



The rugged coastline of Brittany is one of Europe's great sea cliff climbing regions, yet it remains virtually undiscovered by climbers outside France. After numerous trips there over the past fifteen years, evergreen south west activist **Martin Crocker** shares his passion for the place the Romans called Armorica - a wild coastal kingdom of white sand beaches, huge skies, and as much granite as you can handle.



It was my tenth plummet into the bracken, fingers now red-raw. The culprit was a Font 7A+ arête at La Côte Léonarde, one of Brittany's unspoilt granite jewels. In the distance, across Baie de Quillec, lay Roscoff; a shimmering reminder of our return crossing to Plymouth later that day. It was just the incentive I needed to leave France on a high note.

I balanced up, moving my left hand to a sharp crystal cluster, my right hand high to a rounded pinch. Lever up, step on texture, snatch a grainy crimp. But my feet pop again. Once more into the bracken, old man. Next time, I intensify the crimp on my left hand and make a big slap. A scream of relief follows as I latch the top, and invisible coast-path hikers turn for an explanation to the nearby pinnacle of Bloc du Singe. Expressionless, it's not about to give anything away.

The Romans named Brittany 'Armorica', or 'coastal landscape'. Much later, this kingdom of Celts became known as Brittany. Elemental and weather-beaten, there's a raw substance to everything Breton. French romanticism would later eulogise its wild coastland as Les Côtes Sauvages. With separatist roots, Brittany's cultural distinctiveness reflects the region's strong historical allegiance to Britain, and is echoed by its maverick climbing personality, which is far removed from the populist limestone karst and bolted fleshpots of the south of France. Considering that its northern granite coast is closer by half to the English shores than to Paris, it's a small wonder that more climbers do not join the British tourists that flock here each summer.

Yet its ancient heart still beats strongly under its 21st century dressing. It is a rugged coast of jumbled granite, a necklace of gold circling forests hiding tumbledown quartzite outcrops, megaliths, and forgotten shrines. Here, with or without a mat or gear - just the rock shoes on your feet - it is easy to lose yourself on beaches of ochre boulders or in tranquil woodlands, swimming at leisure to heal well-earned wounds. My own regular Brittany pilgrimages date back fifteen years, and there's no end in sight yet, with every trip provoking an early booking for the next. ▶



The North Granite Coast

A seventy-mile-long coast of granite stretches from Paimpol in the east to Pointe de St. Matthieu in the west, changing colour from pink-to-ochre-to-white-to-gold as the granite reshuffles its mineralogy with the regularity of cabinet ministers. A fifteen minute drive west of the centrally placed port of Roscoff brings you to La Côte Léonarde, one of the most beautiful parts of Brittany, yet bypassed by many tourists. Here, clean white granite boulders perch on the headland of Les Amiets with sweeping white sand beaches on either side. Painted micro-arrows point you at the non-tidal problems - which are mostly above springy turf, making pads unnecessary - but it's great to explore at low tide too. A yellow overhanging block on the east side of the headland hosts an off-fingers crack above a grit-strewn platform: 'the Supercrack of Amiets', no less. But if you've come without a mat, forget it - as a lead it's surely E5 6a. Undoubtedly the finest sector lies north of the sleepy Port Neuf. Here, boulders and pinnacles dominated by the 12 metre knife-edge of the Bloc du Singe graze the bracken-clad coastal fringe above kindly landings. You'll instantly salivate at the sight of an elegant, white, glacier-slick 7-metre arête. With a spoil-sport rock beneath, it has yet to be soloed.

Twenty miles west of Roscoff is Kerlouan, Brittany's best-developed coastal bouldering site. Comprising of some seven miles of boulders and outcrops above pristine white sands, if you've

ATLANTIC-BOUND
ONCE AGAIN, AND
GRANITE BLOCKS,
BOULDER-FIELDS AND
DARTMOOR TOP-LIKE
WARTS PEPPER THE
COAST ALL THE WAY
TO BRITTANY'S MOST
WESTERLY POINT.

got nothing else to do with the rest of your life, then this is the place for you. After whetting your appetite with the short film *Escalade en Kerlouan* on YouTube, there are two possible strategies. Either go where the granite takes you, or resort to the endless complexities of *Topo Kerlouan*. It's a courageous effort by the authors nonetheless, but one concludes they must have run out of steam since the guidebook merely plucks the plums from the rumoured 4000 problems of this 'chaos granitique'.

If, like me, you would find the only way to fit your mat in your motor is by leaving the wife

and kids at home, no worries: there's a week's worth of blissful bouldering at Kerlouan with only sand or basking *femmes* on which to fall. Sector Petit Paradis, a little slice of the Seychelles, is just that. Two Font 6A classics here are *La Couleur* and *Fanny*, and they soon reveal the Breton grade benchmark of Font 6A = British technical grade 6a. For sterner fair, check out the grainy overhanging elephant's arse of *Trobo*, started sitting down.

Other sand-caressed sectors are Ty Caillou, a mere hop, skip and dyno from the campsite, and sparkling Cremiou to the east. Centrally located is the fishing hamlet and rock chapel of Menez Ham and, seaward of it, lies a perplexing jigsaw of boulders each as large as many a grit crag in the Peak District. And like grit, Breton granite has the capacity to run riot with geometry. Bizarre, mouth-watering, and contorted shapes incite crazy ideas, and in places there's an unclimbed *Mesbuga* every few metres: such is the way of Menez Ham. Be warned though, much of this stuff is just as high, and just as terrifying, as any grit E9. Only a mountain of mats, or the combined arms of an all-out crag meet of the CAF, will mitigate some of the jagged rock landings. You have to admire the ethic though; anyone eager to pigeon-hole the French as bolt-dependent might be wise to think again, as most of the problems were achieved ground up by inspired Frenchmen who consider a slip from 6 metres onto a single mat game for a laugh. ▶

THIS PAGE: Martin Crocker balancing up the slab of *La Météo* (F4), a gentle stroll in Petit Paradis, Kerlouan. MARTIN CROCKER

A must-do hereabouts is the leaning arête of *Ar Men* (Font 7A). Footless moves to a hole at three metres will bring the holiday of those with a ruptured rotator cuff tendon to a premature close. Beyond, it morphs from the brutal to the balletic, and is aided by a soft grassy landing and the 'allez, allez', of your Parisian onlookers. Just bite back the pain, and do your country proud!

Atlantic-bound once again, and granite blocks, boulder-fields and Dartmoor tor-like warts pepper the coast all the way to Brittany's most westerly point. One of the most exciting places is St. Gonvel, north of Brest, where curious, coarse-granite excrescences up to 18 metres high congregate. This is what the French call 'terrain d'aventure' (adventure climbing) and to date the locals have resisted bolting the crags, meaning that English raiders like me can trad-and-headpoint themselves silly. Mostly the French have stuck to their bouldering; with the talk of the town in these parts being *Mozart l'Egyptien* a dynamic, high-endurance Font 8B enchainment across an overhanging wall.

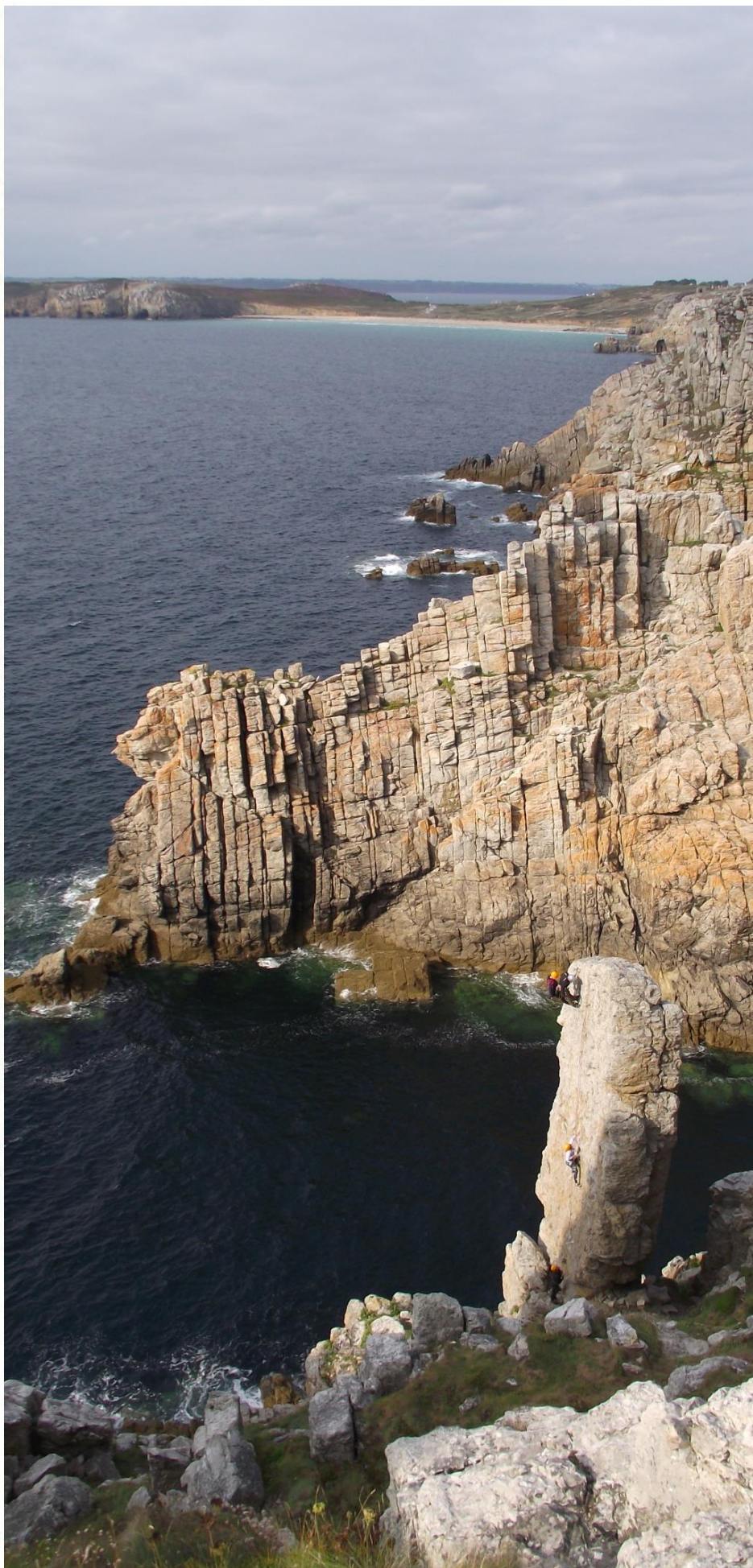
Twenty minutes drive east of Roscoff and visible from the ferry is La Pointe de Primel, a delicious finger of gold wagging 'told you so' at Britain. Over the years the 45-metre high headland has sprouted countless bolts and sport climbs, but the bouldering is equally persuasive and worth a trip in its own right. A mini-classic on Le Mur Noire, across from the car park, is *Le Nez* (Font 5) a highball over a tourmaline-stained nose with dead-hangs to ensure gasps of 'magnifique!' Neighbouring walls and lumps scattered across the meadowland give fantastic workouts on rounded breaks and high-friction granite. All the problems have lines in the way of true micro-routes, and the landings are mostly luxuriant banks of hardy maritime grasses. Just west of the main site, on the trail to the tidal obelisk of Le Sphinx is a cluster of intertwined boulders, their consummate embrace creating two oddballs that beg your indulgence: *L'Arête* and *La Directe du Toit* are both 7A, and improvisational.

East again is the delightful La Côte de Granit Rose, so called because of the pink colour of its component feldspar. At Ploumanac'h, the granite formations mimic most things on Earth: animals, people, and even a balanced bottle poised to serve wine. It's all rather public and environmentally sensitive, so it's best to head to Tregastel where the rich-orange beach of Plage de Coz-Pors boasts a block the size of the local town hall and a 9-metre pinnacle. Superb rock and lines provide a clutch of brilliant problems, all with altitude to keep the juices flowing. On the block the scalloped arête facing inland is a gymnastic Font 6A/B - a favourite with stray Brits escaping bucket-and-spade duties - while on its reverse side is *L'Arête Grand Large*, an ace Font 7A. Behind, the landward slab of the pinnacle offers a string of superb ground-up solos the finest being the left-hand arête (an E3 6a with a low crux). If falling off is on the cards, do note that the sand under the crags has the pliability of concrete!

Beyond, in the direction of St. Malo, Brittany's unkempt granite fringe continues raggedly past the odd sport-climbing node and the uplifting foreshore bouldering at Pors Scarf until the purple sandstones of Cap Fréhel halt the granite intrusion dramatically.

The South West Coast

Since they lack the scale and intricacy of the north, the granite bouldering sites of the south west coast are best combined into a general holiday or mixed sport climbing and bouldering roadtrip. If staying in the Quimper area, St. Guénolé is an obvious hit. The best problems are at





Secteur les Douze Travaux and Secteur Est which comprise several 5-metre 'sugar-lumps' sitting on a wave-cut rock platform just 20 metres from the sea wall: all very exhibitionist. Grades are between Font 3 to 7c, with the prize being the awe-inspiring *Tequila Spirit* (Font 7A). It's inverted and slappy, so a mat, preferably a mobile one, is obligatory!

Serving the Lorient area is the extensive low granite cliff-line of Ploemoeur. At Kaolin the cliff is low and the ground flat, and a squat tidal pinnacle provides a focal point for a spread of feel-good problems. Adjacent are beaches made solely of mica flakes as light as talc which float in the wind and leave your face a-glitter. To the south, at le Courégant, the increasingly kaolonised crags rise up to 9 metres, transposing harm-free bouldering to high-danger soloing.

The final southern granite outpost (apart from the sport-climbing mecca of le Croisic) is the Quiberon peninsula. Situated next to chic Cnrac, during peak French holidays Quiberon bustles with the surfing-cool and the beat of four-on-the-floor from VW vans. You'll quickly forgive yourself for leaving your rack at home, since the rock here can resemble the crumbliest parts of

the Land's End coastline, and the lead-routes are deadly. So pop down to the beach and enjoy the halcyon pleasures of sound, wave-washed granite above soft sands, a swim, and a barbecue. Nearby Port Rhu is a particularly fun area which sports a fine overhanging promontory.

The Interior

Ancient Brittany is littered with megaliths, and many of these tombs and standing stones require a sixth sense to find. One such dwells in the forest at Plouhinec, a 50 cubic metre granite stone that gives a whole new meaning to Neolithic ritual, thanks to bloc. There are 12 problems here mostly between Font 4+ and 6B, enough for an afternoon's entertainment depending on how you get on with the striking arête of *La Douceur du Vol* (Font 7A+). Much more amenable is *Le Genou de Gégé* (Font 6B+), its knock-out punch being a wicked 6b shoulder press punctuated by lots of airtime. Okay, you're not going to travel the country for this place, but if you could ever choose a boulder that could be air-lifted to your back garden, then this megalith might be it!

The interior of north west France is dominated by 'Armorican gris', a compact grey quartzite

the envy of Britain. At first acquaintance it's like sipping Calvados for the first time. This quartzite makes up many of Brittany's key climbing sites like Pen Hir, L'Imperatrice, and Le Saut Roland, outcropping mostly in reclusive shady glades. New crags await discovery. One quartzite bouldering site is Les Rochers du Blaireau, north of Rennes. With a southern sandstone ambience, but without the people, and 100 problems on boulders up to a stirring 10 metres high, it's easy to get hooked.

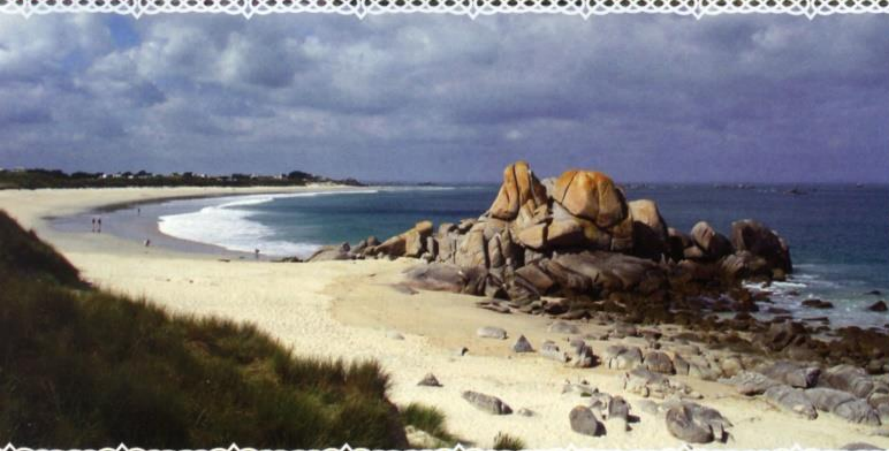
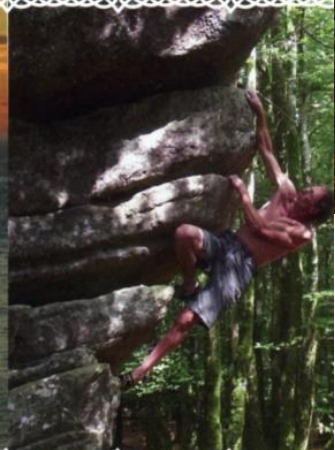
A similar atmosphere prevails on the outcrops around Lac de Guerlaiden north of Pontivy. Of these the most enchanting is St. Brigitte, so secretive it took me fifteen years to find. The walk-in passes no less than 13 uniquely-styled shrines. By the time you reach the hugely overhanging crag at the 13th shrine, you will have either converted to the Catholicism or be cursing the fact you didn't bring a rope and draws.

Above and beyond however are bite-sized quartzite nibbles, and exploration is the name of the game. That's the joy of this unique region: not everything in Brittany is prepackaged, and you can go make it up for yourself. Meantime look out for the La Côte Nord de Bretagne— it's coming your way! ■

THIS PAGE RIGHT: A boulder perched on the rugged headland of Les Amiets with a dynamic move starts a juggy F5+. Roscoff is in the background. JONATHAN CROCKER



SITUATED NEXT TO CHIC CARNAC, DURING FRENCH HOLIDAYS QUIBERON BUSTLES WITH SURFING COOL AND THE BEAT OF FOUR-ON-THE-FLOOR FROM VW VANS



Beta

Getting There

A car and ferry combo is best; the Plymouth to Roscoff route (6 hour crossing) lands you straight in the heart of the north coast. Brittany Ferries is the main carrier and prices are reasonable, especially if you avoid weekends. If you live in the south east of England the Portsmouth to St. Malo ferry might be a better option, with a crossing of 9 hours.

When to Go

Brittany's weather is the same as on England's south coast but with less rain. Humidity is rarely a problem, and even with a blazing sun the Atlantic airstream maintains a degree of freshness. The best season is late spring through to autumn, although fine days in winter will provide the best conditions. If planning a trip off-season, check that relevant campsites are open first.

Websites

krimpadenn.free.fr/ is packed with information on climbing in Finistère. Downloads include La Côte Léonarde; Topo Kerlouan; St. Guénolé; and Le bloc des landes aux buses (Plouhinec). Escalade22.perso.neuf.fr is an ever-improving website covering the Côtes d'Armor. It incorporates numerous colour topos and 'how to get there' guides, including to Plage de Coz-Pors and Ploumanac'h.

Guidebooks

La Côte de Granite d'Ogres (2003) is a locally produced hand-drawn topo to the sport climbing and bouldering of La Pointe de Primel, sometimes (1) available from the Primel campsite. *Escalade en Haute Bretagne* (1998) is a well produced photo-topo guidebook published by the FFME which covers all the crags in Ille-et-Vilaine including Les Rochers du Blaireau.

shrine on the pilgrimage to St. Brigitte. MARTIN CROCKER **CENTRE:** Sunset over the tiny fishing harbour of Menez Ham, Kerlouan. **CENTRE RIGHT:** A juggy 6-metre F4+ arete at St. Brigitte deep in the tranquil woodlands of central Brittany. Juggy breaks make for fast aerobic climbing in this secluded spot. JONATHAN CROCKER **LOWER LEFT:** By late August, the pristine beaches of Les Amiets are almost deserted. MARTIN CROCKER **LOWER RIGHT:** A 15-metre high stack at Les Amiets with lots of potential for new routes and highball problems. MARTIN CROCKER