

THE LOVE FRANCE GUIDE N. 002

Bastille Day

inlovewithfrance.com

Not About a Building Falling - About What It Held

On July 14, 1789, a crowd stormed the Bastille, a fortress-prison in Paris. The building itself held only seven prisoners that day - four forgers, two men held for insanity, and one accused nobleman - nowhere near the mass of political prisoners popular imagination assumes. What made the Bastille worth storming was what else it held: a large stock of gunpowder and weapons, at a moment when Paris was arming itself against the royal troops massing around the city. Its fall mattered as a direct challenge to royal authority, not as a mass prison break, and it became the symbolic starting point of the French Revolution.

Two Different Events, One Date

France's national holiday actually commemorates two separate events that happen to share a date. The first is the 1789 storming of the Bastille itself. The second is the Fete de la Federation, held exactly one year later on July 14, 1790 - a huge public celebration of national unity, held on the Champ de Mars, intended to mark reconciliation after a turbulent first year of revolution. Modern Bastille Day draws its tone more from the second event - celebration and unity - than from the violence of the first.

The Military Parade on the Champs-Elysees

Every year on the morning of July 14th, France holds a military parade down the Champs-Elysees - the oldest and largest regularly held military parade in Europe, dating back to 1880. Troops, cavalry, armored vehicles, and a flypast from the French Air Force pass in front of the President of France, and each year the parade traditionally includes a guest unit or two from allied nations. It is broadcast live and watched by millions across the country.

Fireworks at the Eiffel Tower

On the evening of July 14th, Paris puts on a large fireworks display centered on the Eiffel Tower, drawing crowds along the Seine and the Champ de Mars below it. In recent years the show has grown to include drone displays and synchronized light effects alongside the traditional fireworks, but the core tradition - the entire tower lit up and framed by explosions of color - goes back decades. Towns and cities across the rest of France hold their own smaller firework displays the same night.

Bals des Pompiers - The Firefighters' Balls

One of the least internationally known Bastille Day traditions is also one of the most genuinely French: on the evening of July 13th and 14th, fire stations across the country open their doors to the public and host dances - the bal des pompiers, or firefighters' ball. Music, dancing, and drinks continue late into the night, often raising money for the fire brigade, and the tradition has run in Paris in some form since at least the early 20th century. It is a real, still-active custom, not a tourist invention.

Myths Worth Retiring

"The French call it Bastille Day." They don't - in France it's called le 14 juillet or, officially, la Fete Nationale. "Bastille Day" is an English-language name that isn't used domestically.

"The Bastille was full of political prisoners freed that day." It held seven ordinary prisoners, not a mass of political detainees - the building's symbolic and strategic value mattered far more than who was inside it.

"It only commemorates the storming of the Bastille." The holiday also marks the 1790 Fete de la Federation, a celebration of national unity a year later.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Bastille Day actually called in France?

Le 14 juillet, or officially la Fete Nationale (the National Celebration). "Bastille Day" is used in English but not in France itself.

Is the military parade open to the public?

Yes - crowds line the Champs-Elysees to watch in person, and it is also broadcast live on French television nationwide.

Can visitors go to a bal des pompiers?

Generally yes - most are open public events, often with a small entry fee that supports the local fire brigade.

Join 7,000+ France lovers - real stories, every week.

Subscribe free: lovetovisitfrance.substack.com