

PEOPLE

Pilgrims and tourists are charting their own pathways to the town of Bernadette

Lourdes: a place like no other



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‘HAVE you been to Lourdes before? I’ve been there 15 times. I love Lourdes.” The woman in the seat behind me on Ryanair Flight 5079 from Dublin was speaking to the person beside her in a voice too loud not to overhear.

The answer was inaudible, but the question was enough to remind me that there are people reading this who could lose and find me in this pilgrim site beloved of Irish people for decades.

My first and only visit to the shrine was an hour or so spent while passing through on a bicycle tour a few years ago. We were aiming for the Col du Tourmalet, one of the highest points on the Tour de France circuit, and lighting a candle in front of The Lady seemed a prudent precaution.

This time it was different. The Ryanair service began on April 1 and flies to and from Tarbes-Lourdes-Pyrénées airport every Friday and Monday until October. This familiarisation trip was a far more comfortable way of getting there than pedalling along the foothills of the Pyrénées.

Lourdes is different from any other city I have visited in France, and the difference starts in the airport.

Where else would you see rooms set aside for sick people? The airport was built specifically in mind of the kind of people who come to Lourdes seeking a cure, people who may be in the end stages of an illness, or with a condition that leaves them bed- or

wheelchair-bound.

The airport also has a rather fine restaurant, far ahead of the normal airport eatery, where we had a memorable lunch before the 15km bus ride to the town. It would make an ideal last taste of France for anyone taking the 13.40 flight back to Dublin.

As well as a large number of charter flights bringing pilgrim groups from all over the world, with a significant rise in numbers coming from Asia, the airport also caters for more and more individual travellers.

So at this stage it may be no harm to remind ourselves of the significance of this riverside town near the mountains that divide France from Spain.

As a person who just about remembers the centenary year of 1958, it is hard to imagine that there are young people who are not quite sure what happened there.

Briefly, a young local girl, Bernadette Soubirous, saw 18 apparitions of Mary the Mother of Jesus between February and July, 1858. Scoffed at in the beginning, Bernadette was eventually believed and declared a saint in 1933.

Long before her canonisation, pilgrims came to the grotto, or shallow cave, where she saw the apparitions, and the water that flows from the spring discovered by Bernadette is believed to have healing powers.

Thousands claim to have been cured of various conditions there. The Catholic Church is extremely careful in acknowledging cures to be miraculous but about 70 of them have been declared by panels of medical experts, and then by a bishop, to have been beyond human intervention.

The criteria for a miracle are that the medical condition must



have been certified as incurable; the cure must be sudden and complete, with no relapse; the passage from “an established pathological state to a state of health” must be attested by a panel of doctors.

Our group had the good fortune to be given a tour of the sanctuary (the area surrounding the grotto which includes churches, the basilica and hostels) by Monsignor Xavier d’Arodes, the vice-rector of the Shrine (who incidentally is a good friend of Fr Richard Gibbons, the rector of Knock Shrine).

A former diplomat who travels the world promoting Lourdes and liaising with other Marian shrines like Knock, Walsingham in England, Czestochowa in Poland and Guadalupe in Mexico, he

was generous with his time and knowledge.

The day before we had seen the candlelight procession which takes place every evening at 9pm. The mist had come down from the mountain, and the damp atmosphere was not very inspiring, but the devotion of the pilgrims was almost tangible as they recited the rosary in many languages, including Irish.

It was still damp and cool on the Saturday morning as we visited the Accueil (reception in English, but really a cross between a hostel and a hospital) where sick and disabled people are accommodated and cared for.

There are professionals involved, but every year up to 900 people volunteer at any one time for this

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THE candlelight procession and multi-lingual devotions that take place each evening in Lourdes will never be forgotten by anyone who has experienced them. PHOTO: PIERRE VINCENT



charitable and demanding work.

“The volunteers are the sign of the continuing miracle of Lourdes,” said the Monsignor as he led us towards the famous baths where faithful and sceptical alike are welcomed to bathe in the waters of the sacred spring.

Each stone bath is enclosed by curtains, and volunteers assist those who need help with their immersion.

According to published accounts, the cold water does not have the usual effect on those who experience it, and they can get dressed immediately afterwards without a long wait to get dry.

There is an undoubted aura of peace and tranquility around the sanctuary. People wait in silence to take their turn in the baths;

others carry candles they will light in specially built shelters; and in the adoration chapel, relays of the faithful keep vigil in front of the Blessed Sacrament every hour of the day, every day of the year.

It was relatively quiet when we were there in mid-June. But at times of traditional pilgrimage it can be extremely crowded, and the grounds are laid out with the safe and efficient movement of people in mind.

A river, the Gave de Pau, rushes down from the mountains and flows through Lourdes. There is no fishing allowed in the sanctuary, and during one traditional pilgrimage, that of the Gypsies, the ducks that live on the river are trapped and brought to a place of safety. These particular pilgrims

would regard them as free meals provided by Our Lady.

Apart from the Sanctuary, the defining characteristics of Lourdes that distinguish it from all other French towns are the hotels and the souvenir shops. The famous statue of the Immaculate Conception appears everywhere, most often in the shape of holy water bottles, but on medallions, keyrings, shopping bags – you name it.

Some shops cater for specific nationalities. St Laurence O’Toole seems even diocese-specific, never mind country-specific.

There are more hotel rooms than any other town or city in France, with the exception of Paris. We stayed in the elegant Hotel Gallia & Londres, established originally by a



THE young Bernadette sculpted in stone. PHOTO: DAVID BURKE



A STATUE of the Irish mountaineer, Henry Russell (1834-1909) stands in the chateau garden in Lourdes.

PHOTO: DAVID BURKE



PEOPLE come in reverent silence to the grotto at all hours of the day.

PHOTO: PIERRE VINCENT

member of the Soubriou family. It combines old-world opulence with modern style, and if you only take breakfast in its beautifully panelled dining room you will have had a memorable experience.

Dining and drinking options are myriad: one of us wanted to visit the Munster pub; it was closed on the night, but it will merit a visit another time. Lunch at the Cent Culottes restaurant was a reasonably priced and delicious meal which included local seafood and pork specialities. The name is a pun – think of the French Revolution’s sans culottes and take it from there.

There are many more non-religious diversions, including the funicular to the Pic du Jer which gives an even better view of the town, but the star for this summer is likely to be *Bernadette de Lourdes: The Musical*, which premiered at the beginning of this month.

What most people now think of as Lourdes did not exist in the time of Bernadette. The old town clustered on the slopes of a hill surmounted by a castle which withstood many attacks during the centuries when it dominated contested territory between the various kingdoms that eventually were absorbed into France and Spain.

These days the Chateau de

Lourdes provides a panoramic view over the town and the shrine, with the peaks and valley of the Pyrenées for an alluring backdrop.

A visit to the castle is a small boy’s delight as the guide points out the drawbridge, the portcullis and the murder holes through which all kinds of nasty things were dropped on intruders.

Further in is a museum of Pyrenean life with rooms kitted out as they would have been centuries ago. A sign of how isolated these people were, even from the next valley, is the display of the varying styles of traditional dress from places only a few miles from each other as the eagle flies.

One of the first non-local people to climb in the Pyrenées was an Irishman, Henry Russell, heir to a title in Co Down, who fell in love with these mountains, climbed some of them many times, and wrote the first books about them in the mid-19th century. A statue of him looking towards the mountains, staff in hand, adorns a lovely rock garden in the Chateau de Lourdes.

Thousands followed in his footsteps to breathe the pure air of the mountains and revel in their splendours.

In the next couple of days we got a taste of what the Pyrenées have to offer, but that will have to wait for a week or two.