

Travel

A new flight to Lourdes led to adventures in Pyrenees



ADVENTURES NEW: Cammy Harley, who undertook a trip to Lourdes-Pyrenees, with Ryanair.

LOURDES now has a new miracle to offer — not only is it still a world-renowned destination for pilgrims, but it now offers an easy port of entry to the Hautes-Pyrenees.

Previously, arriving in Lourdes from Ireland required booking with a group on a charter plane, but now, thanks to a new route by Ryanair, individuals can jet out of Dublin and land in Tarbes Lourdes-Pyrenees in just under two hours.

Lourdes City and Sanctuary

Even if you're using Lourdes airport as a springboard to the numerous ski resorts and hiking trails of the Pyrenees, Lourdes city itself is most definitely worth a visit in its own right.

Second only to Paris for beds, you are guaranteed a wonderful place to stay. We stayed at the Gran Hotel Gallia which is located right in the heart of things with the sanctuary just 350m away. The hotel has been in operation for over 100 years giving it a royal, opulent feel whilst being highly comfortable and modern.

Visiting the sanctuary with its 22 places of worship, three Basilica's (one of them underground with a seating capacity of 25,000), the famous Grotto of Massabielle and the candlelit procession at 9pm each evening, are all worth experiencing.

In addition, there is the lovely fortified Lourdes Castle and a journey up the Pic de Jer in a little antique funicular to enjoy.

Setting out on our journey from

Lourdes is a renowned destination for pilgrims, but it's a great place from which to explore the Pyrenees too, writes CAMMY HARLEY

Lourdes, we made our way along winding alpine roads to the mountain village of Cauterets which is un-marked by tourism and quintessentially French. Here we booked in at a quaint family-run hotel called Hotel Lion d'Or which cannot be recommended enough. The hotel has been run by the Lasere family for four generations and it oozes charm.

Care and attention to detail is evident in every corner of the hotel, which all display attentively maintained collections of antiques. The bedside phone in the room is of course, also vintage and the whole ambience is exactly what a little mountain lodge should feel like. Breakfast consisted of a fabulous spread of home-made jams, pastries, boiled eggs, ham and cheese and freshly squeezed orange juice.

From here, we were a short 7km drive (or hike on a separate mountain trail if you have the time) to the nearby Pyrenees National Park which has a wealth of sights to feast the eyes. The park is watched over by the towering Vignemale, the highest peak in the Pyrenees at 3298m with the 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 ob-

tain a bird's eye view of the park.

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

The Pont d'Espagne is an historical stone bridge that used to be part of the route to Spain — it looks stoic as it spans the cascading waterfalls.

Back in Cauterets, don't miss out on visiting the beautiful thermal baths of Les Bains du Rocher, a truly restorative experience where you can relax in warm jets of bubbles whilst taking in the view of wooded hillsides and snow-capped mountains beyond.

The Pyrenees are studded with gems to explore and each valley holds a unique beauty. The UNESCO heritage site of Cirque du Gavarnie near the town of Gavarnie is spectacular and despite its dramatic 1500m snow-capped walls, you can walk right up to its base without any specialist hiking shoes or guides making it a perfect walk for families. The waterfall that ends at the bottom of the cirque has plunged a 400m making it the highest waterfall in France.

The gem of the next valley we visited is the summit of Pic du Midi. If you park in the town of La Mongie, a cable car will take you to the summit. The cable cars leave every 15 minutes making it

easy to plan your adventure.

The Pic du Midi offers a panoramic view of the Pyrenees as from the viewing terrace, you can see 300km of the 400km long range. 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'. Informative, interactive Histopads give an immersive experience and are available in five languages. When you have picked up an appetite, the aptly named 'le 2877' is the highest restaurant in Europe and its gourmet menu would not look out of place in a Michelin guide.

For more information on planning a tailor made trip through the Pyrenees visit www.lourdes-infotourisme.com



ON HIGH: There's a chairlift for the hour long walk to the Gaube glacial lake.

My favourite holidays

Cork actress Ciara Morrin (right) is appearing in the play *Madam of Myrtleville*, in an outdoor location on Meade Street, off O'Sullivan's Quay in Cork city tonight, tomorrow and Saturday at 9.30pm. For more, see Off-Street Theatre Company on Facebook



Where was your favourite childhood holiday, and why?

I would have to say it was a trip to Majorca with my parents and brother, I must have been seven, we stayed in apartments and we made loads of new friends and had fun in the pool diving off my dad's shoulders. I think I had my first banana split and I went to my first amusement park with big water slides. We had fun for hours on end.

Where was your favourite holiday as an adult, and why?

Recently I visited Norway, I began my trip in Bergen, a city surrounded by six mountains, the fish cakes are delicious in this region. I then travelled by train and bus through the infamous Fjords region near Flam and onward to Oslo to meet friends that I worked with in London. We did an overnight trip to a nature reserve and stayed in a typical Norwegian hut that was more than 300 years old. We went rowing and caught fish for dinner. The most striking aspect of Norway in June are the bright skies at night, it doesn't really get dark. I found I didn't need as much sleep as I normally would. The people were so very welcoming and I loved their waffles.

What is your favourite short-break city destination, and why?

It's hard to choose one but if I had to, I'd say London, as its rich in culture, I love to see Shakespeare at the Globe or stroll along the South Bank, taking in an exhibition at the Tate and grabbing a nice burrito afterwards by the river. London never sleeps if you ask me. It has fantastic transport links. I miss living in London so it's always great to return and catch up with friends anytime I'm in town

Which city or country have you never visited that you would love to see, and why?

There are so many I'd still love to see. Japan in spring time for cherry blossoms season, Iceland for their volcanic landscape and geysers, Scandinavia for the Northern Lights, Antarctica for its sheer beauty and its remoteness. Next on my list is Nepal, it has been calling to me for some time. I'd love to visit Tibet, the mountains, sit under the tree that Buddha sat under when he became enlightened and meditate to my heart's content.

AFTER the success of the marketing campaigns for the Wild Atlantic Way and Ireland's Ancient East, there was a feeling that the middle part of Ireland was losing out

So, last year, Fáilte Ireland launched their latest brand, Ireland's Hidden Heartlands.

To reinforce this brand and put it firmly on the map last week they put a number of installations at some of the region's most beautiful and scenic midland destinations in Cavan, Leitrim, Roscommon, Longford, Westmeath, Clare, Galway, Tipperary and Offaly.

The signs are a fun reminder to slow down and take a moment to appreciate the beauty and tranquillity of the region, showcasing some of Ireland's best kept secrets.

With so many people now seeking immersive and unique outdoor experiences to recharge and replenish from their hectic lifestyles, Ireland's Hidden Heartlands is inviting people to break from routine and take a moment to stop, look, listen and enjoy all the region has to offer.

At the very heart of Ireland, the region offers the perfect escape for those seeking hidden gems and active breaks in nature.

Uncover a blend of land and water trails, undiscovered spots and beautiful landscapes, in one of the most surprising and unspoilt parts of Ireland only two hours from main cities.

