

Boots On in Brittany

Travelling by car or train, the world flashes past the window. Taking it step by step, you develop a deeper connection. Giselle Whiteaker walks the Breton coast.

“Ready?” I ask my mother, Judy, as we stand by the boat moorings in Port Dahouet. The tide is out and a plethora of pleasure-craft lie at angles on the wet sand. We arrived in France yesterday, making our way to Lamballe in Brittany, where we were met by our ultra-friendly Headwater rep, Steve, and were whisked to the Hotel Le Manoir des Portes. At the charming 16th-century manor we were briefed, kitted with maps, and willingly sequestered in the dining room for an incredible introduction to contemporary Breton cuisine.

Amidst rustic decor, we dined on fresh salmon wrapped maki-style with delicate cucumber slices and served with pureed avocado; Bordeaux-style grilled beef fillet served with a smattering of green and dauphinoise potato stacks; and a decadent rhubarb dessert featuring macaroons and rhubarb sorbet. Neither of us are what you’d call walkers, yet we’d signed up on one of Headwater’s self-guided walking tours. The gastronomic delights distracted us from our inner doubts.

After a good night’s sleep, here we are at Port Dahouet at the start of the trail, mildly apprehensive. Despite Judy being the less experienced walker, there’s determination in her eyes and she sets a cracking pace, striding ahead on the clearly marked trail. It takes me quite some time to catch up with her, as I constantly pause to admire the stunning coastal scenery. We’re on the GR34 for most of the day, a well-maintained long-distance footpath that stretches along the Breton coast. We pass a stone guard house on the cliff’s edge, before

entering Le Val-Andre, which we have designated as a coffee and supply stop. Continuing on our way, we settle into a comfortable rhythm, pausing every now and then to consult the detailed notes Headwater has provided, kept folded in the pocket of my shorts, close to hand.

The day is varied. We pass the islet bird sanctuary Le Verdelete and veer across the beach for one section, the golden sand crunching under our hiking boots. Here we find a picnic spot, sitting on a flat rock warmed by the sun. Our coffee break is in the esplanade-rimmed town of Erquy and here we depart the coast, taking an urban amble before joining a cycle path that winds through a farming hamlet and into a shaded forest. We are ejected at the viaduct that allows access to the seaside resort of Sable-d’Or-Les-Pins and march gratefully into the Hotel de Diane, collapsing in our balconied room, reunited with our baggage. We’ve covered 17.3 kilometres – far further than either of us has ever walked in a day. We have earned dinner.

We are the first to arrive at the Hotel de Diane’s airy

terrace restaurant, but it soon fills with patrons keen to sample the flavours of the region. We are pleasantly surprised by the amuse bouche, a glass of fresh diced tuna with a beetroot emulsion topped with creamy froth. This augers well for the meal to come. We choose a colourful concoction of light Bavarian goat cheese, salad leaves, smoked duck breast and slices of salmon for our starter, followed by pork done three ways. Both dishes are delicious. For dessert, we split a crème brûlée and a plate of four local cheeses; a wise choice given the generous portions. Half way through the brûlée, I feel a strange sensation on my tongue. “Is your mouth popping?” I ask Judy. She shakes her head, bemused. “Listen”, I say, taking another spoonful of brûlée and opening my mouth. It sounds like fireworks. I’m reminded of space dust; an exploding candy from childhood that left a sugary tingle. “You’re right,” the waitress confirms. There’s a smattering of popping sugar sprinkled on the centre of the dish. I just happened to snaffle those scoops.

After a brief stroll along the beach to aid our digestion, our yawns overtake us. We want to be fresh in the morning. It’s a designated rest day, but we plan to do half

of the optional walk. We will stroll the 10 kilometres to Erquy port where we will meet friends and beg for a lift back.

It seems like a foolproof plan and the ramble along the cliffs is lovely. Our picnic stash is well-stocked with goodies from the local bakery and our legs are willing. Unknowingly, however, our pace has slowed and we are late



Cliff-top heather

to the port. Our friends have gone, leaving us with a 7-kilometre return walk. With a few grumbles, we unfold the notes to trace our path back. Before we know it we’re there, feeling tired yet invincible. We have another 17-odd-kilometres planned for tomorrow.

We set off early, again following the coast. In the distance, we catch glimpses of the lighthouse at Cap Frehel. As we walk, it seems to increase in size, rather than getting closer. Hints of warm honeysuckle assail our nostrils as the trail winds over heather and gorse-capped cliffs, purple and yellow flowers dotting the landscape. Butterflies flutter by as we pass impossibly picturesque coves, the emerald water lapping at the moss-coated rocks framing the golden sand. Finally, the lighthouse looms, our chosen picnic spot for today. The camembert is a little soft, the bread a little misshapen and the pate a day old, but after our exertions, it all tastes superb.

The path continues to the 14th-century Fort la Latte, perched on a 70-metre high cliff. We are beginning to understand that this kind of holiday is not about

the destination, but rather the journey. Fort la Latte is an interesting diversion, but the pre-ambule is the real attraction. We find Steve in the car park and he accedes to our demands for coffee – despite the name, Fort la Latte does not have a café. He transfers us to the Hotel Printania in Dinard, which sits in a glorious location, right on the water's edge. Our weary legs creak and groan on the stairs as we make our way to the top floor, but the views are worth it.

On our rest day, I decide that we will walk to St Malo. Most visitors catch the ferry the short distance across the bay. Had I read the fine print, we would have done the same. The walk meanders along the bay, over the barrage – a point of fascination for engineers – and along a lovely forest path. That's when we discover the walk is twice as long as we thought. By the time we reach the 14th-century old rampart-ringed town, we are ready to relax. We wander briefly through the pedestrianised streets before ferrying back to the beach. The water is icy cold and wonderfully refreshing.

Our furthest distance is a whopping 19.2 kilometres. It's day six. We have trained for this. We are ready. Steve drops us at Langrolay-sur-Rance and we are away, wandering through sleepy Breton hamlets and tracing the path of the River Rance. We pass a small stone chapel and a boat yard filled with vessels, sailing now on shrubs, rather than waves, many in a state of disrepair. We see tiny lizards resting in the sun and wooden fishing huts hovering over tidal mud flats. Sometimes we talk, sometimes we are lost in thought as we stride. Eventually, we reach the pleasure port in Dinan, our feet aching, but our confidence high.

The Hotel Le d' Avaugour sits at the top of a steep climb up the cobbled Rue du Jerzual, lined with artists' studios. The stylish abode is in the medieval heart of Dinan, the weekend market on its doorstep. It is surrounded by restaurants and boutiques, narrow laneways and half-timbered buildings. Here we rest for a day, roaming the streets and the sights and pausing in the hotel's lovely garden, pressed up to the town ramparts.

Revitalised, we don our boots for our last day of walking. With Steve's guidance, we choose a coastal walk to complete our kilometre tally. We hike across the undulating cliffs, spying horses in training on the wet sand below. As the tide recedes, mussel farmers drive out to tend their charges at rows of wooden stakes stretching into the distance. At Plage de Jospinet, a moulerie dishes up the fresh shellfish in large metal pots, wafts of white wine in the air. The discarded shells form mountains on the tabletops.

A short walk later, we see a familiar beacon on the rocky shore. We are back in Port Dahouet, where the journey began. We have clocked up just over 100 kilometres. It's time to celebrate our achievement. A three-course gastronomic feast at Hotel Le Manoir des Portes is a fitting reward. ■



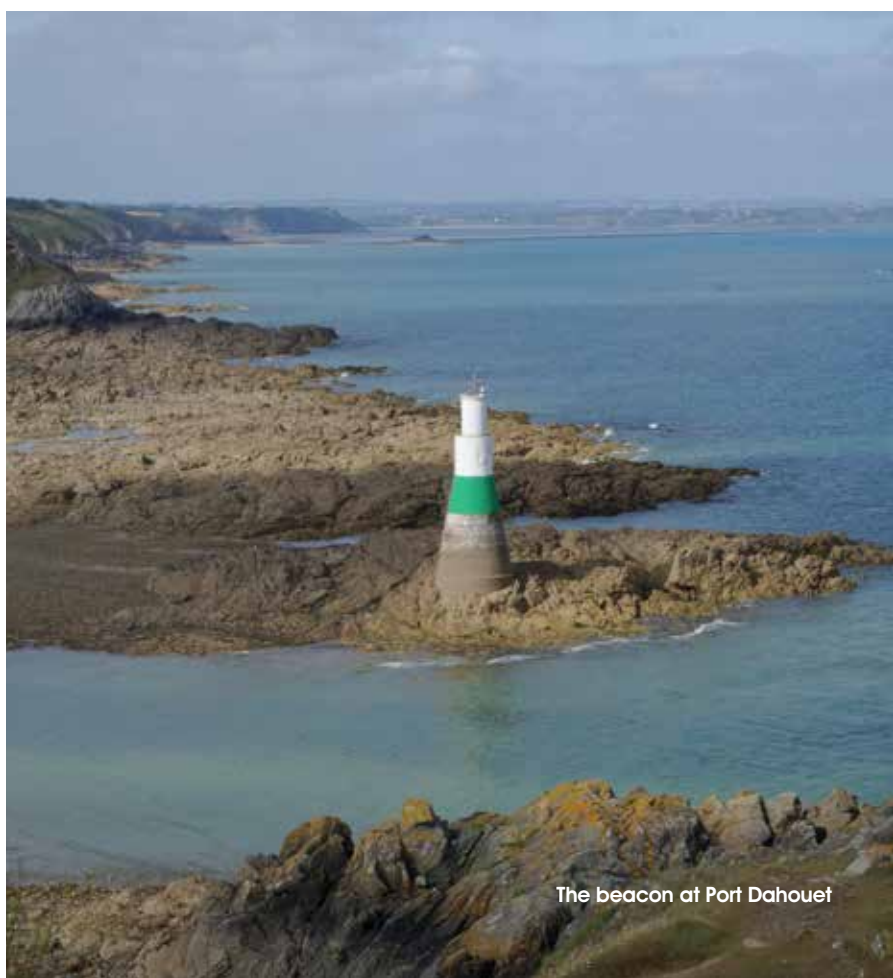
Hotel le Manoir des Portes



Superb dining at Hotel Diane



The medieval streets of Dinan



The beacon at Port Dahouet

For more information about any of
Headwater's superb walking or cycling trips
see www.headwater.com