

Freewheeling to France

Swap four wheels for two next time you Channel-hop, with **Brian Schofield's** guide to Breton biking

The pleasure begins as you glide past the overstuffed estate cars queuing to crawl into the ferry's open jaws. The drivers smile at you with condescension — "Aah, bless, a cyclist." Just smile back and know what lies ahead. No autoroutes and toll booths for you. Your views will be unsullied by tinted wind-screens and that duvet in the rear-view mirror. They might be on a short break, but you're on a mini adventure.

Because that's the difference with a cycling holiday. The world and his wife go on driving tours in France, and very nice it is too — but cocooned in the car, you're always a spectator, passively viewing the countryside as it rolls by. On two wheels, you're not just seeing the scenery — you're part of it.

It needn't be exhausting, either. This style of break is endlessly flexible. Our Brittany bike-ferry weekend covers about 30 miles on day one, a little over 40 on day two: a breeze for some, a labour for others. So, while our map shows the full route, we've included some double-backs and short cuts for those who want to take it easier.

The final bonus? It's cheap. Foot-passenger tickets on ferries are a steal, and if you take an overnight crossing, you'll only pay for one night in a hotel. You could use the money you've saved on a weekend of à la carte gluttony. No need to feel guilty — you're getting plenty of exercise...

SATURDAY

Spend your Friday night on the overnight ferry from Portsmouth, and your reward will emerge early on Saturday,



through the Breton morning fog — the citadel of St-Malo, just waking up and as yet untouched by day-trippers. And because the harbour bridge is usually closed to cars in the mornings, you'll have the old town almost to yourself. If coffee is a priority, La Bonne Etoile (on Rue de la Vieille-Boucherie) is a *Madame-knows-everyone* locals' cafe, with a *boulangerie* nearby to secure midmorning sustenance.

Now head out through the sophisticated suburb of Rochebonne and onto the D201 Cancale coast road, for a morning of Brittany's best sea views, sheltered beaches and rolling country roads. Diversions to the clifftops at Rothéneuf and La Guimorais will offer the best views of the beautiful Havre de Rothéneuf estuary, while the windblown Pointe du Grouin, with views over the Ile des Landes sea-bird sanctuary, is the ideal spot for a self-congratulatory breather, before the last two miles into Cancale.

At which point, if that was your first bike ride since school, you should take a late lunch, find a hotel, and run a bath — tomorrow you can just potter back on inland lanes. Cancale is one of the region's most well-to-do seaside towns, with decent hotels and fine, oyster-worshipping restaurants

aplenty. For a less transparently touristy meal, try the bustling Le Piccolo, off the main square (Rue Duquesne; mains from £4.90), while Hôtel de la Plage, just outside the town (Pont-Mer beach, 00 33-2 99 89 81 59; doubles from £49) is simple but wonderfully positioned.

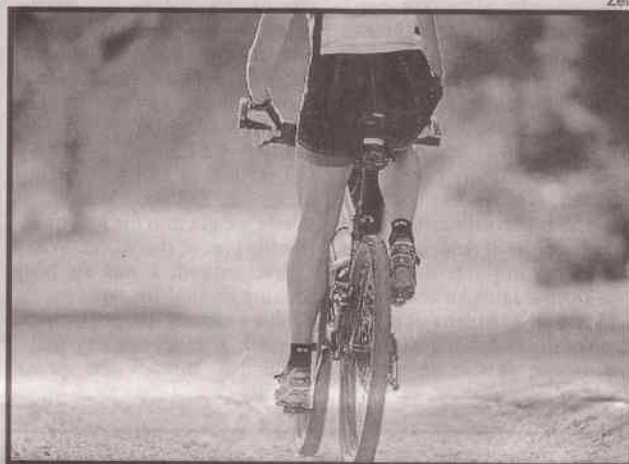
However, that first leg should take most bodies just two to three hours, so hopefully you'll just top up the tank with lunch and a moderate draught of cider, before the run inland to Dinan. You can break the back of the journey with an hour or so of pedalling along

the straight, flat D76 to Château-neuf, before slowing to a crawl on the old D29 road, as you travel above the banks of the huge Rance estuary, taking diversions into some of the many beautiful riverside villages along the way into Dinan.

Blessed with a vibrancy that doesn't rely on visitors, Dinan is an excellent spot to dismount — Hôtel les Grandes Tours (2 96 85 16 20, www.dinanhotel.com; doubles from £35, breakfast £2.85) is central and, with underground bike parking, secure. For dinner, La Courtine (Rue de la Croix, menus from

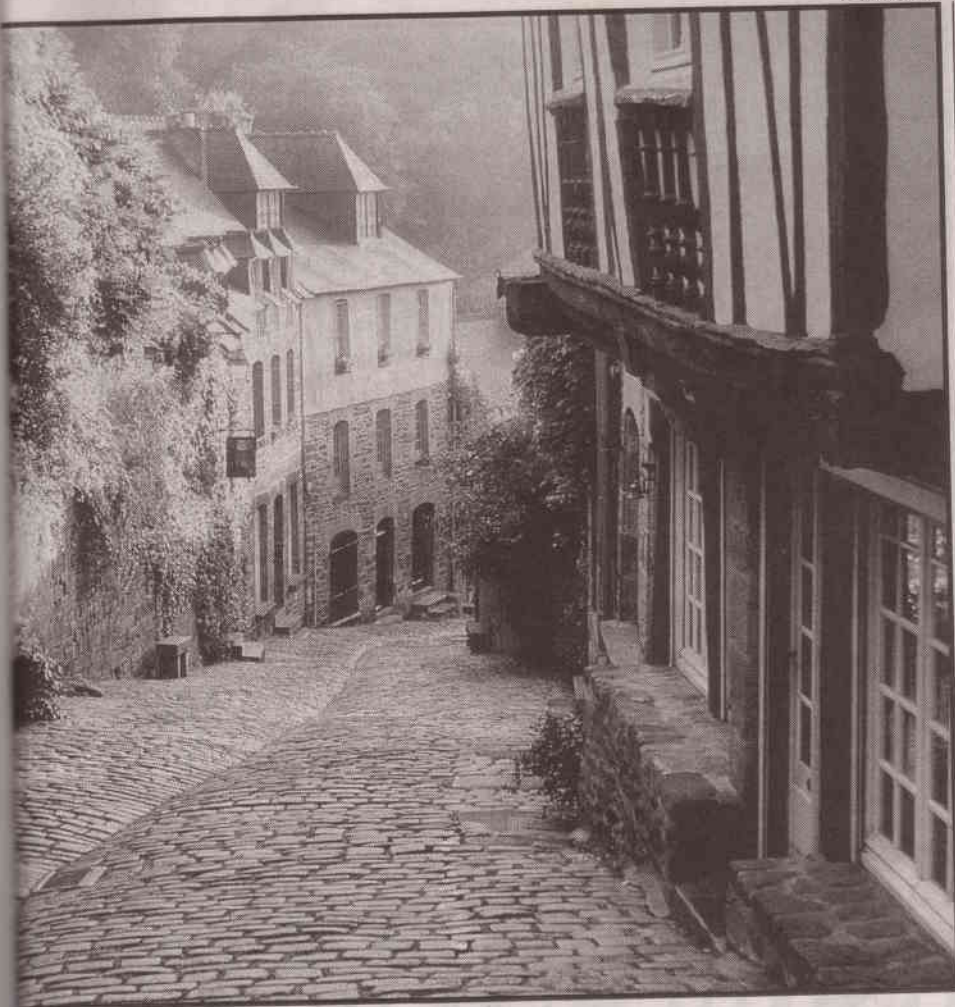


Follow the Rance estuary and you



On July 10, the Tour de France flies by. You can go a bit slower

Zeta



Eventually arrive at the charming town of Dinan — an excellent spot to dismount for the night

(£12.80) offers Breton country cooking at its best, while Crêperie du Roy (Rue du Lainerie, mains from £2.80) is cheap and mightily generous.

SUNDAY

The brisk downhill whizz to Dinan's riverport should wake you up — and set you on the

body's more willing, pick up the D3 at Le Minihic for some wonderful "let's keep going clean across France" cycling to Ploubalay, and west to the coastal resort of St-Jacut-de-la-Mer.

A town designed for wandering around in plastic flip-flops in the height of summer, St-

ferry takes just 10 minutes to cross to St-Malo (£4.60 with bikes, last ferry 6pm, but later in high season).

If there's time to kill, the sea-front suburb of St-Servan is more pleasant, and less anglophone, than St-Malo in full swing — but the citadel's restaurants should lure you back for a celebratory pre-ferry blow-out. Le Chalut (Rue Corne de Cerf, 2 99 56 71 58; menus from £22, book ahead) has the town's Michelin star, but Café de la Bourse (Rue de Dinan) has the £5 *steak-frites*.

Suitably stuffed, haul aboard the 9pm ferry, get your quality eight hours on board and arrive in Portsmouth just before 6am on Monday. Just remember to switch your expression from relaxed and refreshed back to standard-issue tired and sullen for the commute into work.

Travel details: Brittany Ferries (0870 366 5333, www.brittanyferries.co.uk) sails from Portsmouth to St-Malo at 8.30pm, with a return at 9pm; weekend returns from £64pp, with sleeper chairs. Double cabins cost £44 on each leg. Portsmouth and Southsea railway station is 1hr 25min from Waterloo (0845 748 4950). The best map is IGN Carte de Promenade no 16; £4.99 from Stanfords (020 7836 1321, www.stanfords.co.uk).

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way for a wonderful hour following the bankside path past the reeds and rushes towards the sea. Turn away from La Rance at the bizarre fishermen's huts-on-stilts, for three roller-coaster miles along the D12 to Plouër-sur-Rance and a well-earned coffee in the town-square *tabac*.

You're now on the route that, come July 10, the 2004 Tour de France will be taking, when the Bretons, who love their cycling, will be out in force. Lance Armstrong and co will be covering a hefty 130 miles that day, but if your legs are feeling yesterday, it's now only 10 miles to Dinard via the marked scenic drive through Le Minihic-sur-Rance. If the

Jacut is comatose for the rest of the year. But with 11 beaches and one beautiful headland nearby, this is perfect picnic territory, and the two *boulangeries* on Grande Rue have plenty of alfresco lunch options.

The final run past the camp sites and crazy-golf courses of the Côte d'Emeraude into Dinard could take as little as an hour, whizzing along the D786, but it's better to take plenty of diversions — through the wildlife sanctuary between Ploubalay and the coast, to visit the beaches at Lancieux, and to take in the craggy views from Pointe de la Garde Guérin and Pointe du Décollé. When you do finally wind your way into Dinard, the

More wheelies

NORMANDY

Slightly easier cycling than Brittany. Brittany Ferries (0870 366 5333, www.brittanyferries.co.uk) sails overnight between Portsmouth and Caen; from £64 return with sleeper seats (£40 per leg for a two-berth cabin). On arrival, you can follow the beaches to Arromanches, staying inland at Bayeux: Hôtel Reine Mathilde (00 33 2 31 92 08 13; doubles from £32) is chintzy but friendly. Then village-hop back on Sunday.

ISLE OF WIGHT

Eager to establish itself as a cycling haven, the Isle of Wight has been laying Sustrans paths in every direction. The best is from Cowes across the island to Sandown, but push round to Bembridge for a lovely stopover at the very British Sea Change B&B (01983 875558; from £22pp). Red Funnel Ferries (0870 444 8898, www.redfunnel.co.uk) sails from Southampton, £10 return.

PAS DE CALAIS

The countryside around Calais is good for something besides driving through quickly — mountain-biking. Head over the Cap Gris Nez headland to Wimereux, where the Hôtel du Centre (00 33 3 21 32 41 08; from £34) comes recommended. P&O (0870 520 2020, www.poferries.com) makes the quick crossing from Dover, from £14 return, or try Hoverspeed (0870 240 8070, www.hoverspeed.com) or SeaFrance (0870 571 1711, www.seafrance.com).

HOOK OF HOLLAND

With more than 1,000 miles of cycle paths, Holland is pedal heaven, but the overnight ferries are currently car-only or overpriced-cabin-only. If you have more than a weekend, the short day sailings from Harwich to the Hook release you onto car-free paths to Haarlem, the Hague and Scheveningen. Stena Line (0870 400 6798, www.stenaline.co.uk) has returns for cyclists from £66.