

St Peter's Pilgrimage to Lisbon / Fatima / Santiago de Compostela



Sunday 8th September: 29 Pilgrims from St Peter and Good Shepherd Parish set out led by Fr Geoff to Gatwick en route to Portugal's no 1 city, Lisbon. Lisbon is a beautiful city which we explored: splendid buildings, a lovely old city centre and with the ancient trams still jangling. We had our own Mass at a big modern church near the hotel (Our Lady of the Rosary - beautiful colours in modern stained glass windows). Next day we looked at the Cathedral, a very plain but significant church, but our Mass was held in the chapel next door which in contrast was ornate and very beautiful. We had plenty of time to explore the city, including for some an evening of 'Fado' (historic folk) singing in a small restaurant in the old medieval quarter. Possibly an acquired taste...

Tuesday saw us depart for Fatima via the seaside town of Nazaré. Mass at Sitio (the top of the town) in a stunningly beautiful but simple old church, Our Lady of Nazaré church. Then with soul satisfied, down to the bottom of town for a splendid lunch of fresh caught sardines, in little cafes along the beach front.

We arrived in Fatima in time for the evening International Rosary in the Chapel of Apparitions (where Mary appeared to the three little children in 1917), followed by a Mass and Candlelight procession round the enormous Sanctuary apron which stretches 500m between the old and the new Basilicas.

The two Basilicas were amazing - the original basilica in traditional style contains the tombs of the three children. The modern basilica was built in 2004 to seat 9,000 people and is completely different - a huge building shaped like a pill box. Not particularly attractive outside, it is stunning inside: a plain white interior with just one decoration: a huge gold mosaic across the back wall with a contrasting modern bronze crucifix - very emotive and thought provoking.

Next day we toured Fatima including the site of the children's visitation by an angel and their homes in adjacent Aljustrel. Mass of the Sick and Eucharistic Procession was followed by our own Stations of the Cross on the Sanctuary Esplanade, led by Fr Geoff - very moving. We returned for the International Rosary and Torchlight procession.

Then a long day: we joined the International Rosary and Concelebrated Mass, and Procession of Our Lady of Fatima, and Adieu to Our Lady. A long celebration from 9.00am to 12.30pm (but some of us did sneak out for a coffee break, as it was all in Portuguese!). Then back on our coach for a very scenic drive north into Spain to Santiago de Compostela.

Santiago has an amazing Cathedral which dominates the skyline of the whole city, and which is the termination of the world famous Camino Pilgrimage. The Cathedral is reputed to contain the remains of St James the Apostle, and had been a centre of pilgrimage since the 9th century. Pilgrims would walk or ride from across the whole of Europe. At its height it was the 3rd most visited pilgrimage site in the world. Now people still flock along the Camino route from the Pyrenees through hilly northern Spain until they fulfil the Camino by reaching the Cathedral in Santiago.

We too completed our pilgrimage there, but it has to be said in an air conditioned coach, not quite on our feet and knees! A walking tour of this fascinating old town and then a visit to the Cathedral for Mass to complete our stay.

The Cathedral was built in 1211, and renovated over the years by the addition of its two magnificent towers and elaborately carved stone facades which open onto grand plazas within the medieval walls of the old town. We timed it just right for the daily Mass, and squeezed in among crowds of pilgrims who overflowed the church, standing inside, outside, and anywhere they could.

At the end of Mass, an unexpected special treat: the swinging of the Botafumeiro, the biggest thurible in the world, which swings from a pulley system in the roof installed in 1604. The silver vessel, which weighs 160 kilos and takes 8 men to swing it, arcs up over the congregation amid billowing incense smoke and swings till it almost hits the ceiling!

Back home to Sunday Mass St Peter's, to see how Deacon Cyril's swing compares!

