

“Bastille Day in a French Village”

Last summer, we missed the usual Fourth of July celebrations in the United States because we were traveling in France. But we looked forward to July 14, Bastille Day, or La Fête Nationale. Their national holiday also commemorates a “revolution of the people” and honors the birth of a new republic.

The big day found us in a small place. The hilltop village of Puylaroque in the Midi-Pyrénées region (in the central part of the country), pretty far off the beaten track. It’s a sparsely populated area of handsome rolling hills, farms, and vineyards that reminded us somewhat in climate and terrain of California’s Central Coast. We were the only non-natives around, as far as we could see.

Bastille Day fell on a Sunday. We observed that many towns, including little Puylaroque, therefore extended the festivities over the entire weekend. As with our Independence Day celebrations, parades, fireworks, and speeches by politicians are popular. The show up north in Paris, of course, is spectacular, long, and televised. Elsewhere, as in American small towns, people make do with more modest, homegrown displays. We wondered what we might witness.

The hostess of our bed-and-breakfast alerted us that the Saturday show would begin when the darkness fell, which at that latitude and time of year, is nearly 11 p.m. Shortly before then, we ambled down our little cobblestone street and into Puylaroque’s unpretentious main town square—a couple of cafes festooned with white Christmas lights, leafy sycamore trees overhead and kids and dogs underfoot.

There we found about 100 people lounging about on this soft, starry summer evening, happy on wine and ice cream. Some children had small colorful paper lanterns on sticks, and we observed a mom flitting around lighting these with a taper. Then, with the excited, lantern-bearing children leading the way, a procession began to move up the street towards the far side of town, where the houses end.



Because we’d explored Puylaroque the previous day, we knew we were headed in the direction of a large water tower and park (a good spot from which to watch sunsets or, ahem, park). We fell in, holding hands, swinging along.

At the overlook spot, the fireworks went off rather loudly from an ostensibly safe distance for about 10 minutes to applause and cheers.

Also, to our bemusement, especially exuberant commentary from adults and children alike followed each and every explosion—remarks on the colors, the height, and the éclat, or radiance or sparkle factor. The reception was infectious and soon we, too, were clamoring with each whistling, acrid blast. Hallelujah, woot woot!

On Sunday morning, not too early, there were more rituals. There was no mass; like every other little village in this region, Puylaroque had a church, but it was shuttered while its dilapidated old roof was being replaced. So we returned to the town square, where a small band diligently performed patriotic favorites. Their somewhat inexperienced efforts were accompanied by an imported chanteuse, who appeared confident about her cues. (“A real chanteuse!,” our hostess exulted,

beaming, giving us the impression that this addition was a coup for such a small town.) We stood by, and politely applauded for the requisite performance of “Marseillaise,” bien sûr. Some around us sang along.

Everyone then gathered around the town Memorial, a weathered stone obelisk. Not only does every village in this region feature an old stone church, there is always a memorial to the war dead. Sometimes it’s a cross or a statue of a soldier. We spotted a more elaborate one in a slightly bigger town



down in the valley that consisted of a mortally wounded soldier being carried by a comrade. In any event, these memorials always display the names of the town’s sons who were lost in the World Wars. Tiny towns seem to have lost most or all of their young men, twice. Thus it appeared that Bastille Day is meant to honor patriots and patriotism in general. We reflected that while this is something we Americans could appreciate and relate to, the ubiquitous and long lists of the dead are sobering.



The mayor of Puylaroque, a modest, balding fellow wearing a red-white-and-blue sash and flanked by a tall, handsome older soldier in a neatly pressed officer’s uniform, stood solemnly before this Memorial. He cleared his throat, the crowd quieted, the children settled down on curbs, and he read a short speech about *liberté, égalité* and *fraternité*. Everyone listened respectfully and applauded.

We then dispersed to the cavernous town hall, its doors flung open and tables within full of free refreshments: fragrant, still-warm cheese-stick pastries and the anise-flavored liqueur Ricard. All before noon.