

Spotlight on Brittany

Pontivy - Historic Town

Open any tourist book on Brittany and you will be sure to find an extensive section extolling the virtues of a visit to Pontivy. Set in the rolling countryside of Morbihan, this picturesque town has something for everyone; fine architecture, historic buildings including a fairytale castle, art, expositions, boutiques, markets, as well as a large selection of restaurants and cafe's boasting a range of ethnic cuisine. Not just a quaint stop off on the way to the coast, Pontivy set by the meandering River Blavet, has a real sense of presence, often compared to Oxford by delighted English visitors. This similarity may have something to do with the town's historical link with those living across the Channel.

According to legend, Pontivy was so named because of the bridge across the River. Its designer and engineer is reputed to be Saint Ivy, a monk from Lyndisfarne in the north of England, who gave the town a safe crossing point which was known as Ivy's bridge. Other links however, are pure fiction. Excitable fans of Tolkien's 'Lord of the Rings' may be disappointed to learn that the present Chateaux de Rohan has absolutely nothing to do with Hobbits and was built by and lived in by a succession of Dukes from the Rohan dynasty. It now houses exhibitions and the public are welcome to explore its' ancient rooms. Not only boasting a fairy tale castle, Pontivy bristles with important historical buildings.

The medieval quarter, with its' timber framed houses and narrow streets positively oozes historical atmosphere, with delightful boutiques nestling under their protruding upper stories. In stark contrast however, the Napoleonic quarter, with its broad, grid layout, ordered streets and squares, boasts military precision. Lining the Blavet and the Nantes /Brest canal with barracks, warehouses and an enormous hospital, Pontivy is a testament to Napoleon's beautiful architectural statement. A statement which in the past shouted from the roof tops as a demonstration of the powerful hand of the French republic in Brittany. To modern tourists, it is a romantic setting, with beautiful atmospheric lighting on tranquil summer evenings. But to lovers of history it is a record in stone of turbulent political upheaval. Indeed the name of the town has changed on more than one occasion from Pontivy to Napoleonville, a fact that is remembered in some of the street signs. This unique record of history set in stone, leaves an indelible impression on visitors but there is more to the town than it's buildings. It is not a quaint museum piece that shuts down in the winter.

Pontivy is a university town and this influx of youth gives the town a cosmopolitan and quirky feel, a bit like the tourism centre, housed in a jaunty river boat on the Blavet. The presence of the campus of the University of South Brittany, means that the streets are full of law

students, arts students, young people studying language, medicine, engineering, science and commerce, to name but a few of the academic subjects covered. As with all university towns, Pontivy is vibrant and filled with all the culture, dynamism and commerce that a student population bring to a community. The commercial zone is filled with retail outlets and large restaurants and leisure pursuits are well catered for. Sports, that mainstay of Breton society, are well represented within the town. As well as football, equestrian and aquatic sports, Pontivy even boasts a Rugby club.

In these dark days of recession, Pontivy is a breath of fresh air and for those of us who are lucky enough to live near the town, it's a tonic which can be regularly taken. So next time you visit the town, take a few moments to look up as you walk through it's bustling streets, to take in it's fine buildings. Pause by the canal and give yourself a moment to appreciate the picture postcard view. You'll be the better for it.