

# CONTENTS

page

3	Introduction
4	High Points
6	Early history
7	A Byword for Poverty
8	WWII and beyond
9	Walking
11	Map 2 - Plounéour-Menez and Le Relec
12	Map 3 - Heart of the Monts d'Arrée
14	Map 4 - Landes du Cragou
15	Outdoor areas and activities
16	Landscape & Wildlife
18	Village highlights
20	Places to visit
22	Legends
24	Glossary - Breton place-names
inside front cover	Map 1 - and plan of maps
inside back cover	Annual events

## THE MONTS D'ARRÉE

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# INTRODUCTION

*Though mountains no longer, they remember what they were*

*Anatole Le Braz*

The Monts d'Arrée in Finistère are remnants of an ancient mountain chain, although today through erosion they are hills rather than the peaks of three hundred million years ago. They form part of the Armorican massif, which also includes hills in Maine, Normandy and the Vendée, and are the highest hills in Brittany. Their relatively small height (below 400m) is more than made up for by atmosphere. The eerie landscape of treeless jutting crags, moors, peat-bogs and a misty bowl of marsh around the reservoir Lac St-Michel gives a memorable impression of stark wilderness, and is fittingly the source of many Breton legends.

Breton writer Xavier Grall aptly described the Monts d'Arrée as 'a land of mists and battling winds, with place-names as fluid as waves, as resonant as gongs'.

Altogether the Monts d'Arrée cover an area of about 190,000 hectares, approximately from Guerlesquin in the east to Le Faou in the west, with the heart around Lac St-Michel and Menez Mikel (Mont-St-Michel-de-Brasparts) with its iconic little chapel on the summit. The culminating point (387m) is technically at Roc'h Ruz, a small peak to the east of the huge TV mast which dominates the northern crests. This was shown by accurate measurements in 2007: before that, Roc'h Trévél (383m) was always said to be the highest peak.

The two most easily accessible view points are Roc'h Trévél and Menez Mikel which both have parking near the peaks, or Menez Kador/Tuchenn Gador, which requires a walk of 1km up from the parking area to the summit. Maps, suggested walks to make the most of the scenery and places for outdoor activities are given on pages 11-15.

The Monts d'Arrée historically formed the boundary between the areas of Léon to the north and Cornouaille to the south. These territories were part of early political and religious development in Brittany, each with their own dialect of the Breton language, and each being the seat of a bishopric, with the relevant cathedrals at St-Pol-de-Léon and Quimper respectively. There has always been an element of rivalry between the two. Near Le Relec, a third area of Trégor (NE Finistère and NW Côtes d'Armor, with the bishopric at Tréguier) also had a border.

## Proverbs

*A funeral in Cornouaille is as cheerful as a wedding in Léon*

*Crows fly on their backs to avoid the miserable sight  
(when passing the border from Trégor into Cornouaille)*



*Menez Mikel*

## HIGH POINTS

### **Menez Mikel (Mont St-Michel-de-Brasparts)**

This is the iconic point of the Monts d'Arrée with its landmark chapel – dedicated to St Michael, the saint of high places - outlined against the sky, or completely lost in the mist. This distinctive hill has long been a focal point of worship, whether of pagan gods or Christianity, and was said to be one of the seven sacred hills of Brittany. Today it is sometimes the site of Druid or neo-pagan rituals at certain times like the summer solstice.

The chapel was originally consecrated in 1677, but it had fallen into disuse when Jacques Cambry visited at the end of the eighteenth century, being of most use then for shepherds tending their flocks on the moors. It was revived in the 1820s and once more became a place of pilgrimage, including an occasion in 1917 when prayers were said for the soldiers of WWI and for peace. It is not in use today.

The hill summit was occupied in WWII by the Germans who installed a huge radio antenna near the chapel. The circular base can still be seen, as well as the remains of two bunkers. Their activities at least provided a proper road up from the main route.

On a clear day the views are superb, with the Montagnes Noires to the south, the high plains of Léon to the north, the forests of Huelgoat to the east and Menez Hom and the sea to the west. There is a car-park near the summit, with access up to the chapel site via steps or a less demanding track (past the barrier). Alternatively, use the large parking area at the Ferme des Artisans on the D785 below and walk up via a rough narrow footpath and steps on the south face.



*Tuchenn Gador*