

TOUR DE FRANCE 2017: VILLAGE DÉPART

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Claire Read

Did I ever tell you about the time my right hand appeared on French television? No? Strange. I told more or less everyone else about it.

The year: 2014. The location: Arras, northern France, where the town's fortifications had just served as an impressive backdrop for the start of the sixth stage of that year's Tour.

I was wandering around in the strange atmosphere that surrounds the race the instant it's moved on elsewhere. Abandoned goodies from the publicity caravan lay strewn in gutters, workmen busied themselves disassembling safety barriers, and the sounds of helicopters and cars and bikes had faded. The party felt like it had ended just as suddenly as it had started.

Then I saw the bright lights, the hoardings plastered with the logo of TV station France 3, and the huge crowds. In that moment I knew I had stumbled upon the set of a quintessentially French televisual concoction by the name of *Village Départ*. And I knew that the party wasn't over. No, my friends. It was just beginning.

Words seem inadequate when describing a work of art such as *Village Départ*, but I shall try. Imagine a portable version of *This Morning*, which pitches up at the start town for each day's Tour stage. A chef shows you how to whip up the regional speciality.

You get a performance from one of France's finest purveyors of musical entertainment. And, often, you'll be treated to a bizarre *It's a Knockout*-style contest between the two main presenters. Because, you know, why not?

Cycling is mentioned – perhaps through an appearance from the double world champion of balancing on a bike, who performs the least erotic strip tease in history (watch below) – but it's not the focus. No, the attention is on celebrating the town in which the Tour finds itself; in celebrating France.

I eagerly took my place among the crowds on that day in Arras. I craned my neck to glimpse the day's musical performer, an ageing French rocker whose face was as leathery as his jacket. And in enthusiastically waving during his performance, my right hand suddenly found itself on national television – a fact I've previously mentioned to a few people though not, it seems, to you.

But I'm sorry to say these words are a eulogy. *Village Départ* broadcast its final edition last year. It's been cast aside through a desire to show every Tour stage in its entirety.

I understand that. As the sport's international popularity has grown, and as satellite television means hours on hours of coverage are not only possible but expected, it must make sense for France Télévisions to ditch a show which only plays in its homeland.

I may understand it, but I don't have to like it. To lose *Village Départ* is to lose something which was as important to my enjoyment of the race as the race itself. It was the perfect *apéritif* to the day's action, because it recognised the Tour isn't just a sporting spectacle. It's a cultural one. Its arenas are the roads of France. That makes it inextricably linked with the villages,

Some of my fondest memories of seeing the Tour from the roadside have nothing to do with the sport. There was that time in the pouring rain in Roubaix, when my only companions were the employees at the nearby offices of catalogue firm La Redoute – they came out just in time for the racers, cheered wildly, and got back to work once the pack had passed through.

At the other end of the weather spectrum, there was that 30 degree day in Reims, when *Madame le maire* came and shook the hands of her constituents (and me) and complimented us on our choice of a spot in the shade. Speaking of boiling hot days, I'll forever be grateful for the kindly French woman in Burgundy who invited me into her home for a glass of water and a chat in between riders coming through for an individual time trial.

This is the essence of the Tour for me, just as much as Chris Froome running up Ventoux; or Greg LeMond winning by eight seconds; or Stephen Roche emerging through the fog at La Plagne.

And that's why I'll miss *Village Départ*. But I comfort myself with the thought that the two of us will always have Arras.
