

One of France's best-kept secrets: The village of Talloires in the Rhône Alps

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TALLOIRES-MONTMIN, France — We felt like we'd fallen into a vintage French film, although without the subtitles, as we wandered down narrow cobblestone streets flanked by centuries old stone buildings. A tiny church with a bell tower rang out the hour. Down the lane, Lake Annecy sparkled as boats bobbed and children squealed in delight as they splashed and played in the summer sun.

We'd happened into the village of Talloires, on Lake Annecy (population 1,600, which doubles in the summer, mostly with French vacationers). My husband and I were visiting a friend who had a summer home there and were so taken with the place, we came back the following year and stayed for three weeks.

The village, located in the Rhône Alps, 13 kilometers from the town of Annecy and a 45-minute drive from Geneva, borders Lake Annecy, which has been called the purest lake in Europe.

This title is special because back in the 1960s, the lake was so polluted that the fish were dying. So the communities around the lake organized a wastewater project and now have achieved a wondrous result in the clean, pure water. When you swim in the lake, your skin feels soft and silky for hours.

One petite boulangerie supplies the pain au chocolate and baguettes, a small grocery some staples. The marché on Thursday mornings offers the local Reblochon cheese, freshly laid eggs and bright red strawberries. A few excellent restaurants and boutique hotels and a cinema that opens from time to time, round out the picture.

Behind the village, the mountains rise straight up. The Tour de France came through in 2013 and cyclists come from around the world to try their hand at the hills. Hikers love the many trails that wind through scenes from “Heidi” or “The Sound of Music.” Thrill-seekers hangglide and parapent off the steep cliffs, flying through the sky like Isarus, though hopefully with more success, or go ‘canyoning’ down waterfalls.

Sailing, paddle-boarding, water-skiing are just some of the fun activities happening on the lake. Golf and tennis, horseback riding are nearby or you can take a water taxi across the lake to the bustling town of Annecy.

We divided our stay between a hotel and a small apartment, both located in the center of Talloires and an easy walk to the lake. Our apartment had a small kitchen, a living room and bedroom and a tiny balcony that looked down on the street, three stories below. From the balcony, we had a slice of a view of the lake just down the hill.

We became a part of the daily life of the village, swimming in the lake, shopping at the weekly marché, where we picked out sweet strawberries and cherries. We enjoyed being ‘at home’ like a local and yet also sampling many

of the excellent restaurants, which specialize in the local fresh fish from Lake Annecy.

I loved practicing my French, and my husband, who doesn't speak French, even learned how to ask for "un croissant et un pain au chocolate" at the bakery.

We rented bikes and rode around the lake, a 40-kilometer or 25-mile ride, much of it on bike paths. My husband enjoyed biking up some of the steep hills, stages of the Tour de France. I hiked "La Tournette," with friends, a challenging, all-day hike up the mountains and cliffs behind the village.

Our local friends took us to a dairy up the mountain, where we sampled the freshly made Reblochon and Tomme cheeses, their distinctive flavor given by the alpine herbs, grasses and flowers that the cows graze on.

Winston Churchill is reported to have called Talloires "the most beautiful place on earth." On the lake, the Michelin starred Père Bise Restaurant and Relais et Château Hotel has welcomed many famous guests including Brigitte Bardot, Charlie Chaplin and the Queen Mother of England.

Next door, the sheltered bay in front of the Hotel L'Abbaye, the oldest hotel in the village, has been named one of the 10 most beautiful bays in the world by Geo magazine. The hotel began as a monastery and the grounds and gardens still have a peaceful and spacious feeling, making it a popular wedding venue.

The hotel consistently receives awards for quality of service to the guests. One family has been coming for four decades, four generations. Their guest list also includes Mark Twain, Paul Cezanne and, more recently, Bruce Willis.

Dunja Studen-Kirchner, general manager of L'Abbaye for 15 years, is very proud of her hotel. "The beauty of the place makes it popular for weddings. You can have the ceremony and dinner in the garden, dance till 3 a.m., then go down to the bar and dance till dawn if you want," Studen-Kirchner said.

“Because the building was built as a monastery, originally, it was built for the well-being of the people. You can feel it. The energy lives on here. After all, it is sacred ground,” she added.

My husband and I enjoyed dinner outside on the terrace as the sunset turned the sky and the bay luminescent shades of pink and lavender. My chocolate dessert was so lovely, I had to take a photo. And it tasted as good as it looked.

By staying in one place and relaxing for our vacation, we let the rhythm of the village soak into us. We emulated the French all around us who were ‘en vacances.’ We slowed down, took naps and read. We biked, hiked, swam and lounged. We lingered over long dinners outside in the cool, fresh air as we practiced ‘l’art de vivre,’ the art of living that the French do so well.

Being in Talloires gave us a grand taste of just what that is.