

Brittany

Overview

Few regions of France provide a sense of “otherness” quite like Brittany, the northwestern land of history and mystery often nicknamed “Little Britain” due to its proximity to the UK, strong Celtic heritage and a sense of independence revealed through its own language, cultural festivals, myths, legends and proudly displayed flag. The landscape is rich and varied, from the beautiful pink granite coastline to the rugged Black Mountain interior, from the family-friendly beaches of the north to the busy fishing ports of the west. Add some megalithic monuments, canals, cider and mussels, and you can see why Brittany has a winning way with so many visitors.

Main cities and towns

The regional capital and transport hub is the bustling university city of Rennes, a blend of old and new architecture that is also perfect for a lively night out. Some of Brittany’s coastal towns of note include historic St-Malo (the ferry port and walled city that makes a great base for exploring the region), the small fishing port of Cancale, commercial port Brest, Roscoff, Douarnenez and Concarneau. Medieval Dinan, which sits down the Rance estuary from Dinard, is a dreamy citadel and something of a living monument. Similarly, old cobbled streets lend Quimper and Vannes a delightful old-world charm (Quimper is also famous for its fine porcelain). St-Brieuc is the Emerald Coast’s industrious capital.

Places to visit

Brittany’s has much to offer both the weekender and culture vulture. As well as enjoying many worthwhile city break destinations, you can choose themed visits depending on your interests. Those of an artistic bent should head for the coastal villages that inspired brush-strokers of yesteryear. Camaret-sur-Mer boasts an abundance of galleries, as does Pont Aven near Concarneau, where Gauguin resided and painted before heading for Tahiti. Music and dance lovers won’t want to miss the Festival Interceltique, held in Lorient every August, while history buffs will enjoy France’s very own Stonehenge – the megaliths in Carnac. Just keep an eye out for the word menhir, meaning standing stone. Also particular to Bretagne are parish closes – intricately sculpted walled churchyards – of which Guimiliau is a real highlight.

Things to do and see

Keep fit and enjoy the scenery – that’s the message if you fancy cycling or walking along Brittany’s coastal paths, canals or nature trails, of which there are almost 10,000 kilometres to suit all ages and abilities. At mountain bike (VTT) stations, you can hire two wheels, while tourist offices carry maps and touring ideas. If that sounds too much like hard work, why not pamper yourself at one of the region’s Thalassotherapy resorts, relax by the river with fishing rod in hand or sun yourself on deck whilst travelling along the Nantes-Brest canal. Brittany is a land of legend and myth, and there’s no better place to immerse yourself in history than the Argoat interior or the Forest of Brocéliande. But don’t forget the islands – hop across to Ouessant, Batz or Bréhat for some peace and quiet amid idyllic, if sometimes windswept, scenery.

Food and drink

Brittany really is a food-lover's paradise, offering as it does not only a fine array of seafood, fruits and vegetables but also perhaps its greatest gift to the culinary world: the crêpe which, along with its savoury counterpart, the galette, is served in crêperies up and down the region, with every filling you could imagine conjuring up. Often served with a delicious and refreshing bol (bowl) of cider, it's a hearty, tasty and usually cheap treat. As for seafood, no trip to Brittany is complete without devouring a harbourside platter of fruits de mer, but do try the moules marinières or soupe de poissons first! As for land produce, local strawberries, cauliflowers and artichokes are especially noteworthy, so pick the seasonal menu where possible.

Family attractions

Not only does Brittany possess some of France's best traditional resorts – Dinard's beach, flanked by Belle Époque villas, is hard to beat for atmosphere – but also some of France's loveliest, with La Baule, St-Cast and Audierne ranking among the most sandy and expansive. For safe sailing, windsurfing and other adrenaline-fuelled sports, select a beach like Perros-Guerec, which has the reputable Station Kid logo. Also on a coastal theme, Brest's Océanopolis, with its Polar, Tropical and temperate areas, is both fun and informative (the region has other aquariums, including one at St-Malo) while Branféré Zoo and the Vannes Butterfly Garden are among Brittany's most popular animal parks.