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**For our grandson Jacob  
We hope that you too  
will enjoy the wild landscape  
of Brittany one day**

Main cover picture - misty morning on Lac de Guerlédan

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Cancale

## INTRODUCING THE FOOTPATHS OF BRITTANY

Brittany brings to mind many images - cliffs and seascapes, fishing villages and forests, folk-lore and festivals, religion, legend and pre-history. It is a land almost separate from the rest of France, temperamentally as well as geographically; a land jutting far into the Atlantic Ocean, a land with many miles of coastline. The unspoilt and beautiful beaches are well-known to British holiday-makers. Very much less well-known is that Brittany has more waymarked paths than any other region of France and that Tourist Offices are often stocked with a good supply of maps and routes. Add to this the mild climate of Brittany - in winter, temperatures are close to those on the Cote d'Azur - and you can see that it is the ideal destination for a vacation on foot. But whether you are considering a full walking holiday in Brittany, or just want to escape from the beach for a few hours, this book should have something to offer you.

Bretons are no strangers to long-distance walking. Until a few hundred years ago, every Breton, at least once in his lifetime, was expected to undertake a walk of over 400 miles, to be completed in under a month. The walk was the famous Tro Breiz, a pilgrimage visiting each of the seven cathedrals of Brittany - Quimper, St-Pol-de-Léon, Tréguier, Saint-Brieuc, Saint-Malo, Dol-de-Bretagne and Vannes. If the walk was not taken in life, the threat was that the Breton soul must take it after death, advancing along the route by one coffin length every seven years! No such heroics are demanded by the walks in this book: they are all simple circular routes between 3 and 10 miles in length, and many have short cuts as well, which means that most of them are suitable for all the family. But before you set out, here are just a few words about what you will find on foot in Brittany.

The ancient Celts perceived Brittany to be in two parts - Armor, the coast, and Argoat, the forested inland country. This simple division is apparent today. The coast is the destination of most holidaymakers - and, of course, it is simply splendid! One of the most scenic footpaths in Europe, the GR 34, runs along almost the whole length of this shoreline. You could get off the boat at St-Malo and follow it west to Roscoff, pick it up again on the west coast, and follow it south around Cornouaille almost to the Gulf of Morbihan - a distance of over 600 miles. If that seems a little far for a holiday, the circular walks in this book include some of the best stretches - the famous Sentier des Douaniers on the Pink

## WALK 5 - BROCÉLIANDE - le Val sans Retour

<b>Length</b> 5kms	<b>Time</b> 1½hrs	<b>Level</b> Moderate
<b>Location &amp; parking:</b> Tréhorenteuc, on the western edge of the forest, north-east of Ploërmel (follow the D141 for about 13kms). Large parking area in the village, close to the church.		
<b>Refreshments:</b> pleasant bar/restaurant in Tréhorenteuc.		
<b>Notes:</b> this is just a short walk, but you can combine it with one of the two walks mentioned below. Trainers would be suitable for this walk in summer, but in winter the paths can be quite boggy, requiring more substantial footwear. (Map: IGN Série Bleue 1019 E)		

### Introduction

On the map you will see the Forest of Paimpont - it is in your imagination that you will find Brocéliande, mythical home of King Arthur. The stories of the Knights of the Round Table have their roots in celtic mythology, but they were 'Christianised' and spread by troubadours in the Middle Ages. Chrétien de Troyes told some of the earliest of the Arthurian tales in 12<sup>th</sup> century Brittany. Forests were always places of legend, and these stories became located here - the Forest of Paimpont became Brocéliande. Here Arthur and his Knights pursued the Holy Grail, but the forest itself has more connections with Merlin, magician at Arthur's court.

Merlin lived not in the court, but in the forest, retiring there to meditate and weave spells. Here you will find the fountain of youth from which he drank, and the magic fountain of Barenton where he met his eternally beloved Viviane. Beneath the lake at Comper he built her a crystal palace, and his tomb is in the woods. The forest is a beautiful place for walking in its own right, but only an incorrigible cynic would deny the sparkle these tales add to the scene. This particular walk is through a beautiful valley on which a spell has been cast by the fairy Morgane - beware!

The walk starts from the village of Tréhorenteuc in the west of the forest. In the middle of the last century, the priest here was one Henri Gillard. He was so absorbed by the Arthurian legends that he began mingling Christianity and mythology in his church. The stained glass windows depict the disciples at the Last Supper - or are they the Knights of Arthur gathered at the round table? The Stations of the Cross have Arthurian themes, while celtic mosaics and legendary creatures decorate the walls. Sadly, his unorthodox ideas were not viewed favourably, and he was asked to leave. He was, however, loved by his parishioners and returned frequently, finally requesting to be buried in the church. This was granted - but how things have since changed! The church has become a place of

curiosity, attracting many visitors to the little village. A TO is located opposite and organises conducted tours in summer. Out of season, you can have the key and explore for yourself. A statue of the Rev. Gillard has been erected in front of the main door - he would have been amazed!

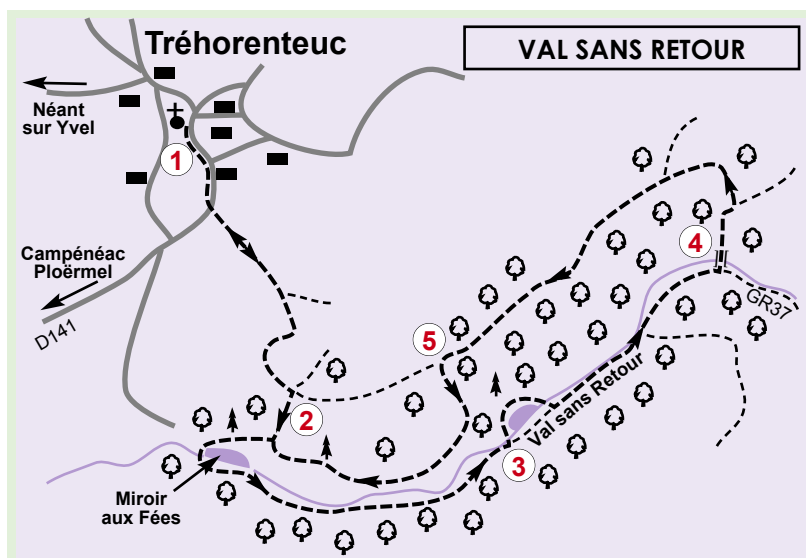
Leaving Tréhorenteuc, you head for the Valley of no Return, and it truly is one of the most beautiful parts of the forest. The story here is that the wicked fairy Morgane, half-sister of King Arthur, was betrayed in love, and, in revenge, imprisoned all faithless lovers in this valley. They were condemned to wander for ever in this place, whose entrance and exit were guarded by a rock (Rocher des Faux-Amants) on which sat the fairy herself. Think well before you take this walk! But if you feel you can risk it, there are fine rewards. Deep in the valley is a calm lake, the Miroir aux Fées, at which the fairy folk come to view their perfect reflections, and farther on is a smaller version. A recent addition to the valley is the Arbre d'Or (Tree of Gold), a remarkable sculpture commissioned to commemorate the fire of 1990, which destroyed much of the forest. This valley was replanted by the Association for the Protection of the Val sans Retour. The return is along the rim of the valley with fine views into its deep bowl. Here Merlin would sit at sunset, watching the long shadows creep across the forest - walking here, perhaps you also can feel the magic of this place.

### Directions

1. Facing the church door, turn right onto the road, then right again (on the road to Campénéac). Leaving the village you pass on the left an ancient manor house. Just past it is a large sign directing you left to the Val sans Retour. Climb up the broad stony track and, reaching a barrier ahead, turn right on a track, which is a fire-break, and continue to the left hand bend.
2. Here turn right on a track through the trees, following GR waymarks until you reach a rocky edge amid gorse and heather, where the path begins to descend. On crossing the bridge, the Arbre d'Or is on your right. The sculptor was François Davin, who used the Christian-mythological symbol of antlers to design a golden tree amid the black - life arising from the flames. Continuing, the path leads you around the end of the Miroir aux Fées - the



Miroir aux Fées



Rocher des Faux-Amants is the red rock high on the left above the lake. Bear left on the path around the lake to enter the valley. Now keep ahead on the obvious path on the right of the stream (Ruisseau du Rauco). After about 15 minutes, you reach a wooden bridge at the end of a second lake.

3. Cross this bridge and continue on the path, which weaves its way through gorse and pines high above the lake. Soon it descends again, and crossing a plank bridge, you now have the stream on your left once more. A signpost shortly appears, and you follow the direction of *la Vallée de l'Aff*, straight on up beside the stream.
4. At a track junction (about 20 minutes from the last lake), the GR37 goes to the right, but you bear left following the yellow waymarks. Cross the stream, and continue to follow the yellow flashes alongside another stream. Bear left again on a track that now climbs out of the valley and rejoins the fire-break. Soon the track levels out and you are above the valley with distant views.

5. As soon as the view opens out, look for an orange-flashed rock on the left. Take the



Sunset across the Valley of no Return

path beside it, which threads through the gorse and the pines to come out along the very rim of the valley. Continue along the edge and you soon arrive at a reasonable track in the right direction. Merlin's seat is one of the fine viewpoints back into the valley. Yellow flashes again appear and lead you across a surface of ridged rock and past another huge boulder to arrive at the GR you started out on earlier. Now turn right, and retrace your steps to the fire-break road, where you turn left to return to Tréhorenteuc.

### More walks in the area

- There are more than 20 circuits in Brocéliande, with information and forest maps available from TOs in Paimpont, Plélan-le-Grand or Tréhorenteuc.
- A 10km circuit, les Landes de Gurwant, passes the superb Château de Trécesson, built of red schist and overlooking a lake. The route also includes a megalith, The Giant's Tomb, and another coffin-shaped prehistoric tomb known as the Maison de Viviane. (This walk connects with the Val sans Retour.)
- An 8km circuit from Tréhorenteuc visits the 'Monks' Garden', a curious flat rectangle surrounded by blocks of stone in alternate colours. Dating from about 3000BC, its true purpose is unknown, but legend has it that a local lord and his hunting party were turned to stone in punishment for taking a monk hostage.

### Places of interest nearby

- The Fontaine de Barenton lies 3kms north, through Folle Pensée. From a small parking area, follow the main path into the forest and the Fontaine is about 1km ahead. The spring is crystal-clear, and rising bubbles of nitrogen give the appearance of boiling. Legend has it that Merlin met the fairy Viviane at the stone slab beside the spring: here she imprisoned him in nine magic circles of air to keep him in the forest forever. It is also said that if, in drinking from the fountain, you accidentally spill water on that stone, a huge storm will arise immediately.
- Travelling on through Concoret will bring you to the Château of Comper. Here, it was said, Viviane was born and raised Sir Lancelot in her crystal palace below the lake. There has been a castle on this site for about a thousand years, and the current château (open in summer) houses the Centre de l'Imaginaire Arthurien, with exhibitions and audio-visual displays.
- The little town of Paimpont in the heart of the forest has an ancient abbey beside a large glassy lake - the perfect spot for a summer picnic.