

LOURDES

Lourdes is a large town in the **French Pyrenees**. It is a global centre of Marian pilgrimage, receiving hundreds of thousands of visitors each year. Roman Catholics believe that Mary, the Mother of God, appeared 18 times at the Grotto to a young girl, **Bernadette Soubirous**.

Originally a sleepy market town on the road to the spas of the Pyrenees, **Lourdes** has grown into the largest Marian pilgrimage centre in the world. The town has two sections: the international portion by the river, consisting of the spiritual area containing the Grotto and churches (known as the **Domaine** or **the Sanctuaries**), and the "French" portion, centered around the Marketplace & Hotel de Ville.



The Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes is an area of ground surrounding the shrine (Grotto) to Our Lady of Lourdes in the town of Lourdes, **France**. This ground is owned and administrated by the Church, and has several functions, including devotional activities, offices, and accommodation for sick pilgrims and their helpers. The Domain includes **the Grotto** itself, the nearby taps which dispense the Lourdes water, and the offices of the Lourdes Medical Bureau, as well as several churches and basilicas. It comprises an area of 51 hectares, and includes 22 separate places of worship. There are six official languages of the Sanctuary: French, English, Italian, Spanish, Dutch and German.

Processions

The Blessed Sacrament Procession is held daily at 4.30pm. The procession begins at the open-air altar in the Prairie, and is usually led by a priest or bishop carrying a monstrance containing the Blessed Sacrament. Typically the bearer of the Blessed Sacrament is sheltered from the elements by a mobile awning carried by four assistants.

The exact order of the procession varies from time to time. The Blessed Sacrament may be preceded by bearers carrying leafy branches, incense burners or other devotional items. These bearers are usually lay people who may be invited specially. The Blessed Sacrament is usually followed by a group of priests who concelebrate the rite. Following these are groups of pilgrims, usually under a group banner, and in no particular order, although larger groups tend to dominate the procession near the front.

The procession makes its way across the Gave, alongside the ramps, and past the Crowned Statue, along the Esplanade to the Cross at the far end, and then around it, and down into the Underground Basilica (where participants may be seated). Pilgrims in wheelchairs are brought to the front in each case.

During the procession there are meditations, prayers, hymns and chants, in several languages. When all the participants have assembled, there follows a period of **Eucharistic Adoration**, and the Blessing of the Sick.

The Torchlight Marian Procession takes place daily at 8.45pm. It begins outside the Grotto and follows the same route as the Blessed Sacrament Procession. In extreme weather an indoor ceremony may be held in the Underground Basilica instead.

The procession is led by pilgrims bearing a replica of the Cabuchet Statue of the Virgin Mary. As before, groups usually proceed together under their group banner. Typically each participant carries a candle; these have a paper shade which diffuses the light and makes the candle less likely to blow out.

The focus of this procession is the Rosary. All five decades are recited, usually in a variety of languages. The Lourdes Hymn is also sung, with verses in different languages. Intercessions may be invoked followed by the Laudate Mariam. There is a final blessing in Latin, and then an invitation to exchange the Sign of peace with fellow pilgrims.

The Main Churches of the Domain

The Crypt was the first of the churches to be completed in the Domain, and is today among the smallest. Construction was started by **Abbé Peyramale** and Mgr. Laurence. Bernadette's father worked on its construction and was present at its official opening, on Pentecost Sunday, 1866.

The nave is small and a notable feature are the enormous pillars which support the weight of the Upper Basilica, which was constructed on top of it.

The Crypt is entered along a corridor, whose entrance is dominated by a large bronze statue of St. Peter, holding the Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. Opposite stands a statue of Pius X. The walls of the corridor and nave are lined with small marble plaques, known as ex voto plaques, donated in thanks of spiritual favours received.

The Upper Basilica

The Basilica of the Immaculate Conception, known widely as the Upper Basilica, was the second of the churches to be completed. It was consecrated in 1876. It is an impressive, elaborate building in Gothic style, designed by architect Hyppolyte Durand, and on one side seems to emerge directly from the rock of Massabielle (the sanctuary is directly above the Grotto). The walls are lined with ex voto plaques, and banners from official National Pilgrimages of the past. It has a series of stained glass windows depicting various events in the story of Lourdes, and the clerestory windows depict Mary as the Second Eve.

The exterior is dominated by a 70m spire, and two lesser spires (not completed until 1908). Above the entrance is a mosaic depicting **Pope Pius IX**, who defined the dogma of the Immaculate Conception in 1854. The clock plays the Ave Maria hourly, and chimes the hours with a 2-tonne bell called Jeanne-Alphonsine. The other bells in the tower are named Geneviève-Félicie (weighing 1800 kg), Hermine-Benoîte (1100 kg), and Cécile-Gastine (800 kg).

The Rosary Basilica is the third of the churches to be completed, in 1899 and designed by architect Leopold Hardy. It was consecrated in 1901 and has a capacity of 1,500 worshippers. Its style is influenced by Byzantine architecture. The nave is open and circular, surmounted by a dome. The exterior of the dome is surmounted by a dramatic gilded crown and cross, which were a gift from the People of Ireland in 1924.

The exterior facade of the basilica was modified in 2007 to include a depiction of the Luminous Mysteries, which were added to the traditional fifteen by Pope John Paul II in 2002.

Crowned Statue and Rosary Square

The open space in front of the Rosary Basilica is known as Rosary Square.

The entrances to the Crypt and the Upper Basilica, both of which are built on top of **Massabielle**, are far above ground level. To facilitate access, two enormous ramps were constructed, which curve down either side of Rosary Square. The image of the entrance of the Rosary Basilica, flanked by the two ramps and surmounted by the spires of the Upper Basilica, has become one of the iconic symbols of **Lourdes**, and a stylised form of this image has been adopted by the Domain itself as its logo.

As three churches, almost in the same spot, the two Basilicas and the Crypt are sometimes considered to be symbolic of the Trinity.

The Statue of the Crowned Virgin, often known as the "Crowned Statue" (French: La Vierge Couronnée), stands across Rosary Square from the Rosary Basilica and faces the entrance. This prominent statue is a familiar landmark and a traditional meeting point. The statue is 2.5m high and cast in bronze, painted white and blue in the traditional colours. Her rosary is of the Birgittine style and incorporates six decades.

Behind the Crowned Statue is the Esplanade, a large open walkway which is used in the processions.

The Basilica of St. Pius X, known as **the Underground Basilica**, is the largest and most controversial of the Domain's churches. It was designed by the architect **Pierre Vago** and completed in 1958 in anticipation of the enormous crowds expected in Lourdes for the centenary of the Apparitions. A modern, concrete building, it is almost entirely underground (part of the building lies beneath the Boulevard Père Rémi Sempé above). When full it can accommodate 25,000 worshippers.

The Underground Basilica is stylistically very different from the previous two basilicas. The concrete of its construction has been left bare throughout, making it gloomy and uninviting inside, and it draws comparisons with an underground carpark. Therefore, although it provided a practical solution to the problem of accommodating very large numbers, it remains unpopular with many visitors to Lourdes.

Church of St. Bernadette

The most recent of the major centres of worship is the Church of St. Bernadette, which was consecrated in 1988. It was built opposite the Grotto across **the Gave**, on the spot where Bernadette stood during the final (18th) Apparition.

The Church of St. Bernadette is a modern building with comparatively little adornment. However, it has been designed to allow as much natural light as possible into the nave, and lighter-coloured materials have been used, making it noticeably brighter than the Underground Basilica. It was designed by the architect Jean-Paul Felix.

It is also a more versatile building. The nave has provision for 5,000 seated worshippers (and a further 350 wheelchairs), but partitions can be drawn which divide the nave into smaller sections. In addition, it includes the Hemicycle, a large lecture-room which may be used for worship, and an assortment of conference rooms and smaller rooms which may be used for devotional or non-devotional activity.

The Chapel of Reconciliation formerly occupied a site slightly more remote, at the entrance of the Upper Stations of the Cross. It was moved several years ago into a more prominent position, into the building previously known as **the Accueil Notre Dame**, near the Crowned Statue and facing the Esplanade.

The Chapel of Reconciliation is somewhat unusual in that no Masses or other services take place there; instead it is given over entirely to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Priests from different countries observe a duty roster, which means that, at almost any time of day, pilgrims from Europe (and occasionally further away) can find a priest who will hear their confession in their own language.

St. Joseph's Chapel is situated at the far end of the Esplanade, near **St. Michael's Gate**. It is a modern, concrete church, mostly underground, with little natural light. It was also designed by Pierre Vago, and was consecrated on 1 May 1968. It has provision for 450 seated worshippers and 80 wheelchairs.

The Grotto

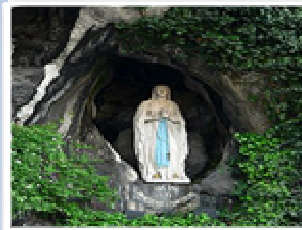
In contrast to the grandness of Rosary Square and the various basilicas the grotto at Massabielle where **St Bernadette's visions** took place is very simple and stark. The recess of the grotto itself is undecorated, although a plain stone altar and lectern have been placed there so that Mass can be said. Above the main recess is the niche where the apparitions took place and Fabisch's statue now stands. A large stand of candles next to the altar is kept burning during the season.

Pilgrims can process through the grotto and it is traditional to touch the rocks directly under the statue. Indeed so many people have done this that the stones have been polished smooth and shiny. Also at the rear of the grotto is a metal box into which written prayers or petitions may be deposited. These are collected daily and burnt.

Rows of benches allow visitors to sit and pray or contemplate. Pilgrims are asked to remain silent whilst in the vicinity to create an atmosphere of devotion. One of the spots where Bernadette prayed to the Virgin is marked by a special paving slab.

Some of the rock walls around the grotto bear clear signs of deliberate alteration, presumably to improve access for pilgrims. It is no longer clear what the original configuration of the grotto was.

At least one contemporary account describes a series of chambers behind the statue's niche, which can only be reached by climbing "like a lizard" through clefts in the rocks.



INFORMATION

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