

Favorite French Pilgrimage Destinations: Lourdes and La Salette

The word “pilgrim” immediately conjures up images of travel, but it goes far beyond that. Since the word first appeared in the western vocabulary of 14th century Europe, it has been associated with a sense of purpose, a commitment not just to wander through life but to focus, a wake-up call that may lead to positive change. Most of all, it has meant sacrifice, not just of time and money to reach the pilgrimage destination, but hardship to the human body and mental wellbeing. Reaching the destination was seldom easy, requiring weeks, months, even years away from family, community, livelihood ... no jetting across oceans or continents in a matter of hours nor driving comfortably to a pre-booked pilgrim hotel, reservations secured by credit card!



In the 21st century, the world feels just as strongly about pilgrimage travel as it ever has, but have the motivations changed as much as the style? Even with deep economic recessions and readily-accessible medical care in most western nations to cure our ailments, pilgrimage travel holds steady among the already-faithful and those who search for meaning and new directions in their lives. Partly because the rigors and dangers of pilgrimage travel have been drastically reduced and partly because older people have the time, money, good health and compelling urge to explore the world, men and women age 45 and better make up the vast majority of pilgrim travelers, whether doing so independently or in groups of varying sizes.

Being married to a devout Catholic while I myself am an Evangelical Christian, I have had the pleasure of visiting several Catholic pilgrimage sites in Europe. We lived in Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina for two years, only 45 minutes from Medjugorje, visited annually by one million of the

Catholic faithful and the spiritually curious since 1980. Despite the numbers, the still-small town with no high-rise hotels or fast-food outlets is a cheerful, unhurried, accommodating experience where fellow pilgrims strike up conversations with strangers and spontaneously share a restaurant table or a countryside hike up one of the challenging apparition mountains.



Longer established, larger and more commercially sophisticated is Lourdes at the foot of the French Pyrenees. Yearly from March to October the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes is a high-profile place of pilgrimage with an estimated 200 million visitors since 1860. With an incredible weekly roster of activities, services and meetings, there are information centers and armies of volunteers who work diligently to make the individual or group pilgrim experience a lifetime memory.

Rotating through different languages at different times, church services are laced with spine-tingling choir singing, but there are also riverside and hillside walks to offset the intensity of the more focused timetables. Again, a peaceful, cooperative atmosphere among residents and perfect strangers is an essential feature of this bustling but walkable town, even if there are too many souvenir shops to qualify as an exclusively spiritual experience.

However, I truly lost my heart to the mountaintop pilgrim shrine of La Salette in the French Alps (Sacred-destinations.com/france/la-salette-shrine) hardly known compared with Medjugorje and Lourdes. It has only a couple of hundred visitors at once for the very good reason that the only place to stay is the efficiently-run retreat center, booked months in advance. After a two hour drive or a public bus ride out of Grenoble on narrow road with dozens of tight hairpin curves, you arrive in dazzling natural surroundings with no town, no shops, an imposing stone basilica (built 1852-65) and a modern chapel, a visitor center staffed by welcoming volunteers and a modern hostel for pilgrims to stay and eat cafeteria-style at shared tables. The majority of guests are from France, Poland and Italy, but English is also spoken.

Apart from the daily schedule of spiritual experiences, what makes you go "Wow!" many times throughout a visit is layer upon layer of mountain ranges, the perpetual tinkling bells of sheep in tiny

green fields that sweep down from the pilgrimage site, and dozens of well-worn ridge-top hiking trails straight out of the opening scenes of The Sound of Music.



When we booked this piece of heaven for three nights, all the double "cells" were taken, so we happily booked two single cells on opposite sides of our hallway. In each small, immaculate room was a surprisingly comfortable single bed (no suffering there), wardrobe, desk and chair, and a sink, towels and mirror. Down the hall was a large bathroom of shared toilets and showers. We paid under \$40 each for three meals a day and accommodation, surely a bargain in either the spiritual or secular world!

By Alison Gardner

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