

Lourdes - more than just a shrine nestled in the foothills of the Pyrenees



Breda Graham pictured at the summit of Pic du Midi in the French Pyrenees.



[By Breda Graham](#)

Digital Journalist

There's more to Lourdes than just a shrine. Self-confessed sceptic **Breda Graham** leaves her perceptions at home and miraculously discovers a different side to the Pyrenees region.

Checking in for my Lourdes-bound flight at Dublin Airport I was overwhelmingly sceptical as to what I was about to encounter on my four-day trip to one of the world's most renowned Catholic pilgrimage sites.

I am all for pushing myself out of my comfort zone, especially when it comes to travel, but this was different. As someone who is admittedly doubtful of all things religion, I wondered was I the best person to send on such a trip.

Before visiting the town, which lies in the foothills of the Pyrenees mountain range, I had a very definite opinion of Lourdes.

A place of worship and devotion. A place of spiritual significance and healing. A place which attracts millions of pilgrims each year, who travel from the four corners of the earth to visit the Sanctuary of

Lourdes, where reported apparitions of Our Lady of Lourdes were witnessed by Bernadette Soubirous in 1858.

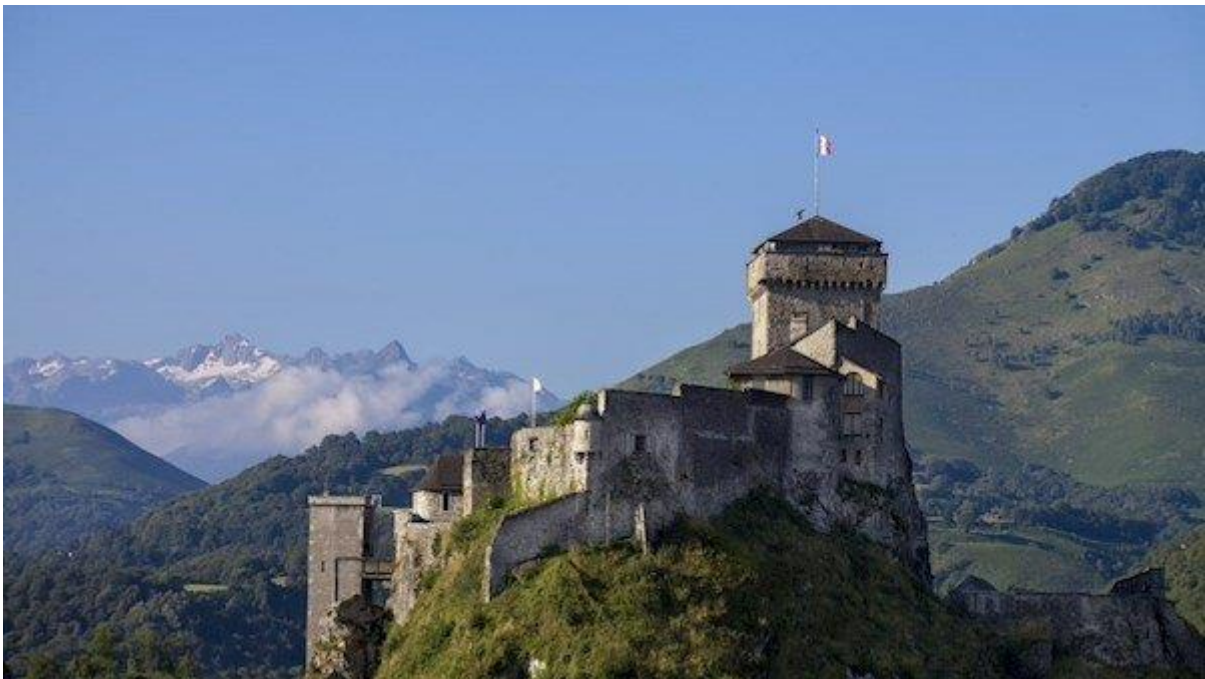
How wrong was I to write off such a characteristic and quaint French town before having truly immersed myself in all it had to offer.

A slight “where’s my passport” panic while queuing at the Ryanair boarding desk, a relieved “I found it, it was there all along” realisation and a two-hour direct flight from Dublin to [Tarbes Lourdes Pyrénées Airport](#) later and I was surrounded by the snow-capped mountain tops of the Pyrenees.

On arrival into the town centre, the first thing that struck me was the amount of souvenir shops that lined the streets, selling holy medals and replicas of the Virgin Mary, a representation of just how major a religious site the town is. In contrast, the part of the town where the locals reside, was that of a charming French town.

Winding cobbled streets and colourful buildings with casement windows met us on our short stroll from the town centre to the fortified castle.

A wander around the castle and the streets below will take you away from the hustle and bustle of the gathering pilgrims, so much so that you almost forget its association with Catholicism.



Château fort de Lourdes.

After a stay at the 4-star Grand Hotel Gallia & Londres, with its beautiful yet vintage-style decor, we took off for the French Pyrenees.

Just 32km southwest of Lourdes lies the picturesque spa town and ski resort of Caunterets.

Upon check-in to our second hotel of the trip, Hotel du Lion D’or, it was evident we were in a mountain town, with the unique decor creating a chalet-like feel to the hotel’s spacious rooms with views of the surrounding Pyrenees.

After admiring our rooms and the impressive views, we set off to wander around the Pyrenees National Park.

The spectacular we were treated to was Pont d'Espagne, a stone-built bridge that spans the Gave de Marcadau river at its meeting point with the Gave de Gaube river.

The mist from the impressive cascades lightly sweeping my face, the whooshing sound of the water and the crisp mountain air reminded me of where I was: 1500 metres above sea level in the heart of the French Pyrenees.

After heading back to Cauterets to explore the ski resort with a population of less than 1000 people, it was time to relax in the thermal waters for which the town is well known.

The last thing I expected to happen whilst unwinding in Les Bains du Rocher spa was to meet a local who spent almost two years of his early 20s living in Cork city.

In what could only be described as the most unlikely of places, the old saying that us Irish can't go anywhere without meeting someone somehow connected to us, proved true.

Lifeguard Sebastian reminisced about his time spent in Cork and boasted about his love of GAA, the Rebel county jersey on hand to prove his pride.

"Before coming to Ireland, I didn't know how to use a washing machine, how to cook, pay my bills, or take public transport on my own," he admitted.

He said that he felt so lucky to have met such friendly people who he still keeps in contact with, 16 years later.

When asked what he missed most about Cork he summed it up nicely. "The craic."



Lifeguard Sebastian showing off his Cork jersey from his time spent in the Rebel county.

Witnessing how much meeting someone from a place that was such a big part of his life meant to Sebastian, made me realise just how special travel really is. Day three began with a 9am departure from Cauterets to Cirque de Gavarnie, a 5km in diameter colosseum which holds the highest waterfalls in Europe.

The surrounding meadowland was alive with scurrying insects and the turquoise water, such so because of the melting snow from the mountains, was a rare perfection.

A quick stop at Col du Tourmalet, the most climbed route by Tour de France cyclists, was made before travelling by cable car to Pic du Midi.

The peak, famous for its astronomical observatory, houses one of the highest restaurants in the world, called 2.877, the height above sea level at which its food is served.

The panoramic terraces allow for a 360-degree view over 300km of the 500km stretch of the Pyrenees and a 12m metal bridge suspended in thin air allows for a view not only of the peaks but the nearby floating clouds.

Over €7million was invested over three years to build new attractions such as the sky bridge, an immersive cinema, the Histopads which allow the experience to be enhanced by augmented reality and the Experience zone which makes the science behind the observatory accessible to all.

After what was hands down one of the highs of the trip, quite literally, we enjoyed yet another evening of relaxation in thermal waters. A life I could get used to.

Balnéa Thermes houses the outdoor Japanese baths, a range of three panoramic pools of, ranging in temperature from 33 degrees to 40 degrees. Pure zen.

That evening we enjoyed a final meal together before heading back to spend the late hours on the balcony of the Mercure Sensoria hotel room listening to the rushing water of the nearby Le Neste d'Aure river.

Before leaving for the airport on the final morning, I enjoyed a stroll through the centre of Saint-Lary-Soulan where friendly locals greeted "Bonjour!" as they opened up shop.

A characteristic little ski town with the backdrop of the snow-capped peaks, even its buildings had charm. From packing up the bus for our departure right up to boarding the aircraft's steps I thought to myself how special the trip had been.

Leaving Dublin doubtful, people joked that I would come back 'converted', and yet somehow I did just that. My once inaccurate opinion was converted to a new appreciation for Lourdes and the surrounding region.

See that's the thing about travel, it opens your eyes to new experiences and your heart to new people, and that is exactly what my trip to Lourdes and The French Pyrenees did for me.

WHAT TO KNOW

How to get there: Ryanair will operate a twice-weekly service from Dublin to Lourdes from April to October 2020. Fares start from €24.99 one-way. For further info, visit www.ryanair.com.

Where to stay: Lourdes - [Grand Hotel Gallia & Londres](#). Cauterets - [Hotel du Lion D'or](#). Saint-Lary-Soulan - [Mercure Sensoria](#).

Where to eat: Lourdes - [Les 100 Culottes](#). Caunterets - [Ô Regent](#). Saint-Lary-Soulan - [Restaurant Le Grange](#).

Don't miss: Stunning mountain-top views from [Pic du Midi](#), fresh mountain air of the [Pyrenees National Park](#), some of Europe's highest waterfalls at [Cirque de Gavarnie](#) and the natural thermal spas.