

The Sleeping Beauty

by

Mark Sampson

The Sleeping Beauty

Paul-Henri Meurnier's documentary film, *Ici Najac: à vous la terre*, is an affectionate portrait of daily life as it meanders like the river Aveyron itself around Najac, *l'un des plus beaux villages de France*. One of 10 such classified villages in the Aveyron, Najac skirts the department's western frontier with neighbouring Tarn et Garonne.

Life as depicted passes by as unhurriedly as the stopping train from Aurillac to Toulouse, and such singular characters as a slothful stationmaster, a widower who collects china dolls and tractor parts, and a toothless centenarian who seems to subsist on a diet of soup exude a strong sense of convivial contentment.

But does it, one wonders, portray the reality of 21st century life for the 750 or so souls of this commune? Half of them still live on or just off the single street that tracks the crest of the steep rocky promontory around which, several hundred feet below, the river doubles back on itself. Perched at the point, a monumental fortress dating back to the 12th century dominates most views and lends the village its distinctive character. Throughout its turbulent history, Fortress Najac was impregnable. No wonder that the village continues to resist the march of time.

Régis Najac, a knife maker by trade, would have it no other way. Born in the department and enticed here recently by the name, he restored a dilapidated building as home and workshop just up from the village's monolithic 14th century granite fountain. A sign by the front door tells prospective customers that if they 'can't be bothered to say hello or goodbye, please just stay in the street'. Monsieur Najac de Najac's *Le Najac* is his trademark creation. Manufactured 'neither in Asia nor by children' from steel forged at Laguiole in the Aveyron and with a handle of hand-carved wood or horn, *Le Najac* is based on a legendary 'knife of peace' (whose *retroussé* point prevents its use as an attack weapon).

He sells his wares to collectors and to passers-by from upwards of around €100. The Chinese are already churning out cheap copies, but people are prepared to pay more for something authentic. He knows that it's only the tourist trade today that keeps him and his few fellow *commerçants* (just) afloat. 'I'm not interested in turning this into an industry and making a lot of money. This place is human, *quoi*; it's not about the pursuit of money. Whenever you need help, people are there to help you. You're part of a family here.'

Najac is well known as a *grand site*, so there are visitors even on sunny winter days. 'I'm going to try and stay open the whole year, at least at weekends, to catch the passing traffic,' he tells me. 'In July and August, though, you can't move. People queue up outside just to get into the shop. Then suddenly winter arrives – and hardly anyone.' Not that this is a problem. 'I go fishing, I look for mushrooms, I work on this place, and there's my music.' He plays the guitar and writes songs and performs for his local fans.

He also goes looking for buried treasure with a metal detector. There must be much booty in the soil around here. Copper, silver, lead and coal were all mined in the vicinity and exploited by the occupying Romans. Add to all its natural advantages its position on a secondary route of the pilgrim trail to Santiago de Compostela and you understand why the population of Najac was once numbered in thousands rather than hundreds. For a period, in fact, it was the effective prefecture of bygone Lower Rouergue.

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Living above his workshop like the tradesmen of yore, our knife maker would have slotted right into Najac's *belle époque*. As a Cathar community, a humanist and egalitarian religious unorthodoxy tolerated by the ruling Counts of Toulouse, Najac found itself embroiled in religious conflict. As a bizarre punishment for its heresy, the community was made to construct the church of St. Jean at the foot of the fortress, an outsize statement of the true church's sway.

With peace restored, the king's brother, Alphonse of Poitiers, consolidated the region. For 10 years during the middle of the 13th century, his army of 2,000 workmen transformed Najac's fortress into an unassailable symbol of his power. Renowned as a great administrator, he established a network of *bastide* (fortified) towns in the Rouergue. He founded nearby Villefranche in 1252 and gradually it usurped Najac's regional role. The dismantling of the fortifications and the piecemeal stripping of the fortress for building materials mirrored Najac's municipal decline. Thankfully, the magnificent keep was largely preserved thanks to its bell that tolled the hours for the parish.

Higher up the street, towards the market place, another new arrival has set up shop in Najac. Sylvie Sallet is a ceramicist with a mellifluous voice and a hearty laugh. You can tell by her stance that she used to be a dancer. She moved here a year ago from Angoulême (in the Charente), because Najac met all her criteria as an *artisan d'art*. 'Najac has everything necessary to attract people,' she explains, 'but where is the dynamism to get it going? It's a bit of a sleeping beauty. Prince Charming hasn't yet arrived to awaken it. We're at a bend in the road: we need a project or something to bring the artisans here, and visitors all the year round. But if we don't negotiate that bend, we'll risk losing everything – and we won't manage to get it back.'

It's not that there's a dearth of local spectacles and festivals. Every August, for example, to celebrate St. Barthélemy's Day, Najac's delightful *boulangère* bakes a giant *fouace* (a kind of local brioche), to be decorated and paraded and finally consumed at the fountain. But this kind of quirky folklore is unlikely to animate the village in the way that Sylvie Sallet advocates.

While they wait for Prince Charming, she and Régis Najac and their compatriots will at least continue to enjoy an exceptional quality of life in a beautiful place where people still stop and chat and smile and pass the leisurely time of day. The film got it right. Arguably, there are more stunning villages in France – but few, I'll wager, with the same generosity of spirit.

© Mark Sampson, April 2012

FRANCOFILE FACT BOX

GETTING THERE

By road: Najac is roughly 10 hours away from the Channel ports.

By rail: There is a station (now unmanned), on the Aurillac to Toulouse line.

By air: Rodez is the nearest airport, Toulouse the nearest big airport.

WHERE TO STAY

Le Belle Rive

Le Roc du Pont

12270 Najac

Tel: (Fr) 5 65 29 73 90

www.lebellerive.com

hotel.bellerive.najac@wanadoo.fr

30 rooms, double room (excluding breakfast) from €58

An elegant two-star Logis de France hotel in the lee of the fortress and overlooking the river, with pool, tennis court and billiards room. The hotel is open throughout the season – from 1st April to 31st October.

L'Oustal del Barry

2 Place du Sol del Barry

12270 Najac

Tel: (Fr) 5 65 29 74 32

www.oustaldelbarry.com

oustaldelbarry@wanadoo.fr

17 rooms, double room (excluding breakfast) from €57

Another two-star Logis de France, the hotel backs onto the old market place at the top end of Najac. The hotel is also open throughout the season – from 25th March to 5th November – and, as well as the usual facilities, offers culinary courses.

Camping Le Paisserou

Villages de chalets du Pontet

12270 Najac

Tel: (Fr) 5 65 29 73 96

www.camping-le-paisserou.com

info@camping-le-paisserou.com

Reasonably priced and strategically situated on the banks of the Aveyron for a stunning view of the village and fortress above, the site also offers a number of 'bungalows' and wooden chalets that can be rented for a week at a time.

The nearby municipal *aire de camping-car* offers free parking for camping-cars and charges a modest €2 per day for the power supply.

WHERE TO EAT

Le Belle Rive

Le Roc du Pont

12270 Najac

Tel: (Fr) 5 65 29 73 90

www.lebellerive.com

hotel.bellerive.najac@wanadoo.fr

A mid-price restaurant with a number of midday *formules* (including a *menu vegetarian*), and evening and Sunday options ranging from €23 to €40 for the gastronomic *menu saveur*. Eating out on the shady terrace with a view of the river and the fortress above adds a definite *je ne sais quoi*.

Il Cappella

Route de la Gare

12270 Najac

Tel: (Fr) 5 65 29 70 26

Cheap and cheerful and open all the year round. There is a choice of simple fare on offer, but the pizzas in particular, cooked in a wood-fired oven, are authentic and copious and offer excellent value.

PLACES TO VISIT

Forteresse Royale de Najac

12270 Najac

Tel: (Fr) 5 65 29 71 65

forteressejenajac@wanadoo.fr

This gem of military architecture is open from 1st April until the Toussaint holidays at the beginning of November. Otherwise, guided tours can be arranged out of season. Although the tours are in French, there are English brochures available from the shop. Adults €4.5 and children €3. Special rates for groups.

Eglise Saint-Jean

12270 Najac

Tel: (Fr) 5 65 29 71 63

www.tourisme-najac.com

This stoic stately church was one of the first in Rouergue built in a Gothic style. It is open for (free) visits during the season (from 10am – 12pm and from 2.00pm – 6pm Mondays – Saturdays, and 11am – 12pm and 2.00pm – 6pm Sundays).

Commerce

Visit Sylvie Sallet's Atelier Poterie (05 65 65 86 46) and Régis Najac's Atelier Couteau (05 65 81 60 06) and be sure to buy a slice or two of *fouace* from Najac's sole but most welcoming *boulangerie* (Boulangerie Delmur, at the foot of the market place).

Villefranche de Rouergue

Office de Tourisme de Villefranche de Rouergue

Tel: (Fr) 5 65 45 13 18

www.villefranche.com

This nearby classic *bastide* town boasts some splendid medieval architecture and a bustling market on Thursday mornings.

TOURIST OFFICES

Office de Tourisme de Najac

Place du Faubourg

12270 Najac

Tel: (Fr) 5 65 29 72 05

www.tourisme-najac.com

infos@tourisme-najac.com

Comité Départemental du Tourisme de l'Aveyron

17 rue Aristide Briand

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