

Post



Scott Farnsworth

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Departing Paris, landing in Lourdes - May 17, 2025

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SUMMARY

After an uneventful 5-hour train ride we arrived in the town pilgrimage town of Lourdes. We dropped our bags at the hotel and headed out to see the famous Basilica. The streets on the way there were jam-packed with soldiers and it turns out we happened to be in town during the annual International Military Pilgrimage. It was just amazing! Some 40 or so countries were represented from the Vatican's Swiss Guards to the U.S. Navy in the dress whites to many in casual fatigues. And don't get me started on the hats! Periodically a group would march in formation (frequently with a band) through the crowd. After touring the

Basilica we had a good Italian dinner then headed back to see the 9:00 candlelight procession. This consisted of thousands of people in uniform marching behind their country's flag, Wounded Warriors being pushed in wheelchairs and church dignitaries in long robes walking by, all carrying lit candles while a mass was being performed over loudspeaker. It was extraordinary! - Karen

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DETAIL

Up, we 'coffee', pack, and check out. Our food gets combined with Ron and Nancy's into her big cooler. The hotel is happy to give us ice. Madame points us to the ice maker and big scoop behind the bar. Nancy holds open the ziplock bags and I shovel ice.

We walk to the bus where Nancy's phone again refuses to cooperate. We think of the sign we saw that said "Give me coffee for the things I can change and wine for the things I can't". This is one of the latter. The bus drops us at Gare Montparnasse where we head for coffee and croissants (well, pain au chocolat and pain raisin). We also buy a baguette for our planned picnic, en route.

Where one's train departs is always a mystery until the very last minute. I ask and am told. Sweet. The train has been here for a while, maybe being cleaned, but our access to it isn't until a few minutes before departure. They post from which Voie the train will be departing and the race is on. We get our four QR codes on my iPhone scanned and we're on our way. We're in coach #1, which is the first we come to, and climb aboard, wrestling with our luggage and daypacks. We're upstairs, which makes it even more tricky. We paid a few extra euros for assigned seats so the four of us are around a table facing each other.

We're on a TGV, so the train should go fast, but our trip is around five hours. We're confused. Maybe some of the tracks aren't made to go so fast? We'll be heading down to Bordeaux after which the train will head south into the Pyrenees to the city of Lourdes. There's electricity and wifi on the train (the former is adequate and the latter is, sadly, slow) so we're able to keep ourselves occupied during the long trip. A highlight is the picnic for which we've been shopping. The cheese board pairs well with our fresh baguette. We also have cherry tomatoes, roasted red pepper and feta dip, kouign-amann (somehow pronounced 'queen-amahn'), chocolates, and a bottle and a half of wine. We tried to have our noise level match that of the locals in our section who were being as silent as church mice.

Out of Bordeaux it's getting more mountainous, and we're gliding past a swiftly flowing river. We're definitely out of the city. In Lourdes we schlep our bags off the train into the bright sunlight. Our hotel is a twenty minute walk away, but we're up for it. We decide not to have myself and Ron hop on a bus to the Lourdes-Tarbes airport to pick up our rental car. We'll go drop our bags and freshen up first.

Pretty quickly we're struck by the number of military people we see. They're being greeted at the train and are walking around the town. I guess maybe one in four people we see are in uniform. Is there a base nearby? Getting closer to our hotel it gets more hilly and the road narrows. There's a bit of traffic but not bad. Before we can actually access our hotel we're stopped by a big military parade, complete with marching soldiers and a big band. It's stirring but puzzling.

Checked in we ask our host about it and learn it's the annual military pilgrimage. We know that Lourdes is a very famous pilgrimage site, so that Catholic military personnel would come here makes sense. What we learn, as the day goes on, is that it's an international event and there are soldiers (and airmen, and navy personnel, paratroopers, medics, etc. etc.) from at least forty different countries here. And it's not just those who fight in our wars but fire fighters, crime fighters, and others. It's a five day event, er, party. This is the 65th annual. And lots of these people will be participating in a religious procession at 9pm tonight. That we'll have to see!

But first, we need our rental car. To get to the airport we can take a bus for a few euros, or a taxi for around 40€. If we're going to be spending that much we do not want to find the office closed (it is 3pm on a Saturday after all). We call and they do not answer. We check the web, only to find that the office closed at 1pm. We'll just have to get our car tomorrow. What are the hours on Sunday? Ah, closed. Well we'll make do.

Walking downhill towards the basilica/cathedral (real name "Sanctuaries Notre Dame de Lourdes") we see more and more military personnel. They're just having fun. Some are in their combat fatigues and others are in their dress uniforms. Some look like they do today and others are dressed as they would have been a century ago, with feathers and swords. Who am I to say what the dress uniform looks like for Lichtensteinian lieutenant? Soldiers from one country are constantly conversing with those from a different country. They're comparing notes, and sometimes swapping badges. It's very social. A surprising number of the soldiers are females and while the ages range from early twenties to sixties and seventies, the vast majority of soldiers we see are in their late twenties. It seems to be a perfect age for extreme fraternizing. We're imagining this may be a bit what it's like in the olympic villages.

The road we're on winds down and goes over a bridge across a very full, fast moving river, likely from the high pyrenees above us. On the bridge are a number of bars and hundreds of soldiers, drinking, partying, and doing pushups as others count loudly. It's a trick to swim through the sea of green to get across but we make it to the other side. At the Sanctuary, too, there are oodles of military personnel. They're frequently in groups, adding to the impact of their outfits. People are approaching them (as do we) asking if they can take a picture with them, and all are happy to oblige. Many of the soldiers are carrying candles, big and small, for the parade tonight, or to light at shrines in honor of this or that saint. Some of the candles are so big they have to be hoisted on a soldier's broad shoulder or carried by two people.

Around the side of the cathedral are banks of faucets, each with some of the faithful filling containers with holy water. Nearby shops sell bottles ranging from an ounce or less up to a few liters, and we see them all. Nearby there's a grotto packed with soldiers in their dress uniforms, the clergy, lit candles, and civilian faithful performing some service. When the Ave Maria is being recited everyone around us chants it in unison.

Eventually we've had our fill of things militarily ecclesiastical so we head off in search of beer. Judging from the soldiers we saw on the bridge finding it shouldn't be hard. What is tricky is wending our way through the ocean of tall clean cut green-clad soldiers on the bridge. Karen, not being quite as tall, is nearly swallowed up by the throng. We do find a beer and a young American couple here in support of the Wounded Warriors project (who are contemplating a possible move to Austin). We have a dinner reservation (thank goodness) and for that reason alone we're able to get into a popular restaurant. The food is excellent and soon the place is at capacity.

After dinner we head to watch the candlelight procession, along with many thousands of others. As the procession goes on (and on and on) it gets darker and darker. Up in the sky I believe I see a planet. It can't be a star as it's way too bright. It's stationary so it's not a plane or satellite, but it's brighter than any planet I've ever seen, kind of like the star of Bethlehem. Ron later clues me into the fact that it's a military drone waaaay up there, hovering like a star during the entire procession.

Eventually we head for home, back past all of the stores open selling religious trinkets for the visiting faithful. We head off to bed, hopeful that our earplugs can sufficiently muffle the sounds of the soldiers' drunken revelry and the toll of the religious bells.

Photos



Quite the delicious picnic on the train, complete with pink wine. Some of the cheese was a bit stinky, but not too bad to disturb the other passengers in our car.



Getting into Lourdes we see "a church" and lots of people in a field. Maybe a soccer game? Little do we know.



In our hotel the decorators tried to be edgy. Black everywhere and lights down, not up.



In our room, black, white, a feather overhead light fixture and crinkled sheets. Interesting.



In town? Military personnel everywhere!
It's the 65th annual Military Pilgrimage of Lourdes. Thousands of soldiers from France, Spain, and Italy alone. Forty countries or more are here for five days of seriousness (and wild parties).



May we have our pictures taken with you?
May oui! Here, let's switch hats and I'll put my arm around you. I don't mind at all.



The contingent from the former French colony of Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast) teaching others how to do a line dance to their music.



Karen and Nancy are happy to go shoulder to epaulet with soldiers for a picture.



Karen tries on a gold crown.



Watching the parades. So many parades.



Red, white and blue! USA? (no) France?
(no) Spain.



Not guarding the new Pope Leo these Swiss Guards pants swish with each step.



For the other soldiers who weren't able to make it? 1.5 ml of holy water.



A service in the famous grotto. A blessing of the troops?



FARNSNIENTE



Looking back at the "Cathedral". So many people. That's NOT a parade, that's just people.



Nancy has got to talk to these guys!
What's with the white uniform??





Oh and she has to talk to these guys, too!



Thankfully Karen was smart to make a reservation a week or more ago. Every place is in serious demand during this pilgrimage.



9:00 pm, time for the candlelight procession.



It goes on for hours (it seems). Whoever has the corner on the wax market here has it made. We're sure the bees are busy working overtime.

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