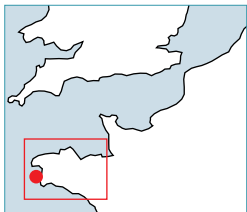




Cape *magic*

Nick Rider travels to the headland of **Cap Sizun in Brittany**, and discovers a dramatic landscape rich in folklore



Some places seem made for a special role even if they might not be strictly qualified to claim it. For centuries, Cap Sizun and its furthest headland the Pointe du Raz in southwest Brittany were regarded as the westernmost tip of mainland France, the 'prow of Europe', and the end of the habitable world – until geographers determined that Pointe de Corsen, west of Brest, is actually a few degrees further west.

Corsen, though, is an unexceptional set of cliffs, while the granite blade of Pointe du Raz, on the other hand, truly looks the part.

As a wild world's end, Cap Sizun played a major part in Breton folklore. At its foot is the village of Locronan, which stands on a straight line between Locronan Mount, above which the sun rises, and the point where the sun sets in the west over the Cape. It was therefore a hub of pagan Celtic sun-worship and fertility rituals – and consequently a perfect destination for the Irish Saint Ronan to head for as part of his mission to bring Christianity to the pagan Bretons in the 6th century (Locronan means 'place of Ronan').

Like all good Irish saints, he had crossed the sea on a stone, and according to legend

The Maison-Phare
du Millier perched
atop Cap Sizun



PHOTOS: ALUNNY

his main opponent was a peasant woman called Kében, wife of one of his first converts, who launched slanders against Ronan, which he answered with miracles. They are portrayed brightly on the carved pulpit in Locronan's gnarled 15th-century church, which also contains Ronan's tomb.

A gorgeous knot of tumbledown-looking granite houses, Locronan is famous for one of the most impressive of Brittany's *pardons* or religious processions, the Troménie, in July, with a longer Grande Troménie every sixth year lasting a whole week (next one, 2019). They are in honour of Saint Ronan, but have

pre-Christian roots, as the processions trace the outlines of a 'nemeton', a sacred wood that surrounded the Celtic shrine.

Centuries after Ronan, Locronan grew rich weaving sailcloth ('Lockram cloth' is mentioned by Shakespeare), but this ended around the 1680s, which is why its appearance has scarcely changed ever since.

In the 1920s, a local mayor was one of the first to see the potential of such an untouched relic for tourism – and the movies. Locronan has served as an historic backdrop for films ever since the silent era (to aid filmmakers, notice that there are no visible cables or TV aerials, everything is underground), and even doubled as Dorset in Roman Polanski's *Tess*. Even so, it's still a living community, with many shops occupied by craftspeople of different kinds.

Below Locronan and presiding over its great bay is Douarnenez, another place wreathed in legend, particularly as the site of the lost city of Ys (see box). On its east side, the preserved village and forest park of Plomarc'h is said to be home to such things as Korrigans, leprechaun-like night-sprites who play mischief on disrespectful passers-by.

Douarnenez also features in a version of the most famous of all Celtic myths, that of Tristan and Yseult. After Tristan had been sent by his uncle King Mark of Cornwall to bring back Yseult to be his queen, but had fallen in love with her himself, the two lovers are said to have found an idyll together hiding from the King on Île Tristan, a wooded island in Douarnenez harbour. It can only be visited on certain days due to the tide (ask at tourist office for details).

Meanwhile, above the west side of Douarnenez, the old village of Tréboul has small tree-lined beaches and a beautiful coastal path leading back into town past Île Tristan, especially lovely at sunset.

Modern Douarnenez has plenty of maritime character. This is France's sardine capital, a trade that also goes back a long way. Plomarc'h woods also contain excavations of one of the largest ancient Roman 'factories' in northern Europe, where sardines were transformed into 'garum', or fish sauce, sent from here all the way to Rome.

The modern business boomed into life with the introduction of canning in the 1850s; men fished, while women worked in the canneries. Fishing and canning still go on but employ →



The town has an extensive nautical past and its old port hosts the Port-Musée

Ys and the King's choice

In Breton legend the most dazzling city in Europe stood in Douarnenez Bay, the city of Ys, amid walls and giant gates to keep out the sea and tides. Its King was Gradlon, who fell in love with a sorceress called Malgven, with whom he had a daughter, Dahut, and who gave him a magical horse, Morvarc'h.

The King adored Dahut, and denied her nothing. Dahut, though, was a wild child, who held mad masked balls where she took up with a different young man every night, often disposing of him the next day. King Gradlon also had an advisor, Saint Guénoilé, another missionary saint (but Welsh, not Irish) who warned him that Dahut's behaviour would lead Ys to perdition.

Dahut, though, kept up her wicked ways, until at one party she met a masked man with whom she fell madly in love – so in love that she begged him to show his face. He said he would, but only for something in return: the keys to the gates of Ys. She crept into her father's chamber, stole the keys, and gave them to her lover, who promptly revealed himself to be the Devil, and ran off to open the gates. As the waters rushed in Gradlon mounted Morvarc'h, who could gallop over the sea, as Dahut begged her father to save her. Guénoilé, though, said sternly that the King had a choice: to save his daughter, or his people. The King did his duty, and cast off Dahut, and she and Ys were swallowed by the waves.

King Gradlon could no longer bear to look at the Bay of Douarnenez, and rode off to found a new capital at Quimper. Dahut survived as a siren, luring men to their deaths around Pointe du Raz. And, it is said, during very low tides you can still hear the bells of Ys in the Bay.



The Pointe du Raz provides majestic views for walkers

AROUND BOTH POINTES IS AN ASTONISHING NATURAL SCULPTURE GARDEN OF ROCK PINNACLES AND PRECIPITOUS DROPS DOWN TO TINY COVES

Eat

Crêperie Le Temps Passé

Rue du Four, Locronan
The name sums it up: a snug, stone-walled Locronan building from times past, with classic crêpes and galettes.
Tel: +33 (0)2 98 91 87 29
creperie-locronan.fr

Au Gouter Breton

36 Rue Jean Jaurés, Douarnenez
Friendly, eccentric crêperie packed with books, local produce (for sale) and knick-knacks, with a selection of superior Breton ciders like a fine wine list.
Tel: +33 (0)2 98 92 02 74
augouterbreton.com

L'Esquisse

Rue Jeanne d'Arc, Douarnenez
Outstanding creative cuisine.
Tel: +33 (0)2 98 74 21 88

La Maison Bleue-Case de Tom

Île de Sein
Right on the harbour, with wonderful locally caught fish and seafood.
Tel: +33 (0)6 85 60 03 20
ile-de-sein.com

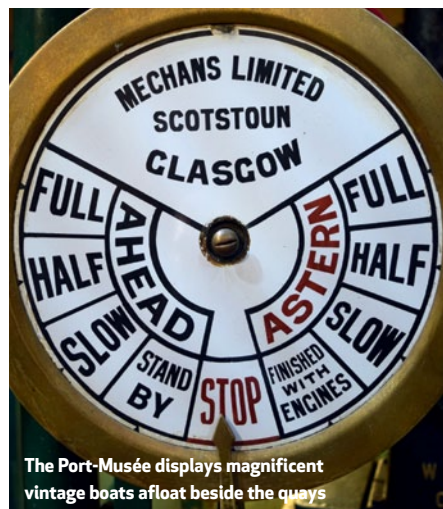
West of Douarnenez along the north flank of Cap Sizun, turn-offs lead to superb views over ranks of rugged cliffs. The GR34 Breton coastal footpath, naturally, runs all the way along the clifftops. One road (signposted Réserve Naturelle de Goulrien) leads to the Réserve du Cap Sizun bird reserve, with well-marked paths above the nesting places of fulmars, guillemots and ravens. (reserve-cap-sizun.org)

At some points, like Pointe de Brézellec, there are tiny harbours in clefts in the rock, and on the south side of the Cape there is another filmset-style old town at Pont-Croix, the lively harbour of Audierne. Then, south from there are stretches of sand and surf as broad as you could ever wish for.

On a commanding site near Plouhinec are the prehistoric remains of Ménez Dregan, with large stone tombs.

For walkers, though, the natural magnet – whether for a short stroll, or a stretch of the GR34 – is the end of the cape, with Pointe du Van in the north and Pointe du Raz to the south. Van is a little less spectacular – only by comparison – but also less visited, and offers majestic views of Pointe du Raz. In between the two is the beach of Baie des Trépassés or 'Bay of the Departed', so-called because the ghosts of shipwrecked sailors are said to gather there.

All around both Pointes is an astonishing natural sculpture garden of rock pinnacles, unearthly shapes and precipitous drops down to tiny coves accessible only to the birds. Colours change with the weather, from glittering blues to dramatic greys and whites. Then Pointe du Raz ends in a massive spearhead of rock, full of clefts →



The Port-Musée displays magnificent vintage boats afloat beside the quays

far smaller numbers today, and the old port or Port-Rhu now hosts the Port-Musée (port-musee.org), combining an inspiring display on the town's nautical past and smaller craft on land, with historic boats that are still afloat beside the quays.

Douarnenez also celebrates its seagoing heritage in the Fêtes Maritimes, when traditional sailing craft from around the world gather in the Port-Rhu, with entertainment onshore – held this year from 19th to 24th July. (tempsefete.com)

Stay

Ty Mad

Tréboul, Douarnenez
A stylish, charming hotel with creative restaurant in an old Tréboul house. Gorgeous bay views and close to beaches and the coastal path.
Tel: +33 (0)2 98 74 00 53
hotelytmad.com

Ar Men

Île de Sein
The only hotel on Sein; rooms are simple, but the location is extraordinary, and there's superb fresh fish and seafood.
Tel: +33 (0)2 98 70 90 77
hotel-armen.net

Brittany Ferries offers a wide range of holiday accommodation nearby. Visit brittanyferries.com/ holidays and holidayfrancedirect.co.uk



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PHOTOS: NECK RIDER



ALAMY

1 Irish Saint Ronan (middle) brings Kében's daughter back to life **2** The island of Île Tristan in Douarnenez harbour: setting of the Celtic myth of Tristan and Yseult **3** Statue of Saint Andrew in Locronan's Bonnes Nouvelles Chapel **4** Prehistoric stone tombs on the site of Ménez Dregan

and caves, which points out to one of Brittany's many lighthouses.

Pointe du Raz feels like the end of the world, but beyond the lighthouse you may just see another smudge of land before the open ocean. This is the Île de Sein, reached by ferry from Audierne. Scarcely rising above the waves, it has a permanent population of around 100, one village, no cars, and barely even any bicycles (anything big is moved around in wheelbarrow-like handcarts). You can surf, scuba dive and kayak, and there's fabulous fresh fish and a miniature beach. But the prime attraction is the special atmosphere, the rocks, birds and silence.

Most Sein residents come from the same local families ('all cousins'), but they've been

joined by a few incomers, like ceramicist Christelle Le Dortz at L'Atelier-Café, a combined café-workshop. "It's very unusual to live here," she says. "It's amazing when a storm is due, or a particularly high tide, as everyone gathers together on the quay to see the show." For Sein, too, is a magical place. 🚤

Getting to Île de Sein

Sein ferries run at least once a day each way all year, usually leaving Audierne at 9.30am and returning from Sein at 4pm. In summer there are extra services, and ferries on Sundays only from Brest and Camaret. The Audierne crossing takes about an hour. For details contact Penn-ar-Bed, **+33 (0)2 98 80 80 80** or visit pennarbed.fr