

Nimes Moi!

August 2007 saw me in Southern France. From 1970 when my family acted as a host family during the Nimes – Preston exchange, I had always thought that one day I would visit Nimes and possibly even try and locate my exchange student and friend for two weeks, Dominique Foubert. Well it took 37 years but that's what I did.

To cut a long story short....I was perhaps re-enacting my Inter Rail holiday on the early 70s when I found myself at Agde railway station on my way to Montpellier. Standing outside the station in lovely sunshine, I received a text from 'Sue' – a friend from Liverpool – who asked how my holiday was going. I hadn't heard from Sue for a long time and what timing!

'Sue! Hiya! Have you any contacts in Nimes?'

Sue at that time was Head of International Student recruitment at Preston College and I knew served on the Preston Twining Committee with whom I believe she had visited Recklenhausen.

Sue confidentially said she would make some enquiries after she had got in touch with one Derek Smith. I'd heard of Derek but had never met him. Fate took a hand, or at least Derek did, and I soon received a call from Derek whose help proved invaluable.

Later that day after I had booked into my hotel in Montpellier, I received a call from Derek who gave me the name of a hotel in Nimes and the number of a British guy – Robin Boxall who runs an organisation for Brits in Nimes appropriately called 'Nimes – Brits'.

Robin – a Louis Theroux 'sound alike' on the phone – asked if I could make it to Nimes for the following day which was a Friday since he and his French mates were making their usual trip to the Olympique Nimes stadium for the football. Being a lifelong Preston North End supporter, this sounded like a good plan for me and the next day I set off for Nimes on the TGV. French trains are brilliant by the way.

Arriving at the hotel recommended by Derek, I greeted Eric the owner with a bit of: 'Bonjour monsieur. J'ai un reservation', using the usual schoolboy French.

When I enquired about the price of the room and said 'Je suis un ami de Derek Smith de Preston', Eric immediately gave me a discount on the room! Well done Derek!

I will leave readers to do their own internet research on Nimes but personally I found it an utterly enchanting place. A clean, outward looking, sophisticated but non pretentious small city with the most amazing almost perfectly preserved, original Roman Amphitheatre, a modern Art Gallery – the Carree D'Art – and a Roman 'Temple' on which I presume the Harris library was modelled. Add to this a beautiful climate and truly friendly, welcoming, polite inhabitants makes Nimes a perfect holiday location.



The beautiful and famous arenas in Nîmes



Carrée

The Roman Temple of Nîmes called Maison

Let me explain 'Nîmes – Moi'. This is the chant which reverberated round the Olympique Stadium on the Friday night and it is also the accepted hallmark/slogan of being a proud Nîmes resident. The picture below shows Robin (wearing the sunglasses) with his French footy mates.



After doing the usual tourist things over the weekend, I was due to leave Nimes on the Monday but before departing I thought I would spend the morning trying to find my exchange family from 37 years earlier.

I enjoy speaking French, or at least trying to. I went to the Hotel de Ville (Town Hall) and explained my mission. They directed me to another local government building where I was told I should ask for Patricia in 'Le Bureau de La Jumilage' (Twinning department).

A pleasant young man pointed me in the right direction and I found Patricia in her office. After explaining what I was up to, Patricia had a think about what could be done. I noticed that on the office whiteboard was written the names of the towns twinned with Nimes. Preston was up there along with Prague, Verona, Frankfurt, Brunswick (Germany), Salamanca and Rishon Lezion (Israel) and Meknes (Morocco). Make no mistake we are in very good company!

Not through the wonders of the internet, but rather just a telephone directory Patricia located Dominique's mother there and then and within 2 hours we met up for a drink. It was becoming as close as you can get to being on 'This is Your Life'.

Monsieur and Madame Foubert were delightful people. They took me for a meal that night – the starter being 10 or 12 oysters each!!! – and 48 hours later they drove me the 50 miles or so to meet up with their son Dominique in the beautiful Cevennes region. If after 37 years, Dominique had turned out to be a teacher, postman or office worker that would have been fine, but in reality Dominique was an ecological National Park ranger. Going to work often on his horse, Dominique lives in a truly enchanting beautiful location. I had a wonderful day with his family and returned to Nimes at night just in time to catch a bit of the Norah Jones concert which was being held at the Arenas.



The Foubert family

It was all a great experience and has left me with a desire to seriously improve my French. I am thankful to Derek for his help in Nimes and it is pleasing to think that the twinning exercise worked for me even if there the slight issue of a 37 year delay in making the return trip!

Norman Shilcock