

Pilgrimage to Lourdes

By Larry Plachno

Photos by the author



While the Basilica of Our Lady of the Rosary sits on top of Massabielle, the Grotto is below facing the river and has a statue of our Blessed Mother. This photo shows a Mass being celebrated. This Grotto area is also used for Rosaries and other gatherings and activities. When there are no activities, pilgrims can line up and walk through the Grotto.

This responds to those friends and relatives who asked for a write-up on our recent trip to Lourdes. In common with past trips to Rome, Athens and Istanbul, Lourdes is also a place where you can get to many important and interesting sites on foot. However, it is also different than any other place we have visited. Nancy said that she found Lourdes to be more religious than Rome and the Vatican. The number of priests, nuns and pilgrims makes it different than any other place we have visited.

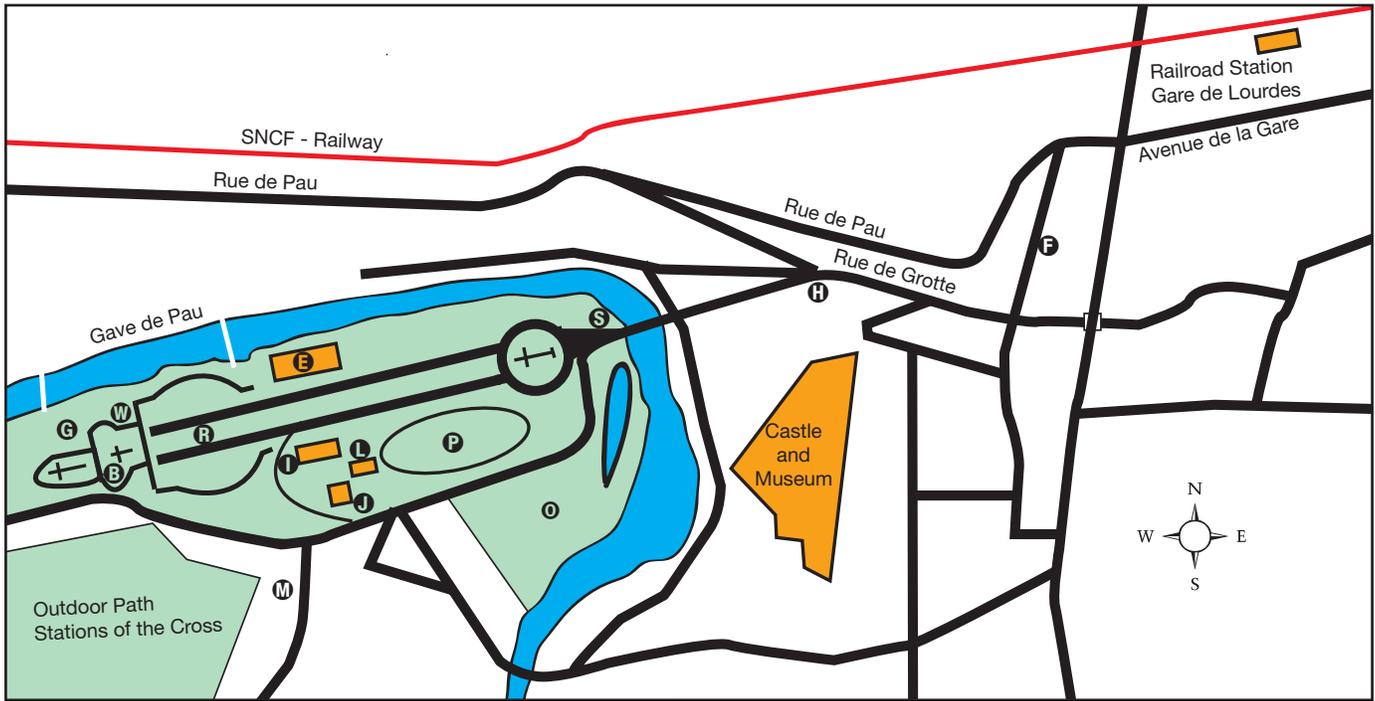
Location and History

Lourdes is located in the far south of France in the foothills of the Pyrenees Mountains that serve as the border with Spain. The town is surrounded by high ground with three mountains reaching 10,000 feet to the south and three hills around the town reaching 3,000 feet. With the Atlantic Ocean and Bay of Biscay located not much

more than an hour to the west, the climate is somewhat more mild than expected but often rainy. High ground next to the Gave du Pau River has been the site of a fort or castle for centuries.

All of this combined to make the area a good place to live and easy to defend. The area was inhabited in pre-historic times and was reached by a Roman Road in the days when Rome ruled the area. In the 8th century, a Muslim leader named Mirat controlled the fortress that was under siege by Charlemagne. Legend says that an Eagle flew past and dropped a large trout at the feet of Mirat, causing him to surrender. He converted to Christianity and took the name Loras, that was eventually modified into the name of the town.

More recently the area changed hands several times in battles and treaties. It was often controlled by counts or minor royalty and twice controlled by the English. Lourdes became part of the Kingdom of France in 1607. Napoleon turned the castle into a jail in the early 1800s. The Duke



Lourdes is not very big. The distance from the railroad station to the Grotto cannot be much more than a mile. The Sanctuary area, shown in green, has two primary gates plus footbridges across the river.

- B** – Basilica of Our Lady of the Rosary
- E** – English morning Mass on second floor
- F** – Grocery store
- G** – Grotto
- H** – House of Bernadette's father

- I** – Information office
- J** – St. Joseph Gate
- L** – Library
- M** – Bernadette Museum
- O** – Pavillion of Our Lady
- P** – Pope Pius X Underground Basilica.
- R** – Rosary Plaza
- S** – St. Michael's Gate
- W** – Water from the spring

of Wellington took over the area after defeating the French in 1814. Presumably, things quieted down after that.

The Apparitions

By the time of the apparitions in 1858, Lourdes was a market town with a population of only about 4,000. On February 11, 1858, a 14-year old girl named Bernadette Soubirous was gathering firewood near a large rock known as Massabielle adjacent to the river in a public area that served as a garbage dump and source of firewood. She saw a beautiful woman in a grotto in the rock.

There were a total of 18 apparitions that caused some consternation with local officials and brought thousands to the area. The woman called herself The Immaculate Conception and had Bernadette dig to an underground spring that still flows today and has healing power. The story can be found in a 1944 movie titled *Song of Bernadette* that received four academy awards. In 1960, Andy Williams released an album containing

a song called *The Village of St. Bernadette*, The *Ave Maria* song is today sung in many languages on the evening candle processions.

Bernadette went off to a convent and was later canonized as a saint while Lourdes grew in



One of the local buses in front of the railroad station. The destination sign suggests that it is going to the St. Joseph's Gate

importance. Today, Lourdes is the third most important Catholic pilgrimage site behind the Vatican and the Holy Land.

Transportation

Our situation on this trip is that we started out in Belgium, attending a biannual bus show that we rarely miss and is probably the most important international bus show of all. We had several days between attending the show and an appointment in Spain to visit a bus factory. This gave us some time to stop in Paris so Nancy could once again visit the Eiffel Tower and then spend a few days in Lourdes. We are used to riding trains around Europe but also used a plane on this trip because we could not find a good train schedule when we wanted to travel.

Lourdes has a regular population of about 15,000 but hosts between five and six million visitors annually. The only city in France with more hotel space than Lourdes is Paris. In spite of its relatively rural and isolated location, Lourdes is fairly easy to reach. Based on what I saw, I would suggest that most individuals arrive by train while the large number of tours tend to arrive by bus.

There is no large airport nearby but there are two smaller, regional airports in the area. We were able to ride a small, regional jet from Paris to Lourdes that originated at Orly Airport, the smaller of the two airports in Paris, and took us to Tarbes-Lourdes-Pyrénées Airport. The taxi ride from the airport to Lourdes was not very long.

Most people who do not come in a tour bus or car probably arrive by train. The SNCF (Société Nationale des Chemins de Fer Français - French National Railways) station can not be much more than a mile from the Grotto. But note that it is downhill to the Grotto but uphill to the station.

There is regular TGV (Train a Grande Vitesse - High Speed Train) service from Paris to Lourdes. It takes about five hours and some of the trains are routed along the coast which is somewhat of a resort area. The good news is that the TGV trains are modern and double deck with restrooms on both levels and a food car in each eight-car train. The bad news is that SNCF only makes announcements in French so you have to watch the schedule or on-board electronic signs. In any event, you will not miss Lourdes since there are always people in wheel chairs or needing assistance that causes the train to dwell for several minutes at the station.

Nancy and I rode a double TGV (16 cars) out of Lourdes that was going to Paris. I asked two people where our assigned car would stop, both



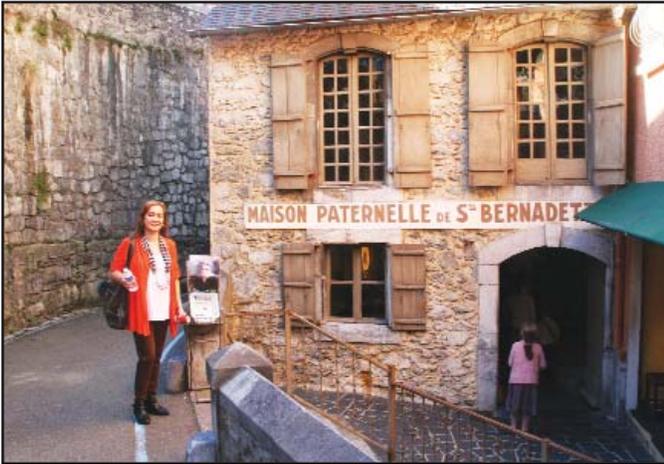
This photo taken on Rue de Grotte shows that religious goods stores, hotels and restaurants line the streets near the Sanctuary.

said virtually adjacent to the station door, and both were right. At many stations there are diagrams on the platforms that give you a hint where your assigned car will stop. There are about 150 seats per car. If you count both levels, multiply by 16, subtract 100 for two food cars, and you get a capacity of about 2,300 passengers. A virtual city on wheels.

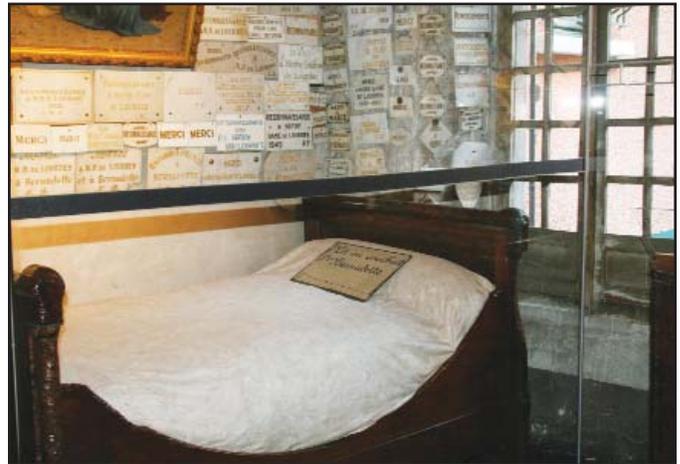
Lourdes looked to be too small to have its own local bus service. There was a little tour tram you can ride on that was themed to look like a train that took people around for a tour of some of the major attractions. There apparently are some regional bus routes that serve Lourdes and stop at either the railroad station or near the St. Joseph's entrance to the Sanctuary.



The closest thing to a local tour is this tour train. It was photographed on Rue de Grotte crossing the river.



Nancy stands at the home of St. Bernadette's father which is located behind Rue de Grotte



The bed that St. Bernadette slept in at her father's house has numerous messages on the wall.

As you might expect from the map, if you go out St. Michael's Gate you will walk uphill up Rue des Grotte into the older part of town. Rue des Grotte is unlike any other place we have been. Buildings alternate between boutique hotels, small restaurants and religious goods stores. There are more religious good stores in Lourdes than in the area surrounding the Vatican in Rome. We stayed on Rue des Grotte and discovered that our hotel was essentially above the home of St. Bernadette's father.

This is apparently the home the family lived in while Bernadette's father was a miller. It is around in back so you have to watch for the signs. You can go through the building and see illustrations of family members, how the family lived, and the bed that Bernadette slept in. The exit takes you into a religious goods store on Rue des Grotte.



The castle photographed from near St Michael's Gate to the Sanctuary.

Lourdes and the Sanctuary

Lourdes is not very large. The accompanying map is probably not much more than a mile from east to west. Most of the religious activity is on the west side beyond the castle and the river. There are two things that are worth mentioning. One is that Lourdes tends to follow the Spanish tradition in having an afternoon siesta. Expect that some stores and shops will close in the afternoon and open again later in the day. The other thing we noted reminded us of Rome. Many of the restaurants tends to specialize in pizza and pasta. You had to search the menu or find another location if you want a steak or seafood.

Keep in mind that the land slopes down to the river. From the corner west of the railroad station down past the grocery store and Rue des Grotte to St. Michael's Gate at the river, it is all

downhill. It is walkable uphill but I would not want to do it with luggage. Likewise, the path from St. Joseph's Gate to the Information Center is downhill.

Religious activity is concentrated in the area called the Sanctuary which is shown as green on the map. However, there are hotels on both sides of the river. Apparently, what is now the Sanctuary was originally a common area and garbage dump prior to the apparitions. There is no food service nor commercial activity in this area, although there is a place to get candles and an office where you can leave a stipend to have Masses said for relatives and loved ones. Private vehicles are not allowed. There are two primary entrances - St. Michael's Gate and St. Joseph's Gate - plus a couple of footbridges across the river near the Basilica and Grotto. Both gates are normally locked at night but do remain open on special occasions.



Once inside St Michael's Gate you can look west to see this crucifix and the two roadways leading down to the Basilica of Our Lady of the Rosary. The Pope Pius X Underground Basilica is to the left.

Entering St. Michael's Gate you will find an information center, restrooms and a small museum on your right. Straight ahead is a large crucifix between two roadways going to the Basilica of Our Lady of the Rosary. The rosary theme carries over from St. Bernadette praying the rosary during the

apparitions. The two "arms" on the Basilica are actually two ascending walkways that surround Rosary Plaza. They are used during some of the processions. On the left or south of the two roadways is a staircase that leads down to the underground Basilica of Pope Pius X. This was the first time I can remember seeing an underground church.



If you walk up the path and through St. Joseph's Gate you will find this bus station and a slightly more modern area that still has hotels, restaurants and religious goods stores.

Walking ahead you will see a long building on your right. While we were there a morning English Mass was celebrated in a chapel on the second floor. To the right is the main Information Center and the path up to the St. Joseph Gate. This, again, is quite an uphill walk to the Gate. Beyond the gate is a little city center. It is more modern than the buildings along Rue des Grotte but still has a mixture of hotels, restaurants and religious goods stores. There is also a little bus station adjacent to the Gate. We noted that many of the groups stayed in the several hotels in this area.

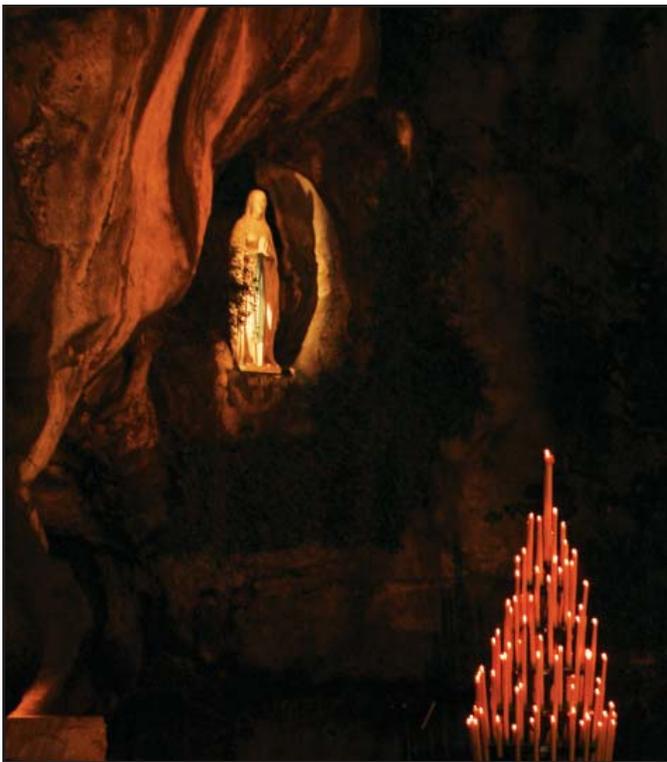
You will see a fairly diverse group of people and all fairly religious. There are priests, nuns and people in groups. You will also find people in wheelchairs being pushed by nurses. Many come here to bathe in the holy water from the Grotto. There are special medical and hospital facilities in the area and across the river.

There is always something going on in many different languages: Masses or rosaries in either basilica, the chapel or at the Grotto itself. We found a two-day schedule on a bulletin board in front of the Information Center and adjacent to the path leading up to the St. Joseph Gate. You can also go inside the Information Center to get schedules or ask one of several information guides that walk around the Sanctuary.

Restrooms are not a problem. In addition to the restrooms at St. Michael's Gate there are rest-room belows each "arm" from the Basilica of Our Lady of the Rosary as well as on the second floor of the building by the river near the chapel where the English Mass was held.

Continuing west, you come into the Rosary Plaza between the two "arms" from the Basilica. The Basilica is huge and hosts numerous religious activities. We found a special area near the entrance where pilgrims could light a votive candle for a special intention. The Basilica is actually built on top of the rock known as Massabielle but the Grotto has been preserved on the north side adjacent to the river.

From Rosary Plaza you can walk under the "arm" extending from the Basilica to near the river and turn to your left or west. The original Grotto is carefully preserved and a statue of the Blessed Virgin has been placed in the Grotto. Below it is a tree of candles. There is seating for a substantial



The Grotto at night



The Basilica of Our Lady of the Rosary has a rosary theme because Bernadette prayed the rosary during the apparitions. This alcove with votive candles is located near the entrance.

number of people in front of the Grotto for those who attend various activities here.

Masses are said at the entrance to the Grotto as well as rosaries being said in different languages. In between the Masses and rosaries, pilgrims line up to walk through the Grotto. Many will touch the walls and overhead rocks. The original spring with flowing water that was uncovered by St. Bernadette is still there. You will find many pilgrims seated or kneeling while praying in front of the Grotto. It is a very moving experience.

There are two foot bridges going across the river to the north side. There is another church on the north side known as the Church of St. Bernadette as well as some medical facilities. The bridges also provide a good view of the river and area.

To the left of the Grotto, moving back along the side of the Basilica, is an area where water from the spring is available at several faucets. There is



The spring inside the Grotto is surrounded by flowers and notes with petitions.



This photo looks east along the river and was taken from the footbridge beyond the Grotto. While the lighting might not be the best, it does give you an idea of how close the Grotto is to the river. The Basilica of Our Lady of the Rosary sits above the Grotto. The Grotto itself is located below the church and facing the river.

no charge for the water. People are often lined up here to fill various containers with the spring water to take it home or give it to friends and relatives. The religious good stores sell several types of empty glass or plastic containers for filling with the special water.

The Catholic Church is very circumspect about saying that the water is holy. However, there are claims that thousands have been healed by the water. This is why you see people in wheelchairs

who come to bathe in the water and others who take the water home or give it to friends for its potential healing power.

To the left of the water faucets is an office in the side of the wall just below the Basilica of Our Lady of the Rosary where you can request that Masses be said for family members or loved ones and leave a stipend. Not far from this is a stand where you can purchase a candle and leave your payment.



Water from the holy spring is available at faucets just east of the Grotto.



Nancy is filling up several bottles of the holy water from the spring for friends and relatives.



The newer TGV trains are double deck and run in trains of eight cars including a food car.



Nancy arrives at the train station in San Sebastian, Spain after riding three trains from Lourdes.

During warmer months, there are evening candle processions. Pilgrims purchase the candles and have little hoods to prevent the wind from blowing out the candles. The pilgrims start from the Grotto following a rosary in several languages and then wend their way around the entrance roads and Rosary Plaza. A statue of Our Lady leads the group. While marching they sing the *Ave Maria* in several languages. Some of this can be seen on YouTube.

Lourdes is not like any other place we have ever seen. It is filled with priests, nuns, pilgrim groups and people in wheelchairs. It is a place where people participate in a Mass, say a rosary and pray. It is a place where you will hear prayers and singing in several different languages and see people from all around the world. It is a gathering place for those who want to be closer to the Blessed Virgin and share a spot where she touched our world.

Transportation Notes

Since many readers live in the United States, I thought I might add a few notes about rail travel in Europe. Nancy and I have ridden trains in seven European countries I can remember and I have been on trains on my own in a few others. Europeans believe in public transportation and the trains are the usual way to go from city to city. If you can read the schedule you can go most anywhere.

The TGV and longer distance trains usually have assigned seats but you can often get travel agents in the U.S. to book them for you. They can also be booked at major railroad stations. For local trains, you need only walk up to the ticket counter with a Visa credit card to get tickets. The longer distance and TGV trains do have space for luggage. However, we find that the trains will frequently

run out of space, particularly on weekends when people travel with luggage.

One of our most interesting rail adventures came when leaving Lourdes on a Saturday morning. We had some concerns about trying to carry our heavy luggage up and down steps to get to the right platform. But the train stopped on the track and platform immediately adjacent to the station, presumably because there were several handicapped people boarding. No need to hurry, it took several minutes to get everyone on board.

This double TGV with 16 cars was headed for Paris via the coastal route so we rode it to a city called Dax and got off to change trains. We had about 40 minutes between trains and the platform signs told us that we had to move us and our luggage over one platform. Another sign told us approximately where our assigned car would stop. As usual, it was correct.

We found this next TGV train crowded with people coming down from Paris to various resort cities along the coast. It was not much more than an hour until we got to the end of the line at Hendaye. The station is located only a short walk from the river that serves as the border with Spain.

From here we pulled our luggage behind us across the parking lot to a little station for the Euskotren. The ticket agent there said that trains ran every 30 minutes and sold us two tickets to San Sebastian for about four Euros each. This reminded me of a modern electric interurban railway with overhead electric power and a lot of single track operation with passing sidings. In less than an hour we were in San Sebastian, Spain and taking a taxi to our hotel.

All of this goes to prove that you can get to most larger communities in Western Europe by train ... even if you are pulling luggage behind you.