

# ETHICAL

## PILGRIMAGE TRAVEL IN THE 21ST CENTURY



Pilgrims conquering the world? Perhaps not yet, but still there are millions of tourists who travel each year for spiritual reasons. Discover the art of pilgrimage, visit Lourdes in France, south American temples or even Armenian monasteries.

# SACRED ENCOUNTERS: THE ART OF PILGRIMAGE



The Sufi mystic **Mevlana Rumi** wrote seven centuries ago, "Don't be satisfied with the stories that come before you; unfold your own myth." His poetic brother here in the West, Walt Whitman, put it this way: "Not I—not anyone else, can travel that road for you. You must travel it yourself."

Together, these musings aspire to the idea echoed in the work of seekers everywhere, that travelers cannot find deep meaning in

their journey until they encounter what is truly sacred. What is sacred is what is worthy of our reverence, what evokes awe and wonder in the human heart, and what when contemplated transforms us utterly.

## THE KNOT OF ETERNITY

*Surely*, a voice whispered to me one night in the ruins of an old castle in Donegal, Ireland,

*surely there is a secret way.* The moon was rising like a celestial mirror over the heathery hills. The sea slapped at the peculiar basalt rock formations along the coast. The wind howled like Gaelic pipes. From a distant farmhouse came the sweet smell of burning peat.

I stood shivering in the stone archway of an ancient chapel. Turning my head, I saw the weathered carving of a centuries-old Knot of Eternity. Each thread wandered far from the center, then whorled back in again. The ancient Celts believed this to be a potent symbol of life's journey, and the desire to return to the source that replenishes the soul.

Slowly, I followed the old stone path with my finger. Around and around went my hand, feeling the ancient chisel marks, the abrasions of wind, rain, and sun, and the tender burnishing of time. I thought of all the travelers who had come there, step by step, prayer by prayer, and wondered if they had discovered what they had been seeking, if their faith had been restored.

Slowly, the moon lit the ancient stone. The night air stung my eyes. My hand kept moving across the eternal knot, seeking out the hidden pattern beneath the whirling stone. In the sublime moment I felt an ancient presence rise in my heart, and in my fingertips the unwinding spiral of joy.

## PILGRIMAGE AS ART

This is the path that *The Art of Pilgrimage* follows, one carved out by the simple beauty of a handful of practices, tasks and exercises that pilgrims, sojourners, and explorers of all kinds



have used for millennia. In each of us dwells a wanderer, a gypsy, a pilgrim. The purpose here is to call forth that spirit. What matters most on your journey is how deeply you see, how attentively you hear, how richly the encounters are felt in your heart and soul.

Kabir wrote, “If you have not experienced something, then for you it is not real.” So it is with pilgrimage, which is the art of movement, the poetry of motion, the music of personal experience of the sacred in those places where it has been known to shine forth. If we are not astounded by these possibilities, we can never plumb the depths of our own souls or the soul of the world.

Whether we are on vacation, a business trip, or a far-flung adventure tour, we can look at the trying times along the road as either torment or chances to “stretch” ourselves.

But what do we do if we feel a need for something more out of our journeys than the perennial challenges and pleasure of travel? What happens if the search for the new is no longer enough? What if our heart aches for a kind of journey that defies explanation?

Centuries of travel lore suggest that when we no longer know where to turn, our real journey has just begun. At that crossroads moment, a voice calls to our pilgrim soul. The time has come to set out for the sacred ground—the mountain, the temple, the ancestral home—that will stir our heart and restore our sense of wonder. It is down the path to the deeply real where time stops and we are seized by the mysteries. This is the journey we cannot not take.



### THE PURPOSE OF PILGRIM'S JOURNEY

Imagine your first memorable journey. What images rise up in your soul? They may be of a childhood visit to the family gravesite, the lecture your uncle gave at a famous battlefield, or the hand-in-hand trip with your mother to a religious site. What feelings are evoked by your enshrined travel memories?

According to the dictionary, the word pilgrimage derives from the Latin *peligrinus*, meaning foreigner or wayfarer. It refers to the journey of a person who travels to a shrine or holy place.

The pilgrim's motives have always been manifold: to pay homage, to fulfill a vow or obligation, to do penance, to be rejuvenated spiritually, or feel the release of catharsis. The journeys all begin in a nervous state, in deep disturbance. Something vital was missing in life: Vitality itself may be lurking on the road or at the heart of a distant sanctuary.

The ritual act of pilgrimage attempts to fill that emptiness. It can happen halfway around the world, as it did with a very kind priest I know—Father Theodore Walters of Toledo, Ohio, who began leading groups to the Marian Shrine at Medjugorje, Yugoslavia, because he believed that modern people desperately needed “a healing vision from the Mother of God.” He also confessed that he believed a war-battered country might need the kindness people on pilgrimage convey from the sheer gratitude brimming in their hearts.

### SACRED & PERSONAL TOURS

Pilgrimage can also occur just down the road, as it did to a married couple I met briefly, who had reached an imase in their creative endeavors. They said they had lost their voice and needed “to hear the voice of commitment to words again.” In response, they decided to reinvigorate their love of literature by traveling to the poet Robinson Jeffers' stone house in Carmel, California. My old friend Michael Jajuga was under so much stress in medical school that once a month he would rejuvenate himself in what he called his “nature pilgrimages.” He would drive all night in his 1970 Challenger into the woods of northern Michigan so





he could go trout fishing for a few hours before returning home. That brief contact was his “golden time,” he used to say—his sacred time.

Participation can be communal, as was China Galland’s march with a million other pilgrims to the Shrine of Our Lady of Czestochowa in Jasna Gora Monastery, Poland. Or it may be solitary, as with the World War II pilot I met in Tokyo in the mid-1980s, who had just returned from a sorrowful visit to ground zero in Hiroshima.

What unites the different forms of pilgrimage is intensity of intention, the soul’s desire to respond to return to the center, whether it portends ecstasy or agony. What makes a pilgrimage sacred is the longing behind the journey, reminiscent of the famous sixteenth-century woodcut of the Pilgrim Astronomer, who pikes his head through a slit in the dome of the sky so that he might gaze at the machinery behind the sun, stars and moon and so unveil the mysteries of creation.

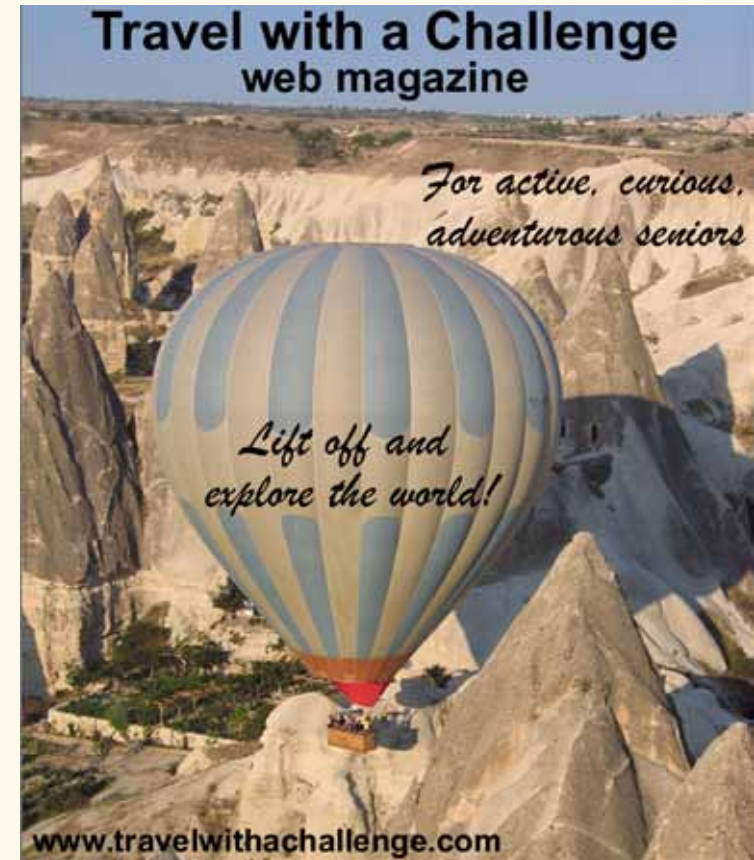
(Extract from ‘The Art of Pilgrimage’)

By *Phil Cousineau*

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# 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



Yearly from March to October the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes is a place of pilgrimage for Europeans and others from around the world. Photo credit: *Alison Gardner*

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 inten-





Open all year except November, the shrine of La Salette is located in a high alpine pasture at an altitude of 6,000 feet, about 9 miles from the nearest town. Photo credit: *Alison Gardner*

sity 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](http://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-



Evening candlelight processions wind along paths from the Basilica to the Valley of the Apparitions. Photo credit: *Alison Gardner*

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*

Editor/journalist, Alison Gardner, is a global expert on nature-based vacations and cultural/educational travel. Her *Travel with a Challenge* web magazine, is a recognized source of new and established operators, accommodations and richly-illustrated feature articles covering all types of senior-friendly alternative travel. <http://www.travelwithachallenge.com>



# FAITH TOURISM IN ARMENIA: MONASTERIES OF HAGHPAT AND SANAHIN

**Christianity played** a crucial role in the development of Armenian art and architecture. The “classic” style developed in the 5th-7th centuries, but its further evolution came to an abrupt halt with the Arab occupation that began at the end of the 7th century. Armenia became independent again at the end of the 9th century and Armenian art was revived when the kingdom was consolidated and national identity re-established.

In this period two Byzantine monasteries were built – the monasteries of Haghpat and Sanahin. They were important centers of learning, housing some 500 monks, and bear eloquent testimony to the highest achievement of Armenian architecture. Today they are visited by hundreds of tourists and pilgrims eager to see and explore the two monasteries inscribed on the UNESCO’s World Heritage List.

“People are often surprised by the majestic and severe architecture of the monasteries. They are truly impressive,” said Vrezh, a tour guide of AdvenTour, that organizes tours around Armenia and Georgia.

Both monasteries are exceptional examples of the 'domed hall' ecclesiastical architecture that developed in Armenia from the 10th to the 13th centuries, which blended elements of both Byzantine church architecture and the





traditional vernacular building style of this region.

“We were fortunate that in Haghpat, the priest gave us an expert and well-informed tour,” said John from UK who joined the AdvenTour’s tour Best of Armenia last year. “It was a unique opportunity. We wish we had had more knowledge of the history of these places,” he added.

The construction of the main church of the large fortified monastic complex of Haghpat, dedicated to the Holy Cross, began in 966-67 and was completed in 991. The central dome rests on the four massive pillars in the side walls. The external walls are almost entirely covered by triangular niches. The apse contains a fresco of Christ Pantocrator.

The building is complete and in its original form, apart from some 11th- and 12th-century restorations, includes a large gavit through which access is gained to the church. The plan of the gavit, built in the second decade of the 13th century, differs markedly in style from the main church. A large narthex-type building used for meetings, teaching and funerary rituals is based on vernacular architecture in wood, with the roof supported on four pillars in the centre of the structure.

The Sanahin Monastery consists of a large group of buildings on the plateau above the Debet gorge. It is skillfully integrated into the impressive mountain landscape. The buildings are laid out on two rectangular axes, with their facades facing west.



The main church, built in the 10th century, is the Cathedral of the Redeemer. The emphasis of the cross-shaped interior is on the central nucleus and the harmony between the square base and the circular dome. The central dome in this case is surrounded by four two-storey sacristies or chapels. To the west there is a four-columned gavit built in 1181. Its plan is that of a cross inscribed in a square. Lighting is by means of an aperture in the centre of the

dome. This is the earliest known example of this type of structure, which owes its origins to Armenian peasant dwellings consisting of square rooms with four free-standing pillars supporting the roof and a central hole to allow smoke to be dispersed.

The Church of the Mother of God (Astvatatzin), located to the north of the cathedral and connected with it by means of an open-ended vaulted passage, is the oldest building in the complex, built in 934 by monks fleeing from Byzantium. The large library (scriptorium), built in 1063, is square in plan and vaulted, with ten niches of varying sizes in which codices and books were stored. At the south-eastern corner of the library is to be found the small church dedicated to St Gregory the Illuminator. The 11th-century Academy of Gregory Magistros is located between the two main churches. The deep niches along the walls and the abundance of light give this building an exceptional spatial quality. The cemetery, located to the south-east of the main buildings, contains the late 12th-century mausoleum of the Zakarian princes.

#### By AdvenTour

**AdvenTour is the pioneer of experiential travel in Armenia and the Caucasus. They create original travel experiences that provide real-life interaction with the colorful region and its people. Whether it's a classical sightseeing or a more active exploration, the travelers get up close and personal with places they are exploring. More information about their tours at**

**<http://www.caucasusexplorer.com>**

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# DEVELOP YOUR OWN PILGRIMAGE TOURISM

**Pilgrimage tourism** may be one of the earliest and most important forms of tourism. Faith based tourism exists throughout the world, from India to Mexico, from Israel to Saudi Arabia. From Biblical times pilgrimages have not only been calls to spirituality but also major economic drivers that impact not only the soul but also the pocketbook. The Bible speaks of ascending to Jerusalem at least three times a year for each of the Biblical harvest festivals. Likewise the Islamic world is famous for the Hajj or pilgrimage to Mecca.

## CITIES, TEMPLES AND ... LENIN

For many millennia people have made pilgrimages to cities, shrines, rivers, mountains. Cities around the world have developed religious tourism not only at their main centers but also in places where miracles have been reported such as in Fatima in Portugal and Lourdes in France.

Furthermore, while pilgrimages are usually associated with religious events or locations, they may also come in the form of visits to places where political events have occurred, burial sites of political leaders, or famous monuments. For example, during the Communist period of Russian history there, millions of people made a pilgrimage to Lenin's tomb and in the USA millions visit the monuments that punctuate Washington, DC

Pilgrimage tourism in many ways parallels other forms of event tourism. While some form of spirituality, wish for divine healing or thankfulness inspires the trip, in many ways these pilgrimages also reflect many of the characteristics of other forms of tourism venues. A visitor to any of these religious sites will quickly note that in the modern world of pilgrimage tourism (and from what we can learn from ancient texts, also in the ancient world) the places produce secondary industries. Be these, the souvenir industry or the lodging industry, a series of dependent industries quickly develop around the site.

## SPIRITUAL OR COGNITIVE TRAVELERS?

Secondly, just as in some many other forms of tourism, the visitor (pilgrim) must be a believer in the narrative. Thirdly there is a difference between a pilgrimage, whose primary basis is faith-oriented, and a trip in which the person's primary purpose is other than the spiritual narrative. These people may be classified as pilgrimage based tourism but they are not spiritual pilgrims. Thus, entering into the world of religious pilgrimage sites is an exercise in spiritual emotion rather than cognition.

While all pilgrimages are faith-based travel, not all faith-based tourism is pilgrimages. Faith based travel may take place for life cycle events, for missionary work or humanitarian



interest projects and for religious conventions and conclaves.

Although from a social psychology viewpoint pilgrimages are based on emotion, faith-based tourism is big business. To help you deal with this growing travel trend. Here are some essentials to help the busy travel and tourism professional.

## PILGRIMAGES ARE OFTEN BIG BUSINESS

It is estimated that in the US alone some 25% of the traveling public is interested in some form of pilgrimage or faith-based tourism. When one adds to this the number of people who travel for faith-based conventions, and faith based activities such as weddings, bar mitzvahs or funerals, the number becomes extraordinarily large. World Religious Travel is one of the fastest growing segments in travel today. Religious travel is estimated at a value of US\$18 billion and 300 million travelers strong. Major faith based destinations such as Israel, Italy and Saudi Arabia have developed large



industries that provide services for people on pilgrimage.

### GROUP OR INDIVIDUAL TOURISM

Pilgrimages may occur as a form of group or individual tourism. Especially among young people (who compose about one third of the faith-based visitors) there are a great number of people who seek spiritual aspects to their vacations. Think through what areas of your community offer a chance to increase self-awareness or spirituality.

### LESS THREATENED BY ECONOMIC CRISIS

Pilgrimage travel is often less prone to economic ups and downs in the market place. Because faith-based travelers are committed travelers they tend to save for these religious experiences and travel despite the state of the economy. Faith travelers tend to have different motives for travel than do travelers for other reasons. For example, the faith-based traveler often travels as part of a religious obligation or to fulfill a spiritual mission. Faith-based travel can provide a steady flow of income to a local tourism economy.

### ALL AGES AND ALL NATIONALITIES

The pilgrimage and faith based market has the advantage of appealing to people from around the world, of all ages and of all nationalities. Tourism and travel professionals should be aware that this market might well double by the year 2020. To add to this number many faith-based travelers prefer to travel in groups rather than as individuals.



### BE SENSITIVE TO RELIGIOUS NEEDS

Religiously aware professionals will do best with this market. From airlines to hotels, those travel and tourism professionals who are sensitive to religious needs are going to do better. Among the things to consider are types of food served, types of music played and when activities take place. As in other forms of tourism it is essential to know your market. For example, airlines that do not offer vegetarian meals may lose a portion of the faith-based market whose religion has specific food restrictions.

### DEVELOP YOUR FAITH-BASED TOURISM

A recent study reported by the Associate Press found that in the Judeo-Christian world Israel is the number one preference of faith-based travelers followed by Italy and then England; however, faith-based tourism does not have to be built around a classical pilgrimage site. There is no doubt that it helps to have a major religious center, such as Jerusalem, Mecca, or Rome most locales will never have such holy sites. Lack of a religious center does not mean however that a location can-





not develop faith-based tourism. Florida has created its own Bible land, and multiple cities around the world have found ways to incorporate religious holidays into their tourism product.

**COORDINATE WITH PILGRIM'S NEEDS**

Support industries must coordinate with the pilgrimage cycle and needs. All too often the spirituality that visitors seek is lost at the level of supporting industries. During faith based tourism periods it is essential that hotels and restaurants connect with the arts and cultural

communities to develop an overall faith based product rather than a mishmash of unrelated offerings.

**RESOURCES FOR RELIGIOUS TOURISM**

Be aware of new and exciting resources for pilgrimage and faith-based travel. For examples the website Grouple.com has a whole section dedicated to religious travel. Major religious institutions also maintain travel centers for people of their faith. Another inspiration for pilgrimages may be called the anti-faith based traveler. For example, the fictional works of J. K. Rowling' Harry Potter, Dan Brown's Da Vinci Code, Shakespeare's plays – have all created pilgrimages.

*By Dr. Peter E. Tarlow*

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# VIA FRANCIGENA – WALKING EUROPE’S OLDEST PILGRIMAGE TRAIL

For centuries, people from all “walks of life” regardless of their religious or spiritual leanings, have been making pilgrimages to sacred places. For nearly as long, Christian pilgrims, rich, poor, and sometimes famous from throughout Europe have used a network of paths to journey to Rome, called the Via Francigena.

The Via Francigena is Europe’s oldest cultural trade route dating back more than 2,000 years. In Italy it is an elusive network of trails of ancient Roman roads and medieval paths that wind their way from Switzerland to Rome for 1,000 km.

Unlike its counterpart, the ever-popular Camino de Santiago in Spain, the Via Francigena in Italy, remains barely known. However, this is quickly changing as modern day pilgrims equipped with new guidebooks, trail maps and GPS devices are rediscovering the Via Francigena.

## WINDING FROM THE ALPS TO ROME

What makes the Via Francigena extraordinary, apart from its religious and spiritual importance as a Christian pilgrim trail, is that it crosses through six separate regions from northern to central Italy. From Gran San Bernardo high in the Swiss/Italian Alps, the Via Francigena descends into the distinct French



Via Francigena Sign on Route Napoleon – Switzerland

speaking Valle d Aosta, and through the rice capitals of Europe, Piedmont and Lombardy, and meat and cheese heartland of Emilia-Romagna. It then slowly climbs the Apennines Mountains, entering the tiny district of Lunigiana of northern Tuscany. It continues south

through undulating hills of vineyards and wheat fields, pass the medieval towns of Lucca and Siena, before entering Lazio, a prehistoric volcanic homeland of the original Italians, the Etruscans, before finally reaching the Italian capital of Rome.



While some sections of the trail have been lost to modern highways and thus re-routed, other segments include old cobble-stoned Roman roads and gravelly medieval paths and dirt farm tracks that bypass Etruscan and Roman ruins and hilltop towns. The trail weaves throughout famous Roman and medieval towns such as Aosta, Pavia, Piacenza, San Miniato, San Gimignano, and Viterbo where you can wander through many of the grand medieval churches and cathedrals, and gaze upon many of the ancient castles and forts.

### FINDING THE PILGRIM'S WAY

Navigating an elusive trail in modern day Italy does require an understanding of the nuances and challenges – something modern day pilgrims need to appreciate. When my wife and I walked the trail back in 2008, there were few good guidebooks, and none in English. Today, there is not only an excellent English guidebook (and another on its way), but two different Italian guidebooks, and one in French and one in German. There are also free downloadable road books (in Italian only for now), maps, and even GPS coordinates for the techie pilgrim types.

Signage remains a problem in some sections especially along the Po River, the country's longest waterway that divides northern and central Italy, and the region that produces most of the rice consumed by Europeans. Thus being equipped with a good guidebook and basic understanding of Italian is wise. Even though the Italian state government has spearheaded a campaign to install official signs along the



Quart Castle – Valle d'Aosta

entire route, they have left it up to the 139 local community authorities to carry out the task.

### SLEEPING IN MONASTERIES

Affordable accommodation is sometimes challenging but a network of religious accommodations offer inexpensive rooms with

breakfast to bonafide pilgrims, an opportunity to sleep in thousand-year-old abbeys and monasteries. For those looking for something more upscale, staying in family run pensions or bed & breakfasts or the occasional agriturismo is an excellent opportunity to experience the local culture, taste some of Italy's fine cuisine, and meet some very hospitable locals. There is even the chance to sleep in an ancient castle.





Monteriggioni Italy

This said, state and local authorities continue to make investments in improved signage and accommodation that will assist walkers in their journey.

In summary, the Via Francigena provides an exceptional opportunity to experience the contemporary culture, intricate cuisine, and rich history of Italy, one footstep at a time. Moreover, it is one of the world's important religious and spiritual modern-day Christian pilgrimages. And it is still yours to discover.

**By Neville J Tencer**

Neville J Tencer is co-author of *An Italian Odyssey: One Couple's Culinary & Cultural Pilgrimage*. To learn more, please visit [www.verderamedia.com](http://www.verderamedia.com)  
<http://www.verderamedia.com>



# TRAVEL TO MOTHER EARTH'S SACRED PLACES



From ancient stone circles and jungle-tangled pyramids to gothic cathedrals and mountain-top shrines, sacred places attract us with a mysterious power. Since the beginning of time,

people have been visiting sacred sites for healing, inspiration and guidance. Mainstream western scientists may scoff at suggestions that water from holy wells can cure illnesses

or that ancient megaliths can deliver messages from the spirit world, but the concept of powerful places has been known to many cultures for thousands of years.

## THE FIRST PILGRIMAGES

The oldest known pilgrimage site is Mount Kailash in Tibet, which has been a holy travel destination for an incomprehensible 15,000 years. Walking the 32-mile trail around Kailash takes about three days, at altitudes as high as 18,000 feet. Buddhists say the ritual circumambulation erases the sins of one lifetime, and 108 times around the mountain will enable you to reach Nirvana.

The first Christian pilgrim was Helena, the mother of the emperor of Constantine. She toured the holy land in 326 c.e. and identified (not necessarily accurately) many of the sites associated with Jesus. By the Middle Ages, when Chaucer wrote his *Canterbury Tales*, pilgrims who couldn't manage the long voyage to Jerusalem could still do penance or seek cures by visiting shrines devoted to the various saints. The Benedictine monastery in Montserrat, Spain attracted 50,000 pilgrims per year during the Middle Ages, and today it draws about 60,000 visitors, eager to see the image of the Virgin Mary said to have been carved by Saint Luke.

North Americans don't have to go overseas to find places known for miracles. In Chimayó, New Mexico there is an adobe chapel where 2,000 believers congregate each Good Friday, and 300,000 pilgrims come every year. In a small room at the back of the chapel, known



as the “Room of Miracles”, is a hole in the floor through which people scoop out sand, said to have curative properties. The walls of the room are lined with hundreds of letters and pictures from visitors thankful for the healing they say they received.

Even closer to home is Lac Ste. Anne, about 70 km west of Edmonton, where last July’s annual pilgrimage drew 40,000 visitors, largely First Nations, to pray, sing and seek comfort. Although no actual miracles have been reported at the lake, participants describe feeling more calm and content, with their spirits renewed. Visitors to many sacred places come away feeling inspired, with a greater sense of purpose. For millennia it was customary for North American native youth to go on vision quests to powerful places. After receiving instructions from a shaman, medicine man or wise woman, young people would go, alone, to mountains, canyons, caves or other sites where they would await visitations from the spirits. Rock paintings with images of spirit visions can still be found along the Stein River valley near Lillooet, BC, a popular destination for hikers from Vancouver.

### BIZARRE STORIES IN CORNWALL

Much more unusual sacred places are fogous (FOO-goos.) These curious stone tunnels are unique to Cornwall, in the southwestern tip of England. Some people who go into fogous experience headaches, dizziness, messages from spirit guides or a distorted sense of space. One artist sketching inside Carn Euny fogou suddenly became aware she was being



watched by an Iron-age woman. A visitor who tried to enter Boleigh fogou said she found her path blocked by boulders which do not exist.

One of the strangest first-hand reports about a sacred place this writer has ever heard took place in the Peruvian Andes. A woman from Olympia, Washington told me she was walking across the main plaza of Machu Picchu when a large spacecraft-like object materialized in front of her. An extra-terrestrial being emerged from the silver ship and sent her a telepathic message of profound, unconditional love. Neither Andrea’s husband nor the other members

of her group saw what she did, but they agree the experience had a profound impact on her. Now a Reiki Grand Master, she describes her life as divided into two parts: before and after Peru.

Sedona, Arizona has been a pilgrimage destination since prehistoric times. Not only the local Hopi and Navajo, but natives from as far as Canada and Central America would journey there for healing and learning long before Europeans invaded North America. Sedona’s dramatically-shaped red sandstone rocks are said to emit powerful energy partly because



of their high concentration of magnetic iron. Sandstone is also rich in quartz, the mineral from which computer chips are made.

Added to these geological forces is the human factor. Sedona was settled by aboriginals from the four sacred directions: Apache from the East, the ancestors of the Hopi from the South, Yavapai from the West and Athabascans from the North. This seems to be the way with many pilgrimage sites. They were first identified as places of natural earth energy. In time, the land was developed by adding monoliths, stone circles, shrines, cathedrals etc. Over the centuries, as people gathered to celebrate or worship at the places, they added their own human energies, which continue to accumulate and mingle with earth energies.

### PREPARE FOR THE SACRED JOURNEY

For every bizarre story you hear about unusual happenings at sacred places, there are thousands of disappointed souls who go on pilgrimages hoping for miracles that never happen. This writer confesses to being a little jealous after I went to the same plaza in Machu Picchu where my friend Andrea had her close encounter with ETs and I only saw tourists. One reason why so many pilgrimages fizzle out may be lack of preparation.

Without going overboard, there are several practical steps you can take to make your pilgrimage experience more meaningful. First, do your homework. Learn about the history and folklore associated with a place. One of



the reasons I was moved to tears in Canterbury Cathedral is probably because I had first read Becket. Next, approach sacred places with humility. Instead of barging into a stone circle, stop outside and ask the *genus loci* for permission before you enter. Know your reason for going. If some entity were to ask “Why have you come here?” how would you answer? Open your mind and heart to the spirit of a place. Meditate, or at least take time to absorb whatever energies might be there.

Dr. Jean Shinoda Bolen, author of *Crossing to Avalon* and *Goddesses in Everywoman*, recommends that visitors go to sacred sites “with an attitude like the Fool in the Tarot deck. You have to suspend your own critical attitude which usually prevents you from acting foolish and be free to do whatever you are moved to do, whether it be picking up a certain stone,

singing, doing a ritual, walking around in a certain way or lying on the ground.” Openness to synchronicity is also important.

Self-discovery is, of course, the ultimate goal of any spiritual pursuit. All transformation must come from within, and pilgrimage is just one of many routes you can take to get there. But if doing yoga or Tao Chi seems less appropriate to your spirit than going on a Goddess tour of Turkey, then follow the path that feels best for you. In the end, all spiritual roads lead to the same destination, an idea beautifully summarized by T.S. Eliot in his *Four Quartets*:

“And the end of all our exploring,  
Will be to arrive where we started,  
And know the place  
for the first time.”

*By Robert Scheer*

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