



FRENCH FORTRESS:
The majestic
Lourdes Chateau

SCENERY does not get much more spectacular than the Cirque de Gavarnie, high in the French Pyrenean Mountains near the border with Spain.

Just the sight of the sheer cliffs rising nearly 5,000ft from the valley floor is enough to take your breath away.

I've been here before on a solo hiking trip but it's just as impressive second time round. Today I'm with a group of friends seeing it for the first time and they are all quietly spellbound.

The cirque — a wall of rock shaped like a horseshoe forming a natural, majestic amphitheatre — is the centrepiece of the Pyrenees National Park.

The cliffs are even more impressive when you consider you are already well above sea level and that the actual peaks stand at around 10,000ft.

If you are lucky enough to visit in spring when the melt water from the winter snow is at its highest, you can marvel at the second biggest waterfall in Europe cascading 422 metres down the cliff face.

The Cirque, a Unesco World Heritage Site, is 5km in diameter and is surrounded by 16 summits all over 3,000m.

On our recent visit, the sun was shining, the birds were singing and the views were glorious.

We had stayed the previous night in the picturesque town of Cauterets, 42km away, a great base for exploring this whole region. It's a pretty town in a dramatic setting at the foot of the mountains which caters to skiers in the winter and so has

no shortage of lively bars and restaurants, including the lively O Regent where we had dinner during a local rugby match on the TV.

Our accommodation, Hotel Lion d'Or (Golden Lion), was cosy and quaint, the type of place you immediately fall in love with.

As we toured the peaks we stopped off to see the spectacular waterfalls of the Pont d'Espagne before driving to the Col du Tourmalet, a mountain pass at

2,115m which regularly features in the Tour de France. It was mobbed with cyclists all vying for photographs

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against the rugged backdrop and we had to admire their stamina getting up the ferocious hills.

Further on, in the ski resort of La Mongie, now quiet and empty in the warm spring, we caught the cable car to the Pic du Midi, an astronomy and meteorological research centre sitting at the top of a

MOUNTAIN HIGH ENOUGH:
Jim Gallagher at the Cirque de Gavarnie in the Pyrenees National Park in France



High & Almighty

JIM GALLAGHER gets closer to God with a visit to the French Pyrenees and a pilgrimage to Lourdes

mountain at 2,877m.

The journey up alone is worth the €45 return ticket (children €27) because of the spectacular views. The ride is so long it actually takes two cable cars to reach the summit as you change at a midway station.

At the top there are magnificent 360-degree views of the Pyrenees from several panoramic terraces. For hardy souls, there is even a sky bridge, a metal walkway over a drop of thousands of feet, part of a recent

€7m development. A museum tour and an interactive astronomy centre are also included in the cable car ticket.

And don't miss out on the amazing restaurant, the highest in Europe. You

might expect frozen pizza and chips in such a remote location but you could not be more wrong.

We enjoyed a gourmet meal starting with a tasting plate of trio of Pyrenean trout (tartare, gravlax and smoked), vegan mille-feuille of seasoned vegetables with herbs and house-smoked mi-cuit foie-gras with roasted dried fruit chutney.

My main course was squid stuffed with black boar sausage. And it was all washed down with some lovely local red and white wines.

You can actually sleep at the Pic du Midi but it is fully booked a year in advance. It can only accommodate 27 people in 12

double rooms costing €450 each and three singles (the cost includes the cable car).

Pricey, yes, but hopefully you will be waking up to one of the most extraordinary views you will ever see, dawn over the Pyrenees. Guests get up in the dark to catch the sunrise.

While in the mountains, we also visited two gorgeous spas with warm outdoor pools facing the mountains, the Bains du Rocher Thermes in Cauterets and the stunning Balnéa Thermes in Loudenvielle.



RIDING HIGH: The cable car to the Pic du Midi

Our hotel base for the latter visit was the modern four star Mercure Sensoria in St Lary, a pretty little town half an hour away. Dinner was in the atmospheric Restaurant Lagrange nearby.

We had flown to France with Ryanair

on their new direct link to Tarbes-Lourdes. And our first night and morning were spent in the pilgrimage town, familiar to so many Irish visitors over the decades.

Naturally we visited the famous grotto, the three basilicas and even the baths

where pilgrims wait patiently to immerse themselves in the waters, but there are other sights too to see in this town at the foot of the Pyrenees, including the impressive medieval castle.

From its ramparts there are lovely views



EVENING PRAYERS: A night-time procession in Lourdes

Travel notes

- For more information on Lourdes and the Hautes-Pyrénées region, see: lourdes-france.org; tourisme-hautes-pyrenees.com; pyrenees-trip.com
- For information on Ryanair's new service to Tarbes-Lourdes, see: ryanair.com
- Hotel Lion D'or in Cauterets: hotel-cauterets.fr/fr/le-lion-d-or/html
- Pic du Midi: picdumidi.com
- Bains du Rocher Spa: bains-rocher.fr
- Balnea Spa: balnea.fr
- Mercure Sensoria Hotel: mercuresensoria.fr/en/home

of the sanctuary and the mountains and there is a model village not to be missed.

Our base in Lourdes was the stylish four-star Grand Hotel Gallia & Londres, right in the centre of town with easy access to all the sights.

We even took in the nightly torchlight procession to the Notre Dame Basilica which attracted hundreds of pilgrims, despite a constant rain.

Before leaving for our mountain tour the following day we had a hearty lunch in the Les 100 Culottes to prepare us for our journey.

The logo for this region of Haute-Pyrenees is HaPy. We certainly left it that way.