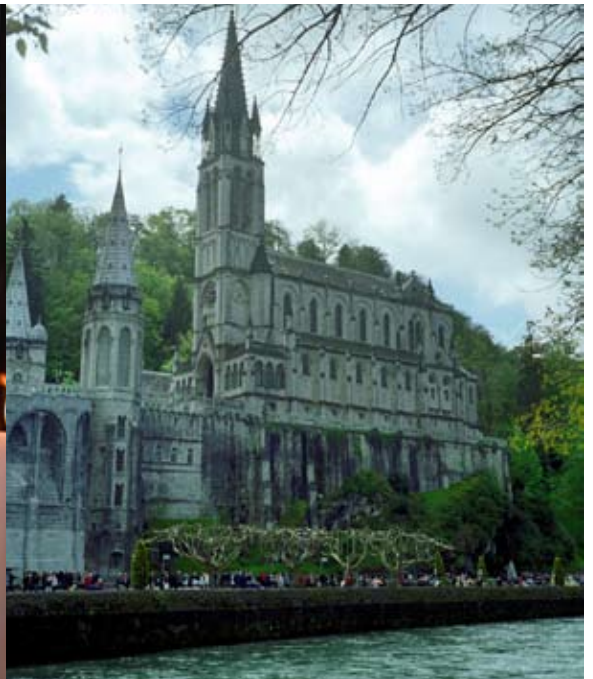


HAIL MARY WHAT A PLACE

Searching for a miracle in Lourdes, France. **By Kelli Dunham**



Heather and I were not typical pilgrims at Lourdes, but sometimes you've got to throw caution to the winds and live a little. And by that I mean fly 15 hours on a cut-rate international airline that doesn't even serve water without a sizable bribe, then take an eight-hour train ride that involves three transfers in as many different small French towns, then continue 40 minutes in what the guidebooks euphemistically call a "shared rural taxi situation," because the sharing in question involves both people and livestock. But you do all this when the goal is to find a miracle cure for your partner who has cancer.

Lourdes, France, is a holy place for Catholics because in the mid-19th century a teenage girl named Bernadette Soubirous reportedly saw the Virgin Mary on 18 separate occasions. Now, of course, that girl is known as St. Bernadette. After a number of other miracles allegedly occurred there, it became a shrine for millions of devout Catholic pilgrims—millions of devout Catholic pilgrims, that is, and us.

Neither my partner Heather (whom I referred to as "my queen," before she passed away) nor I were practicing; however, we did call ourselves ironic Catholics—in a completely unironic way. But when it comes to a miracle cure, you seek it where you can get it. If someone had politely (or even not so politely) suggested that Heather would be A-OK if we swam naked together in a vat of whale feces, or fashioned ourselves

matching butt plugs of ginger that we were to wear while singing the national anthem at a Cubs game, we would have given it some serious thought, too.

This is how we came to be walking hand in hand in an after-dark, thousands-of-lighted-candle-strong procession to honor the Virgin Mary, among the sainterazzi of all Europe and beyond, attempting to keep up with the rosary in French and feeling—as my queen said later—profoundly queer.

True, Heather and I would never be mistaken for people who fit in, even within our own national borders. She was an activist and burlesque diva, and often made total strangers gasp with her sheer glamour—even when coming back from the gym. There was a rumor going around San Francisco that she peed glitter, but because she would only say that it "brings a whole new meaning to the term 'golden showers'"—this was never confirmed. As for me, on a good day I look like a cross between Dennis the Menace and Miss Hathaway from the *Beverly Hillbillies*. And at that point it had been a very long time since I'd had a good day.

We didn't have a big plan for our trip, at least not in the usual touristy way. We were skipping museums and monuments in exchange for a miracle. Since the usual miracle-seeking path involved a dip in the sacred pools that have collected from the spring that Bernadette discovered, visiting it was our only agenda item for the next day.

I accompanied Heather to the building where volunteers helped pilgrims lower themselves into the 60-degree pools then stood there awkwardly for a moment, stuck for something to say.

"Good, uh, luck," I said, but she was already in the door.

I waited outside, reclining on the warm lawn and playing a game of Spot the Nun. After what seemed like a very long while, I felt a few drops of water on my face and turned to my right. The spray was coming from Heather, towering over me and shaking. She had obviously had quite a cry. This did not seem like a positive sign.

She spat, "Jesus Christ, they didn't even have any towels!"

I countered with a tentative, "So, um, how do you—feel?"

"The same," she said, and then, after a moment, added, "but colder. Much colder."

We had long ago learned that when the situation was very bad, my tendency was to try to overcome it with the sheer quantity of words I would level at it. I had, therefore, been advised by Heather that the only phrase permitted in such situations was a simple "I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry," I said, getting up.

She was silent for a moment, took my hand and said, "I know."

We walked back toward the hotel and Heather sent me to get some food. This was easier said than done, since Heather was practically eating a vegan diet at the time, and we were in rural France. I returned to the hotel two hours later with the only non-meat, non-cheese food item I could find: a medium size bag of salt and vinegar potato chips.

"I only found..." I began to say, but she waved me away with, "Just. Whatever. I'm hungry. Set the table and we'll eat."

Ten minutes later, she was glaring at me across the potato chip-laden table. We both reached for the bag, and then collapsed into laughter.

"Goddamn, this trip sucks!" I said, between guffaws.

"It sucks ass," she agreed.



The late Heather MacAllister (left) and the author

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The next morning at the train station, I went to check on our luggage, once I saw that Heather was safely aboard. Unfortunately, I didn't note the track number, so after I completed my errand there was a frantic 10 minutes of searching for the right train. If Heather hadn't leaned out the open door and waved to me, I might still be standing on that platform.

An American tourist, who was sitting across from us and had been watching our little comedy play out, said, in an exaggerated California surfer boy accent, "Dude, it's a frickin' miracle you all found one another."

Heather ruffled my newly sweaty hair.

She said, "Yeah, that is our frickin' miracle," and kissed my cheek as I sat down. ■

PENNY FOR YOUR THOUGHTS

Whether you're going scuba diving on the Great Barrier Reef or just taking a road trip with your girlfriend, recording your adventures will allow you to revisit them when you're too old and gray to remember anything without a little help. That makes *Everywoman's Travel Journal* (Ten Speed Press) the perfect travel companion. Haven't been keeping a journal since you were 12? Don't worry—the travel journal includes helpful tips on how to begin filling those pages and hints from novelist Barbara Kingsolver on different ways to record your experiences. It also includes useful stuff like packing checklists, natural remedies for common ailments like jet lag

and hangovers, a place to record your travel itinerary and important contact information, lists of languages and currencies used around the world, time zones

and maps, addresses and contact information for U.S. embassies and tips on etiquette, body language and dress in foreign countries (in Iceland, for example, tips can be considered insulting). While it doesn't come with any blank pages for the artistic lezzies among us, it does have an accordion pocket to hold small keepsakes like ticket stubs, post cards or that napkin the hot Parisian chick passed you with her phone number scrawled on it. (\$13, ten-speed.com) [Ariel Messman-Rucker]

