As with most of our other European trips, this one started as a business trip to a bus trade show in Brussels. While it was our first trip to Portugal, it became the third time we have visited a Marian apparition site. Since we had visited Lourdes two years earlier, we decided to spend a few days in Fátima, Portugal at the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Fátima, the Marian apparition site. We found this to be the most complex of the Marian Apparition sites we have visited because of multiple apparition locations as well as the lack of transportation and distance to some places.

Fátima is located towards the center of Portugal, about 70 miles north of Lisbon and only about 25 miles east of the Atlantic Ocean. The area tends to have heavy precipitation in the winters but warm, dry summers. It was apparently named after a Moorish princess who converted to Christianity to marry a knight. The area is best known for the 1917 Marian apparitions to three local shepherd children. Sister cities include Czestochowa in Poland and Lourdes in France, both of which have some religious significance.

As far as numbers are concerned, it appears that the most popular Marian apparition site is Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City with about 20 million visitors annually. Lourdes in France has about six million visitors annually and Fátima gets about five million visitors annually. This seems to make it the third most popular Marian apparition site.

At the time of the apparitions, the area was primarily active in sheep herding and subsistence farming. Fátima is made up of several different smaller villages and hamlets. For example, the three shepherd children came from a location called Aljustrel. Today, the Fátima area has a population of about 11,800 inhabitants. The primary industry is religious tourism with hotels, restaurants and shops that sell religious articles. The area around the Sanctuary is ringed...
with small hotels, restaurants and religious goods stores. In spite of the narrow streets, there are numerous tourist buses and sometimes they encounter problems on corners and tight clearances.

Comparing Fátima to other European locations, we found that there was less English spoken than other places in Western Europe. This was generally not a problem and I did know how to say “thank you” and a few other things because of a previous trip to Portuguese-speaking Brazil. Like some other European locations, some of the stores and restaurants closed for a while in the afternoon and then opened again later. Unlike some other places like Lourdes and Rome where pizza and pasta were popular, it was easy to get seafood and other dishes in Fátima. As a general rule, their food was good and I liked their local squash soup.

Unlike the other apparition sites, Fátima is not easy to reach on public transportation. The nearest railroad station is too far away to be useful. There are also no nearby regional airports. However, there are frequent public buses from and to Lisbon with the Fátima bus station being north of the west end of the Sanctuary. Hence, it appeared as if the greatest number of pilgrims not driving a car arrived by bus. There seemed to be numerous bus tours from different places and a steady stream of one-day tour buses from Lisbon. While we were there we even saw a group of six buses arriving from a tour boat that had docked at Lisbon.

It appears that the original Cova da Ira (Cove of Peace) was a grazing and farming area in the time of the apparitions. It was recorded that Lucia’s father was upset with the original pilgrims in 1917 because they trampled his crops. Today, the primary area for religious activities is the Sanctuary, a large rectangular area with the short sides pointing east and west. The east end is anchored by the Basilica of our Lady of the Rosary. On the west end, which is an attempt to provide a simple map of the Fátima area showing most of the important buildings as well as the apparition sites and other locations mentioned in the text. Note that North is to the left on this map.

The Sanctuary area is shown in yellow with the more important buildings and structures. The area shown in the tan color tends to be urban with homes and businesses while the green area is typically more rural.

Taken from the Basilica, this photo looks west with the Chapel of the Apparitions in the foreground and the Basilica of the Holy Trinity across the Sanctuary. Note the white path where pilgrims walk on their knees.

The Chapel of the Apparitions is a popular site for Masses and religious activities. You can see the original small chapel of 1919 and the statue of Our Lady of Fátima with the jewelled crown.
is slightly uphill, is the newer Basílica of the Holy Trinity, said to be the fourth largest Catholic Church in the world.

In front of the Basílica and a little to the north is the Chapel of the Apparitions, which is roofed but partially open to the air. It was built on the site of the oak tree where Blessed Mother appeared to the shepherds. The Sanctuary itself is paved but there is a white walk slightly downhill from west to east where many pilgrims cross the Sanctuary on their knees and end at the Chapel of the Apparitions. Obvious differences with Lourdes include the pavement because Lourdes has more grass with paved paths. In addition, Lourdes has actual gates that are closed at night while the Fátima Sanctuary is open. Restrooms are located in different places near the Sanctuary.

Another major difference is that the apparitions in Lourdes took place at the grotto in a fairly limited area. In Fátima, some of the apparitions of the Blessed Virgin and the angel took place some distance away near the homes of the shepherds. Fátima is made up of several small villages. The three shepherds lived in an area called Aljustrel, located more than a mile south of what is now the Sanctuary. They apparently walked this distance when tending their flocks of sheep. There is a rubber-tired tourist train that connects the Sanctuary with Aljustrel and other stops if you do not want to walk. The homes of the shepherd children are open to tourists and nearby is their parish church where the three shepherd children were baptized and attended Mass.

The Fátima Story

In comparison with the other Marian apparition sites, Fátima gets a little complex because of multiple apparition locations and extended dates. Hence, it might be best if I briefly covered the story while providing appropriate photos.

Oldest of the three shepherd children was Lucia de Jesus Santos who was born on March 28, 1907, the youngest of seven children. Her father, Antonio dos Santos was a farmer with small land holdings in the area. Her mother, Maria Rosa, was deeply religious and could read. She was devoted to the rosary and instructed her own children and neighbor children in the catechism. As a result, Lucia was able to receive her first Holy Communion at the age of six instead of the usual 10 years of age.

The other two shepherds were Francisco and Jacinta Marto, the first cousins of Lucia. They were born June 11, 1908 and March 11, 1910, the eighth and ninth children of Olympia Marto. Born Olympia Jesus dos Santos, a sister to Antonio dos Santos, her first husband gave her two children before he died. She then married Manual Marto, often called Ti Marto.

Based on what I saw, it appeared that the Marto family had outgrown their original house and that some of the younger children, like Francisco and Jacinta lived in a second house across the road. These local roads are somewhat narrow, winding and hilly. Yet there are several large tour coaches that negotiate these roads with their pilgrim passengers each day. The little rubber-tired train also runs a regular route past the homes of the shepherds.
The house of the Santos family was built in 1885 and restored in 1987. This is where Lucia lived. Behind her house and down the hill is the Poço Do Areniro, the well where the angel appeared for the second time. The house of the Marto family was built in 1888 and restored in 2000. After the apparitions at the Cova but before Jacinta went to the hospital at Ourém, our Blessed Mother appeared to her here.

To the east from the Santos and Marto homes is the parish church. Its patroness is Our Lady of Pleasures. The three shepherds were baptized here and attended Mass here. The church is surprisingly larger than you might expect and the baptismal font is located at the rear, to the left as you enter. On the feast of the Ascension in 1917, Our Lady appeared to Jacinta here and taught her how to “pray the Ascension.” Across the street from the church is the parish cemetery where Francisco and Jacinta were buried until they were moved to the Basilica.

There was little formal schooling available in those years so the three shepherds could not read or write at the time of the apparitions. Typical of that period and location, care of the family sheep flocks fell to the youngest in the family, hence, Lucia for the Santos family with Francisco and Jacinta taking that duty for the Marto family. There are
suggestions that they may have had a dog for a helper. Lucia got along well with younger children so the three of them grew up as playmates.

It all started in the spring of 1916 when the three shepherd children were playing at Loca do Cabeço, what is now sometimes called the Loca do Anjo, a grassy, hilly area with a cave a little distance north of Lucia’s home. An angel appeared to them calling himself the “Angel of Peace.” He taught them to make sacrifices, to spend time in the adoration of the Lord and say prayers. This simple prayer was: “My God, I believe, I adore, I trust and love you! I ask pardon of You for those who do not believe, do not adore, do not trust and do not love you.”

The second appearance of the angel took place in the summer of 1916. At that time the three shepherds were down the hill behind Lucia’s house at the Poço do Arneiro, the local well. This time the angel called himself the Guardian Angel of Portugal. He asked them to “offer all that you do, to the Most High, as prayers and sacrifices.”

It was in the fall of 2016 that the angel returned for a third time, again at the Loca do Cabeço. He held up a chalice and a host, then prostrated himself and prayed with the shepherds. He gave the host in communion to Lucia and shared the blood of Christ with Francisco and Jacinta.

There are a couple of side notes that help explain the background of what was going on in Portugal at that time. The first of these came in 1910 when the Portuguese monarchy was replaced with a republic. Since the monarchy had supported the Church, the new government had an anti-religious bias. The world was at war – World War I or some called it The Great War. In 1916, Portugal declared war on Germany and sent troops into France to fight the Huns. On April 21, 1917, the first Portuguese soldiers departed for the front lines. In May of 1917 Pope Benedict XV made a direct appeal to the Blessed Mother to intercede for peace in the world. It was just over a week later that the apparitions began in Fátima.

On May 13, 1917, the three shepherds took their flocks to the Cova da Iria when a flash of light was followed by the appearance of a beautiful lady above a small holm (holly) oak tree. In answer to questions from Lucia, the lady said that she came from heaven and she wanted the three children to come to this same location on the 13th day of the month for six months. She asked the children to sacrifice and to say the rosary to end the war. I might note that one of the movies covering the Fátima apparitions was called The Thirteenth Day.

Lucia’s father was skeptical while the parents of Francisco and Jacinta were more supportive. The second apparition of our Blessed Mother took place on June 13, 1917 at the holm oak tree in the Cova de Iria. About 50 local people showed up to accompany the children. While they did not see or hear our Blessed Mother, they did see the cloud that accompanied her and heard some sounds. The
messages on this day included a request to keep praying the rosary and to learn to read. Our Blessed Mother indicated that she would take Francisco and Jacinta to heaven soon but that Lucia would remain behind to foster devotion to her Immaculate Heart.

The July apparition took place at the same location. Messages included praying the rosary to end the war and a promise for a miracle in October. By this time the apparitions were known all over Portugal and thousands of people were showing up on the 13th of the month to accompany the shepherd children. This obviously religious activity had reached the secular press and was also creating problems for local secular authority. This apparently prompted the activities in August.

On the morning of August 13, the three shepherds were kidnapped by Auturo Santos, the mayor of Vila Nova de Ourem. They were interrogated and threatened with death when they refused to disclose any information about the secrets of Fátima. They were then thrown into prison. Hence, the August 13 apparition did not take place although local tradition says that the three shepherds had the other prisoners praying the rosary and singing religious songs.

The three shepherds were soon released from prison. On Sunday, August 19, 1917, our Blessed Mother appeared to the three shepherds at a place called Valinhos, a little distance north of the Santos and Marto family houses. The messages of our Blessed Virgin this time included a request to return to the Cova da Iria on the 13th of each month. She also asked the shepherds to pray and to sacrifice for sinners.

To help clarify things, today there is a path for pilgrims called the Via Sacra or Sacred Way. It reportedly follows the original trail the three shepherds used to get to their play area at the Loca do Cabeço/Loca do Anjo. It starts at the South Roundabout where there is a sculpture of the three shepherds. Then the path goes west and uphill with outdoor Stations of the Cross to the Hungarian Cavalry Chapel. They are named this because they were donated by Hungarians in exile. Along the way, the Via Sacra passes the Valinhos apparition site and continues to the Loca do Cabeço. As a guess, they only about a half mile north of the Santos house. The Sacred Way also offers a building with rest rooms about halfway up the hill and near Station Number 10.

Huge crowds were present at the apparition on September 13, 1917. Word of the apparitions had gone beyond Fátima to other countries and people had come from all directions. The messages from our Blessed Mother on that day included a continued request to pray the rosary for the end of the war. She also again mentioned that in October there would be a miracle “so that all may believe.”

Avelino de Aimeida had published a satirical article on the apparitions in the anti-religious newspaper O Seculo. In spite of this and a storm with heavy rain, tens of thousands of people from all over arrived at the Cova da Iria on October 13. Blessed Mother appeared as usual above the small oak tree. She called herself the Lady of the Rosary, asked that a chapel be built here in her honor, and mentioned that the war would end and soldiers would soon return to their homes.

The promised miracle became known as the Miracle of the Sun. The sun danced, swirled, and descended towards the earth. This was also seen by people 15 or 25 miles away, thus eliminating the possibility of mass hallucination. Physical cures were also reported and both the ground and the clothes of the attendees were made dry and clean. Some people have commented that this is the greatest miracle since the Resurrection since it is also the only other miracle predicted as to date, time and location.

I might also mention that Avelino de Aimeida, who was present, reported positively on what took place and stood by his story in the face of heavy criticism.
Later Years

An influenza epidemic swept through Europe in the autumn of 1918. Francisco received his First Holy Communion on April 3, 1919 and died the following day at home in Aljustrel. Jacinta was diagnosed with bronchial pneumonia. She underwent painful operations and died in the hospital on February 20, 1920.

A small chapel was built on the site of the apparitions and in 1920, pilgrims defied government troops to put a statue of the Virgin Mary in the chapel. In 1927, Stations of the Cross were erected on the mountain road, now the Sacred Way. And the following year the foundation stone was placed for the present Basilica of Our Lady of the Rosary. In 1951 and 1952, the bodies of Francisco and Jacinta were reinterred in the Basilica.

Lucia became a nun, initially with the Sisters of St. Dorothy and later with the Carmelites. She continued to be active in devotions to our Blessed Mother. On December 10, 1925, our Blessed Mother appeared to Lucia and asked her to announce what we now call the First Saturday Devotion. On June 13, 1929, our Blessed Mother again appeared to Lucia and said that God asks the Holy Father, in union with the bishops of the world, to make the consecration of Russia. This, plus the popular three secrets, are among the most-discussed items of Fátima.

In following years, Lucia returned to Fátima on special occasions and sometimes met with popes. One of her most interesting writings predicted that the last great battle between God and Satin would be over the family. We have to question whether that battle is taking place right now. After she died on February 13, 2005, Lucia was interred in the Basilica of Our Lady of the Rosary alongside Jacinta.

On May 13, 1981, Pope John Paul II was seriously wounded by a bullet shot by an assailant at the Vatican. He credited Our Lady of the Rosary in Fátima for saving him.
from death. A year later, on May 13, 1982, Pope John Paul II went to Fátima to thank our Blessed Mother. He put the assailant’s bullet in the crown of the statue of Our Lady that stands in the Chapel of the Apparitions. There is a statue near the High Cross in the Sanctuary that honors Pope John Paul II and his attachment to Fátima.

On May 13, 1979, Pope John Paul II declared Jacinta and Francisco “venerable,” the first step on their way to canonization. On May 13, 2017, the 100th anniversary of the first apparition at Fátima, Pope Francis canonized Jacinta and Francisco. They are the youngest non-martyr saints declared in the history of the Church.

The Sanctuary

The Basilica of Our Lady of Fátima of the Rosary was built on the ground where the three shepherds played while watching their sheep. In 1928, a first stone was blessed and in 1954 Pope Pius XII named it a basilica. It is located a distance above the Sanctuary level and does require climbing a substantial number of stairs to get to the door. The bell tower is 213 feet high. In the niche of the tower stands a statue of the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

While the Basilica itself is very lovely on the inside, the biggest attraction for pilgrims is that it serves as the final resting place for the three shepherds. In 1951 and 1952 the bodies of Francisco and Jacinta were moved from the cemetery across from the parish church and reinterred at the Basilica at the sides of the church near the front between the pews and the altar. When Lucia died, she was placed adjacent to Jacinta. Today, a steady stream of pilgrims stop for a prayer at the railing surrounding each burial area.

To the east and a little north of the center of the Basilica is the Chapel of the Apparitions. The original small building dates to 1919 and was erected on the site where the Blessed Virgin appeared. Today’s modern building has a roof and glass walls but is open to the air. In addition to covering the original small chapel, it also has a one-meter high statue of Our Lady of Fátima with a gold crown containing three thousand precious stones. In 1982, Pope John Paul II left the bullet with the statue that failed to kill him in an assassination attempt a year earlier on May 13, 1981. The Chapel of the Apparitions is frequently busy with Masses, rosaries and other activities. As in Lourdes, the religious activities take place in various languages. While we were there, we were a little dismayed that there were no English Masses on Sunday. However, there is an English Mass on weekdays where you can get your religious goods blessed.

In some of the documents the Sanctuary is also called the Plaza Pio XII. This comes from the October 31, 1942 consecration of the world to the Immaculate Heart of Mary by Pope Pius XII in the Portuguese language.

A little ways south of the Chapel of the Apparitions, and effectively lined up with the center of the Basilica, is the Monument to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. It has a spring water well that allows pilgrims to stop for a drink or even take the water home with them.

Looking west and slightly uphill across the vast paved Sanctuary you will see a huge contemporary crucifix to the
south of the main entrance to the Basilica of the Most Holy Trinity. Made of CorTen steel, it is impressively high although I never could find its actual height. Adjacent, and overshadowed by the height of the cross, is the statue of John Paul II with his well-known crucifix staff. On the north side of the entrance to the Basilica is the Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament.

The Basilica of the Most Holy Trinity is huge. Although planned since 1973, construction did not start until October of 2007. Built in a circular shape, it is about 411 feet in diameter with the main door dedicated to Jesus Christ and 12 side doors dedicated to the apostles. The Basilica has 9,000 seats and is said to be the fourth-largest Catholic Church in the world.

Areas to the north and south of the Sanctuary are occupied by hotels, restaurants and religious goods stores. Most of the public buildings are located almost directly north of the Basilica of the Most Holy Trinity. This includes the taxi and bus terminal, the police station, the fire department, a clinic and the post office. It is obvious that the visitors and pilgrims are the center of activity. There is even a short automobile tunnel in the back of the Basilica of the Most Holy Trinity that allows local traffic to bypass the traffic from the Sanctuary.

While Fátima has similarities with other tourist areas, it is also different. Like Lourdes, many of the pilgrims are priests, nuns and people with a deep faith. It is not unusual to see people stopping to pray or joining in religious activities. I admire the people who walk on their knees to the Apparition Chapel.