



've visited several of Europe's preserved medieval cities, and in my book, none come close to Carcassonne. But don't take my word for it — see this incredible testament to former times during the grandiose Bastille Day celebrations.

The Charming City

Carcassonne is located in southern France, between Toulouse and the coastal town of Narbonne. Driving toward the city center, you catch your first glimpse through the humid haze of what appears to be a mirage — a very out-of-place medieval fortified village perched on a hilltop. The old town is comprised of a 12th century castle surrounded by additional buildings, two layers of foreboding ramparts and more than 50 towers. Much of the fortification was painstakingly rebuilt during the 1800s to recreate the magnificent 13th century complex.

However you arrive to Carcassonne, you'll enter the citadel on foot. Walk across the bridge and through the city gate as millions have before you. Meander the worn cobblestone streets to discover quaint homes, shops and restaurants tucked inside historic structures, and stop for decadent French pastries and coffee at a courtyard café.

La fête Nationale

French National Day, or Bastille Day, is observed annually on July 14 throughout France.



BASTILLE DAY IN

BY GENEVIEVE NORTHUP

On this day in 1789, Parisians rushed the Bastille to free inmates and obtain ammunition, triggering the French Revolution. One year to the day, people around the country recognized the solidarity of their nation's citizens and the abolition of monarchical rule with La Fête de la Fédération. In 1880, Bastille Day was distinguished as a federal celebration.

The whimsical setting and fireworks grand finale make Carcassonne's Bastille Day celebration truly unique. You'll be astonished at the quantity and quality of the fireworks

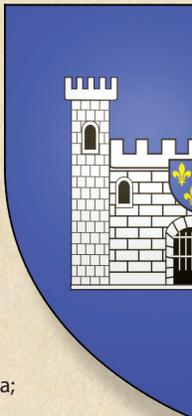
shot from La Cité's walls. The sky shines brilliantly, the explosive sounds reverberate for miles, and the audience's pride and awe is palpable.

Braving Bastille Day

It is easy to become overwhelmed by the Bastille Day bonanza; the town of 50,000 balloons to more than ten times that number on July 14. Having been there and done that, here are some tips to get you through in one piece.

Come Early - Arrive at least one, preferably two days in advance of the holiday to enjoy all of the tourist sites, dining and shopping before the chaos ensues. Spend a couple of hours touring Château Comtal, the castle hidden within Carcassonne's walls, and snapping photos of the city. Though you can see more during the day, also have a look around after dark when the ramparts are illuminated. Research restaurants before your trip and make advance reservations to savor fabulous French cuisine.

Scope for the Perfect Spot - For the best views, be prepared to camp out all day on July 14. Keep in mind that your perfect view may be unobstructed initially, but you're likely to have people standing in front of you later on. If you can find a spot against a railing, on a





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wall or at the top of a hill, you'll be better off. We had a large group interested in different activities, but we staked out an ideal location the day before and converged around 12:45 p.m. — with more than nine hours before showtime.

Bring Survival Supplies – You have a very long afternoon ahead of you, so come prepared. There is little shelter from the sun or rain, so pack bug spray, sunscreen, hats, sunglasses, raincoats or ponchos, umbrellas, and waterproof bags for your camera and any other electronic devices. Also bring lawn chairs or blankets so that you have a comfortable place to sprawl.

Have toilet paper, baby wipes and hand sanitizer on hand for the portable toilets. The bathrooms in local businesses are for customer use only.

Depending on your location, there may be food stands serving snacks and beverages by late afternoon; bring euros just in case. To save money, I highly recommend packing your food. Bring a wheeled cooler (which can double as a table) with plenty of bottled water, and purchase fresh produce, cheeses and meats in Carcassonne. Oh, and stop by a bakery for more French treats. It's OK to drink alcohol on the streets, so buy French wine, and bring a corkscrew and plastic cups. Just remember to stay hydrated to avoid becoming an obnoxious drunk by 6 p.m.

Prevent boredom by bringing entertainment: a book or e-Reader, magazines, cards and toys for the kids. We brought our iPad to play multi-player games, including the Carcassonne board game. But we also chatted with people who had traveled from around the globe for this fireworks display. Take the opportunity to people-watch and socialize with locals and fellow travelers.

Beware of the Crowds – If you're in a group, you'll have the advantage of being able to split off and explore when you get restless.

Travel

Fly into Toulouse and catch a train; the quickest route will have you to Carcassonne in 40 minutes. Or fly into Perpignan and take a longer train ride.

Accommodations

Anything within or near the old town is likely to be booked or prohibitively expensive. Don't get discouraged; look for a hotel in the newer areas of the city or on the outskirts. Just be aware that you'll need to get a taxi to the fortification.

If You Have More Time

Make your Bastille Day extravaganza a part of a grand summer vacation. Take a train from Carcassonne to the beautiful beaches of nearby Narbonne. Or start your trip in Paris; look at the time tables for the TGV trains that will have you to Carcassonne in just over five hours. You can even begin in Barcelona and get to Carcassonne via a 5-hour train ride.



Never leave your spot unattended and keep valuables secure, especially as the crowds thicken. Hold your ground as new arrivals attempt to storm your fort. Don't worry; once the fireworks start, everyone will stop fidgeting.

You'll be tired and perhaps a bit sunburned by the end of the day, but it will be worth it. You will, undoubtedly, believe in fairy tales — at least for one night. ■

