

Praying with Gypsies in the South of France

Picture this: You're in the country – the Marshlands to be exact. This is a fertile swampy space where the river meets the ocean. Around you there are glassy lakes where pink flamingos feed on abundant fish and the signature sight are of white horses and black rodeo bulls grazing on ample acreage.

Your accommodations are just right because they are ground level and are appropriately rustic to integrate you into the authentic pulse of the place.

To top it off, the serene simplicity of the surroundings is adorned with customer service fit for royalty.

Sounds good, doesn't it? Well, I had such an experience earlier this year while vacationing in the South of France, Saintes-Maries- de- la-Mer to be exact.

I was there for the annual Gypsy festival.

'Gypsy' is a catch-all term for a historically nomadic people, who have settled throughout Europe and beyond. They have significant concentrations in France, Spain and Hungary and Slovakia. Once a year, for 8-10 days in May, they descend on Saintes- Maries- de- la-Mer to pay homage to their matron saint, the Black Sara or Sara-la-Kali.

Sara's myths are varied. In one rendition of the story, Sara is recalled as a Gypsy who welcomed the witnesses to Jesus' resurrection - Mary Jacobé, Mary Salomé and Mary Magdalene-to the shores of France after they were set adrift on a rudderless boat (from Palestine). Other accounts say that Sara was a servant who accompanied them on the journey while still others regarded Sara as the actual daughter of Mary Magdalene.



Black Sara or Sara -la-kali

In any case, I was present for the feature presentations: the catholic masses followed by street processions which take place on the 24th and 25th of May.

The church which houses in its crypt the shrine of the Black Sara was built between the 9th and 12th century. This medieval structure towers over everything else in the quaint village revealing the centrality of faith to the ancients.

I definitely felt this faith connection:

On the morn of the 24th I was among the faithful as well as the curious tourist spectators in the church. Pretty soon I was caught up in the intense spiritual fervor which inhabited this sacred space – a space charged with the prayers of countless devotees spanning at least 8 centuries.

The transcendent frankincense fumes issuing from the clergy's censers; the unison of voices lifted in praise; the descent of the shrine of the two Mary's from the upper chapel, and the joyous anticipation of the emergence of Sara-



La-Kali's holy effigy from the churches crypt – combined to elevate me into an altered state of consciousness. My spirit was impregnated with the Divine!

I'm a lifelong Catholic. Pilgrimage and religious observance made a significant mark on my youth. In my adult years, I had drifted away from regular engagement with Catholicism in search of other ways of tapping into the sacred. And now, I was brought full circle, back to my roots...sort of.

In any case, Black Sara's holy effigy, a 4 to 5ft statue adorned in brightly colored layers of robes and topped by a tiara is hoisted onto a platform which is lifted high and carried by Gypsy men down the center aisle of the church out into the streets and down to the sea.



Church of Saintes Maries-de-la-Mer

Leading this procession is a young gypsy woman representing Sara accompanied by a phalanx of men atop white horses. Along the way, it is impossible not to notice that all village squares as well as seaside nooks and crannies are populated with the vans and caravans of gypsy pilgrims.

The whole procession is a rich chaos of tradition, color, people, and sounds which are mostly expressions of gypsy culture mixed in with a significant measure of Catholicism. Rounding out the experience is, of course, people like me: the curious and thoroughly engrossed tourist who

significantly 'bulk up' an already sizeable throng of humanity.

The following day was another mass followed by a procession to the sea, this time centered around the figures, Marie-Salomé and Marie-Jacobi. I didn't make it to this one. Truthfully, I was spent from the evening before, but I do know it is reputed to be a more solemn, conventionally catholic - that is to say, relatively less gypsy-centric -affair.

All in all, this South-of-France experience has proven to be an immersion in a powerful combination of place and culture. It's as if raw, exotic nature serves as an energy source which has supported a lengthy history of spiritually uplifting ceremony/ritual and lifestyle. Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer is a 'must-visit' for the spiritual vacationer especially during the Gypsy festival.

In closing, I leave you, my fellow pilgrims, with this prayer to the Black Sara:

Sara, patron saint of travelers and gypsies the world over, you who lived in this region of Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer. You came from a far-away country from across the seas. I love to come and find you here, to tell you all that I have in my heart and in you confide my sorrows and joys. I pray to you for everyone in my family and all my friends. Sara, come to me! – traditional prayer to Sara

