

SPIRITUAL TOURISM IN FRANCE ON THE RISE



Whether tourists or pilgrims, more than 51 million people visit religious sites every year in France according to Atout France. Formerly practiced by pilgrims alone, spiritual tourism today attracts an increasingly large and international audience.

Spiritual tourism in France is unceasingly bringing new visitors to the country. **Each year, more than 15 million visitors come to explore one of the seventeen shrine cities in France** and the trend is on the rise.

“An estimate of the overall attendance has to be taken with caution,” said Géraldine Ballot of the Association of the Shrine Towns in France which brings together religious leaders and tourist offices of pilgrimage sites. “Some religious buildings have counters or ticket offices at their entrances; others do not and only count visitors in groups. We lack common indicators for an accurate mapping of the number of visitors.”

Two indicators, however, provide a proof of a growing interest in spiritual tourism according to the association. 10 412 groups of pilgrims, with an average size of 38 people, were welcomed in 2013 in one of the seventeen shrines, a rise of 1.5% in comparison with 2012. 4.7 million visitors travelled to the sites of the tourist offices or the shrines which are members of the association, a rise of 10% over one year.

While the holy places have always given rise to great pilgrimages, the profile of their visitors is increasingly wide. “There is an undeniable profound tendency in favor of spiritual tourism. An enthusiasm that far exceeds religious practice,” observes Géraldine Ballot. “The share of 'unbelieving' visitors has grown considerably. The latter are enthusiasts of historic places, far away from the consumer society and conducive to meetings and exchanges.”

This is evidenced by the success of the Route of Santiago de Compostela. Fallen into disuse for nearly two centuries, the pilgrimage to Compostela today arouses an extraordinary enthusiasm. On the five roads leading to the Spanish shrine there are hikers, pilgrims and lovers of Romanesque art. What are their motivations? A need to recharge, a search for meaning and a desire to discover the French heritage.

The rise of spiritual tourism in France is also explained by the diversity and richness of the religious sites open to the public. A total of 163 shrines, 50,000 buildings, including 10,000 protected historic monuments and some recognized as UNESCO World Heritage sites such as the Chartres Cathedral, Mont Saint-Michel Abbey, Rocamadour or Vézelay.

The ranking of most popular site is led by **Notre-Dame Cathedral and the Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Paris with 13 million and 10.5 million annual visitors respectively**. The Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes which attracts 6 million visitors each year comes third. The Mont Saint-Michel, where 3.5 million people travel annually, the Chartres Cathedral with its 2 million tourists and Lisieux, the second largest shrine city of France with 1 million come next.

Everywhere, spiritual tourism attracts more and more international visitors. Out of the 87 million foreign tourists visiting France each year, 20 million come for spiritual and religious reasons according to a study carried out by the World Tourism Organization (2014).

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