

*Pilgrims, Prayers, and Profits:
Assessing the Cultural Significance and Economic Value of Lourdes*

Abstract:

Fueled by faith in the unseen and reverence to meaningful events and people, religious tourism reinforces cultural interest and stimulates the migration of millions of people each year and with that, substantial commercial enterprise. This paper aims to analyze the cultural significance of this type of tourism and to evaluate the activities producing economic advantages, specifically in the sanctuary town of Lourdes. It also focuses on how something as intangible as the hope for miracles transformed this small provincial French town into one of the most popular attractions in Western Europe, attempting to measure this success through Lourdes' ability to market its unique attributes and to host the influx of the masses in its hospitality industry.

Unlike other destinations of religious importance in Catholicism such as the Vatican or the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem (the burial site of Jesus Christ) where the faithful and other tourists flock to appreciate their historical implications, the aesthetic grandeur in the art and architecture, or to venerate physical relics, Lourdes' main attracting force is arguably rooted in the prospect of miracles from the waters of the grottoes that are said to hold healing properties. It is this aspect that many claim make an experience at Lourdes priceless.

Few are aware that Lourdes, a small and unassuming town nestled in the mountainous terrain of the Pyrénées of southwest France, often rivals the cosmopolitan capital of Paris in tourism. With around 15,000 inhabitants, the locale annually hosts estimates of about five to six million tourists each year.¹ On any given day in Lourdes, about 16,000 tourists mingle with the locals, profiting from the unique amenities furnished by centuries of history, the rural environment fit for personal retreats and leisure, and its main claim to notoriety—its significance to the Roman Catholic faith and human spirituality.²

This paper explores the phenomenon of religious tourism in Lourdes and the intertwined areas where culture and economics converge. It analyzes the value of these touristic activities and the goods and services created to not only sustain the livelihood of the town and its people, but also the legacy of inherited religious and spiritual value. It will first discuss its history then go further into an analysis of factors driving its economic success.

Arguably, religious tourism remains driven by history, a devotion to a faith and its extensive chain of meaningful events and people.³ Lourdes serves as a legacy of modern Roman Catholic heritage. In this town well over a century and a half ago in 1858, Bernadette Soubirous, then a young girl of the lower-middle class, witnessed several apparitions of the Virgin Mary.⁴ These Marian apparitions, as referred to by the Church, are often regarded as prophetic, tied in with the Roman Catholic belief of divine revelations.

¹ Hughes, Peter. "France: At the Frontiers of Faith." *The Telegraph*. 14, April 2001.

² Ibid.

³ Vukonic, Boris. "Religious Tourism: Economic Value or an Empty Box?" Department of Economics: University of Zagreb. *Zagreb International Review of Economics and Business*. Vol. 1: no. 1. pp. 83-94. 1998.

⁴ Perrier, Jacques. "Cures and Miracles." Site Internet des Sanctuaires Notre-Dame de Lourdes. 17, March 2003.

Undoubtedly, these accounts of holy encounters have, for many years, inspired countless believers to visit this sacred space, to pay reverence to Saint Bernadette and to Mary, or to find their own spiritual peace. Unlike other destinations of religious importance such as Fátima in Portugal or Guadalupe in Mexico where popular local belief alleges Marian apparitions took place, Lourdes' somewhat of a material or tangible asset, the grotto waters, cement a fellowship not solely based on religious belief, but of the wider human ability to hope, resonating to many across religious lines.⁵ The waters that flow from the grottoes in Lourdes (in particular, the location where the Basilicas of the Rosary and of the Immaculate Conception, the epicenters of Lourdes' religious tourism, now stand) are believed by many to have healing properties.⁶ For these reasons, millions have been visiting this small mountaintop town, transforming it into one of the most popular tourist sites in Western Europe.

After the Vatican, the heart and power hub of the Church, officially recognized Lourdes as an authentically holy place, and even more so after the canonization of Bernadette as a saint, more credibility backed the story. This authority from a widely credible international force would provide the means for others to measure and assess the town's cultural and economic value.

Several popes, including the late John Paul II and Benedict XVI have made special visits to the site and have celebrated Mass(es) there.⁷ Of course, where the head of the Church goes, his supporters as well as international media will follow. Since he is also considered in some

⁵ Hughes, Peter. "France: At the Frontiers of Faith." *The Telegraph*. 14, April 2001.

⁶ Perrier, Jacques. "Cures and Miracles." Site Internet des Sanctuaires Notre-Dame de Lourdes. 17, March 2003.

⁷ Horowitz, Jason. "Pope's Visit Shines Light on the Practical Side of Lourdes." *The New York Times*. 15, August 2004.

respects, a leader with considerable political or diplomatic influence, participants from other backgrounds may electively observe.⁸

In the respect that most come to bathe or drink the supposedly miraculous waters, Lourdes means more than a pilgrimage, or a religious retreat; to the visitors, this voyage is a last resort in finding cures for their health problems as they have likely tried and/or abandoned hope with traditional medicine.

Although this phenomenon concerning the water may blur the lines between nature and faith, or tangible fact and intangible belief, it potently attracts millions who visit Lourdes in search of a cure for their ailments or injuries. Since 1858, more than 7,000 individuals who have either bathed or consumed the waters have claimed to have been healed, while 67 cases have been recognized and officially documented as miracles by the Vatican,⁹ among them, a three-year-old boy from France's Aix-en-Provence region supposedly cured of blindness and paralysis of the limbs and a 50-year-old male of Angoulême who suffered from Multiple Sclerosis.¹⁰

Lourdes, its attractions and sites, and everything it represents remains culturally significant to many groups especially, but not exclusively, the Roman Catholic Church, the nation of France, and as one may argue, believers in alternative medicine, and to a greater extent of miracles.¹¹ Moreover, it cannot be assumed that all tourists visiting Lourdes identify themselves as Roman Catholic. Over the years, the tourists have represented various faiths, nationalities, and cultures. This trend adds to the leverage of Lourdes' status as universal cultural

⁸ Hughes, Peter. "France: At the Frontiers of Faith." *The Telegraph*. 14, April 2001.

⁹ Associated Press. "'Miracle' at Lourdes?: Don't Ask These Doctors." MSNBC. 3, December 2008.

¹⁰ "Les Guerisons de Lourdes: Cinq Observations Remarquables." Sanctuaires Notre-Dame de Lourdes. Dossier de Presse. 2008.

¹¹ Cougat-Droulez, Sandrine. "Religion, Science et 'Miracles:' le Cas de Lourdes." *Socio-Anthropologie*. N°10 | 2001, 15, January 2003.

capital stemming from the significance and effects on humanity and appeal as a haven and refuge.¹²

Regardless of background or motivation, people are willing to financially invest in the experience for this trip.¹³ Evidently, high risk and high investment accompany ventures in travel, especially in tourism where one voluntarily leaves his/her home for a temporary period to fulfill leisure. Risk and investment increase, correlating with the increase in distance traveled. Not only is the traveler's health and safety at risk when venturing a great distance from familiar surroundings, he/she must also pay the necessary expenses to cover the cost of transportation and miscellaneous daily living expenses accrued.

In all travel, these investments must be made at varying costs. Tourism generally requires the voluntary movement of people to places, typically, for purposes of leisure. If applied to the economic formula of supply and demand, the site or attraction (ranging in various geographic spaces, i.e.: regions, cities, parks, monuments, etc.) supplies the consumer or tourist with a unique experience (an accumulation of both goods and services). Likewise, the tourists in whatever the size of their droves, demand a quality experience valued at the total price they paid for the necessities of the voyage (accommodation, transportation, meals, etc.). This factor of quality remains largely an irregular component since it is measured not only by monetary worth, but is deeply reliant on individual tastes and perceptions of quality. As a two-star hotel may be suitable for some, may be far from it for others.

The tourism that Lourdes attracts contributes significantly to the revenue of the town's economy, as well as the regional (Midi-Pyrénées) and national one. Furthermore, the immediate beneficiaries of Lourdes' annual financial earnings are not only the local economic sectors of

¹²Throsby, David. *Economics and Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2001.

¹³ Ibid.

Lourdes, but also the regional and national. Tourism's steady high volume of profits received each year helps to sustain employment and to fund various community urban planning initiatives.¹⁴ Compared to other towns of similar population sizes, Lourdes rakes in many times its standard value (projected economic value produced by its population not consisting of gains from its unique commercial and touristic activity) due to its dynamic tourist industry. Through the goods and services industries, especially in hospitality, an estimated total of €270 million per year is profited by the town.¹⁵

Competition is abound in a Europe with deep Roman Catholic heritage where numerous shrines have been constructed and dedicated to Mary and where churches throughout the continent harbor the relics of various saints and holy figures. The local government of Lourdes contributes some of the endowment and earnings generated from past touristic and industrial revenues toward the improvement of facilities such as hospitals to accommodate the sick and incapacitated tourists.¹⁶ By investing in quality services and striving to accommodate the needs and demands of these visitors with such investments, the government seeks to attract their loyalty and cooperation to enhance the economic activities and overall livelihood of the town.

In addition to hospitals and specialized centers for the sick, tourists are housed in the numerous hotels and inns peppered throughout the town. The majority of the locals are employed in the service industry, mainly in these hotels. Accommodating the sizeable influx of visitors each year are the over 290 hotels, more than any other area in France, ranking second only to Paris.¹⁷

¹⁴Throsby, David. Economics and Culture. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2001.

¹⁵Horowitz, Jason. "Pope's Visit Shines Light on the Practical Side of Lourdes." The New York Times. 15, August 2004.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

The actual religious or spiritual experience is free; this includes access to the cathedrals, bathing in the waters, and collecting the water.¹⁸ Most, if not all, of the commercial activity, the supply and demand exchange is generated from the local industries providing day-to-day living arrangements and the manufacturing and distribution of material commodities. The production of souvenirs brings in a considerable amount of revenue as well. The tiny stone streets that vein the town are filled with merchants selling various memorabilia from containers for the grotto water to rosaries and statuettes of Mary.¹⁹ Although cost of production may vary from items crafted from inexpensive materials such as plastic to artisan-made goods that demand higher prices, value is applied by the consumer. They pay what they are willing to pay for those mementos; for most, they serve as concrete proof and remembrance of their visit.

Public promotion of the town and its attractions is another form of investment by the (local, regional, and national) government. This supports efforts to ensure that the public is made aware of the town and its unique attributes and that marketing strategies are targeted toward [new potential guests. With the international media attention generated particularly from the cases of miraculous healings and the sort of legendary status it has received over the years, Lourdes has become sort of an icon in the world of travel and tourism, much like sites and cities that enjoy immense popularity. Despite its standing notoriety, advertisements marketing Lourdes as a serene place of peace with its images showing its main cathedrals and grottoes are widely published on the Internet (particularly in travel agency websites such as Virtual Tourist and Travel Advisor), travel guidebooks (i.e. Lonely Planet), street posters (generally throughout France), and in print media (newspapers, magazines, etc.). In some cases, not only is the town

¹⁸ Perrier, Jacques. "Cures and Miracles." Sanctuaires Notre-Dame de Lourdes. 17, March 2003.

¹⁹ Heavey, Bill. "In the Pilgrimage Town of the Pyrenees, No Trinket Outshines an Unexpected Miracle of Joy." Los Angeles Times. 2, July 1995.

packaged and promoted as a formidable leisurely retreat, but the history and religious components of Lourdes are also promoted.

Although Lourdes' Office of Tourism as well as the French Ministry of Tourism make concentrated efforts to create marketing strategies for the town and its unique attributes, a significant portion of touristic promotion originates from word-of-mouth or spreads among the network of parishes and dioceses that then encourage their parishioners to undertake a pilgrimage to Lourdes.

As long as people are intrigued by the story of Saint Bernadette and are open to the possibility of finding cures for their health problems, Lourdes will lure visitors, thus creating a model for sustainable tourism. Here, the sustainability comes in the form of intergenerational appreciation or the inheritance of cultural capital.²⁰ With the demand constantly present, one of the immediate outcome is the stabilization of the economy and employment rates for the locals. The need to welcome, orient, and accommodate the flow of tourists maintains the cycle of supply and demand.²¹

Something as intangible as the hope for miracles has had a profound effect on the region, the masses of believers around the world, the sick in search of miracles, and the heritage of a faith and a nation. The value they place on this spiritual journey remains rooted in this hope. For these visitors, the value and experience at Lourdes is invaluable.

²⁰Throsby, David. Economics and Culture. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2001.

²¹Vukonic, Boris. "Religious Tourism: Economic Value or an Empty Box?" Department of Economics: University of Zagreb. Zagreb International Review of Economics and Business. Vol. 1: no. 1. pp. 83-94. 1998.

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