



POSTCARD FROM *Provence* Carol Drinkwater on life in her olive grove

There is little as splendid as participating in a joyous event, particularly one that is unique. In Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, ‘the Saint Marys from the Sea’, a fishing village on the wild and wonderful Camargue coast, there is an annual pilgrimage that I highly recommend.

A little history. The Marys who have given their name to this humble port are three: Mary Jacobé (the sister of the Virgin Mary, Mother of Christ), Mary Salomé (mother of two Apostles: John and James the Greater) and Mary-Magdalene, the redeemed sinner. Around AD 40, when the Christian persecutions had reached fever pitch in the Middle East, these women with their revolutionary preachings were expelled from Jerusalem. To escape death, they skipped off in a boat with a party that included their black-skinned servant Sara,

possibly an Ethiopian. Their vessel, which lacked provisions and some say oars and sails, battled Mediterranean winds for weeks while heading in a northwesterly direction, landing eventually by the coastal village of Ra. The refugees were welcomed and, along with their African servant, settled, living out the rest of their lives in and around the Camargue, preaching their faith and doing holy works. They were buried locally and Ra was renamed in their honour. There are Christian pilgrimage sites all around the globe, but what makes this story exceptional is Sara. This enigmatic African has become the patron saint of *les gitans* (gypsies), and is their guide to safe travelling.

Ever since I left home, I have been a traveller. To become a travel writer was a childhood dream of mine and one that I am proud to have achieved. It seemed natural then that I should participate in the *Pèlerinage*

des Gitans, held on 24 and 25 May in Sara’s honour. In the preceding days, throngs of gypsies descend from all corners of Europe upon this little town, which has been a holy site since the days of the Celts.

This pilgrimage gives gypsies the chance to meet with others of their kind, seek husbands for their daughters and share with fellow *gitanos* tales of their itinerant lifestyles. The ceremonies commence in the Romanesque church overflowing with pilgrims. (The church itself is worth a visit. Standing proudly at the mouth of the Petit Rhône, it overlooks the Camarguais lowlands. It is possible to climb up to its roof where, at

close of day when the sun turns pink and roses the wetlands for miles around, you’ll gaze upon a scene to enrich your heart for the rest of your life.) During this first service, the relics of the Marys are brought down from a reliquary secreted in the church’s

rafters and the statue of Sara is carried up from the candlelit crypt. The next morning, crowds are waiting outside the church on horseback to escort the box of bones to the sea while, held aloft in pride of place, is Sara. Dozens of local inhabitants attend, attired in Provençal costumes. Tourists flank the parade as it winds through the streets to the beach. There, the riders carrying the statue and box of relics trot into the sea, to bless their holy women. These days are for worship but also ecstatic celebrations. Everywhere, there are vibrant street happenings with feasting and music. In the warm late May weather, these events are a costumed party with rarely heard languages being spoken or sung. I have attended on several occasions. A gypsy at heart, I discovered recently that my paternal great-grandparents were Irish travellers, gypsies, so to this ancient Celtic site I am eternally drawn. 📍

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ILLUSTRATION: TIM WESSON

Answers to Quick Quiz on page 83: Napoléon Bonaparte; Link the phrases: Une araignée – a spider; Un pré – a meadow; Un ruisseau – a stream; La foudre – lightning; Pourrir – to rot; L’écorce – bark