

Spending Christmas Eve with the gypsies of Perpignan, France

[Olivier Laurent](#)



Maeva, 13, dances on Christmas Eve in 2016 in Perpignan, France. (Jeanne Taris)

It's Christmas Eve and Maeva, the pastor's daughter, is dancing in her red dress. She's just 13, but tonight, she looks like an adult, like her other friends in the streets of the Saint-Jacques in Perpignan, France.

One of the oldest neighborhoods in Perpignan, Saint-Jacques is home to one of the rare communities of gypsies that still live within a city's center. Unemployment and poverty can be rampant there, but their streets are full of life, as French photographer [Jeanne Taris](#) found when she started working there, in 2016, during Visa pour l'Image, a photojournalism festival held annually in the French city. "I took a few photographs then,"

she told In Sight. "And as I was talking with some of the women there, they asked me what I was doing for Christmas." Taris had no plans. "My four children live far away — I was alone," she said. "So they invited me to live with them and their families from Christmas to New Year's Eve."

Taris's photos show how men of all ages have put their suits on, sitting around large tables as the women dance in black or red dresses with elaborate hairdos and heavy makeup. The music and the party spill out of their homes and into the streets. That night, it seems, daily worries are left behind.



The party is about to get underway on Christmas Eve. (Jeanne Taris)



Young boys drink and smoke. (Jeanne Taris)



A Christmas Eve party in 2017 in a building set to be demolished by the city. (Jeanne Taris)

Through her work, Taris shows not only that the city seems to have abandoned this community, despite plans to rebuild some of the neighborhood's buildings, but that its social fabric is slowly crumbling. "In Saint-Jacques, it feels like time has stopped," Taris said. "Drugs are taking a toll on the community." The familiar scenes of men playing guitars on their doorsteps are long gone, she said. Instead, pop music can be heard in the neighborhood's narrow streets. "Young girls are precocious and often marry early. Young boys drink and smoke like little men."

"The gypsies of Saint-Jacques feel forgotten, abandoned, judged," she added. "It's a feeling that has become predominant in the entire community. They have a real need for attention, and they've accepted me because I'm someone from the outside who's interested in them. I'm a witness of their lives without judgment."

But, on Christmas Eve, Maeva doesn't worry about the future; she is dancing the night away. "She looks like a woman," Taris says. "The next day, when I see her on a couch, snuggling in a bathrobe, she's a kid again."



Oui-Oui, 6, center right, dances the flamenco. (Jeanne Taris)



The girls spent hours getting ready. (Jeanne Taris)



It's 5 a.m., and Oui-Oui is still dancing. (Jeanne Taris)



The men stay together during the party. (Jeanne Taris)



The girls also stay with one another. (Jeanne Taris)



Oui-Oui, left, and his cousin have few limits. That's not the case for the girls their age. (Jeanne

Taris)



Shaina, 3, got boxing gloves for Christmas. (Jeanne Taris)



Kids also wear suits for Christmas. (Jeanne Taris)



Maeva dances on a street in Perpignan on Christmas Eve in 2017. (Jeanne Taris)



A street in Perpignan. (Jeanne Taris)



The end of the night. (Jeanne Taris)