

# Lourdes, an uplifting experience

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We made a trip to Lourdes for the first time recently to see the world famous pilgrimage site. Visitors come from around the globe, Asia, the USA, Africa, South America and various parts of Europe. There is a peacefulness in the place and a warm atmosphere among the people, despite the frequent rain. It is a major tourist honey pot and our hosts there told us that they hold the most hotels in France outside of Paris. Prices for hotels range from 40-150-euro per night.

Meals are good value too and beat Irish prices. The Irish go in large numbers with over 25,000 per annum with various diocesan pilgrimages and group visits. This is down by half in over a decade, but there are still major specialists handing the tours like Joe Walsh Tours and Marina Pilgrimages. Ryanair have also opened up a direct route from Dublin to Tarbes, which is just 10 minutes by bus to Lourdes. Many charter flights also fly into this spacious airport, where you can get 3 course lunch for 15 euro. The other route is via Toulouse with Aer Lingus, a two hour train journey away.

We arrived and tried the nice airport lunch in Tarbes and then took the short journey to Lourdes. Flight time is 10am, so you are there for lunch-time. On arrival in Lourdes you might be overwhelmed by the number of tourists and religious shops and wonder how they can all do business, but they said the season has been ok so far.

## Procession

We observed the pilgrimage procession one evening at 9pm, where pilgrims go to the basilica area and grotto. Many pilgrimage groups carry banners and sing in a variety of languages. The sick are here with relatives and others in wheelchairs and there are a large number of carers on duty. You can hear, French, English, Spanish, Italian and Polish hymns and prayers in what is a worldwide gathering that has been going on over 150 years. With air travel more can come, and despite religious decline in Ireland there is still great interest worldwide in the Lourdes phenomenon. There was little small talk among our group as we took it all in, absorbed the scene as people walked via candlelight. It was quite a moving spectacle.

Earlier that day we visited the very impressive Castle Fort and Pyrenean Museum. This gives a mini history of the rural life in late middle ages, the defences of the castle against invaders and now the story of farming and living in



Crowds gathering for candlelight procession outside Lourdes Basilica



A candlelight procession



Crowds gathering at St. Mary's grotto

previous centuries. There is also a wonderful rock garden and great views of the Lourdes area. The next day was an early start to visit the Basilica, later an American priest said mass and in his sermon, who should we admire more the likes of success in business like Bill Gates of Microsoft or the person, battling through life with a disability in a wheelchair, better values are needed in modern life. He gave the congregation much to consider.

The following day was an appointment with a French priest, Xavier, and former UN Diplomat, who told us how the miracle of Lourdes began with Bernadette, a girl of 14 years, who saw a vision of the Virgin Mary, while collecting wood near a grotto cave by the river in the cold month of February back in 1858. The vision would appear many times to her, 18 in total, initially the church and Bishop of Tarbes were sceptical, but would later describe it as a miracle and she would devote her life to the church and become a nun but die at the young age of 35 from asthma cough. She was deemed in full mental health

after the vision investigation at the time in 1858 when she saw the visions at age 14 onwards. The church asked her to question the woman in the vision and she said I am the Immaculate Conception. Bernadette would later become a saint. Now there is a feast day for this.

## Miracles and Hospital

Pilgrims would then go there and there have been 80 proven miracles described in the hospital. Individual stories are told, some had cancer, pancreatic cancer that was cured or other terminal conditions. None were Irish as it turned out. Special dossiers are done on these patients and cures included that of Addison's disease, back injuries, MS and traumas. The conditions have to be severe and the sudden remedy cure long lasting. We learned the story of Edel Fulda in 1950 from Italy who was cured of cancer.

Special investigations are done involving a medical committee as each year there are thousands of annual claims of

a miracle cure. Pope John Paul came here twice, but current Pope Francis although invited by the Mayor has not yet come to Lourdes. This is partly why so many come here annually as they hope for some cure to their condition.

One of the most amazing elements is that thousands of carers come here annually at their own expense to help the sick. They number up to 100,000 and some of these carers have medical skills others do not but just want to help others. They assist in the hospitals there, where there is capacity for 900 patients in short stays. 300 full time staff plus many voluntary carers keep the hospital operation functioning.

You can read of sick people suddenly recovering at the hospital exhibition and the description of their condition prior to the sudden cure. A doctor there explained how the systems worked in treatments and how wonder cures are reported, but they are very rare, but some have happened as detailed in the exhibition.

Lourdes is a healing place with many happy encounters. It is not just physical healing

but spiritual also. Confessions are heard in many languages, even "reserve sins" for special ministry. Fr. Xavier gave example of a war criminal who came to confession and how people unburden big sins here and cleanse themselves mentally. We were also showed a huge hall for mass to 3000 and an underground church below the river with capacity for 25,000 worshippers, Sundays can see 15,000 at mass in various languages.

We then went out in the rain again to see the Baths, these are not sulphur baths but cold water from the nearby river and people queue up for the 12 Celsius cool water bath, which can be invigorating, some are disabled and need help and there is a male or female section. It can be a humbling experience. Some people come here annually and it was amazing to see the devotion to the task. Annually we have the Waterford Diocesan pilgrimage and the regulars say how much they enjoy coming to this special and peaceful place close to the mountains of the Pyrenees and away from the busy normal lives that they lead.

They get a sense of special fulfilment. People have left their hopes, dreams and fears there and carry on a long tradition. On the way back on the train to Toulouse on the Sunday, we met some Germans who had cycled all the way from the River Danube city of Regensburg Bavaria, 1800 kilometres across the Alps and southern France. They went sending the bikes back and flying home but seemed happy. A group of African diplomats and IT workers based in Holland were there too and said they wished to express their appreciation to the Blessed virgin, for all their success in life. Meeting persons like this brought back memories of a Camino Walk a few years back as folk want to give thanks and seek also fulfilment in life. There can be a sense of joy and exhilaration among some.

## Food and Drink

Not many Irish bars there to celebrate but one called the Munster, that served daytime food also, but had irregular hours. Next door is a very good Italian pizza place called Da Marco, very busy too, nearby is the Alexander, 3 courses for €21 in the evening. Try the nice Van Gogh Bar or the Comptoir near the market square, at Place Marcadal for a drink, good place to watch world go by and meet a local or two. A band played some rock and blues there outside on the Saturday evening. There's a memorial inside the "Comptoir" also to French General Marchall Foch of WW1, who visited here after defeating the Germans in WW1 in 1918.

We had a fine fish meal lunchtime at the 100 Culottes, great lunch and dessert, has nice Belgian beers in the evening time and is lively then. We stayed at the comfortable Gallia Londres Hotel, good food there too at good prices and is close to the 120 church owned, Basilica area, good bus service nearby to station and elsewhere in town. Take the bus the funicular railway and Pic de Jer, great views and hikes nearby. On the hike back down the hill there at Pic de Jer, we met a resident cave woman, literally. She is a Belgian hermit, we had a chat in French and said she liked the nature and lived off birds, eggs and rabbits, she goes down to pray in the grotto daily and spends summer in the cave, said the train driver of the funicular railway.

The train runs on hydro power from the river. We missed the Lourdes lake and the larger Pyrenean mountains but got a taste for a future occasion they have spa and hot springs up there, plus ski options in the winter and walking in the summer.