

THE MAGIC OF MONTPELLIER

Montpellier is one of the most charming places I have ever been. We arrived at night, usually not the best of time for a city to show off its charms, and definitely not near the station area. But here, as soon as we stepped out of the station, we felt like we were in a magic land, all lights and charming small places. Immediately to our right was a picturesque bridge over which we walked to our Airbnb, finding ourselves meandering through narrow cobblestone alleyways, filled with quiet tables and small flickering lights, row after row of magic.

The magic stayed when I got up early and walked to the nearest square. There was a slight drizzle in the gray morning, from which the square emerged like a Woody Allen movie set. The large cobblestoned area was surrounded by Renaissance buildings, some of them with walls sketched out in the beautiful life-sized mural art that Montpellier is known for.



A tram quietly curved around right in front of me, its body too exquisitely painted. The square was quiet, with a slight drizzle and almost dark in the early morning, except for two warm, lighted corners. In one there was a café with soft yellow glowing light streaming out, people moving about laying tableware. And in the other corner, I almost teared up to see a small lighted newspaper stand, so homely so comforting, the owner putting out stacks of newspapers, again giving me a weird feeling of a shot being played out from a movie.

As I stared at it, trying to absorb this wondrous scene, I felt another person standing beside me also staring at the stand and taking pictures.

On an impulse I turned and exclaimed, “It is so lovely, isn’t it?”

And he replied, “Yes, it is. It is magic.” Oh, that word again!

We got to talking and it turned out that he was also a New Yorker who had moved there and was working in a café adjoining for the past three years. I was struck that he could yet find magic in the city after all these years. We exchanged names—turned out both our names began with L—and later I visited the café with him.



The girls and I decided to go dancing the first night. Giggling, we put on whatever we had, which was not much, just backpacking pants and runners with some nice tops. But we loaded on the lipstick and mascara and swayed out.

The night was alive. Well-dressed couples, black-outfitted teenagers, walked in groups, every bar spilling out with people, noise and music. Our originally booked club was too small, and so was the next, and the next. We walked and walked and finally squeezed ourselves into one, pushing ourselves through the throng all the way to the back where it suddenly opened up. There were upturned beer barrels as tables, ours already filled with empty shot glasses which we pushed aside. The music was 70s French and English, with a number of crowd favorites. Soon we were jumping and hooting.

We went wild dancing every night.

Once we came back from the beach and without washing up, we changed outfits in the narrow eight-bed dorm, and headed downstairs to a rollicking, head-banging, ear-splitting party.

But the best dance memory I have is of dancing with Mimi at the beach bus stop at Carcon.

It was the last bus of the night. We raced from the beach about two kilometers to the stop, and then threw ourselves panting at the seats, some sitting on the ground. We had ten minutes to spare. It was a beautiful night. On an impulse, I went to Spotify and my French playlist. The tunes of Aline filled the air. I started swaying and coaxed the others to join. To my surprise, Mimi got up looking very purposeful, took my hand, and we started a slow ballroom swing. Ingrid started making a video clip. It was beautiful. Mimi was unexpectedly graceful. So far, she had come across as a quiet Chinese, mostly interested in photography. And



here she was in my arms, smiling and dipping gracefully, and I did the same, and we blended in and out.

I found her watching the video multiple times afterwards, and once, after watching it, she held my hand and said, “I called my parents in China, and told them that I was sad that day, but with that one dance my mood changed so much!” She said I should remember this gift that I have, of making people feel better.