

Pipes and Leather Underpants

I was excited when I was assigned the task of researching Film locations in Brittany. Mouthwatering locations beckoned along the beautiful coast lines. I'd even dug out my old swimsuit.

But what I hadn't bargained for, was the delinquent behaviour of the Jet Stream and the subsequent monsoon. My research therefore, has been confined to cyberspace and the two fantastic locations chosen, leap out of the monitor the moment you enter Brittany into a search engine. They are both absolute classics and feature the Brittany coast line. And that's about all they have in common. One is funny, for all the wrong reasons and the other; a timeless, quintessentially French comedy.

Music score of Les vacances de M. Hulot

The latter is, of course, Monsieur Hulot's Holiday. For the tiny minority that have not seen this cinematic masterpiece, this film put Brittany on the holiday destination map. Back in 1953, holidays were just becoming an economic reality for ordinary people and so Tati's brilliantly conceived Monsieur Hulot, not only gently lampooned the new class of holiday maker, he made the films superb backdrop; St Marc sur Mer so famous, so ingrained in the holiday makers imagination, that it has become 'the' benchmark of French holiday destinations. The beach is the back drop for a great portion of the comedy action, subliminally soaking into the subconscious of an entire generation, who would forever search for another location to match it.

Writers however, were so inspired by the film that several of our own English comedies have Monsieur Hulotesque themes. Mr Bean was shamelessly based on Hulot, focusing on one man's capacity to wreak havoc in everyday situations. The wonderfully shambolic hotel, the Hotel le Plage became the inspiration for Fawlty Towers. You can visit both the beach, (which is exactly the same as all those years ago, apart from the lighthouse, which was washed away in a storm,) and the hotel. You can walk along the promenade, now called La Plage d'Monsieur Hulot. And there looking out to sea, leaning forward with his hands on his back, is Hulot himself, (well his statue anyway,) minus his pipe, which someone pinched on the day of his unveiling. People travel from all over the world to holiday like Monsieur Hulot.

Which brings me onto the second location. People from all over the world travel to this Breton beauty spot too. They are fans of a film made just four years after Hulot. I am talking about that epic Hollywood blockbuster: 'The Vikings'. Someone in 'Tinsel Town' came up with a story loosely based on a Norse saga. They poured money into it, building realistic sets by Nordic fjord's.

Unusually brilliant. They located an atmospheric fortress on the cliffs for the grand finale. Fantastic. They persuaded Kirk Douglass *and* Tony Curtis to star in it. What could possibly go wrong?

I'm pretty sure that the fortress, the beautiful Fort La Latte, shouldn't have been in ruins during the Viking raids. But that is a minor point and the whole location lends itself to the final struggle between the two heroes. There is, however, one glaringly obvious distraction, which is constant throughout the entire film and renders a normal audience incapable of taking the thing seriously. Inexplicably, Tony Curtis is dressed throughout this tale from the frozen north, in a pair of leather underpants, and not much else.

The rest of the male cast are fully clothed and go around doing manly things, such as lobbing axes at their wives' hair. Anyway, Tony looks suitably sheepish throughout the film, and who can blame him. He fights in underpants. He woos in underpants, ok well that is plausible. He is sentenced to death in underpants, I perked up at this point, but was disappointed to discover that far from a watery grave Tony survives through some Divine intervention. Maybe Odin likes underpants or has a weird sense of humour. Having had one of his hands cut off, he manages to kill Douglass off and get the girl. I'm thinking Janet Leigh wouldn't have plighted her troth with Tony, unless he had accidentally on purpose stabbed his brother and become King of Northumbria. Can you imagine taking him home to meet Mum? This is my fiancé, yes I know he's wearing leather underpants in February but he is a Geordie.

It's hard to believe that in just a few miles of coastline two such disparate films were created. Hulot, with his sublime, gentle humour, his wonderfully evocative music score, his wit. And Tony Curtis in his underwear. You only have to play the Theme tune of the Vikings and grown men mist up. Oh no, you haven't, you wouldn't, no stop, oh go on then, I give up.

