

# Travel/Brittany



## From tragedy to triumph for castle

### PENTILLIE CASTLE

Pentillie Castle and Estate, in St Melion, Cornwall, has won Gold for Best Bed and Breakfast Accommodation in the South West Tourism Excellence Awards 2012.

Pentillie - offering nine luxurious en suite bedrooms in a breathtaking setting overlooking the River Tamar and Dartmoor - competed against other B&Bs, farmhouses, inns, restaurants with rooms and guesthouses "offering a high standard of accommodation".

Pentillie was built in 1698 and was remodelled into a castle by the famous landscape designer Humphry Repton, in 1810. By 1965, however, the castle and estate had fallen into disrepair and returned to being a home.

## Romantic offer for Leap Year ladies

### THE SCARLET HOTEL

It's Leap Year, and the romantic Scarlet Hotel on the cliffs at Mawgan Porth in Cornwall has a special package for ladies who wish to propose.

You can soak in a log-fired seaweed hot tub overlooking the beach (picniced) with a glass of fizz, tucked into a delicious private dinner around a log fire in the cliff top bell tent and enjoy a candlelit serenade in the Cloister Garden that twinkles with candles under the night sky, accompanied by a talented a cappella singer with songs of your choice.

There'll be a "cupid" on hand to make sure any proposals go to plan and ladies who propose will be given a bottle of celebratory fizz.

Prices start from £390-£430 per

## Try something wild for the weekend

### DARTMOOR AND TAMAR VALLEY

If you're looking for a rustic rendezvous, how about a shepherd's hut or a tipi for two.

The Dunnabridge Hut at Prince Hall is a replica of a traditional shepherd's hut built on an old farm hay trailer found on the neighbouring farm. The en suite hut started life as a Great Western Railways Yard Trailer but has been converted into a cosy bolt hole with spellbinding views out across the rolling fields and Dartmoor wilderness down to the River Dart. It comes complete with electricity, hot water, double bed and stable door to welcome the outside in.

The hut costs from £96 per night on a bed and breakfast basis (sleeping

Details at [www.princehall.co.uk](http://www.princehall.co.uk) and [www.woodislands.com](http://www.woodislands.com).



at the manor, a local craftsman has carved a fire salamander out of the stone above one of the windows

## Out of season is a good time for walking and cycling

John Powell spent New Year in Brittany and found there's more to this part of France than sea and sun

When most people plan a holiday in France, thoughts turn to sunny days, golden sands and the delights of summer seaside resorts on the sun-drenched shores of the Cote d'Azur.

But there is more to France than that and it can be even more alluring out of season when sunbathing and the pleasures of the sea are put aside in favour of the delights to be gained during the mellow fruitfulness of autumn or the "mad March days" of spring.

In fact, "out of season" cannot be taken to its more extreme than celebrating New Year's Eve in the heart of Brittany and, yes, there are gîte owners who welcome visitors even at this time of the year - when many have shut their doors in readiness for the new season to come.

Thanks to Brittany Ferries' Holiday France Direct brochure, we came across a peaceful and secluded haven run by Robin and Gill Morgan near Rostrenen - a town whose position has marked it out for centuries as the crossroads of Brittany.

And the English couple's proud boast at Magourou to be "open all year" proved true as we booked our treat to welcome in the new year at one of two cottages they have created out of an old stable. The other cottage

nearby was once a barn, and, across the former farm courtyard, is a granite-built manoir dating probably from the 15th century, that they are restoring as their own home.

That courtyard proved handy on December 31 as the launch pad for a host of roman candles, whizz bangs and other fireworks we had brought with us to celebrate - and the Morgans and their friends joined in.

Out of the darkness more fireworks were added to the celebrations - fired off by revellers in another unseen cottage down the road.

**'You might see a fire salamander scurrying across the ground or lurking in a wood pile'**

Good French champagne and red wine, fine food and the odd tittle of Lambig, the Breton equivalent of Calvados, made it a New Year's Eve to savour.

The fireworks over, the black night returned in our quiet, rural outpost where lamp posts are unheard of and clear nights reveal the full majesty of the heavens above.

Of course, travelling out of season means you don't go for the weather and, although heavy snow is not unknown in this part of France in the winter, it's the rain that raineth and the verdant countryside speaks volumes about how much falls to

create such a green and pleasant land.

Stout walking boots and waterproof clothes are a fitting antidote and there are plenty of outdoor delights to take advantage of at Magourou.

The Morgans' gîtes are set on a 50-acre private estate which offers plenty of scope for walking through an open hay field, grassy slopes and an oak glade as well as ancient oak woodland.

One of the great joys of a stay at Magourou, however, lies just beyond the estate in the shape of the Canal de Nantes a Brest - a magnificent waterway that offers miles and miles of walking and cycling as well as fishing. Birdwatchers can be rewarded with a glimpse of graceful herons, the turquoise flash of a kingfisher and even a high flying cormorant seeking goodness knows what so far from the sea.

The oak woods harbour diminutive red squirrels, much more shy than our greys but still careless enough to be spotted. If you are lucky at night, shine a torch and you could pick out the shape of a fire salamander scurrying across the ground or lurking in a wood pile.

We chose a five-mile trek, one of many recommended by our hosts, starting along the towpath of the broad canal, passing several eucalyptus, or locks, and old lock keepers cottages, through a sylvan landscape before crossing the waterway and heading uphill for a stop by a cross-



The canal at Magourou in winter (above) and in warmer weather (below left). Shopping is a pleasure in Rostrenen with its market (left) and bakeries (right)



roads for a heartening swig of Calvados.

Nearby is a roadside memorial 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 was not always so peaceful. In fact, the canal itself is a testament to an earlier conflict, this time involving Britain and France, as it was started by Napoleon in 1811 to link France's two main Atlantic naval ports which were then under blockade by the Royal Navy.

The history lesson over, we made our way back to Magourou through the hamlet of Sainte Christine look-

ing forward to the blazing log fire that is such a feature of both gîtes.

As with all holiday homes where the owners are on hand, their local knowledge makes all the difference and they are a mine of information about what you can do and where you can go.

As we discovered it is quintessential walking and cycling country even beyond the canal and the couple have guides to many places holidaymakers would probably never discover on their own, such as the triple granite carved spring dedicated to St-Ignace, hidden away in the Forest of Quenean, the Neolithic burial chambers of Liscuis and the Gorges du

Daoulas and the remarkable Abbaye du Bon Repos.

The Morgans have worked hard at Magourou over the last seven years or so and the once-derelect stables and barn have been converted into comfortable and modern gîtes.

Stable Cottage - once home to two shire horses on the old working farm - sleeps four with two bedrooms and a bathroom upstairs and an open plan living area on the ground floor. Spring Cottage has similar accommodation.

And they haven't finished yet. The old manoir, once the farm house, is being carefully restored and converted to a family home.

A whole, 30ft 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 has been installed in the ancient granite fireplace to run the underfloor heating, radiators and hot water system being installed.

One of the main gables - made of huge solid granite blocks - has had to be hauled back into place after years of slowly shifting outwards and a local craftsman has carved a fire salamander out of the stone above one of the windows - so good it looks like an original part of the structure.

Yes, out of season proved just the right time to take a break.