining room of Hôtel de la Plage is a glass conservatory sitting virtually on the sand.

Start with typical Bretagne *aperitif*, *pommeau* – a blend of local apple cider and apple brandy. This is best appreciated with a few local oysters, which are famous throughout Europe. The restaurant's cellar contains fine bottles from all over France, often at a fraction of the price we pay in Australia, so now's the time to splash out on a great Burgundy or Bordeaux.

The menu features vegetables from Douarnenez's daily market, fish from the local boats, and shellfish from Camaret's rocky shoreline. Local *lobster au beurre blanc* and *sole*



**8PM**

*You can't go past the local oysters ...*



**"WANDER THROUGH TO THE BAR FOR A NIGHTCAP ... AND GIVE THANKS TO MADAME AUGUSTINE FOR OPENING HER LITTLE AUBERGE ON SUCH A BEAUTIFUL AND REMOTE STRETCH OF COAST"**



**9.30AM**  
 Discover the haunting  
 ruins of Manoir de  
 Coecilian

*meunière*, deftly filleted tableside, pay tribute to the hotel's founder, while tiny lamb cutlets with an assortment of equally baby vegetables are also superb.

One of the great joys of France is its variety of cheeses and, although the selection here isn't huge, each is perfectly ripe and delicious. You'll think you don't have room for dessert, until you see the *soufflé chaud au Grand Marnier avec Condiment Orange Amère*.

Finally, wander through to the bar for a nightcap and give thanks to Madame Augustine for her foresight in opening her auberge on such a beautiful and remote stretch of coast – and to her family for maintaining its charm. **FL**

**VOULEZ-VOUS Y ALLER?**

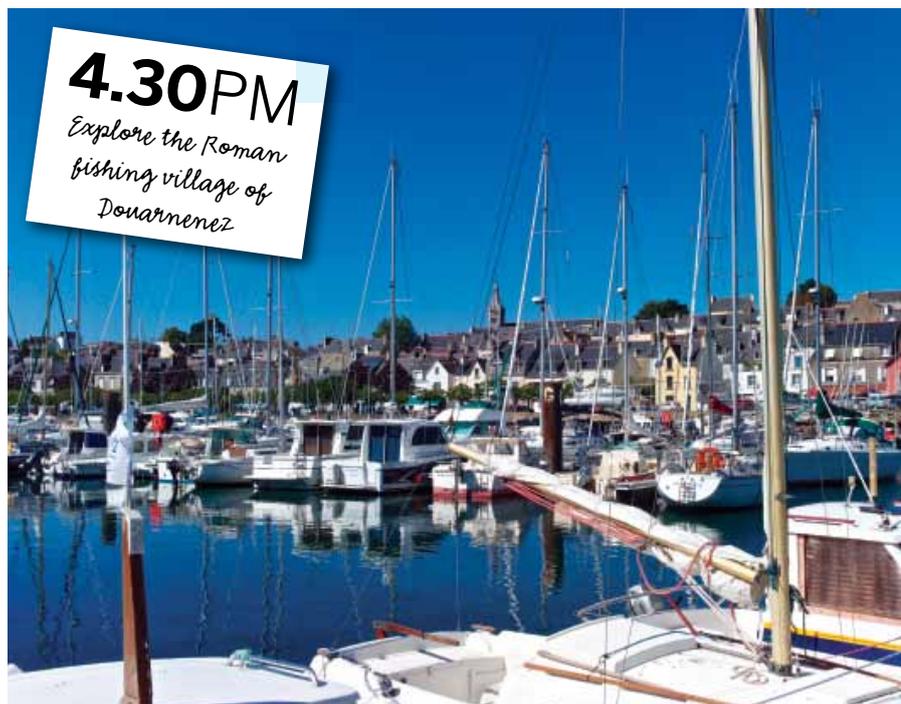
• **WHEN TO GO:** Given its rugged coastline and wind-swept feel, Finistère is as lovely, if a touch colder, in winter as it is in summer, though summer brings the option of water sports. A visit in the last weekend of August provides the chance to see the village's annual pardon procession, an ancient Breton tradition in honour of St Anne, with everyone in local costume.

• **USEFUL INFORMATION:**  
 Hôtel de la Plage, Saint Anne La Palud,  
 29550 Plonevez Porzay  
 Phone: +33 2 98 92 50 12  
 Website: [www.plage.com](http://www.plage.com)  
 Crêperie Le Temps Passé,  
 Locronan [www.creperie-letempspasse.fr](http://www.creperie-letempspasse.fr)

• **GETTING THERE:** Finistère is a 6-hour drive from Paris or an hour's drive from Brest, which has daily flights from Paris, London and other European cities.

Opposite page:  
 Bottom left: A portrait  
 of Madame Augustine.  
 Middle: Shops at  
 Locronan. Top: Local  
 oysters are in abundant  
 supply.

This page:  
 Bottom right: The port of  
 Dournenez. Bottom left:  
 Hotel St Anne La Palud.  
 Above: The haunting  
 Manoir de Coecilian.



**4.30PM**  
 Explore the Roman  
 fishing village of  
 Dournenez