

# A Happy New Year at the crossroads

John Powell enjoyed a refreshing winter break in Brittany.

True: to many people the prospect of a French holiday conjures up images of golden sands, sun-drenched days and the summer resorts of the magnificent west coast and sizzling Cote d'Azur.

But visiting France out of season offers big rewards too – as we discovered after deciding it would make a refreshing and novel change to see in and celebrate the New Year in Brittany.

Looking through the pages of the Brittany Ferries *Holiday France Direct* brochure for a suitable holiday property soon pointed us in the direction of a peaceful and secluded haven near Rostrenen – a town which for centuries has been regarded as the crossroads of Brittany.

Magourou, just 3 km from Rostrenen, is the private 50-acre estate owned and run by English couple Robin and Gill Morgan, who welcome visitors at any time of year. The gite in which we stayed is one of two traditional self-catering cottages they have created from an old stable and a barn, and across what used to be the farm courtyard is the granite-built manoir, dating from around the 15th century, which they are restoring as their own home.

The courtyard proved ideal on December 31st – the perfect launch pad for the Roman candles, whizzbangs and other fireworks we bought to mark the midnight arrival of 2012. The Morgans and their friends joined in the fun, and out of the darkness came more fireworks, fired off by other revellers in an unseen cottage nearby. Good French champagne, red wine, fine food and the odd tittle of lambig – the Breton equivalent of calvados – made it a New Year's Eve to savour and remember.

And, fireworks over, darkness returned. Street lamps are unheard of in this quiet rural outpost, and as there were no clouds the true extent, brilliance and majesty of the stars in the clear night sky was absolutely breathtaking.



Even the canal is white in winter!



Stable Cottage – one of two very welcoming modern gites at Magourou



Home from home – festive lights and traditional comforts

Of course, one of the chances you take with an out-of-season break is the possibility of foul weather. Heavy winter snow is not unknown in this part of France, and the verdant landscape is evidence of how much annual rain falls hereabouts, but we struck lucky. And as walking is one of our favourite activities, we weren't slow to don stout boots and take advantage of Magourou's many outdoor delights.

The estate includes an open hay field, grassy slopes, an oak glade and ancient oak woodland. And just beyond the estate is the Canal de Nantes a Brest – a magnificent waterway where you can walk or cycle for miles at your leisure.



Long before Robin and Gill converted it, Stable Cottage was home to two shire horses

Birdwatchers can enjoy such treats as the glimpse of a graceful heron, the turquoise flash of a kingfisher and even, in our case, a high-flying cormorant seeking goodness knows what so far from the sea.

The oak woods harbour diminutive red squirrels – much shyer than our greys but still careless enough to be spotted. If you're walking in the hours of dusk and carrying a torch, you may be lucky enough to pick out the shape of a fire salamander lurking in a wood pile or scurrying across the ground.

We chose a 5-mile trek – one of many recommended by our hosts, proving the value of



The fire salamander carved in stone

local knowledge – which starts along the towpath of the broad canal. Through a sylvan landscape we passed several eglise (locks) and the cottages of former lock-keepers, before crossing the waterway and heading uphill, stopping only for a reviving swig of calvados.

Nearby, a roadside memorial pays respect to a young man killed by German soldiers, at that very spot, just before the D-Day landings in 1944 – one of many such reminders that rural France has not always been so peaceful. In fact, the canal itself is a testament to an earlier conflict, between Britain and France. The canal was started by Napoleon in 1811 to link the country's two main Atlantic naval ports, at that time under blockade by the Royal Navy.



Rostrenen – traditionally, the crossroads of Brittany



And long after the snow has gone...wild flowers transform the meadow



Abbaye du Bon Repos



Neolithic burial chamber

We made our way back to Magourou through the hamlet of Sainte Christine, and looked forward to the blazing log fire that is a feature of both gites. Robin and Gill Morgan are a priceless mine of information about where you can go and what you will see, on foot or by bike, and have guides to many places you'd probably never discover yourself. Examples include the triple granite carved spring dedicated to St-Ignace, hidden away in the Forest of Quenecan, and the Neolithic burial chambers of Liscuis and the Gorges du Daoulas, and the remarkable Abbaye du Bon Repos.

The two gites at Magourou are comfortable and modern. Stable Cottage (once home to the old working farm's two shire horses) sleeps four. The two bedrooms and bathroom are upstairs and the open-plan living area is on the ground floor. Spring Cottage has similar accommodation.

As for the conversion and restoration work on their own family home, Gill and Robin are still hard at it. A whole 30-ft oak tree was lowered through the open roof to make the centrepiece of the wooden staircase up three flights, and a vast wood-burning stove in the ancient granite

fireplace will eventually run the new underfloor heating, radiators and hot water system. One of the main gables – made of huge solid granite blocks – has been hauled back into place after years of slowly shifting outwards, and a particularly nice touch is the fire salamander carved out of the stone above one of the windows by a local craftsman so that it looks like an original part of the structure.

So did ours turn out, as hoped and planned, to be a happy and novel New Year's break? Definitely!



### Further information

Contact Robin and Gill Morgan on **0033 (0)2 96 29 23 75** or e-mail **morgan@magourou.com** or visit **www.magourou.com**

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