



SANCTUAIRES NOTRE-DAME DE LOURDES

Where millions hope to see Bernadette's same light

By Susie Woodhams

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

LOURDES — When I was a little girl, someone gave our family a small bottle of Lourdes water. No more than 2 inches high and sealed with a blue cap, the clear plastic bottle was embossed with a likeness of a girl kneeling before the Virgin Mary.

At the time, I didn't know that Lourdes was a small town thousands of miles away, set in the foothills of the Pyrénées mountains in southwest France. Nor did I un-

derstand how, according to believers, in a small grotto in the mid-1800s, a scene between the girl and the Virgin made this water special. I do remember being told that if you dabbed the water on an injury or ailment and prayed to Mary, it could cure you.

I have since visited Lourdes and its town within the town — some 130 gated acres of manicured lawns and breathtaking basilicas known as the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes. During the pilgrimage

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The nightly procession goes from the Grotto to Rosary Square.

Explore New England

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Over miles, in throngs, hoping and believing

► LOURDES

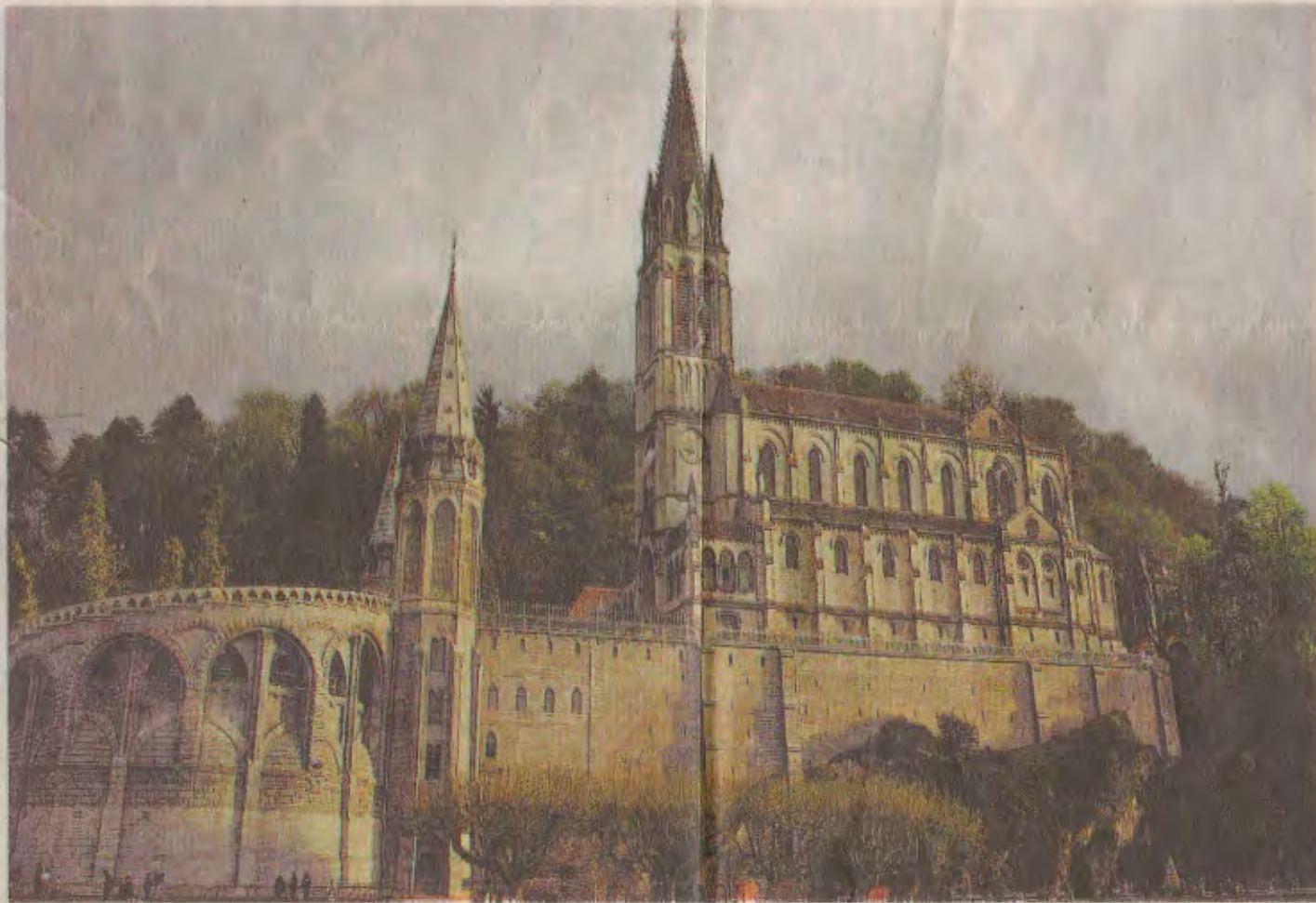
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season from Easter to October, it's a busy place, with volunteers pushing hundreds of "malades" in three-wheeled chariots during the daily blessing of the sick, and the glow of thousands of handheld candles streaming around the main esplanade during the nightly torchlight procession.

Yet on each of my three visits, I have been most captivated watching people, both ill and well, gather around a long row of spigots to collect the famous water. I remember the exasperated sighs of people jostling in line in June as a 12-year-old Irish boy filled a 10-liter jug. "It's for my aunt," he said softly, "because she hurt her hip and can't walk."

Others splash their faces with it, drink it from bottles shaped like the Virgin, or roll up their pant legs and let it run over their bare feet. Many stand in line to enter a stone building, disrobe, and — one by one — recline in marble pools filled with the water (although at a temperature of 54 degrees, volunteers make sure most towel-clad bathers stay only a few moments).

So, my friends ask, is it really miraculous water? And is this the lure for almost 6 million visitors a year to a place that 150 years ago was no more than a market town a few hours from France's more celebrated thermal baths?



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Rosary Basilica is one of two built in Lourdes near where in 1858 Bernadette Soubirous said she saw the Virgin Mary. A statue stands where the apparition did, an inscription underneath it reading "I Am the Immaculate Conception."

If you go . . .

Getting there

Air France has three regular flights (1 hour, 15 minutes) a day from Paris-Orly to Tarbes-Lourdes Pyrénées International Airport, 6 miles from Lourdes center. Air France also offers nine flights daily from Paris to Pau (28 miles from Lourdes). The high-speed train from Paris takes five hours with five return connections per day.

. . . and as a pilgrim

The Lourdes Center in Boston will take a group of 50 pilgrims (including sick and handicapped) abroad May 13-21. Price is \$2,098 and includes air transportation (Air France, Boston-Paris-Pau), ground transportation (bus), hotel and three meals a day. Visit lourdescenter.org or call 617-536-2761.

The Our Lady of Lourdes Hospitality North American Volunteers based in Syracuse, N.Y., makes 15 trips a year to Lourdes, two out of Boston. The nonprofit organization (lourdesvolunteers.org) brings sick pilgrims, volunteers, and youth, usually in groups of 25.

Where to stay

Many Lourdes hotels close November through February, but depending on early reservations, may stay open during the 150th anniversary

few hours from France's more celebrated thermal baths?

Although there are more than 6,800 declarations of cures in the archives of the Medical Bureau at Lourdes, the Roman Catholic Church officially recognizes 67 "unexplained" miracles that have occurred here — 49 through the use of the water. Nevertheless, for both mildly curious tourists and intensely devout pilgrims, the story behind the water is as enchanting as the dark and craggy grotto that stands at the base of one of the world's largest and most beautiful shrines.

According to various accounts, on Feb. 11, 1858, Bernadette Soubirous, a poor 14-year-old, went searching for firewood with her sister and friend in a cave known as Massabielle just across the Gave de Pau. As the others rushed ahead, Bernadette claimed to hear a gust of wind, then looked up to a crevice in the rock where a young woman in white smiled and motioned her forward.

Over the next five months, the vision would appear there 17 more times, but only to Bernadette. On one occasion, the woman told her: "Penance! Pray to God for sinners!" Another time, the Virgin instructed her to dig in the muddy water of the grotto and drink and wash herself there. Later, she told Bernadette to tell priests to come in procession and build a chapel there. On March 25, the 16th visit, the woman said in the local dialect, "I am the Immaculate Conception" — a proclamation that set the Lourdes apparitions apart from other reported visions of the Virgin.



As Lourdes and the sanctuary prepare for the 150th anniversary of those events, don't expect to find the same town Bernadette knew as a child, and not just because the population has quadrupled to nearly 16,000.

Looking out from the terrace of the town's 1,000-year-old fortified castle, which now houses the Pyrénées Museum, the view is probably more majestic. With the towering spires of the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception rising 230 feet, the sanctuary appears like a small kingdom, blending gracefully with the lush green hills

in summer and distant snow-covered mountains in winter.

The 10-minute walk downhill from the town's center to the sanctuary, however, is less a cascade of beauty than hustle and bustle, brimming with businesses catering to tourists. In France, only Paris has more hotels than the 233 in Lourdes. And while the tourist office notes that the 220 souvenir shops equal one for every 30,000 visitors, I counted 16 shops in a row across the street from St. Joseph's Gate, the sanctuary's busiest entrance because of its proximity to hotels.

Sketches of Bernadette praying at the grotto adorn everything from watches to bags of candy-coated, chocolate Lourdes "stones." The hundreds of plastic bottles in all shapes and sizes might be the most useful items, given that receptacles for collecting Lourdes water are not for sale inside the sanctuary.

Yet the Lourdeais shrug off crit-



SOURCE: ESRI

JOAN McLAUGHLIN/GLOBE STAFF

a native who owns a travel agency around the corner from the main Post Office.

"Lourdes is a little like Las Vegas in that it used to be not much really, just a little town. And then suddenly it's huge and growing very fast. Not that we can be compared to Las Vegas in any other way."

While the sanctuary is open all the time, the heavy air of commercialism vanishes as you pass into its park-like grounds.

I brought with me the complimentary candle my hotel receptionist gave when she asked whether I would be attending the 9 p.m. torchlight procession. When I arrived 15 minutes early, a glorious summer sunset cast a reddish glow behind the Rosary Basilica, from which hundreds of tourists had already lined the elliptical staircase and upper ramps for a better view.

Before I knew it, I was shuffling forward, shoulder to should-

While the town usually catches its breath in winter when traffic slows and most hotels close, this year could be different. Rather than begin with the anniversary of the first apparition on Feb. 11, Lourdes officials are hoping to accommodate more pilgrimages by making the celebration last year-round, from the feast of the Immaculate Conception on Dec. 8 until the same date in 2008. The Vatican said Pope Benedict XVI would come (no date has been set yet), and some locals wonder whether his presence would attract as many as the 220,000 who crowded the grounds for Pope John Paul II's final visit and Mass on Aug. 15, 2004.

Brochures printed for the 150th anniversary encourage tourists to follow "The Path of Bernadette," a walking tour that starts at the parish church in the center of town where Bernadette was baptized and then leads to the "cachot" — the one-room cellar of an

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Grand Hôtel de La Grotte

66 rue de la Grotte
011-33-5-6294-5887
hotel-grotte.com
Claims to be the first hotel built in Lourdes, in 1872, and has modernized through the years to four-star status with air-conditioned rooms, restaurant, parking, and handicap access. Double rooms start at about \$100 in low season, about \$130 in high season (breakfast about \$20).

Grand Hôtel d'Angleterre

4 rue Saint Joseph
011-33-5-6294-0015
fr.federal-hotel.com/hotel_grand-hotel-d-angleterre-lourdes_10797.htm (in French)
The three-star "Grand Hotel of England" is one block from the Sanctuary, has 56 air-conditioned rooms, elevator, room service, and handicap access. Doubles start at about \$80 (breakfast about \$9).

Where to eat

Most hotels offer half-pension (breakfast and either lunch or dinner) or full pension (all three meals) when booking your room. Meals are usually three courses, often served family style depending on your group size.

Le Magret

10 rue des 4 Frères Soulas
lemagret.com
As the name implies, "magret," or duck breast, is among the southwest specialties offered, along with "garbure," a thick vegetable soup served here with pieces of foie gras rather than the traditional pork. Price-fixe menus start at about \$19 for a three-course lunch, \$38 and \$48 for dinner.

The Covered Market

Place du Champ Commun
Open from 6:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. except Sundays from mid-October until Easter. Big market days are Thursday and Saturday, when you can watch a baker cook a "gâteau à la broche." The dense cake, usually

muddy water of the grotto and drink and wash herself there. Later, she told Bernadette to tell priests to come in procession and build a chapel there. On March 25, the 16th visit, the woman said in the local dialect, "I am the Immaculate Conception" — a proclamation that set the Lourdes apparitions apart from other reported visions of the Virgin.

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Yet the Lourdais shrug off criticism of excess kitsch and commercialism.

"If no one buys it, there are no stores," said Maguy Poublanc, 63,

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Before I knew it, I was shuffling forward, shoulder to shoulder with Italian and French pilgrims. Thousands of us crept along the half-mile-long esplanade behind volunteers carrying a statue of the Virgin. It was hard not to feel a little lost over the next 45 minutes, while those around me chanted prayers in different languages. But as we weaved our way into the large Rosary Square — occasionally hoisting our candles to sing "A-ve Ma-RI-a" — I was struck by the sense of community shared by these strangers.

When a woman in formal African dress introduced herself at the end of the ceremony as a Congoborn pilgrim from Paris, I asked whether someone in her group had come because of sickness.

"Cherie," she said with a laugh, "we all need healing in some way."

Yet visitors to Lourdes tend to have different agendas. About 1 million register annually for a week of pilgrimage, with May and August the most crowded. Another 100,000 come to volunteer, whether at the train station and with processions or as medical support to some 65,000 sick and disabled, for whom Lourdes offers free accommodations in the sanctuary and in town.

But the majority are individual pilgrims and tourists who might be taking a detour on the way to Atlantic beaches or Pyrénées vaca-

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If timed right, it's the third stop on the path, the grotto, that can offer the serenity and natural beauty Bernadette might have felt. Around the corner from the Rosary Basilica's grand arches, I was surprised in June to find only a trickle of tourists approach the cave in the early evening compared with the throngs at morning and mid-afternoon.

I took my time fingering the wall leading to the cave's opening and marveled at how its cool gray stone had become shiny from the touch of millions of pilgrims. Next to the now glass-covered "source" that Bernadette discovered lay a bouquet, which by tradition, a Lourdes bride brought the day she married. Above the right side of the cave, surrounded by ivy and a wild rose bush, a statue of Mary stood in the same crevice where Bernadette is said to have first seen her.

Other than the chirping of birds and the rush of the river, which has been moved back over the years to accommodate tourists, silence prevailed, allowing a handful of us seated on metal benches our quiet meditation.

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What to do

The Sanctuary

lourdes-france.com
Open seven days a week, nonstop. Make your first stop the information office and ask for the **Official Guide of the Sanctuary**, available in six languages for a donation of your choice. Over 2008, the 150th anniversary year, Lourdes will highlight 12 "missions" or messages through various pilgrimages and encourages visitors to plan their trip according to their interest. For about \$44 to \$73 (depending on season), the **Petit Train** runs every 20 minutes and transports tourists to the seven most popular sites, including the fortified castle that houses the Pyrénées Museum. The **Pic du Jer Funicular** offers a magnificent view of the Pyrénées from nearly 3,300 feet up.

Grottos of Bétharram

grottes-de-betharram.com
Less than 10 miles from Lourdes, where visitors take a train and boat on the tour of the five-story cave.

Cirque de Gavarnie

gavarnie.com
Less than an hour's drive south from Lourdes into the Pyrénées. The area is great for hiking and includes Europe's largest waterfall.

PHOTOS/PAUL A WILSON@BLUE MAN, at The Venetian in Las Vegas.



If you go . . .
and Blue Men in Vegas

The audience can be mesmerized by the Blue Men's variety of sounds, tricks, textures, and liquids.
Blue Man Group
The Venetian
3355 Las Vegas Blvd. South
800-BLUEMAN
blueman.com
Tuesday, Friday, Saturday at 7 and 10 p.m.; Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, Sunday at 8 p.m.
Tickets \$71.50-\$121.

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