

Post



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A Sunday of trains and trams - May 18, 2025

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SUMMARY

It being Sunday in a good Catholic region, our rental car company is closed. This left us unable to execute our planned activities which involved buying a picnic, driving up into the Pyrénées mountains and hiking to a waterfall, the Cascade du Pan. We did hit the covered marché for picnic ingredients which we ate up on the lawn by the Sanctuary. Afterwards we took a city tour on the Petit Train then (urban) hiked to the funicular up the Pic du Jer. At the top we took in the beautiful views of Lourdes and gazed longingly at the snow-capped mountains in the distance. Descent, dinner, gelato and hot tub rounded out our day. - Karen

DETAIL

Today is Sunday but we're not hearing a lot of church bells. That seems a bit odd for a town where religion is like 98% of its raison d'être. We're not hearing much of any noises as so many of the 1,000s of military pilgrims have headed home. We still see a few, here and there, mostly buying a few last souvenirs for family or soldiers back at the base. It's fairly sunny, yay. We walk to the city's big covered market to buy a picnic. The place is quite large, with a high ceiling and louvered walls for ventilation.

Inside, given that it is Sunday, the majority of the vendor booths are covered in green tarps, closed, perfectly still. We check out the few that are open, a boulangerie with breads and pastries, a cheese vendor, produce, some prepared foods, a bar, and not much else. We buy bread, 1/2 a roast chicken, potatoes (cooked in the fat of said roast chickens), bright red cherry tomatoes, carrots, a red pepper, one cookie and a small gâteau Basque.

Our picnic in hand, we head to the Petit Train Touristic to see the rest of the town. It seems that every small French tourist town has the little gas powered white trains with black trim. There's a kerfuffle about whether there will or won't be room for us. In the end there is. The narration is recorded and is not the best. After a couple of stops it gets out of sync and so we just guess at what we're seeing.

We do see parts of town we've not seen before including the 'Chateau Fort'. This combination of words either means it's both a castle and a fort, or that it's a strong ('fort') castle ('chateau'). It's atop of a very high rock in the middle of town. It must have been very difficult to build, way up there, but it undoubtedly provided great defensibility. Nowadays getting up there is just a quick elevator ride away.

Further along we get to the funicular, which is very old and goes way up to the top of Pic du Jer, a high point where we expect we'll get good views of the snow covered Pyrenees in the distance. We want to complete the tour but also want to travel up the Pic du Jer. Inertia gets the better of us and we stay aboard our little train.

Back at our starting point, we ask if it's OK if we stay on, but just as far as the funicular again (so we can go up it). Sure! (If you each buy another 12 euro ticket!!) We decide to walk and save our euros. Nancy and Ron opt instead for the hot tub at our hotel while Karen and I hike the 1.2 miles back to the funicular. We just missed a ride up so we have fifteen minutes to wait. We're first in line and through the window we can see mountain bikers, wearing helmets with GoCams on top, load their heavy duty bikes into the funicular's storage basket. The riders all look pretty hard core.

As we go up the view gets better and better. At the top we recruit a young female college student from the nearby city of Pau ("Poe") to take our picture with the snow covered Pyrenees behind us. True to Karen's plan to take it easy today she stays at the restaurant/bar with the nice view while I hike the remaining distance (nine minutes, it turns out) up to the 'summit'. The views from the top are only slightly better, but are 360 degrees.

After a fortifying beer we take the 6 pm funicular car back down (the last one of the day). In our section of the car are three youngish officers of the Croatian police academy and a precocious two year old who insists to daddy that she needs no help climbing the hand rail to use as monkey bars. We're all amused and supportive.

Back on terra firma the city bus is there within a couple of minutes and we gladly pay our 1 euro each for a lift back to (well, close to) our hotel. We change and meet Ron and Nancy in the hotel restaurant for cocktails and dinner. The hotel decor could be politely termed 'French eclectic'. The main hallway is painted totally black (walls, ceiling, and floor). The lights are often at ankle level (rather than overhead, like the sun). The stairs and entire elevator (including walls and ceiling) are fake grass. Where we are now, in the bar/restaurant, it's painted black, too, with as many matching crystal chandeliers as will fit. Undoubtedly the chandelier to client ratio is very much in favor of the light fixtures.

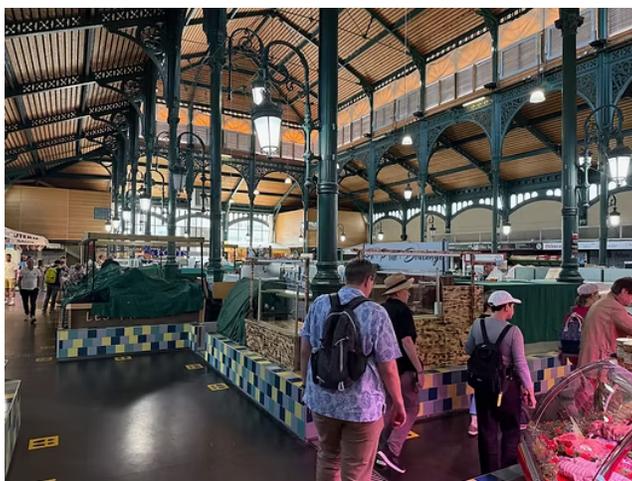
Drinks and dinner are superb. Somehow we mixed up this place with a tapas restaurant in town, but the confused waiter points out some appetizers that we can certainly treat like tapas (including foie gras, local trout three ways, and white asparagus done up as sushi). It's plenty of dinner for the four of us. For dessert we amble down to a good chain gelato place (amorino.com). There's a line and many empty metal trays identifying flavors of which they're out. These were cleaned out over the past few days by the thousand of service men and women here as partying pilgrims. Despite dearth of flavors the end result is very tasty. A trademark of this place is how they do their cones, with the gelato smeared on in petals around the cone, resulting in a flower-looking dessert. We get cups.

Back to the hotel we take a quick dip in the hot tub, from which we can see tonight's candlelight procession in the distance, and then off to bed. Tomorrow's a big day: we'll finally pick up our rental car and head off into the mountains for a look-see. Yay!

Photos



In bed. What I really look like before I put my makeup on.



At the big covered marché in town. So many stalls closed on a Sunday. Time to visit family (or maybe watch the soccer matches).



For us it's time to have a delightful picnic in the park, on the green lawn with the sun and blue sky overhead.



Apparently we're not the only ones who had this idea.



Winding through town is a path marked by these metal markers every ten meters. The path of this pilgrimage.



Along the way lots of stuff to buy, including massive candles and water bottles of every size to carry home some good old fashioned holy water.



The really big candles have to be carried by multiple soldiers.



So many colorful costumes. Tell me this isn't a party?



And the setting for this party? The gorgeous pyrenees. Still a little snow on top.



The Petit Train Touristique showing the highlights of the town, including the old funicular up to the Pic du Jer.



Here we're going up the Pic du Jer on the funicular, bikes in tow. We're just past the 1/2 way point where the two cars pass. For a short section of track there are two tracks, otherwise there's only one. The weight of the two cars balance each other out, being joined through pulleys at the top.



We go through tunnels a couple of times.



At the top the bikers collect their bikes and head back down, as fast as they can (while not being totally out of control).



In the distance, more snow covered pyrenees.



The perfect backdrop for a possible christmas card.



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At our hotel dinner, on the black ceiling so many chandeliers.



After dinner we still have room for gelato. After the big military pilgrimage of the past few days many of the gelato trays are totally empty. We get our fill nonetheless.



We have our gelato in cups but for those who prefer cones they get these flower looking things. They look sweet and taste sweeter.

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