

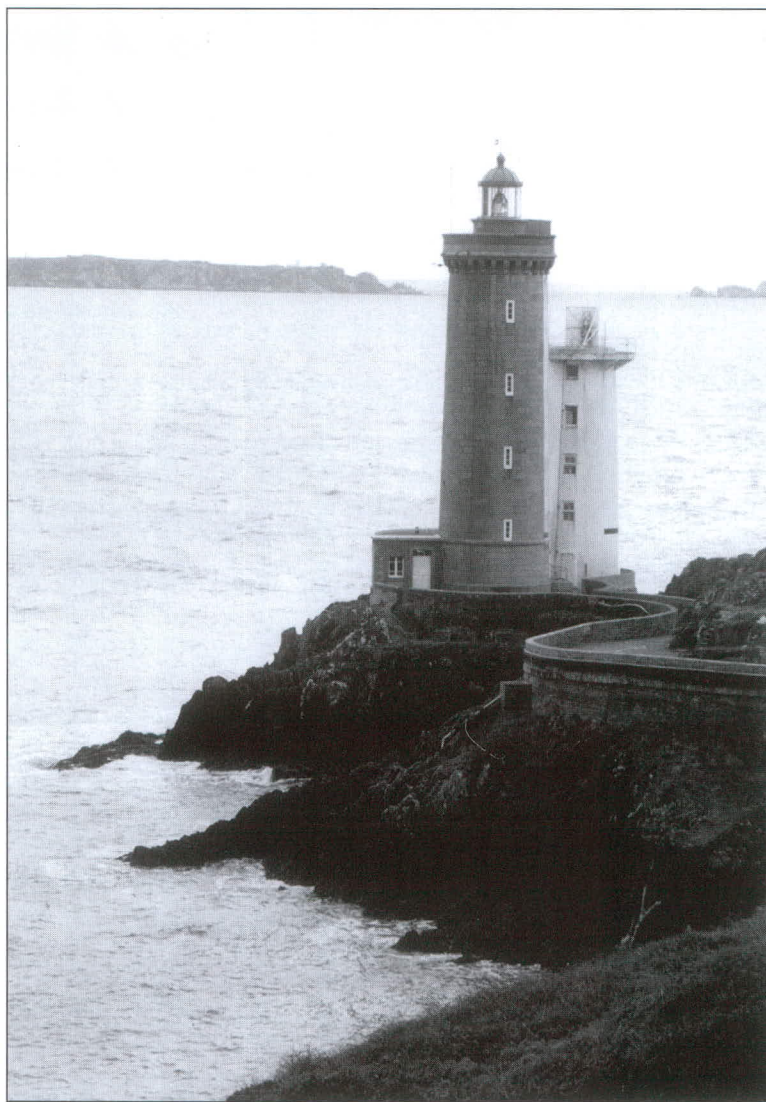
# A LIGHTHOUSE LOVER'S PARADISE

by Henry I. Gonzalez

Where can you tour a manned lighthouse, see the tallest lighthouse on the continent, and visit, get close to, or sight 12 additional lighthouses, all in one day? No, it's not North Carolina's Outer Banks, nor is it Boston Harbor. You'll find this lighthouse lover's paradise in Finistere, which is located at the westernmost tip of the French province of Brittany. My wife, Chris, and I were in Brittany on a combined business and pleasure trip in February, and set a day aside to tour some of the region's lighthouses. I say "some" because the fourteen that we saw is only about half of the story; the Finistere DDE (County Amenities Authority) is the largest lighthouse and beacon district in France, operating 30 lighthouses, 85 minor lights, 14 radio beacons and 240 buoys.

We started our days trek in Brest, a city steeped in nautical history and sea faring tradition. It is the most important French naval port on the Atlantic coast, and was an infamous base for German U-boats and battleships during World War II. We drove west to Point St. Mathieu on the Atlantic, stopping at the Portzic, Petit Minou, and St. Mathieu lighthouses, then continued north-northwest to the western most tip of France (which also marks the transition from the Atlantic Ocean to the English Channel), stopping at the Kermorvan and Trezien lighthouses. We then proceeded north-northeast along the coast of the English Channel, stopping to view the offshore lighthouses of Le Four, Corn Cahai, and Ile Vierge (which is the tallest in Europe, at 82.5 meters, or 271 feet for comparison, Cape Hatteras, the tallest in the United States, is 207 feet tall). Our final stop was at the Pontusval lighthouse, before we returned over an inland route to Brest, 60 miles and 10 hours later.

The lighthouses we saw were generally conically shaped towers, with three exceptions: Portzic, which is an octagonal tower; Kermorvan, which is a short, square stone tower; and Pontusval, which is a small cottage-style house with



**Petit Minou lighthouse in France. Photograph courtesy of Henry Gonzalez, Vice President of the Chesapeake Chapter.**

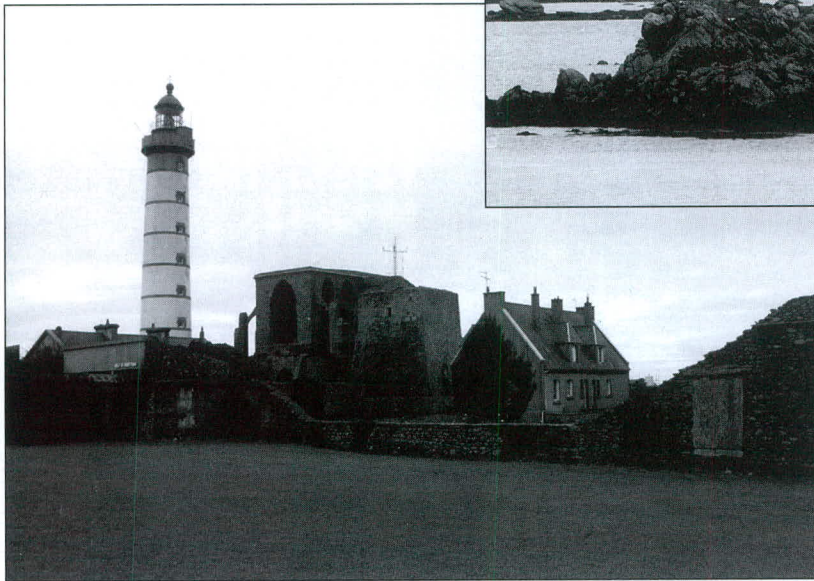
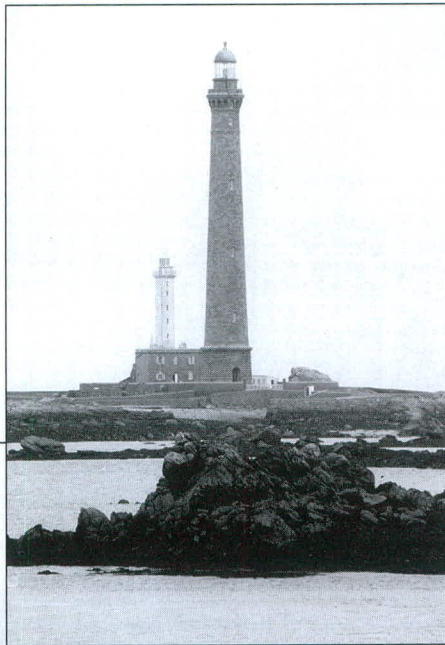
attached square tower. All of the lighthouses we saw are operational, with the exception of Corn Cahai; Pointe St Mathieu was the only manned lighthouse we saw. The characteristics of each of the lighthouses we stopped at or got close to are listed in the accompanying table.

The highlight of our day was our private, guided tour of the St. Mathieu lighthouse by the head keeper and his assistant. St. Mathieu is one of the last manned lighthouses in France. The lighthouse was built in 1835 amid the ruins of a Benedictine abbey from the 1500s. The assistant keeper guided us through the base of the stone tower, showing us the

tool room, the generator room (for emergency power), and the radio-navigation equipment. He then directed us to proceed up the spiral stairway to the lantern, where we were met by the head keeper, who was busily polishing brasswork in preparation for an upcoming inspection. He invited us up into the lantern's optic section to inspect the original 2nd order clamshell Fresnel lens, which is able to cast its beam 29 nautical miles to sea with a 1000 watt bulb. Descending back into the lantern's service room, the assistant keeper demonstrated how easily the Fresnel lens rotates on its bed of mercury by giving it a gentle push. (As a historical side note, Augustine

Right - Ile Vierge Lighthouse, one of the taller French lighthouses.

Below - The St. Mathieu Light Station, note the structure in the middle, which appears to be the ruins of an old church. Both photographs courtesy of Henry Gonzalez.

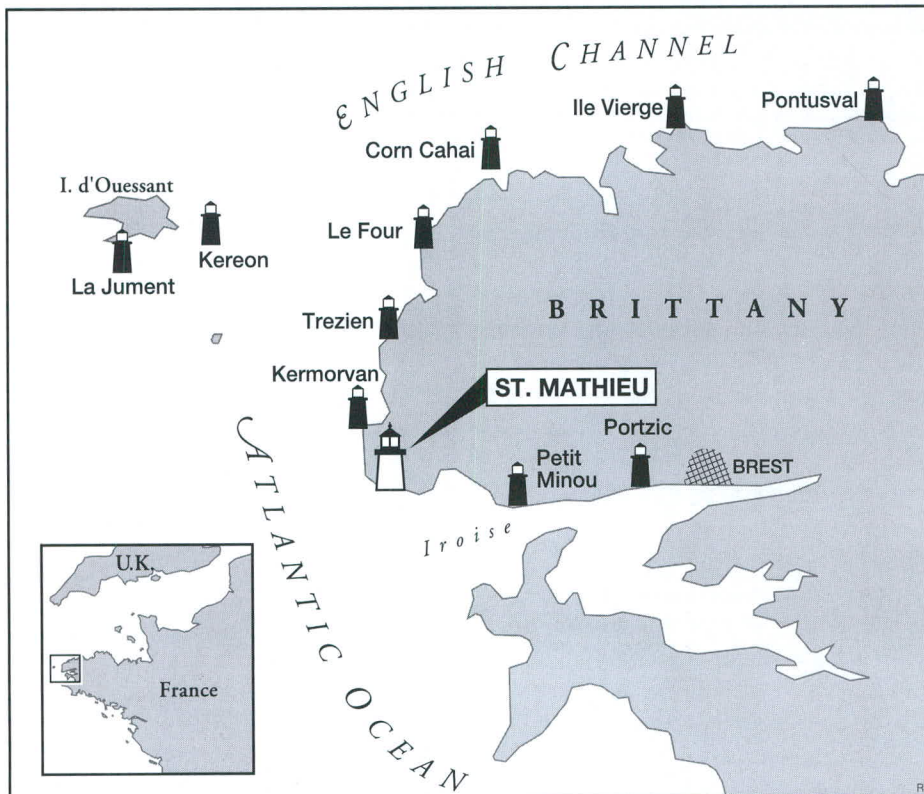


Fresnel spent several years in Brittany in the early 1800s working as a road engineer and developing his theories on optics as well as his namesake lens.)

We then walked out onto the balcony and spent several minutes sighting several other distant lighthouses through our binoculars. We focused our attention on the lights around Ouessant Island, about 14 nautical miles offshore. There are two lighthouses located on Ouessant, including Le Stiff, which was built in 1695, but we focused our binoculars on sighting La Jument and Kereon, two of the rugged sea swept rock lighthouses located just offshore of the island. The closest American analogy to these lighthouses would be Minot's Ledge. La Jument and Kereon, along with Le Four, are the three French lighthouses that have become popularized worldwide through the photography and posters of Jean Guichard, which show, for example, a tremendous wave engulfing the entire height of the La Jument tower, while an unsuspecting lightkeeper is standing in the doorway about to be drenched.

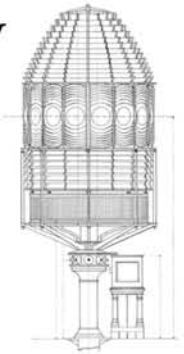
Coming back inside of the lantern to escape the brisk wind, Chris and I exchanged a few more words with our hosts, telling them about some of our American lighthouses and about the U.S. Lighthouse Society. It was truly an honor and a pleasure to enjoy the hospitality and friendship of these light keepers; an honor that we can no longer enjoy here in the U.S., with the exception of Boston Harbor. Although our French was as rudimentary as their English, we were nonetheless able to communicate our love of lighthouses to each other.

Since we were only able to see about half of Finistere's lighthouses, we anxiously await the next opportunity to return to this picturesque and friendly part of France, which is a world apart from the colder harshness that tourists are typically exposed to in Paris. The only damper on our lighthouse journey was the weather; the sky was heavy with dark clouds the entire day, but at least it didn't rain or snow, as it did during the rest of our stay in France. Next time, we'll return in summer so that we can also take one of the ferries out to see La Jument and Kereon up close. Until then, a bientot, Finistere.





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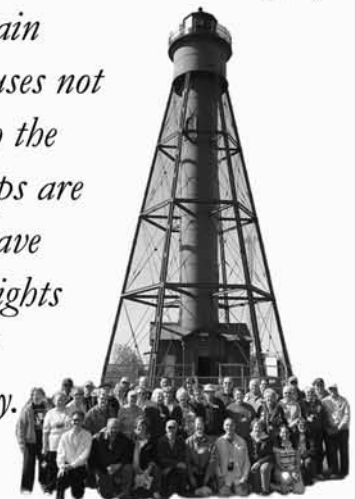
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