

# BETWEEN THE ROCKS AND A HAUTE PLACE

You think you know France?  
Here, even crêpes have another name.  
Welcome to Europe's wildest coast.

By Leigh Newman

Photography by Philip Plisson

**T**he Nautilus, in St-Malo, is a bar, but it looks more like a pub. A grizzled old man in the corner plays the hurdy-gurdy, an obscure and ancient folk instrument that's shaped like a box with a crank handle—and sounds like bagpipes. Toes tap, heads nod as the notes float out through the cigarette smoke and among the weathered faces of the crowd. A man in a fisherman's sweater leans up against the bar and shouts his approval: "*Une autre!*"

French? There are times when Brittany, in the northwest corner of France—the “ear” of its countenance—seems to bear only passing resemblance to the rest of the country. Though officially French since 1532, Brittany has retained an independent spirit, periodically manifested in separatist movements that continued until the 1920s. Today Brittany is in fact part French, part Celtic, and, in places, even part English. The Celts settled here in the fifth century,





## BRITTANY

ST-MALO'S RAMPARTS  
DIDN'T STOP BRITS

driven across the Channel by Anglo-Saxon invasions. English invaders showed up once more in the late 1800s, this time looking for a warm vacation spot. And the French seem to have come here forever—some of them living here year-round, many others heading out of broiling Paris every summer to cool off.

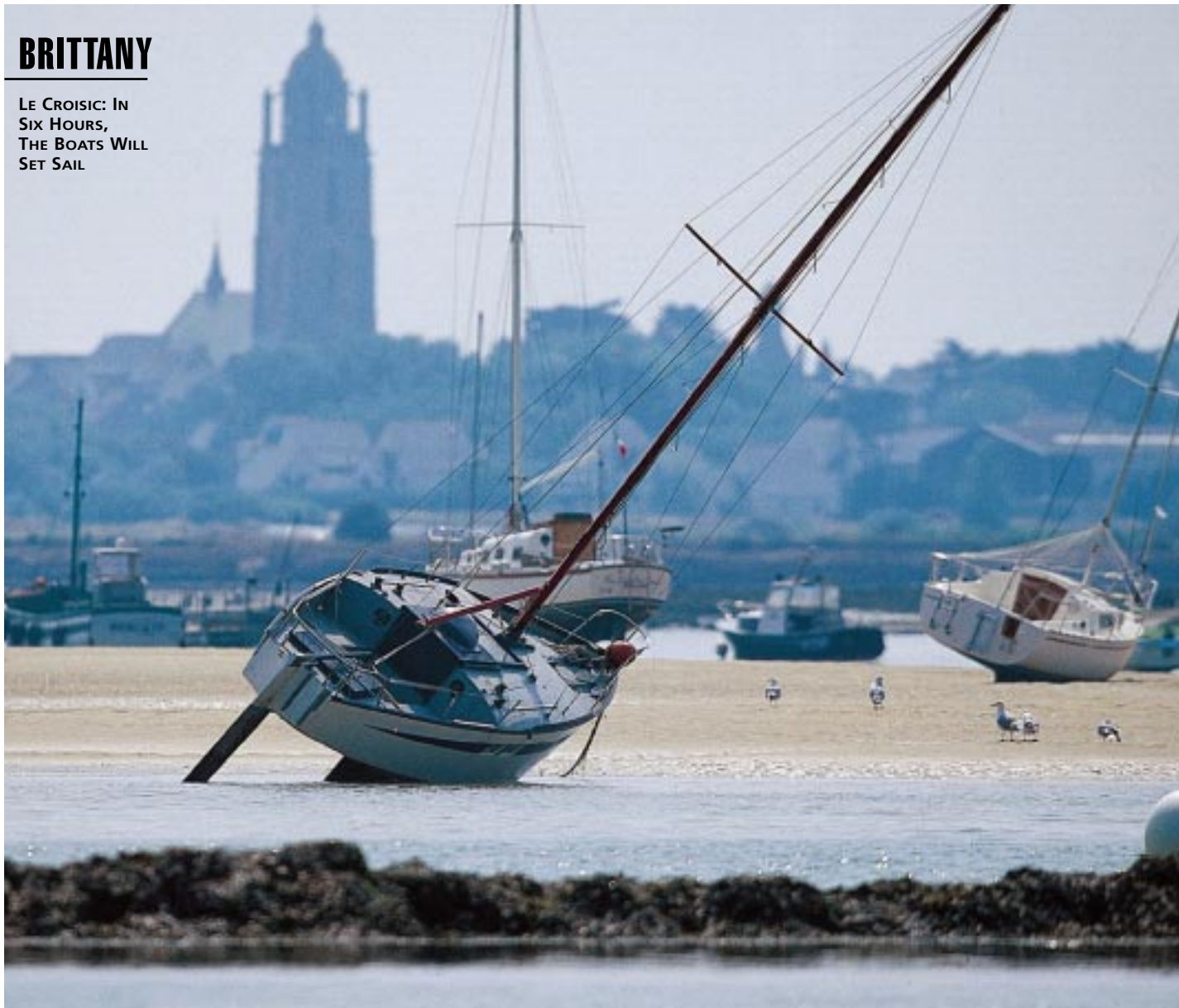
It's not hard to understand why. Down south in the Riviera, there's plenty of expensive but soulless glamour—the high-rises along the shore there are the prod-

uct of recent and dull imaginations. In Brittany, however, you get a couple thousand years of history with your day at the beach. Here, traditional stone villages face the cliffs, fronted by lighthouses with crabby, pipe-smoking lighthouse keepers. Evergreens and sea salt perfume the air. The days are brisk and sunny. And at night, the dinner tables are loaded with just-caught lobsters, crabs, oysters, mussels. Which perhaps points to the true allegiance of the people here—the sea.



## BRITTANY

LE CROISIC: IN SIX HOURS, THE BOATS WILL SET SAIL



**YE NEW ENGLAND** St-Malo is a life-size sand castle—its granite ramparts and the spires of its cathedral seem chiseled straight out of the coastline. St-Malo isn't the closest point in France to England, but it's close enough, and 300 years ago, when these walls were built, the town was one of France's busiest ports, and so an inviting target for attack.

Finding my way through the twisting streets within the walls isn't easy. It's not just the serpentine old-city layout, with passages shooting off into other passages (all of which were actually reconstructed after World War II bombings). Most of the shops look alike, too: The windows uniformly filled with nautical ropes and brass riggings. Toggled sailor peacoats and striped boat shirts hang from outdoor racks. The shoppers are similarly dressed, right down to their never-used leather Top-Siders. Even the Parisians here lose their high heels and attitude and dress like preppy English schoolchildren.

After a morning of window-shopping, a mussel lunch, and a nap on the beach, I head over to Dinard, just 10

minutes away on the other side of the Bay of St-Malo. Dinard was transformed from a fishing village to a summer retreat in the 1860s by two wealthy families, one English, one American. Today, the town's population swells to 20,000 in the summer, and the Anglican church and British yacht club attract as many French as British. The town is surrounded by huge stone summer mansions done the neo-Gothic way: gabled roofs and ivy-covered facades and bay windows. Most of them are positioned on the cliffs, overlooking the bay.

I walk the promenade, which winds around a harbor full of moored boats that trawl the English Channel for mackerel and sardines. Steep cliffs rise above, set with more mansions. At the end lies the beach: A small beige crescent that has been manicured into a proper sunning spot from one end to the other. And I do mean proper, complete with old-fashioned, blue-and-white-striped cabanas and sand that is raked daily. The bathers keep their bikini tops on and lather themselves with white streaky sunscreen—you just don't see the broiled-brown

skin common on the Riviera. A waiter serving afternoon tea while clad in a swimsuit wouldn't entirely surprise me.

On the water, teenagers taking lessons at the sailing school guide Sunfish and windsurf boards through the cove. Younger kids bounce on trampolines and slides, playing in the organized beachside kids' clubs. A lifeguard measures out the lines of a sand-soccer field, arranging netted goals at either end. Be healthy, says Dinard—be active! Don't just lie there roasting in the sun. Which isn't a very Gallic concept, if you think about it.

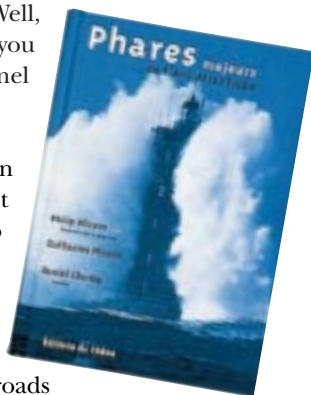
On the other hand, today is market day and people are swarming into town, parking on the sidewalks and hustling toward the stalls with a determination that can only be described as French. As I walk through the outdoor stands, beefy men bellow the virtues of cheese and sausage. A baker coos over my choice of a fresh raspberry tart. Mountains of ice gleam with fresh snapper, cod, and John Dory. Little wooden carts are further piled with kelp-covered oysters, hairy blue spider crabs, prawns, and sea snails (which, says the vendor, "you just steam, pick out with a pin, and dip in mayonnaise"). I get so hungry that I have to order one of the local buckwheat crêpes called *galettes*, hot off the griddle and oozing with ham and cheese.

From Dinard, a narrow road leads past crashing waves and a series of small villages—all of them made of soft gray granite that is quarried all over Brittany, all sisters of Dinard. I push on, heading for the western end of the emerald coast. Humble signs line the roadside: Homemade goat cheese, this way! Mussels and fries, that way! Fresh shellfish for sale! The terrain slopes upwards, often squared off into young cornfields. It is typical of the French countryside, except that it ends at a massive cliff, Cap Fréhel, and its square-towered lighthouse.

The sandstone here staggers 230 feet down to the sea, sometimes dotted with wild roses and grass. Seagulls scream. Tiny kayaks bob like plastic toys in the green surf below. And there's no guardrail, either. A six-year-old French boy is standing beside me. Through the haze, we can just make out a tiny rock island off in the distance. "Look," he tells me. "That's England." Well, not exactly. But were it a sunnier day, you could have seen all the way to the Channel Islands.

**BAGPIPES AND BERETS** The far western section of Brittany's coast, Finistère, doesn't have such a dramatic landscape, so instead I take the autoroute through the interior of the province and speed down towards the southern coast, called Cornouaille. The highway is typical cement scenery, but the secondary roads that wander away narrow to two lanes that gently rise and fall with the pastureland. Sheep, and the occasional cow, graze by the side of the road. It's almost a surprise when the Atlantic Ocean appears.

Bénodet is a pretty little village where the Odet River



“  
The Bretons have managed to keep their own zebra-striped flag, their own furniture, and their own language.”

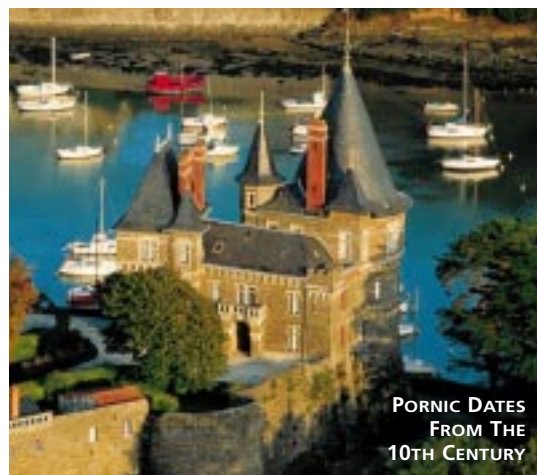
“  
Ancient stone villages face the cliffs, fronted by light-houses with crabby, pipe-smoking lighthouse keepers.”



BELLE-ILE:  
OFF-SHORE  
GOLFING

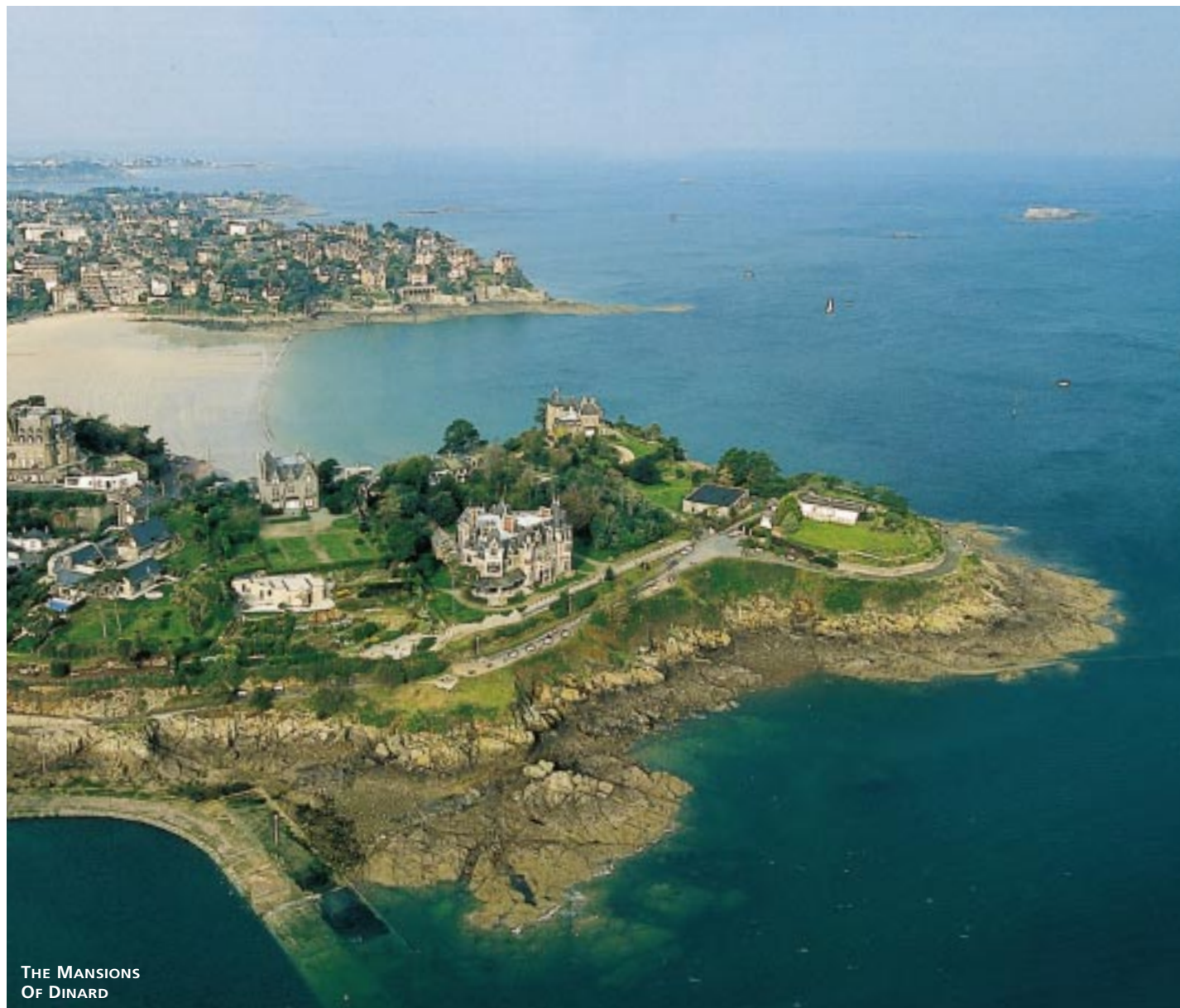


BATZ-SUR-MER,  
ON THE  
SOUTHERN  
COAST



PORNIC DATES  
FROM THE  
10TH CENTURY





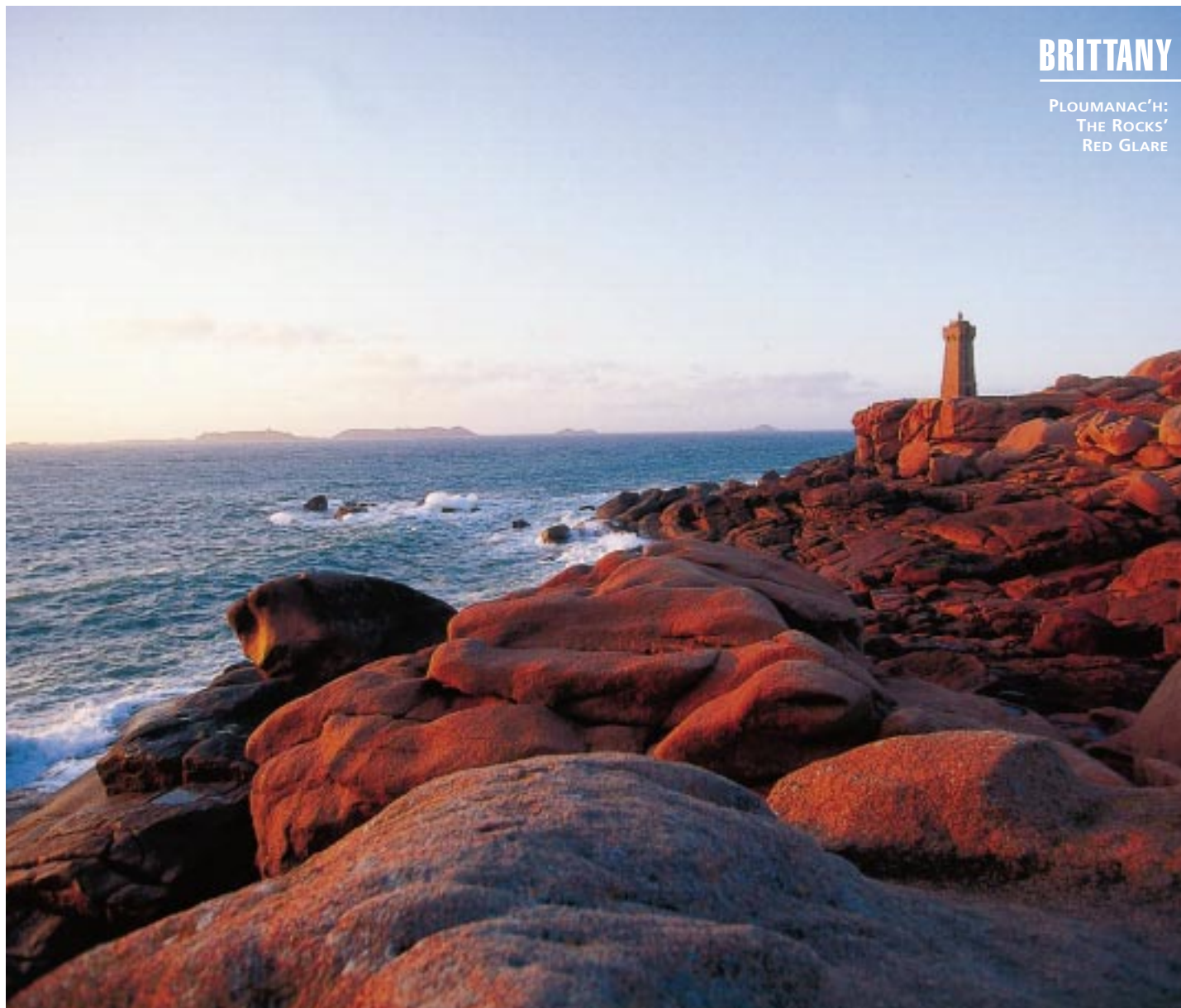
THE MANSIONS  
OF DINARD

meets the Bay of Concarneau; in summer, a flotilla of sailboats heading upriver passes by the 191-step-high pyramid-shaped lighthouse. The beaches here are small, but (as always) there's a promenade and plenty of open-air cafes. When the sun sets, I take a walk. There, in the shadow of the lighthouse, I find a stage has been set, and a crowd of about 200 people of all ages has gathered. Small stands sell beer, hard cider, and butter-and-sugar *galettes*.

The celebration this evening is “a *fez noz*, or festival of the night” one of the musicians, Jacques Beauchamp, explains, translating from the Breton language. “We Bretons used to work in the fields during the summer days and celebrate at night. Now we just celebrate.” Old-fashioned farmers have become scarce, but this remains the most traditional area of the Brittany coast—home to the Celtic Bretons. They've managed to preserve everything from their own zebra-striped flag (known as “The Black-and-White”) to their own furniture (heavy, dark, handmade) to their own language, which is kin to Cornish and Welsh.

Beauchamp takes to the stage. Bagpipes and recorders fill the night with a lonely, misty-sounding music, and the mood turns almost somber. All of a sudden, people form a small circle. Dancing to the pulse of the drumbeat, they shuffle with their arms linked around in complicated hop-step patterns—a dance known as a *gavotte*. More circles form and intertwine with other circles. The whole crowd is now pretty much dancing, but the mood is serious, focused, intense. A few hours later, a sweaty Beauchamp finally leaves the stage. It's almost 2 A.M., and most of the people here must get up early, to work not in the fields but in the tourist hotels and restaurants.

**RIVIERA OF THE NORTH** You'd think I'd be sick of seafood by now. In Le Pô, right on the Atlantic, I come across an old man wearing a knit fisherman's cap standing outside his thatched-roof, whitewashed house, in a yard blazing with pink geraniums. He's eating oysters out of the shell. “Do you want to try one?” he asks. But I need more than one. He leads me across the street to



the local fisherman's stand. Lobsters float in tanks, with fresh mussels, clams, sea snails, and oysters. The oysters come right out of the cultivating rectangular net beds, now visible on the tidal flats. "Clams," the old man tells me, "you have to dig up yourself."

Le Pô is just a cluster of houses and seafood harvesters just outside of Carnac. Carnac is a typical Breton village, tiny and made of stone, but the town is best known for inhabitants who've long-since vanished: Some 5,000 years ago, Neolithic people arranged standing stones scattered among vast, grassy fields inland. Why? Nobody knows. Most of the 4,000-odd stones are lined up in straight rows that bend into semi-circles at the tip; others are piled into tomb-like structures called dolmen. Some of the standing stones sit on a slight hill above the village of Carnac, which in prehistoric times had a view of the sea—a view since obscured by modern houses, lawns, and apple trees.

Carnac's summertime action is down on the beach. This is not the tidy, groomed scene of the northern and more western sections of the Brittany coast. In fact

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## HOW TO TALK LE TALK

**PARLEZ-VOUS BREIZ?** For years, speaking the Breton language was a crime, outlawed during the French Revolution in an effort to establish a single national identity. The government, in fact, remained mostly hostile to the language until the 20th century. Since the formation of the Cultural Institute of Brittany in 1981, however, Breton has experienced a revival, and today about 600,000 people speak one of its four dialects.

You don't need to speak Breton (*Breiz*) to visit Brittany, of course, but locals will always appreciate it when you try. Here are a few words to get you started.

**BREIZH:** BRITTANY

**DEMAT:** HELLO

**KENAVO:** GOOD-BYE

**TRUGAREZ:** THANK YOU

**KRAMPOUEZH:** CRÊPE

**BRETONED,**

**AR VRETONED:**

THE BRETON PEOPLE

**GWENN HA DU:**

THE BLACK-AND-WHITE,

THE FLAG OF BRETON