

Dow Jones Reprints: This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, use the Order Reprints tool at the bottom of any article or visit www.djreprints.com
 See a sample reprint in PDF format. [Order a reprint of this article now](#)

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

WSJ.com

TRAVEL | Updated July 2, 2012, 8:07 a.m. ET

Once More Unto the Breach

By TOBIAS GREY



Culturespaces / M. Fasol

Restaging scenes from the Troy War at the Great Roman Games in Nîmes, France.

As a group of armored gladiators entered the ancient arena in Nîmes, toting swords and tridents from another age, a freak snowstorm suddenly seemed to erupt. The reality, if slightly more mundane, was rather different: to show their enthusiasm thousands of foot-stamping spectators had begun waving

white handkerchiefs and torn-up pieces of paper in the air.

Now in its third year, the annual Great Roman Games in the southern French city, which time-warps audiences back to 122 A.D. during the reign of the emperor Hadrian, is part of a growing trend for historical re-enactments throughout Europe.

In late April, more than 20,000 visitors (a record for the two-day event), some of them decked out in traditional togas rented from a local market stall, thronged Nîmes's remarkably well-preserved Roman amphitheater, where they were treated to a spectacle that included chariot races, equestrian jousting and gladiatorial combat.



Culturespaces / M. Fasol

Chariots at the Roman amphitheater in Nîmes,

"I suppose the reason why people like to come to these events is because unlike a TV program or a film which you just watch, you can actually interact with a re-enactment. You can talk to people, touch things, smell things, even feel history take shape around you," says Howard Giles, managing director of EventPlan, an English company specializing in re-enactments. Mr. Giles, who has organized more than 5,000 re-enactments during his 30-year-long career and spearheaded popular multiperiod events such as History in Action, says "there is also something about historical re-enactment which creates a highly successful form of international fellowship."

France.

This year, mock-ups of the Napoleonic Wars (1803-15) are being staged across Europe as part of bicentenary celebrations.

Last Sunday, more than 1,000 re-enactors congregated on the banks of the Neman River in Kaunas, central Lithuania, to restage Napoleon's 1812 assault on Tsarist Russia. Re-enactors in Spain and Portugal have been busy commemorating the 200th anniversary of the Peninsular War, and in Russia, near Moscow, a re-enactment is being planned for Aug. 30-Sept. 2 to mark the bicentenary of the Battle of Borodino.

High on Mr. Giles's agenda is another Napoleonic campaign—the planned re-enactment of the Battle of Waterloo, which will take place in June 2015, exactly 200 years after Napoleon's defeat at the hands of Wellington. Building and clearing work has already begun to transform the battlefield, just south of Brussels, into an exact replica of what it looked like in 1815. "It's the big one all the Napoleonic re-enactors have been waiting for," says Debbie Pursey, a member of the 43rd Monmouthshire Light Infantry re-enactment society, one of the few in England to accept women members. "People have been saving up their pennies for years. The last big Waterloo re-enactment was in 2010, when there were about 4,000 participants; this one will definitely be bigger, with re-enactors coming from as far away as Australia and New Zealand."



Red Zebra Photography

A member of the Regia Anglorum historical re-enactment group portrays an early medieval archer at England's Rufford Abbey Country Park historical bazaar.

There are also a large number of events being planned to commemorate the 100th anniversary of World War I. According to David Siggers, a coordinator at the Great War Society in England, there will be major re-enactments on Belgian battlefields like Mons and Ypres starting in 2014. In northern France, another event is being planned to mark the 600th anniversary of the 1415 Battle of Agincourt. One of the highlights is expected to be a demonstration of the power and accuracy of the longbow by 1,000 English and Welsh archers.

Though the concept of re-enactment has been around for almost as long as civilization itself—the Romans often re-fought past victories in the Colosseum, sometimes flooding the arena to stage naval battles—the modern mock-warfare we are accustomed to, with its stringent guidelines and safety rules, was first made popular in the U.S. in the 1960s as the country commemorated the 100th anniversary of the American Civil War.

The first green shoots of re-enactment began to appear in Britain not long after, as societies like the Sealed Knot began staging re-enactments of the English Civil War (1642–51) in the late 1960s. During the 1980s, the trend for Napoleonic and medieval battles caught on behind the Iron Curtain as communism slowly began to thaw. "When I went out to Austerlitz with the Napoleonic Association in 1989, just before

the Velvet Revolution, we came across quite a lot of Czech re-enactors," recalls Mr. Giles. "It was all very surreal: there were two groups of re-enactors dressed as Austrian grenadiers—one was composed of enthusiasts and the other was made up of Communist spooks keeping an eye on them."



Yann Kervran/ Les Ambiani

French re-enactor Ludovic Moignet.

It wasn't until the 1990s that these events began to gain in popularity in Western Europe. Though countries such as France and Germany have long had a strong tradition of holding town festivals where people dress up, Mr. Giles says that the deep scars of World War II needed to heal before military re-enactments became a viable form of entertainment.

When Ludovic Moignet first began participating in French re-enactment events about 20 years ago, he says that he was one of only a very few. "There were about 100 of us in the beginning," says the 42-year-old, who participated in the recent Nîmes event as a Gallic chieftain. "Now there are about 10,000 re-enactors in France [compared with about 20,000 in the

U.K.] People are particularly passionate about antiquity today because of all the in-depth work that has been done at an archaeological level."

Mr. Moignet, who is managing director of the Samara Archaeological Park, near Amiens in northern France, credits re-enactment with making archaeological finds more visible. "If you look [at an event like the one in Nîmes], you'll see that all the costumes the re-enactors are wearing are exact replicas of antiquity," he says. "All the work that's been done in laboratories and digs across France means that in the blink of an eye people can recognize a Gaul, a Roman, or an ancient Greek."



Culturespaces / V.Formica

Great Roman Games in Nîmes

The idea for holding re-enactment events on historic properties began to develop significantly in Britain during the 1980s. Before setting up his own privately run company, Mr. Giles served as head of special events at English Heritage, a cultural body sponsored by the British government, from 1984 to 2000. "We started off by holding three re-enactments on different heritage sites," he recalls. "By the year 2000, we did 1,052 on over 100 different historic properties."

"Some independent historic houses like Kentwell Hall, with its Tudor Days, have been doing re-enactments for years," he adds. "The National Trust, on the other hand, did tend to be quite a lot more conservative. But they have now cottoned on to the fact

that historical recreations, if done well, can be a major boost for visitor numbers." Indeed, the Trust says May's Roman re-enactment at Wallington in Northumberland brought in 5,000 visitors over one weekend, compared to the normal 3,000.

The trend has now begun to catch on in France. Nîmes, in particular, has been able to carve out its own niche. Its arena is the only Roman-era amphitheater in the world to put on historical re-enactments, says event organizer Michael Couzigou. It is managed by Culturespaces, whose other sites include the Ancient Theatre of Orange, the Château de Baux de Provence and the Musée Jacquemart-André in Paris, as well as the Waterloo battlefield in Belgium.

At many of these sites, the stress is as much on re-enactment as it is on living history, which incorporates a more pedagogical approach to learning about ancient customs.

On the esplanade outside the Nîmes arena were tents full of living historians, dressed in traditional costumes, who put on interactive presentations of traditional toolmaking, pottery throwing, jewelry design and even Roman cooking. "Our aim is always to put on a show that is both crowd-pleasing and educational," says Mr. Couzigou. "In the past, we've had a tendency in France to hide our patrimony away as though it was inside a bell-jar—you can look but you can't touch. But this kind of attitude is beginning to change."



Photo courtesy of Peter Bentham Hill

The Sealed Knot's Battle of Basing re-enactment in 1969.

A wide range of historical markets are sprouting up not only in France, but all over Europe, creating a whole new thriving mini-industry. One of the most popular markets in England is held every May at Rufford Abbey Country Park in Nottinghamshire. "There are stall-holders at Rufford, but also a lot of re-enactment groups who come along because they want to enjoy the social," says Mr. Giles, who runs a stall selling historical accessories. "Re-enactment is a lifestyle, and if you chat to a stranger about being a Viking, chances are he'll stare back at you blankly. However, if you chat to a fellow re-enactor, even if he re-enacts something totally different, you'll soon be swapping stories around the campfire."

Re-enactors themselves, most of whom are amateurs, range from the likes of Mr. Moignet, who take pride in their historical immersion, to so-called "farbs," those with an indifference to historical authenticity. But their common point is that the great majority are men. "One of the arguments for becoming a re-enactor is that Western cultures have become quite feminized and over politically correct," says Stephen J. Hunt, a professor of sociology at the University of the West of England. "I have often come across men who joined re-enactment groups to get away from their wives for a few days."

Mr. Hunt, who is himself an amateur re-enactor, refers to this behavior as "a masculine bolt-hole." His fascination with re-enactment dates back to his childhood, when he collected bubble-gum cards that marked the centenary of the U.S. Civil War. "Of course re-enactment is reminiscent of boys dressing up and charging around with toy guns," he says. "But what you don't realize until you actually do it is just how exciting it can be."

Copyright 2012 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our [Subscriber Agreement](#) and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit www.djreprints.com

You Might Like

Why I No Longer Support the Health Insurance Mandate

Fan Fiction: A User's Guide

Your E-Book Is Reading You

Bank Wills Aren't Too-Big-to-Fail Cure

Dutifully Taking Your Calcium Pill? It May Be Too Much

From Around the Web

Content from Sponsors [What's this?](#)

10 Places Where You Can Sleep on a Beach (Frommer's)

8 Writing Tips from Vonnegut (Goodnet)

FBI Warns about World's Most Dangerous Places to Use Wi-Fi (LAPTOP Magazine)

A380 flights from New York begin August 9 (Global Traveler Magazine)

LinkedIn Profile Tips: The 10 Mistakes You Want to Avoid and Why (Windmill Networking)