

french lessons

WITH A CAMERA, YOU DON'T HAVE TO SPEAK THE LANGUAGE TO UNDERSTAND THE PEOPLE.

*“I got this image at 'First Light,'
about 7 a.m. The countryside is just bathed in golden light, which is representative of the
quality of light there. This image is unfiltered and unmanipulated.
I am standing on a high bluff over the Garonne River.
I think it captures the romance and atmosphere of this part of France so beautifully.”*

REINHARD ZIEGLER / September 5, 2007

Auvillar is a 17th-century village, considered one of the
100 most beautiful villages in France. According to local history, it was the site of an
ancient Roman-Gallic community, possibly rebuilt during Roman times.

“This tree farm is across the bridge, north of Auvillar. I had taken quite of few pictures to my right, where the sunlight was streaming in, only softened by the fog, and some straight ahead, getting the trees in a leading column into the bank of fog. As I focused on my right side, this picture automatically framed itself. I guess it was the mood that struck me, misty, expecting a unicorn to come charging out.”

RAY JOHNSON / September 2, 2007

Auvillar

I AM LOST IN THE SOFT, RICH LIGHT

filling the crevices of Gimont, like melting butter on a coarse slice of warm French bread, when the voice of my morning companion, Kate Mann, yanks me back into the 13th-century town's large, sheltered square. ☞ "It's my farmer," Kate calls out over her shoulder as she walks briskly toward a produce vendor setting up for weekly market. "Bonjour, Monsieur Allibert! Ça va ?"

☞ The face of Andre Allibert, who is unloading figs picked at his farm, La Sarcelle, the previous day, lights up as he literally squeals with delight. ☞ "My American friend!" he calls out loudly, as they embrace. He then starts introducing her to everyone within earshot. Since I am accompanying Mann, I'm immediately accepted and enveloped in this little celebration. Allibert offers me a fig, which melts in my mouth. ☞ Our southwestern France city bubbles with lush images - locals deep in protracted discussions over the state of produce bursting with color, vendors comparing notes, and gnarled, nattily dressed French gentlemen carrying home stretched plastic bags filled with their weekly purchases. ☞ It is a joyous, intimate moment, one of many that fills the challenging, and rewarding, week for 16 participants of a five-day FirstLight photography workshop based in Auvillar, a hilltop village located between Toulouse and Bordeaux in this country's Midi-Pyrénées region. ☞ Each of us involved here, successful in our own fields of interest, shares a passion for photography and exploration, and the advance legwork and attention to detail of workshop founder and Pulitzer Prize winning photographer, Jay Dickman, avails us access to people living and working in the rural French landscape that even the most savvy wanderer would be hard-pressed to arrange on his or her own. During the Auvillar workshop, we spend our days on area farms or in vineyards, with glass blowers or knife makers, in the local classroom or a gourmet chef's kitchen, where we are welcomed warmly. ☞ For our final evening in Auvillar, in the town's geometric oddity that is its square - really a triangle that contains a circular corn market structure, built in 1825 - we are transformed into part of the tribe. The locals emerge from their 16th- and 18th-century wooden houses and come from farms and shops throughout the area to see large-format prints of their lives on display. The mayor, who has closed the town square, reads a declaration in FirstLight's honor. We each get a particular thrill out of giving some oversized prints to our subjects, which they receive with great joy. ☞ At the end of the evening, locals drag long wooden benches and pull up chairs for a slideshow. They audibly react to their lives being projected up on a large screen, laughing and noting the various residents captured in our images. ☞ The euphoric close is a celebration of the power of the art of visual storytelling, the passion of the participants, and the warm embrace that the locals afford us. ☞ *John Ostidick*



KATE MANN / September 2, 2007
Gimont



“When leaving the crowded Gimont weekly open market, this man was looking for a parking spot in a full lot. Having experienced the same frustration many times, I knew I could be a friend to someone I had never met. Not able to speak French, I communicated with hand motions that I was leaving and he could have my space. While I was putting away my camera gear, I turned to look at him thought, 'What a picture.' I motioned to him with the camera, and he nodded yes. How I wish that we could have talked a bit. What is your name, sir? Are you here to buy bread in the market? Tell me where you live? And yet, I felt as if we had talked together. His face and eyes said, 'Merci.' I treasure this image; it will always remind me of the great things I saw and experienced while traveling in the rural country side of southern France.”

PARK TERRELL / September 3, 2007

Gimont, an ancient bastide town, hosts two weekly markets; one held on Thursdays, when all the usual array of fresh produce, simple fashions and crafts are on display, and its famous Sunday Foie Gras market, when avid fans of the goose liver delicacy queue outside the town awaiting their chance to buy what locals call the best Foie Gras in France.



“Vincent Cotonat and his grandparents, Henriette and Celestin Cotonat, were sitting on their stoop enjoying the waning evening light during Vincent's weekend visit. As I began speaking to them, they each went into a conversation of their own, as evidenced in the photograph. They were full of light, joy, and laughter. I loved the simplicity and humor of their interaction.”

ALISSA EVERETT / September 7, 2007

Village of St. Antoine





“They didn't use overhead lights in the Auvillar school so we had this great natural light, but it was very direct and a little harsh two hours after sunrise. I walked around the room to take shots when I noticed the Pauline's desk was reflecting the sunlight, and would light her beautifully when she got close. Most of the class she was sitting tall and answering questions. When the class was asked to write an answer I got my shot. When I showed the teacher the next day, she said, 'Oh, Pauline again.' She asked me if I had seen the book from the first Auvillar workshop, and produced it from her desk (where she had kept it for 3 years!) I had not looked at the book on purpose so I would arrive with a clean slate, but there was younger Pauline, in a totally different shot.”

ART STEVENS / September 4, 2007

In many parts of the world, it is illegal if not impossible to photograph within a school without individual releases. FirstLight has a standing permission to photograph in this wonderful small public primary school in Auvillar.



“I was walking up a winding cobblestone road, admiring Auvillar's rustic architecture, when I saw a boy ride his scooter out of his family's gate, across my path. I stopped and watched the boy scoot himself up the hill, turn around at the top, and then coast back down, repeating the cycle over and over again. As I watched the boy, so content in his home surroundings, I thought about all the little Auvillar boys who had played on the same streets. It didn't seem to bother the boy that the stones were bumpy or the buildings old. I found peace in the thought that some things, like a boy playing on a warm summer night, never change.”

KIM HOSKINSON / September 4, 2007

Each twilight, Jay Dickman gathers the workshop participants on the promenade, on the site of the former vicont's castle. While the soft light plays off a sweeping view of the Garonne Valley, the group photographs locals and follows the fading magical light through the village streets



“I shot these guinea hens in a village market in Gascony, while foraging for local produce with Serge François, the executive chef for the Hôtel L’Horloge. Despite their beauty, we chose to pass on the birds in favor of the first cèpes of the season.”

ERIN BAILEY DEV / September 4, 2007

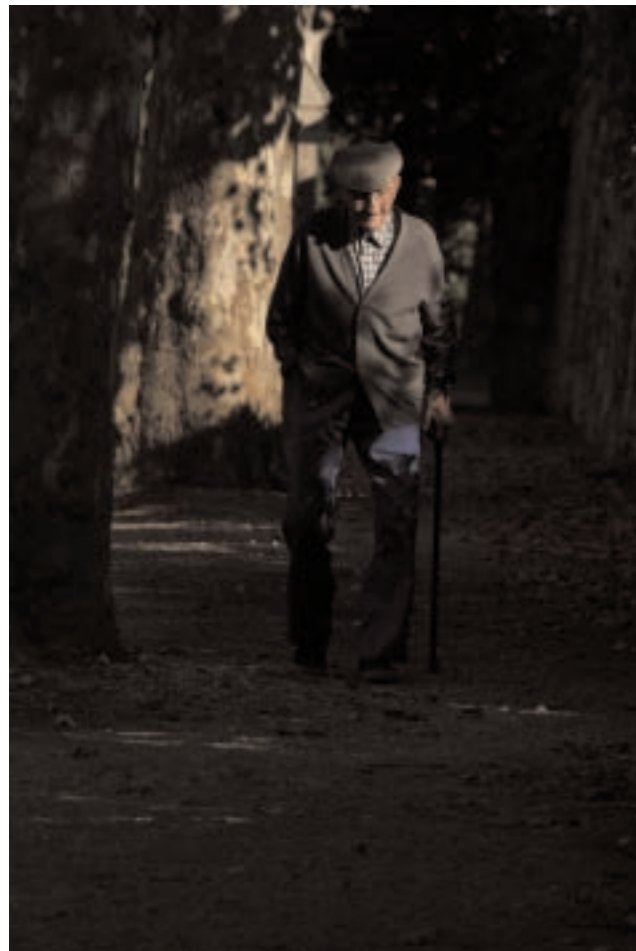
Chefs throughout the world consider the cèpe one of the finest wild mushrooms to cook with, and the deep wood patches where the species (*Boletus edulis*) grow are carefully guarded against poachers.



“Kate Mann and I had spent quite a bit of time shooting pictures of Monsieur Alibert harvesting figs from the orchard of his farm south of Auwillar. When he said it was time to feed his sheep, we followed him to a very large building, which held several pens. I took a few pictures of the feeding, then noticed a smaller pen off to the right, where a small white lamb and its mom and others were mulling around the smaller space. As I moved closer, the sheep began in circular motion, not to get away from me, but to form a protective barrier around the lamb. I was a bit amazed, because I’ve never seen sheep do that.”

RAY JOHNSON / September 4, 2007

Although from different backgrounds, these workshop participants share a common passion, that photography brings them much joy, and no matter how much they learn they realize what they don’t know is overwhelming, that photography, travel and storytelling is a never-ending learning experience



“This old gentlemen was the prototypical French octogenarian, in attire and demeanor. I had observed him as he made his way into the center part of town, along the sycamore-lined road. He regarded me with some degree of suspicion, so I decided to take my 100-400 lens (set at 400), and to wait at a respectful distance to take his picture as he walked in and out of pools of light between the tree trunks.”

REINHARD ZIEGLER / September 3, 2007

Watching locals strolling through the shadows on cobbled street, catching whiffs from savory kitchens, hearing the gentle peels of church bells, it's easy to understand how the inspiring light and rolling hills of Auvillar act as a magnet for artists

“I've always wanted to be a painter but since I can't even draw stick figures, I turned to photography. During the last 30 years, I've taken a few pretty good photographs. The best of them never satisfied my desire to 'paint.' I have discovered that I most enjoy working with photographs having texture as a chief feature. This alley was a real treat for me.”

GREG HARTWELL / September 3, 2007

Auvillar passed between the hands of viscounts and counts until the sixteenth century, when it became the domain of the Kings of Navare, and in 1589 was attached to the French crown

FAKE COPY: OUR "COSTUMED GENTLEMAN" STANDING ON A BRIDGE OVER THE GRAND CANAL IS WEARING A TRADITIONAL VENETIAN WHITE-BEAKED MASK, WHICH REPRESENTS A PLAGUE-DOCTOR. THE BEAK SYMBOLIZES THE DOCTOR'S LONG BREATHING APPARATUS THAT HELD A SPONGE SOAKED IN VINEGAR, WHICH WAS THOUGHT TO KEEP THE PLAGUE AT BAY.