

# Sunday Travel

Whether you seek a miracle in its holy waters or the divine panoramas of the Pyrenees, Lourdes is a refreshing retreat, writes *Jim Murty*

Do I believe in miracles? Not really, but right now I feel closer to God. It is hard not to when you are among the clouds at the 2,877-metre peak of the Pic du Midi mountain in the French Pyrenees. As an inveterate sinner, I also find it hard not to jump up and down on the metal skywalk, despite the sign telling us not to.

I certainly feel lighter of spirit, though perhaps that is the heady mix of altitude and the bottle of dry white clos de la vierge we just conquered while eating cep-stuffed Astarac chicken in Le 2877, the highest restaurant in Europe. But could it be something else: a feeling of elation that comes only from completing a spiritual journey? Perhaps my soul is experiencing a delayed reaction after taking the waters in nearby Lourdes.

When we had touched down the day before at Tarbes-Lourdes-Pyrénées airport the heavens had opened. The fleet of elderly Irish pilgrims we were among on Ryanair's new summer route from Dublin to the French market town famed for its Marian apparitions may well have felt at home in the rain, but as it continued to pour over the château fort de Lourdes – Lourdes Castle – and the Gave de Pau river and valley below, I could not help thinking that we had somehow displeased the creator: I had come for the water, but not this kind.

The wet does not deter us, however, and we soon embark on some traditional Lourdes pilgrim activities. After dinner, we join the nightly torchlight procession around the esplanade of the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes – the area surrounding the Grotto of Massabielle, where 14-year-old St Bernadette Soubirous claimed that her 18 visions of the Virgin Mary took place throughout 1858. The procession has taken place around the sanctuary every evening since 1863 and, as we pass the basilicas of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception and Our Lady of the Rosary, all eyes are on the sisterhood of nuns carrying aloft a lighted box containing a statue of the Virgin Mary to the altar. It won't be the last statue of the Virgin we see.

Each pilgrim carries a candle picked up from a display next to a donation box, which they then encase in a paper holder akin to a Chinese takeaway carton – it offers little defence against the drizzle, as it soon gets soggy. We have quite a job stopping the night breeze from blowing the flame out. Still, it does have the words of Ave Maria on it in a range of languages, as well as the Credo in Latin. For relative heathens like me, there is also the international language of the sign of the cross and “amen”, so we are covered for every eventuality as we listen to the distant figures of the celebrants.



The Basilica of our Lady of the Rosary, above, and a statue of the Virgin, right, at the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes

# All hail a trip for sun shrine worshippers



Relaxing Japanese baths at Balnéa



ving for custom with St Therese et al as far as the eye can see. Unusually, and unfairly, he seems to have no place among the pantheon of saintly trinkets being sold in the shop, though ones I have never heard of – St Expeditus, St Benoit, St Gilles – do.

Must-buy items include Virgin-shaped plastic bottles so that you can fill up on the freely available, reputedly healing spring water from taps dotted throughout the sanctuary, and statues of Our Lady, from which there are thousands to choose, all exactly the same. Candles also do a brisk business, though I pass on buying the 1.8 metre-high one, at €140. Still, if you are looking for something to get for the

grandkids, “I am the Immaculate Conception” pastilles and mints are a bargain at €7.10 a pack.

Next morning, having slept in and been forced to forego my usual ablutions, I wonder if I can sneak in a quick dip at the holy baths near the grotto, where those afflicted with all kinds of ills have come for cures since the mid-19th century. Alas, any ailments I am suffering from are of the self-inflicted, overindulgence variety, so I'm not allowed. Our helpful guide Monseigneur Xavier gets us in to look at one of the baths, however, and it looks . . . unremarkable.

Whatever magic there may be in the water, it is beyond medical minds. Or maybe not: the Monseigneur informs us it is 12C and these days there is scientific evidence to support health benefits from cold baths and showers. If you do get a “miracle”, you can register it with Lourdes' Office of Medical Observations, which has a panel of volunteer medics who evaluate claimed miracle cures.

There is someone behind a curtain in a neighbouring bath when we visit, but sadly we don't have time to wait and see whether or not they got their miracle cure: we are off to climb the Pyrenees. Or at least, take a leisurely ride up one of them. I let the cable car take the strain during the 15-minute trip to the top of Pic du Midi having no more strenuous activity in mind



ALAMY

## THE LOWDOWN

**Ryanair** flies to Lourdes twice a week from Dublin over the summer season. Our return flights were about €120, but look out for offers. [ryanair.com](#)

### WHERE TO STAY

**Grand Hôtel Gallia & Londres**, Lourdes; [grandhotel-gallia-londres.h-rez.com](#)  
**Le Lion d'Or**, Cauterets; [hotel-cauterets.fr/en/the-lion-d-or](#)  
**Hotel Mercure Sensoria**, Saint-Lary-Soulan; [mercuresensoria.fr](#)  
All hotels are about €120 per night.

### WHAT TO DO

Visit **Lourdes Castle** for panoramic views and medieval history. €7.50; [lourdes-visite.com](#)  
**Pic du Midi**, Pyrenees. Walk the skywalk and the Observatory (€45). Stay the night and get up at sunrise and immerse yourself in the Pyrenees. All-inclusive cost of a single room from €439pp, from July-September 15, double room €469pp. [picdumidi.com](#)

### SPAS

**Les Bains du Rocher**, Cauterets; [bains-rocher.fr](#)  
**Balnéa Thermes**, Loudenvielle; [balnea.fr](#)  
(Both about €18 per spa)

### WHERE TO EAT

**Grand Hôtel Gallia & Londres**, in Lourdes. Quaint, old-style surroundings with contemporary cuisine – fish is a specialty. Try the starter of strips of smoked salmon, fennel dill crunch, lemon cream and a main of cod, and chorizo risotto with piquillos and a saffron coulis.  
**Les 100 Culottes**, Lourdes. Sit at a long table and take on the burger de poulet et maison frites (chicken burger and house chips).  
**Le 2877**, Pic du Midi, and **La Grange Restaurant**, Saint-Lary.

### IMPORTANT WEBSITES

[en.lourdes-infotourisme.com](#);  
[lourdes-france.org](#)  
[tourisme-hautes-pyrenees.com](#)

than visiting the aforementioned restaurant. Should you be of a mind, you can book ahead, stay the night and wake to the whitest snow-peaked mountains.

The range of cosy accommodations I stay in includes the Mercure Sensoria in Saint-Lary-Soulan – though I find myself stumped by the shower, which scooshes me from above, behind and all sides. Soaking is easier, and while not all establishments may offer the healing waters of Lourdes, they seem to do baths better here in the Pyrenees. Among the open-air spa offerings, try Balnéa at Loudenvielle: there cannot be many better ways to relax than by gently swimming from Japanese bath to Japanese bath, each pool warmer than the last and all set against a panorama of the Pyrenees and Génos-Loudenvielle lake.

You can get too comfortable though, and I have come to Lourdes and the Pyrenees to be cleansed and purified, after all, so on my way back to the changing room after a trip to the sauna, I pass by an overhead bucket with a chain attached and pull it. I am hit by the cold fresh water of the iciest Pyrenees waterfall. It makes me feel 10 years younger. Now that's a miracle.