

TRAVEL

In search of Mary Magdalene

A French pilgrimage brings devotees to shrine, dwelling of sainted disciple

By Erika Hobbs
For the Chicago Tribune

Whether you believe she was a penitent prostitute, the wife of Jesus or the apostle's apostle, Mary Magdalene and her story have intrigued the nation since Dan Brown published "The Da Vinci Code" in 2003 — and that doesn't include the millions of Catholics and Orthodox in Chicago who for centuries have venerated the saint.

I fell for her two years ago when I sought out women theologians to help me through a period of grief. I learned she was never a prostitute (Pope Gregory the Great made that up). She learned Jesus' koans faster than the men, crashed a party to anoint her 'beloved' and refused to crumble over disciples' mockery of her. That's my kind of girl.

Then, I learned about her French connection. Legend holds that Mary Magdalene fled persecution after Jesus' crucifixion. She, his mother, Mary Salome and others left the Holy Land in a makeshift boat, landing in a fishing village called Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer in the south of France. Tradition holds that Mary Magdalene spent the last 30 years of her life in and around Marseille, preaching and baptizing believers until she retired to a grotto in the mountains of Sainte-Baume.

Two years later, France called to me, as well. I could play pilgrim: visit the relics of her famous skull, imagining her face. I could climb a mountain to touch the rock walls of her sacred dwelling — the *pièce de résistance* of every devotee's trip. This was also in Provence, which meant lavender. Wine. Cheese. Sun.

I joined a tour bookended by stays in Marseille for 10 days in October.

I would be in good company. Roughly 18% of the 87 million tourists visiting France each year come for spiritual or religious reasons, a rising trend, according to data from Future Market Insights, a New York-based research firm. Peak season for Mary Magdalene trips is around July 22, her feast day.

"A pilgrimage to Mary Magdalene is a pilgrimage of the heart," said Ariana Brackenbury, who leads sacred pilgrimages in France.

To see Mary Magdalene's shrines, one doesn't need a tour — although solo travelers will find a car is often necessary — but I chose to travel with Magdalene Sacred Journeys, a tour group run by Veronique Flayol since 2004.

"I was born in St. Maximin, where she lived the last 30 years of her life and is buried, at the foot of the Sainte-Baume mountain," Flayol said. "It's my universe."

She and her husband — she did the teaching, he the driving — led our intimate group of three to visit the St. Mary Magdalene Basilica at Saint-Maximin-la-Sainte-Baume that houses her skull and bones; Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer to witness a seaside procession honoring Mary Salome; and to La Sainte-Baume, the Holy Mountain.

We also made our way to Cathar country — Cathars believed Jesus and the Magdalene were married — including the fortified city of Carcassonne and Rennes-le-Chateau, home of the Church of Mary Magdalene made famous by "The Da Vinci Code."

We opened the visit with a stop at St. Mary Magdalene Basilica in Saint-Maximin-la-Sainte-Baume. In the crypt, behind iron bars, rests a gilded reliquary containing what the Catholic Church believes is her skull, the one researchers used to reconstruct her face. Amid the thick silence in the cold, dark crypt, I could hear my own heart beat.

Later, on the way to Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, the capital of the Camargue, we stopped to see the region's famous pink flamingoes and white horses. By the time we made it to town, wind-whipped by the Mediterranean sea, the parade for St. Mary Salome was lining up. What seemed like every town resident spilled out onto the streets,



Pilgrims chant during a pilgrimage in Saintes Maries de la Mer, in the south of France, on Oct. 19, 2019. Since the mid-15th century, worshippers have paid tribute to Sainte Marie Jacobe and Sainte Marie Salome by parading their shrines through town and returning their saints to the sea. **DANIEL COLE/AP**



Camargue worshippers pay tribute to the Saintes Marie shrine during a pilgrimage to Saintes Maries de la Mer in 2019. **DANIEL COLE/AP**



Mary Magdalene's skull is protected by an iron grate at the Basilica of St. Mary Magdalene in St. Maximin. It sits above her alabaster sarcophagus. **ERIKA HOBBS/FOR THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

waving banners and singing traditional hymns. We followed them through the winding streets to the beach, where priests marched into the rushing sea to bless the saints' statues. Locals believe the Magdalene and her companions docked in this area.

At Rennes le Bains, we watched people swim in waters they find healing just outside ruins of Roman baths. And at Rennes-le-Château, with its own Church of St. Mary Magdalene, we marveled at the religious confection built by controversial priest François-Bérenger Saunière, who was suspended from the priesthood for allegedly selling Masses and cooking the church's books. Nevertheless, Saunière used some of the money to build the church, and he encoded secret messages in the artwork.

Then, finally, the mountain. It rises from an ancient forest where some believers say fertility goddesses once lived. The Dominican Order has long taken care of the site and built a chapel and hostel nearby. The grounds are accessible only by car and hiking is the only way to get to the cave at the top. It's a 45-minute walk canopied by hickory, yew, linden and other trees, and dotted with plenty of resting spots so you can take your time, picnic or meditate.

On the ascent, the path changes from earth to stone. The Domini-

cans placed plaques and statues of the Holy Family along the way as if they were pumping you up on your way. But nothing prepares you for the cliff.

At the top stands the Pietà of the Grotto of Sainte-Marie-Madeleine, Marthe Spitzer's stunning sculpture of Mary cradling the body of Jesus as the Magdalene weeps at her feet. If you walk 30 steps to the cliff's ledge, gaze at the haze over green trees and let the wind lift your hair, you'll know why the faithful believe angels lifted Mary Magdalene into the heavens.

Inside the cave, my hands shook, whether from magic, divine love or the thought of hewing a chapel into rock, I don't know. The energy is palpable. Drops of water from the walls plink and echo. Just beyond the marble altar, a gilded box holds chips of Mary Magdalene's tibia. Flayol pointed out the artwork on its blue pedestal that depicted the refugees with a body prone on the boat's floor. Locals believe what others call heresy: that it depicts the body of Jesus.

At the end of the tour, I hopped a train back to Marseille and checked into the Hôtel Maison Saint Louis Vieux Port, a stone's throw from the famed Noailles market. I headed to Les Bains Sherazade, a hammam, for steam, a black olive body scrub and massage. I wandered through Noailles, the Arabic market, intoxi-



A man adorns a statue of Saint Sara with jewelry in the church of Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, southern France, Sept. 23, 2022. Saint Sara is revered throughout Camarguaise tradition. **DANIEL COLE/AP**

cated by turmeric and cinnamon and in love with handwoven baskets. On my last night, I snagged a coveted reservation for a five-course dinner at La Mercerie.

A whirlwind, for sure. But my soul was fed.

While we were in Saint-Maximin, our group stayed at a family-run, three-star hotel called Hotel de France and dined at its sister restaurant, Côte Jardin. The hotel is charming and efficient, the food divine. If chanterelles are on the menu, don't skip them. We also stayed in Alet les Bains at Hôtel l'Evêché, an enchanting former 14th century monastery. However, is not taking reservations as the owner told us at the time she was selling the place.

You can travel to these sites by flying into Marseilles, Aix-en-Provence or Toulon, but you'll need to drive to get to the grotto's grounds. My group met in Marseille, which has no direct flights from Chicago. I opted to fly into Paris and take the train to Marseille. Trains are daily, cheap and easy. Be sure to download the Trainline or SNCF apps, or Oiugo's, France's discount train service.

Erika Hobbs is a freelance writer.

TO GO TO LA SAINTE-BAUME
According to the Dominican Order's website (saintebaume.org), you should put these coordinates in your GPS:
For the city: Plan-d'Aups-Sainte-Baume
For the site: D 80 Nazareth soit Nazareth
The only way to get to the grotto at the top of the mountain is by hiking up on one of two paths. It is not accessible. Entrance is free, and you can pack a picnic or have one delivered by the hostel for only 9 euros apiece. We picked up a catered lunch in St. Maximin before we left for our trip. Rooms at the hostel (saintebaume.org/hostelry) average about 45 euros for one person per night.
Tour providers: Magdalene Sacred Journeys (VeroniqueFlayol.com), magdalenesacredjourneys.com) Mary Magdalene Pilgrimages (ArianaBrackenbury.com) marymagdalenepilgrimages.com)