

[DEPARTMENT]

THEN AND NOW

BY SARAH JOHNSON



A photo of the historic train station located in Tours, France.

*Je Suis Là en Vacances (*I'm Here on Vacation)*

A St. Louis Park writer takes readers along on her travels to France.

IMAGINE A RIVER CITY WITH AN ABUNDANCE OF FARMERS MARKETS connected to an extensive bicycle trail system, a city with a multitude of cultural activities available to the entire population. While this may sound like Minneapolis, it's actually a description of Tours, France, one of ten sister cities to Minneapolis. Located an hour southwest of Paris and pronounced without the "s" as "tour," this French town of approximately 135,000 residents has been a ville jumelle (or "twin town") of Minnesota's largest city since 1991.

Sister Cities International is a nonprofit organization started by President Dwight Eisenhower in 1956 to foster citizen diplomacy. In 2006, there were more than 2,500 communities from 134 countries worldwide participating in this global initiative. Minneapolis's Sister Cities program was established in 1961 with Santiago,

Chile, and has since expanded to include nine more cities around the globe in countries including Japan, Sweden, Iraq and Kenya.

Since 2009, I have been involved with Minneapolis and Tours Sister Cities, an all-volunteer nonprofit. Some of my duties have included being an ambassador for the Twin Cities when foreign exchange students visit, promoting Minnesota's French heritage at cultural events and writing on various topics for our website, ranging from French holiday traditions to the Tours chapter of Slow Food.

"This organization's mission is so close to my heart," says Gail Beske, board chair of Minneapolis and Tours Sister Cities. "My love of France began when I was in middle school, and when I learned about the sister city program, I thought it was a perfect opportunity to use my experience in international business to foster rela-



Visit slpmag.com for a recipe from Sarah Johnson for rillettes de Tours, a specialty of the Loire Valley.

PHOTO BY ED COUGHLIN

→ **July 20:** Sister City Day 2014 at the Nicollet Island Pavilion in Minneapolis. Free. 1-5 p.m.; minneapolis.org/sistercitiesday. More information about Minneapolis and Tours Sister Cities at mplstours.org

tionships between Minneapolis and Tours.”

For those with wanderlust like myself, the best part of the sister city relationship is being able to visit the area and make deeper connections. I have been fortunate to have traveled to France twice, the first time studying at the Sorbonne in Paris as a college student in 1998. I returned to Paris in 2012, and during that trip made my premiere visit to Tours as a sister city ambassador.

One of my favorite places in Tours is Le Musée de Compagnonnage, which highlights the work of France’s master craftsmen who learned skills in wood, metal, leather, baking and stonework. The city is also home to the Cathédrale Saint Gatien, a Roman Catholic church built between 1170 and 1547. It contains stained glass windows often compared to Notre Dame in Paris and has been classified as a monument historique (national heritage site of France) since 1862.

As far as cultural differences, I found it’s the little things you notice the most—one French woman I talked with was repulsed at the thought of having a glass of milk with a meal. “Milk is for babies!” she exclaimed incredulously.

Although I love sightseeing, the highlight of my trip was being in Tours during the French presidential election between François Hollande and Nicolas Sarkozy. Voting is much the same as in Minneapolis, with neighbors greeting each other as they do their civic duty, dropping ballots into containers to be counted. As France is only about the size of Texas, they receive the results much more quickly—by about 8 p.m. on election night, it was clear that Hollande had beaten the incumbent Sarkozy.

As we said goodbye to France, I realized the people of Tours value many of the same things we do in Minneapolis—a delicious meal shared with friends and a desire for the best life possible for their families. //



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