

A Pilgrimage through the Hautes-Pyrénées

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Cammy Harley finds a lot more than one of the world's most visited Marian Shrines in and around Lourdes

The [Hautes-Pyrénées](#) department has never been more accessible as it is now through the introduction of a [Ryanair](#) flight from Dublin directly to Tarbes Lourdes Pyrenees. Previously, flying into Lourdes meant booking a charter with a tour group but now with the new flight-route, individuals can make an apparition in Lourdes in just under two hours. The airport is small and efficient and due to its years of service in accepting charter flights, is very capable of dealing with surges of people in a fast and efficient manner.

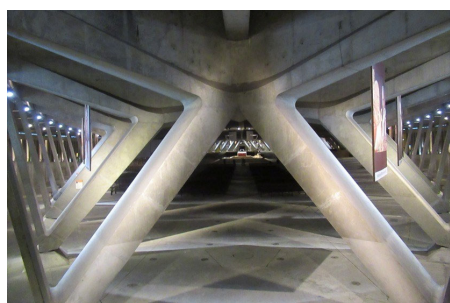
Lourdes City and Sanctuary

For a city that hosts up to several million visitors per year and has the most beds in the country

(aside from Paris), you are guaranteed to find somewhere to stay for a night or two while you explore all that Lourdes has to offer. Even if you are not religious, the sanctuary consisting of 22 chapels and churches, 3 basilica's (one of them underground with a capacity to seat 25,000 people) and the world renowned Grotto of Massabielle are well worth visiting for the sheer experience of the vastness of it. The nightly 9pm Marian torchlight procession is one of the most popular celebrations in Lourdes and it goes ahead regardless of the weather from Easter to October.



Candles burning with hope at the candle hut in Lourdes



A view of the underground basilica that seats 25,000 people

We were lucky to stay in the century-old [Grand Hôtel Gallia](#) situated in the heart of downtown Lourdes, a mere 350m from the sanctuary. The hotel is a family run hotel and has a regal, opulent feel to it although it does have all the modern conveniences. From here, we could explore all that Lourdes has to offer and most of it a mere stroll through interesting streets. For those who do not wish to walk, Lourdes has a little tourist road train that can whizz you around the highlights in 45 minutes or you can rent a Segway and go on the Segway tour which is an unusual, but accessible to all, way to see the city.

Château Fort Lourdes and other highlights in Lourdes

The [Fortified Castle of Lourdes](#) stands on a hill and commands beautiful views over the city and sanctuary of Lourdes with the beautiful emerald-green Gave River flowing through them. The castle has had an interesting history ranging from fort to prison to military barracks and to the museum that it currently houses today.

A journey up the Pic du Jer in an antique funicular is a lovely way to spend an afternoon and if you have the energy, the summit is also the starting point of a lovely botanical guided hiking trail. Also nearby is the lovely Lourdes glacial lake which offers a range of outdoor activities such as rafting, kayaking and airboating. Also on offer are fishing



City of Devotions: A selection of rosary beads in 'Downtown Lourdes'

expeditions, hiking, golf and mountain biking. For those with younger families, Lourdes Lake also makes a wonderful place for a picnic and pedalo ride.

Leaving Lourdes....

Taking a road trip through the Pyrenees is a breathtaking experience. Leaving Lourdes, you will twist your way on small, narrow roads that lead you through the mountains passing quaint villages in every pocket. Rivers gush beside the road and everywhere looks green with forested hillsides and roadside meadows while the mountains rise up sharply to display their snow-capped peaks.

We made our way to the mountain village of [Cauterets](#) which is quintessentially French and unmarked by tourism. Here we booked in at a family run hotel called [Hôtel Lion d'Or](#) which is highly recommended. The hotel has been run by the Lassere family for four generations and it radiates charm and character. Care and attention to detail is evident in every corner and collections of well-maintained antiques adorn every nook. Breakfast was a wonderful spread of fresh, flaky pastries, home-made jams, ham and cheese and freshly squeezed orange juice which set us up perfectly to experience the joys of the thermal spa. From the back entrance of Hôtel Lion d'Or, just across the road, is [Les Bains du Rocher](#) where you can have a truly restorative time wallowing in the warm thermal, healing waters while enjoying the views of the surrounding mountains.



The Pont d'Espagne near Cauterets

From Cauterets, we were a short 7km drive to the nearby Pyrenees National Park which has a wealth of sights to see – most notably the historic bridge of Pont d'Espagne which spans cascading waterfalls and was once part of the old road leading through the mountains to Spain. The park is watched over by the towering Vignemale, the highest peak in the Pyrenees at 3,298m with its famed Gaube glacial lake with its turquoise waters at its feet. A chair lift is available for anyone who is not able for the hour long walk to the lake or for those wishing to obtain a bird's eye view of the park. Known as the

Vintage details at the Hotel Lion d'Or

'Garden of Eden' of the Pyrenees, the park is home to ibex, toads, lizards and friendly marmots.

Cirque du Gavarnie

Each valley in the Pyrenees holds its own particular gem and a valley over, near the town of Gavarnie, is the majestic Cirque du Gavarnie (*see main pic*). The sheer size of the natural amphitheatre with its cliff walls 1,500m high, make it clear to see why it has been listed as a UNESCO heritage site. Victor Hugo described the site as 'it is the most mysterious edifice from the most mysterious of architects; it's the colosseum of nature.' It is also one of the few heritage sites that one can access without a guide or any specialist equipment. The walk is so amenable that it can be done in regular trainers without even the need for special hiking apparatus. The road runs alongside the crystal clear waters of the Gave River which originates here and later runs powerfully through Lourdes. At the end of the road, at the base of the Cirque, you will see the highest waterfall in France as it plunges down its 400m drop. For those not wishing to do the walk, or for something a little different, a queue of little Pyrenean donkeys wait in a shaded enclosure to be hired for a ride to the waterfall and back.

Pic du Midi

The next unmissable gem of the Pyrenees, is the summit of Pic du Midi but en-route, be sure to stop at the famed Col du Tourmalet, a mountain pass synonymous with the Tour de France. Here you can take a selfie with the famous Col Giant, a 3m high sculpture named Octave (in honour after the first rider to cross the Tourmalet in 1910) before continuing on your way to the ski town of La Mongie where a cable car will take you to the summit of Pic du Midi.

A cable car leaving Pic du Midi

The Pic du Midi offers a panoramic view of the Pyrenees as you can see 300km of the 400km long mountain range from the viewing terrace. Pic du Midi also boasts a sky pontoon, a hemispheric cinema, an experiment area showing the history of all research carried out on the sun, stars, atmosphere and cosmic particles. Because of the absence of light pollution, the Pic du Midi has now been listed as an 'International Dark Sky Reserve'. It is interesting to note that it is a working stellar observatory and it is from here that the Americans mapped the moon before their first moon landing. Informative, interactive Histopads give an immersive experience and are highly popular with children who are naturally comfortable with technology. Couples wishing to spend the night on the Pic need to book a room a year in advance due to demand but the wait is well worth it as the rooms have the most exquisite views of the mountains. The on-site

restaurant, aptly named 'Le 2877' is the highest restaurant in Europe and has a wide variety of tempting gourmet food and an extensive accompanying wine list.

Balnéa Thermal Spa

The [Balnéa thermal spa](#) is the largest in the Hautes Pyrénées and also one of the most relaxing. Situated near the Loudenvielle Lake, and surrounded by the mountains, the outdoor Japanese Pools which are set at 33°C, 37°C and 40°C are an experience not to be missed. Submerged to your shoulders in warm, healing waters with massaging water jets aimed at your back, it is easy to drift into a deep state of relaxation and well-being. To ensure you get the most of your experience, Balnéa has a separate section for families with children under 12.

The Pyrenees, which boast a total of 3 UNESCO heritage sites, 8 classic Tour de France Cols, 10 thermal spa centres, 2 national parks, 2 Nature Parks, 13 Glacial lakes, a city known all across the world, a national nature reserve and a vineyard, are a place that one cannot just visit once. The Pyrenees have the capacity to be a playground for pilgrims, hikers, bikers, cyclists, soloists and families. The Pyrenees are a pilgrimage unto themselves and once visited, will call to you forever more.

Where Exactly?



More Information

For additional information or for planning a tailor made trip through the Pyrenees visit www.lourdes-infotourisme.com

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