

MacCulloch Dancers in France 2007

The MacCulloch Dancers return from the 48th Folklore Festival in Montréjeau, France with invitations to travel to Hungary, Serbia, Italy, the Ukraine and France.



Festival Organizer, Thierry Teixeira, contacted the group in August of 2006 expressing her wishes to have the McCulloch Dancers represent Ontario, Canada in France. Group directors, Rae MacCulloch, Deborah Wheeler and Heather Forbes were accompanied by musicians, Denis Carr, James Forbes, Clara MacLeod and Kenton McBean, and dancers, Kelsie Allinotte, Elizabeth Bélanger, Kristen Bankley, Kristine Boucher, Linea Cloutier, Courtney Connors, Kayla Olive Cuggy, Jocelyn Egan, Annie Laurie Franklin, Heather Godsoe, Ellis Hayman, Lindsay Kelly, Michelle Kenny, Katrina Kroeze, Katlyn Ladouceur, Jessica Latimer, Carolyn MacCulloch, Kristin MacDonald, Kayla McLeod, Kristen Marcellus, Dayna McRae, Emily Millar, Megan Sharkey, Katie Taylor, Isabel Villeneuve, Morgan Wheeler.



Three mothers, Lucille Kroeze, Colleen MacCulloch and Nadine McRae also attended the festival. Having traveled with the group before these three moms were experts at French braiding hair and carrying dancers' over sized purses. They were greatly appreciated and wonderful company.



The arcades of the main square and the grid layout of the streets of Montréjeau reveal the origins of this former Bastide town, founded in 1272. Trade and commerce are still by far the Bastide's main activity and draw a wide clientele.

It was on this square that the Opening Ceremonies took place. The visual effect was grand with the brilliant colours of the traditional costumes and the blends of traditional music including Hungary's brass band, the Scottish bagpipes and the rhythmic drums of the Reunion Troupe from France. Two representatives from each country presented their national flag for the raising of the flags ceremony. The flags were raised simultaneously in tribute to international unity.

The first of many parades brought the town of Montréjeau to life as the troupes made their way to the Grand Hall where we would present our first performance. The MacCulloch Dancers handed out Canadian flags along the way bringing warm greetings from Canada to the people of France. In our most favourite parade the groups mixed, walking arm in arm with fellow performers from around the globe.



Our first performance was presented following thirty-six hours with no sleep. We landed at the Toulouse airport just on time for a full day of Festival celebrations. The musicians and dancers were troupers. They presented an energized show which soon made them favourites for audiences and visiting countries alike.

At the end of this very long day we returned to the Convent which was to be our home for the duration of our stay in France. The nuns at l'Accueil St. Germaine were warm and generous and our surroundings were inviting with the comforts of home blending with the antique furniture and historical architecture. We would like to express a warm thank you to the nuns, who brought homemade lunches to our piano player, Clara MacLeod, when she became ill during our stay.



A very long day was not to end yet. As we entered the gates to the convent a young woman approached us and asked that we present a surprise performance for her friends, the bride and groom celebrating their wedding on the convent grounds. Kenton McBean grabbed his fiddle and a group of dancers made the young lady's wishes come true. The troupe posed for pictures with the bride and groom, enjoyed wine and food with wedding guests and then set off for bed at last.



Group meals were served at the Ecole Notre Dame de Comminges. Good timing meant less time waiting outside the dining hall in the sun. The Canadians became proficient in timing their arrival for meals. Rae MacCulloch had no worries. For when she arrived all lines parted as she was respectfully invited to move to the front of the line.



The schedule in France was ever changing. Our motto “Change is good”, created on previous tours, was once again the basis of our good sense of humour and knack for creativity and flexibility.



Backstage gatherings by the Grand Hall were always filled with excitement and international exchange. Hungary's Brass band would spontaneously play "Oh Canada" bringing cheers from our young Canadians. Musicians would break into the lively tunes of their respective nations bringing backstage artists to their feet. The energetic performers formed circles and Congo lines and danced polkas on the tarmac. Our dancers happily shared their dances, teaching the Highland Fling & Canadian step dancing. International friends gathered and posed for photos preserving their memories of the excitement of the Festival.



One of the parades brought the dancers through the market. Their beautiful braids laced with red ribbon, bright tartans and Canadian colours shone through channels between market stands. They stopped along the way and performed for shoppers and tourists.



Rae MacCulloch was greatly honoured by the Festival organizers. During the finale of each of our performances, Rae was called to the stage. She was commended for instilling the love of dance into so many young people. She was also congratulated for the breaking of a Guinness record for the “Largest Massed Performance of Highland & Step Dance” presented by one single school, The MacCulloch School of Dancing, in 2004. Rae responded with kind words for the people of France and a lively step dance. Three young boys were so taking with Rae’s endearing presence that they sought her out and proudly sat by her side throughout the remaining performances.

It is with great pleasure that I speak about our guide, Mary Joe, her daughter Kim and son John. Mary Joe and her children were ever cheerful and made our stay most enjoyable. This young family traveled from the Dominican Republic to be part of the Festival. Mary Joe was originally from Strasbourg, France.





After the busy performance schedules the groups gathered for evening parties. When it was time for our troupe to retire to the convent, our director, Deborah Wheeler and the moms would sing "Oh Canada". Our young Canadian dancers would instantly migrate to the sounds of their National anthem.



We also remember our special friend Thomas, from the family owned restaurant/bar, “Bar L'Ovale”. To our delight Thomas and his family had a Scotland Flag hanging on the wall signed by members of the Caledonian Pipe Band. This was the very same Pipe Band that the Sons of Scotland Pipe Band and MacCulloch Dancers performed with while on tour in Scotland in 2004 and 2005. Thomas was a most generous and entertaining host and we will always smile when we think of him. Our group signed a Canadian flag and left it for Thomas to hang by the flag signed by the Caledonian Pipe band. In turn, Thomas wrote personalized messages to members of our group on a TFC Toulouse Football Club flag.



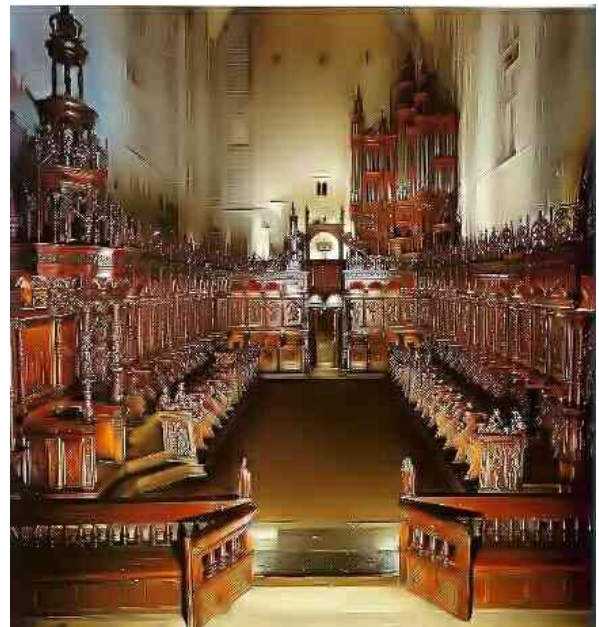
As the Festival week drew to a close Rae MacCulloch and Denis Carr exchanged gifts with the Mayor of Montréjeau and Festival Leaders. The ceremonies also included a mass attended by international representatives dressed in traditional costume.



A final very special performance was for our kind hosts, the nuns at l'Accueil St. Germaine. The setting was peaceful with the beautiful grounds set against the scenic background of flowing mountains.



Due to the efforts of our most gracious guide, Mary Joe, we had an opportunity to visit the Cathédrale de Saint-Bertrand de Comminges located at the extreme southern edge of the county. The view of the rising Pyrenees mountains is awesome. The architectural of the Cathedral reveals three distinct styles: The Romanesque part of the 12th century; The Gothic part of the 13th century commissioned by Bertrand de Goth. and the Renaissance part as well as the organ from the 15th century. The cathedral is famous for its stalls and huge Renaissance organ. - one of France's most beautiful classical instruments built in 1550. It features 3 keyboards, 40 claviers and 40 stops.



We enjoyed crepes in a garden courtyard and shopped for souvenirs in the shops surrounding the Cathedral. Personalized leather bracelets were among the most popular items.





Our final excursion was a shopping opportunity in Toulouse. Then shopping bags in hand the Canadian shoppers were off to the airport.



Once again we remember our new found friends and the historic Montréjeau. The camaraderie of fellow performers from around the world, our friend Thomas, the nuns of l'Accueil St. Germaine, Mary Joe, Kim and John was definitely the highlight of our very action packed week.

Heather (MacCulloch) Forbes

