

CICERONE

WALKING

THE BRITTANY COAST PATH

The GR34 from Mont-Saint-Michel to Roscoff



Carroll Dorgan

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**THE GR34 FROM MONT-SAINT-MICHEL
TO ROSCOFF**

by Carroll Dorgan

CICERONE

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To Emily and Chloé, who follow in my footsteps – and blaze new trails.

Note on mapping

The route maps in this guide are derived from publicly available data, databases and crowd-sourced data. As such they have not been through the detailed checking procedures that would generally be applied to a published map from an official mapping agency. However, we have reviewed them closely in the light of local knowledge as part of the preparation of this guide.

Front cover: Ploumanac'h lighthouse (Stage 20)

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Updates to this Guide

While every effort is made by our authors to ensure the accuracy of guidebooks as they go to print, changes can occur during the lifetime of an edition. This guidebook was researched and written before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. While we are not aware of any significant changes to routes or facilities at the time of printing, it is likely that the current situation will give rise to more changes than would usually be expected. Any updates that we know of for this guide will be on the Cicerone website (www.cicerone.co.uk/1061/updates), so please check before planning your trip. We also advise that you check information about such things as transport, accommodation and shops locally. Even rights of way can be altered over time.

We are always grateful for information about any discrepancies between a guidebook and the facts on the ground, sent by email to updates@cicerone.co.uk or by post to Cicerone, Juniper House, Murley Moss, Oxenholme Road, Kendal, LA9 7RL.

Register your book: To sign up to receive free updates, special offers and GPX files where available, register your book at www.cicerone.co.uk.

On the Pink Granite Coast (Stage 20)



ROUTE SUMMARY TABLE

Stage	Start	Distance	Ascent	Descent	Time	Page
1	Mont-Saint-Michel	19.5km	185m	175m	5hr	36
2	Saint-Broladre	30.5km	310m	320m	7hr 30min	41
3	Cancalle	22km	860m	845m	5hr 45min	48
4	La Guimorais	12.5km	180m	195m	3hr 30min	52
5	Saint-Malo	20km/33.5km	485m/825m	470m/795m	5hr/8hr 30min	58
6	Lancieux	32.5km	690m	710m	8hr	64
7	Saint-Cast-le-Guildo	17.5km	585m	485m	4hr 30min	70
8	Petit Trécelin	22km	825m	875m	6hr	75
9	Sables-d'Or-les-Pins	21km	660m	655m	5hr 15min	80
10	Pléneuf-Val-André	26.5km	930m	930m	6hr 45min	86
11	Hillion	17km	275m	230m	4hr	91
12	Saint-Laurent-de-la-Mer	26km	980m	1005m	7hr	97
13	Saint-Quay-Portrieux	20km	940m	935m	5hr 15min	103
14	Bréhec	21km	625m	635m	5hr 45min	108
15	Paimpol	25km	655m	635m	5hr 45min	113
16	Lézardrieux	19km	315m	335m	5hr	119
17	Le Québo	20km	365m	360m	5hr 45min	125

Stage	Start	Distance	Ascent	Descent	Time	Page
18	Tréguier	29.5km	525m	525m	8hr 15min	129
19	Port Blanc	15km	255m	250m	3hr 45min	134
20	Perros-Guirec	17.5km	330m	325m	4hr	138
21	Trégastel (Coz Pors)	15.5km/22.5km	190m/255m	195m/260m	4hr/5hr 45min	143
22	Île Grande	30.5km	850m	810m	9hr	148
23	Le Yaudet	27km	825m	860m	8hr	154
24	Locquirec	20km (variant 18.5km)	910m (variant 490m)	840m (variant 440m)	6hr (variant 5hr 15min)	159
25	Plougasnou	13.5km	300m	370m	3hr 45min	164
26	Saint-Samson	21km	365m	365m	5hr	167
27	Morlaix	22.5km	605m	570m	5hr 45min	173
28	Carantec	20km	290m	315m	5hr	182
	Total	624km	approx. 15,700m	approx. 15,700m	28 days	



The coast on the western side of the Baie de l'Arguenon (Stage 6)

INTRODUCTION

The distance between Mont-Saint-Michel and Roscoff is 170km as the herring gull flies. If you walk along the GR34 trail from Mont-Saint-Michel to Roscoff, it's 624km – and you'll see a lot more of Brittany than that gull!

The GR34 is a coastal path, and the north Brittany coast is highly indented. This is the 'Sentier des Douaniers' (Customs Officers' Path). In the perpetual game of cat-and-mouse between customs officers and smugglers, no section of the coast could be ignored. Hence, the path traces virtually every cove, estuary, bay and headland of the coast. The Sentier des Douaniers was established in 1791 (incorporating earlier infrastructure)

but had fallen into disuse by the 20th century. Smugglers had not given up the game, of course; they simply used different techniques and routes – often with different contraband. In 1968, work began to restore the Sentier des Douaniers as a recreational hiking route, designated GR34 (Grande Randonnée 34). Today, the GR34 is one of the leading long-distance hiking paths in France. Its length around the coast, from Mont-Saint-Michel to Saint-Nazaire, exceeds 2000km.

In 2018, the GR34 between Locquirec and Saint-Pol-de-Léon was voted the favourite GR of the French in a poll organised by the national hiking association (FFRandonnée).



A discreet cove (Saint-Quiriou) between Le Yaudet and Locquémeau (Stage 23)

You will walk along that section of the GR34 during the last five stages covered by this guidebook, and you may well agree with the vote. Or you may have a different favourite: perhaps the Emerald Coast (Côte d'Émeraude) between Cancale and Cap Fréhel (Stages 3–8) or the Pink Granite Coast (Côte de Granit Rose) between Perros-Guirec and Trébeurden (Stages 20–22). Or what about the cliffs and beaches between Saint-Laurent-de-la-Mer and Paimpol (Stages 12–14)? It's hard to choose!

If you have limited time, you might choose to walk a short section of the GR34. Appendix A suggests four 5-day itineraries based on some of the route's highlights – two sections of the Emerald Coast (Pointe du Grouin and Cap Fréhel), the Pink Granite Coast and Morlaix Bay – with stage breakdowns and notes on getting to and from the trail.

WHAT IT'S LIKE TO HIKE ON THE NORTH BRITANNY COAST

One outstanding feature of hiking along the GR34 is variety. There are memorable traverses across steep slopes high above rocky shores where waves crash, such as between Pointe du Grouin and Pointe du Meinga (Stage 3) and from Locquémeau to Saint-Michel-en-Grève (Stage 23). Elsewhere, the trail stays closer to the water, passing innumerable beaches. Some of those beaches are vast expanses of sand in front of towns that

attract many visitors; others are cosy crescents of sand, barely accessible to anyone but a walker on the GR34. The trail also passes through forests and crosses heathland, often beside coastal cliffs and in sight of the sea. The heathland sparkles in the spring with yellow gorse and broom, complemented in the summer by purple heather.

The GR34 is not a mountain trail; there are extensive sections of level walking. The trail does, however, climb and descend many slopes – never for very long, but steep in places. You'll climb more than 900m during Stage 24 (and descend an equivalent amount), with fantastic views of the sea rewarding your efforts. In short, a trek on the GR34 is relatively easy but occasionally strenuous.

As you would expect, tides sometimes govern this coastal trail. There are short sections of the GR34 that may be submerged at high tide. Variants, mentioned in the text and broadly indicated on the maps of this book, can be followed when high tide blocks the main route. These high-tide variants are easy to follow, as they are clearly marked, with signs at the two ends of the variant trail (for example: 'VARIANTE PAR MARÉE HAUTE') and GR marks. IGN maps (see 'Maps', below) show the variants, along with the GR34 itself. Tide tables are posted on tourist office websites and can be purchased at tobacconists (*tabacs*). Most convenient are smartphone

apps that provide detailed information about tides at numerous places along the coast (for example, <http://maree.info>).

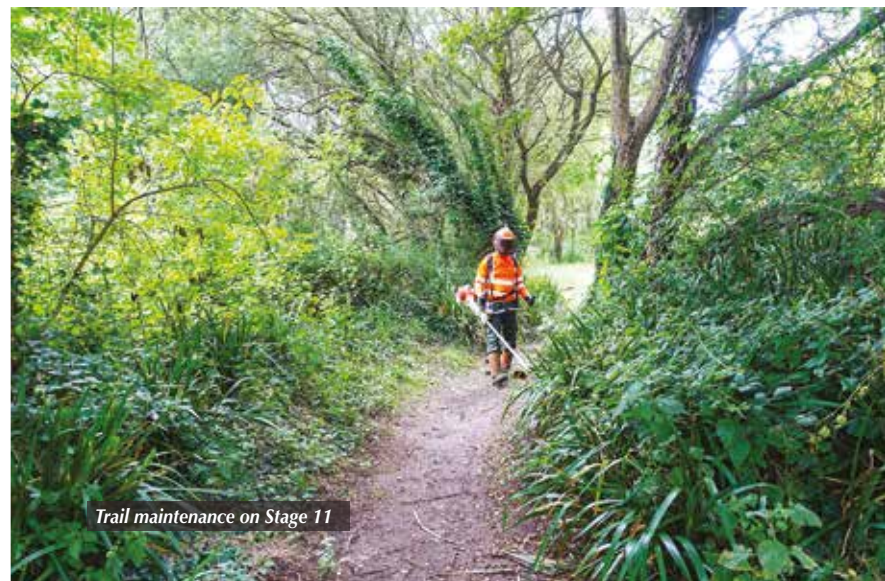
You may also encounter detours resulting from rockfalls or mudslides (*éboulements*) along this coastal trail: a barrier blocks the trail with an explanatory sign and occasionally a map showing the alternate route. You will observe that the GR34 is maintained: you may meet teams of workers cutting back grass and bushes that encroach upon the trail. Give them a smile and wave of thanks!

Urban life may seem remote as you lean into the wind while walking around a rocky headland, but there will be a warm bed at the end of the stage – or a sleeping bag, if you choose to camp. Large towns – Saint-Malo, Dinard, Saint-Brieuc, Paimpol,

Lannion, Morlaix – offer accommodation, restaurants and public transport (including railway service), not to mention historic buildings, museums and other interesting attractions. You will be welcomed with warm hospitality in small towns such as Cancale, Erquy, Tréguier, Perros-Guirec, Ploumanac'h, Trébeurden and Roscoff. If you spend the night in a village where there is no restaurant, your host may provide a meal (*table d'hôte*) or drive you to a nearby restaurant for dinner and return to pick you up at the end of the meal.

GEOLOGY

The story of Brittany's geology is a long one – indeed, longer than most. It starts with the oldest rocks in France: a band of exposed Icartian basement



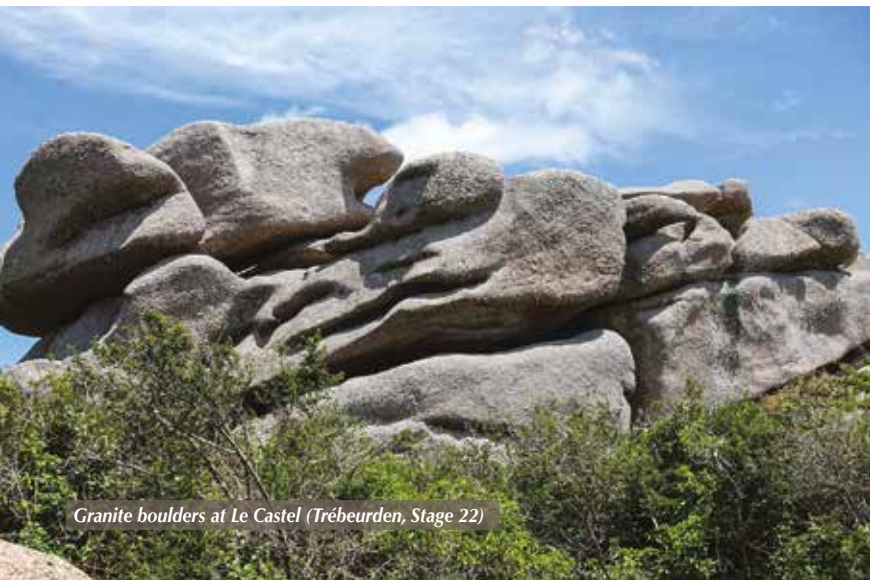
Trail maintenance on Stage 11

extending from Trébeurden past Ploumanac'h and across Guernsey's Icart Point to the Cotentin Peninsula. There isn't space here to describe all that happened on the Armorican Massif after this metamorphic gneiss was formed 2 billion years ago – but there are geological features of the north Brittany coast that will certainly interest a trekker on the GR34.

For example, the pink sandstone cliffs around Cap Fréhel, standing 70m above the sea, are an awesome sight. These cliffs were formed from sand and clay deposited around 460 million years ago (late Cambrian/early Ordovician). The horizontal strata of this sedimentary rock stand out; iron oxides give the rock its pink tint.

The pink granite boulders between Perros-Guirec and Trébeurden will dazzle and astonish

you. How were they formed? How did they get there? Another long story: around 300 million years ago, during the Hercynian orogeny (mountain formation), magma rose from below the earth's crust and filled spaces in the basement rock. The magma cooled and crystallised very slowly, forming granite composed of quartz, mica and feldspar. (The feldspar gives this granite its pink tint.) The slow crystallisation of the granite left minute cracks in the rock. Water penetrated these cracks and caused erosion that produced rounded forms of granite rock surrounded by coarse granitic sand. Eventually, the Hercynian mountains were mostly eroded away, leaving granite boulders exposed on the surface – and subject to further erosion by water, wind and fluctuations of temperature.



Granite boulders at Le Castel (Trébeurden, Stage 22)



A ria (Jaudy River near Tréguier) on Stage 17

The post-glacial rise of sea levels during the Quaternary period partially submerged unglaciated river valleys, creating long tidal estuaries called rias that contribute to the highly indented form of the coast. There are no bridges across the outlets of the rias in our section of the GR34 (although a 'sea bus' links Saint-Malo and Dinard across the Rance estuary). Therefore, you will walk inland on one side of a ria, cross a bridge (for example at Lannion) and then walk back out the opposite side.

WILDLIFE

The rocky headlands and islands along the Breton coast are the home – or at least the nesting place – for many seabirds. One of the best places to observe these birds is Cap Fréhel, a bird sanctuary. A big, guano-covered

rock, Fauconnière, stands just offshore. You may see European shag and several species of gulls. Some pelagic birds (those that live far offshore and return to land only to breed) come to Cap Fréhel each spring: northern fulmar, Manx shearwater and common murre.

In the 19th century, more than 15,000 couples of Atlantic puffins made their nests each year along this coast. Rapacious hunting of these 'clowns of the sea' threatened to wipe out the species in this area. In 1912, the League for the Protection of Birds (Ligue pour la Protection des Oiseaux, LPO) was established and a sanctuary was created specifically to save the puffins: the Réserve des Sept-Îles. About 200 puffin couples now breed there. Other birds flock to the Sept-Îles, in particular the northern gannet, Europe's largest seabird. The gannet

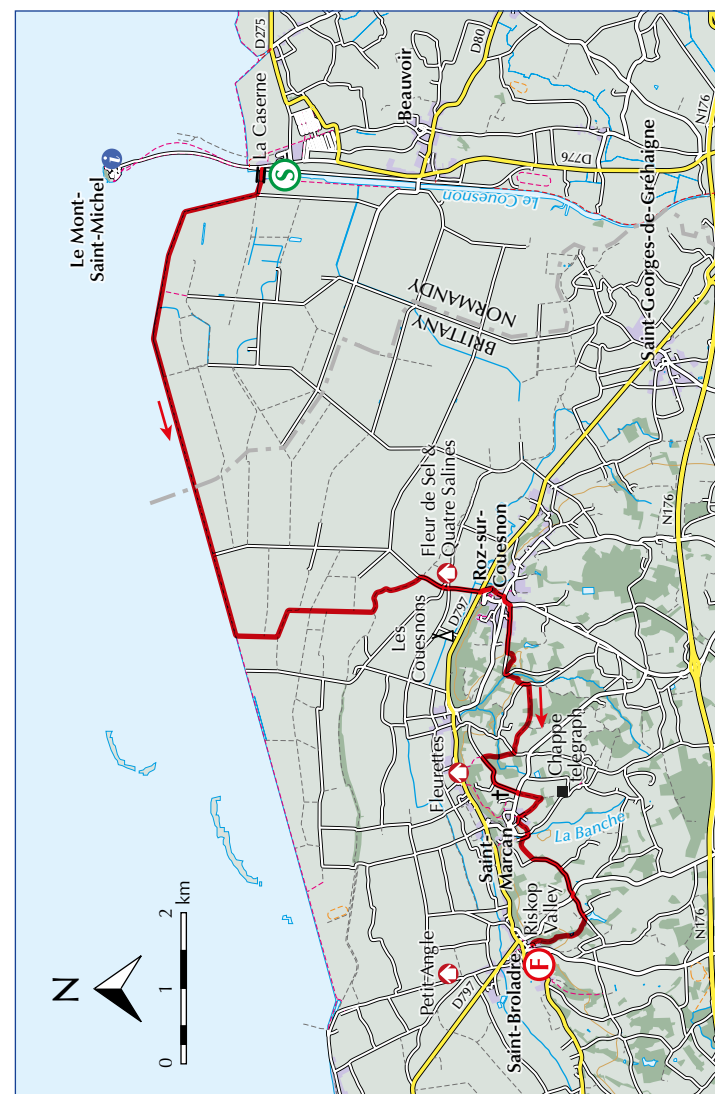
STAGE 1

Mont-Saint-Michel to Saint-Broladre

Start	Mont-Saint-Michel (La Caserne)
Finish	Saint-Broladre
Distance	19.5km
Ascent	185m
Descent	175m
Time	5hr
Map	IGN TOP25 12150T
Refreshments	Cafés/restaurants in Quatre Salines, Roz-sur-Couesnon, Saint-Broladre
Transport	Keolis Armor buses from Rennes and Saint-Malo to Mont-Saint-Michel/La Caserne; Pontorson–Mont-Saint-Michel/La Caserne shuttle bus; BreizhGo line 17 (summer)
Accommodation	Hotels and/or <i>chambres d'hôtes</i> in Quatre Salines, Roz-sur-Couesnon, Saint-Marcen, Saint-Broladre; campground in Roz-sur-Couesnon

The GR34 trekker may feel an affinity with the pilgrims who walked to Mont-Saint-Michel over the centuries. This stage offers iconic views of this UNESCO World Heritage site before the trail turns west to follow the coast on a long, level dyke. The latter part of the stage moves inland and is no longer so flat. The route enters forests and crosses hills, with intervals of open land offering views over Mont-Saint-Michel Bay. Finishing on a narrow, winding trail through the wooded Riskop Valley, you could almost forget that you are anywhere near the sea.

Our trek along the GR34 begins in Normandy beside Mont-Saint-Michel Bay at **La Caserne**, a commercial area (with a tourist office, hotels, campground, restaurants, gift shops and vast parking lots) on the mainland 2km south of Mont-Saint-Michel. (While the official starting point of the GR34 is Mont-Saint-Michel itself, the GR marks that





A rainbow beside Mont-Saint-Michel augurs well for a trek along the GR34

you will follow along the Breton coast begin here.) The conical form of Mont-Saint-Michel presides majestically over the flat landscape and sea.

MONT-SAINT-MICHEL

In AD708, Archangel Michael appeared in a dream to Aubert, Bishop of Avranches, and commanded him to build a sanctuary dedicated to the archangel on a nearby island. Aubert did not comply, even after the archangel repeated the command in a second dream. Finally, after a third dream, during which the archangel stressed the point by poking his finger into Aubert's skull, the bishop wisely complied with the command. (A skull with a hole in it is preserved as a relic of Saint Aubert in the Saint-Gervais Basilica of Avranches.) The sanctuary was dedicated to Saint Michael in 709, and the island became known as Mont-Saint-Michel. A chapel called Notre-Dame-sous-Terre was built in the 10th century, followed by a Romanesque church in the 11–12th centuries. The Gothic abbey that crowns the island was built during the 13–16th centuries, with the spire and its golden statue of Saint Michael added in 1897.

Modern constructions – a causeway linking Mont-Saint-Michel to the mainland (1877) and a dam across the Couesnon (1969) – interfered with the flow of water around the bay and permitted silt to accumulate. Mont-Saint-Michel was no longer an island. Works to make Mont-Saint-Michel an island again and to keep it that way were completed in 2015. A new dam on the Couesnon increases the flow of water carrying sediment into the bay, and the replacement of the causeway by a bridge allows water to flow freely around the island.



This drainage canal marks the border between Normandy and Brittany

The new dam includes a graceful bridge: cross the bridge, heading west, and continue to a line of trees, where you will see a GR mark on a post. Turn right here and enjoy a magnificent view of Mont-Saint-Michel as you walk north on a dyke for 1km. The trail then turns left.

Continue for 6.5km along the dyke between cultivated polder lands on the left and grasslands on the right where salt-meadow sheep graze. Take care to avoid stepping in small rabbit holes that may be concealed by high grass. One of the drainage canals that you pass is the unmarked **border** between two departments, Manche and Ille-et-Vilaine: welcome to Brittany!

Turn left on a dyke where a sign points to Roz-sur-Couesnon (**1hr 45min**). ► Turn left after 500 metres and then right 400 metres further on. Continue straight to reach a T-junction with a bicycle path, where a left turn is clearly marked. Upon reaching a road, turn right and pass a hamlet called **Quatre Salines**. Cross a main road and follow a smaller road that climbs toward Roz-sur-Couesnon. After 100 metres on this road, where it makes a hairpin right turn, leave the road to the left and then immediately turn right to climb a steep, narrow trail. ► Turn left where the trail levels off and enter **Roz-sur-Couesnon (3hr)**.

Walk through the village: right at a T-junction, left where the road forks, left on Rue de la Margasse and finally right on Rue de la Bossette, which leads out of

A variant continues straight along the dyke to La Châtellier, where it rejoins the GR34. Its length is 14.5km, compared with 30km by the main route. It is unsigned but easy to navigate.

A sign here warns walkers to be careful on this 'difficult and slippery' path: 'Prudence! Sentier difficile et glissant'.

town. After 750 metres the GR34 turns left on a narrow trail into the woods. Descend to a footbridge over a stream, then climb a slope with steps. Where the trail levels off it follows a sunken road to the right (northwest). Turn left at a T-junction with a surfaced road and right on a trail back into the forest.

After emerging from the forest, turn left to walk past a group of houses and left at another T-junction. Turn right after 50 metres on a dirt road that rises toward the woods and eventually crests at about 80m elevation. The land opens and offers a view over the sea to the north.

Continue for 1km, cross a road and follow a dirt road to the right (north) into the woods. The road leads to a T-junction with a small road. Follow that road to the left and cross a road where there is an old stone cross. Continue straight on what is now a dirt path toward Le Télégraphe.

The path climbs gently: turn right where it levels off. (Going straight here leads to a restored **Chappe telegraph**.) ◀ Descend 300 metres to a T-junction on the edge of **Saint-Marcen**. The GR34 continues to the left here on Le Couronel toward Saint-Broladre (4hr 15min).

The road curves left and enters the woods above Saint-Marcen. Cross a road and continue on a road that curves uphill to the right. (A sign points to Le Vieux Moulin.) Just before the crest of the hill, turn left on a dirt path. Follow this pleasant trail between stone walls to a T-junction with a road, where you turn left. Walk along this quiet road for about a kilometre, crossing a main road along the way.

Opposite a pond, turn right on a trail that descends into the woods through the beautiful **Riskop Valley** to Saint-Broladre. The GR34 does not enter the centre of Saint-Broladre, but instead turns left behind its church and climbs a dirt path. Continue straight past the church for accommodation, restaurants and shops in **Saint-Broladre**.

Chappe telegraphs, first built in the 1790s, formed a network of semaphore signalling stations that were used until supplanted in the mid 19th century by the electric telegraph.

STAGE 2

Saint-Broladre to Cancale

Start	Saint-Broladre
Finish	Cancale
Distance	30.5km
Ascent	310m
Descent	320m
Time	7hr 30min
Map	IGN TOP25 1215OT
Refreshments	Cafés/restaurants in Mont-Dol, Hirel, Saint-Benoît-des-Ondes, Cancale
Transport	BreizhGo line 17 (summer); railway service in Dol-de-Bretagne (1km)
Accommodation	Hotels and/or <i>chambres d'hôtes</i> in Mont-Dol, Dol-de-Bretagne, Hirel, Saint-Benoît-des-Ondes, Cancale; youth hostel in Cancale

Mont-Saint-Michel Bay comes back into view as you emerge from forests and complete your crossing of high ground during the first part of this stage. The trail descends to lower, flat terrain – with a bump over Mont-Dol. After Hirel, the GR34 follows an arc along the coast to Cancale, a city famous for its oysters.

This stage begins behind the church in **Saint-Broladre**: walk up the Impasse du Donjon, a steep gravel path, to a road. Turn left, pass a cemetery and immediately turn right to walk up steps to another road. Turn right and follow the road downhill to the main road (**D80**). ▶

Turn left and walk 100 metres along the D80; then turn left to follow a dirt road that rises into a forest. Continue straight, passing a smaller trail on the right, and then turn right on a trail beside a sign for the 'Monument de Tréal'. This is a delightful, rolling trail in the forest.

If you spent the night in the *chambres d'hôtes* north of the village, you can walk back to the centre, turn right on the D80 and rejoin the GR34 here.



- a 624km section of the GR34 from Mont-Saint-Michel to Roscoff • fabulous coastal walking: cliffs, beaches, seaside resorts and fishing villages • fascinating history and culture



Taking in cliffs, sandy beaches, forest and heathland, ancient monuments, historic churches and coastal forts, there is plenty to admire along the well-maintained waymarked trail. Highlights include the sparkling Emerald Coast, the striking Pink Granite Coast and beautiful Morlaix Bay. Each day finishes in a town or village where you'll find a warm welcome and a comfortable bed, while camping is also possible should you prefer.

- generally easy walking with occasional strenuous sections
- with comprehensive notes on Breton history and culture and local points of interest
- includes selected accommodation listings

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