



Throughout history people have traveled. They've traveled to find food, to do business or to make war. But until recently, there was no such thing as vacation travel. Tourism, as we know it today is less than 200 years old. But the desire to take a break and get away from home has been around for thousands of years and for most of those years a pilgrimage was the only acceptable reason for personal travel. You could get time off from work. You could get away from your friends and family. You could make new friends and in some cases a new family. You could see new things. And if you were up for it, you could also make an inner journey.

Like a regular trip, a pilgrimage brings you physically from one place to another and it takes time to complete. Pilgrims pass through territory that is not their own. They are in search of a goal, and the trip is controlled by their spiritual compass. Their hearts point the way.



The town of Czestochowa is about 80 miles north of Krakow and would be a simple provincial town centered on a wide street, except for one thing. At the end of the street, rising above the medieval center of the town is the hill of Jasna Gora which means *Bright Mountain*, and on the summit of that hill is the monastery of the order of St. Paul the First Hermit.

Each year, for centuries, hundreds of thousands of pilgrims have come to Jasna Gora. Many make the journey from nearby Polish cities on foot, others travel half way around the world. During the days surrounding the feast of the Assumption of the Virgin, on August 15<sup>th</sup>, the avenue of the Blessed Virgin Mary that connects the center of town with Jasna Gora is filled with a river of people.



The approach to the chapel is itself a pilgrimage marked by a series of portals, arches and gates that open into different spaces. Finally you arrive at the room containing the miraculous image of the Virgin Mary and Child. The work is believed to have been painted in the Holy Land by St. Luke the Evangelist. It has made the monastery one of the most important Catholic shrines in Europe. Some pilgrims pass the picture on their knees, or walk by singing prayers. They

all seek some special relationship to the Virgin Mary. While I was at Jasna Gora I was struck by the age range of the pilgrims. I expected the older generation to be present and even people of my own age but I was surprised at the extraordinary number of young men and women who visit the shrine. On the first Sunday I was there over 100,000 people came through the monastery and over 30,000 were under 25 years of age.

### THE TRADITION OF THE PAINTING

The story of the painting has a number of versions, but they all share a central theme. After the Virgin Mary's assumption into heaven, the followers of Christ asked St. Luke to paint a picture of her in order to preserve her image.

St. Luke took a piece of wood from a table that belonged to the Holy Family and covered it with a painting of the Virgin and Child. The painting was taken from Jerusalem to Istanbul where it was credited with a series of miracles.

Six hundred years later, a Russian prince brought it to his castle. During the 1300s, Duke Ladislaus of Poland came to live in that same castle. While he was there, the Tartars attacked. An arrow flew through a window and struck the picture of the Virgin. Suddenly, a great darkness engulfed the attackers, and they fled in fear.



The story of the painting is set against a background of events that actually took place during the 1300s. The painting started out in Jerusalem, moved to Istanbul, from Istanbul to Russia, and from Russia to Poland. The movement was always from east to west and that is an essential aspect of the story.

### THE PAINTING AS POLITICAL HISTORY

There are many shrines with images of the Virgin Mary, but the one in Czestochowa is of particular importance, because in addition to its religious significance the painting has played a major role in the political history of Eastern Europe.

The Polish Kings and Dukes and warriors mentioned in the story of the painting were real. And they were all interested in increasing the size and power of their kingdoms by conquering land that was to their east. The legend of the painting says that it was held by Orthodox Christians of the Eastern Church until

it was taken west to Czestochowa. By taking the picture from Russia in the East to Poland in the West, Poland confirmed its eastern conquests.

The fact that the painting was taken forcefully from Russia makes it even more valuable. No community would willingly give up an object that was performing miracles. The movement of the painting from east to west reflects the shift in power that was actually taking place.

When King Louis of Poland died in 1382, the Polish nobles offered his youngest daughter in marriage to Jagiello, the pagan leader of Lithuania. But the deal had a catch. Jagiello and all his subjects had to convert to Roman Catholicism. Jagiello accepted, was baptized, converted his people, united Poland and Lithuania and took the name Wladyslaw. It's just like the story of the painting... powerful elements in the east are converted and "rebaptized" into the western church. A powerful painting in the east is taken to a new home in the west.



But in the same way that the conflict between east and west did not end easily, neither did the story of the painting. There are a series of scars running across the face of the Madonna and since the 15<sup>th</sup> century, they have been

presented as having been made during an attack by reformers who opposed the use of images in the Church and undertook their destruction. The Virgin of Czestochowa was a perfect target.

During the 1200s, the idea of the Virgin suffering the same pains as Christ at the Crucifixion was common. More than any other figure in Christian tradition, the Virgin Mary is associated with the ability to understand pain and suffering. Visitors to Jasna Gora know that the Virgin will understand their pain.

### MIRACLES

All pilgrimage sites are believed to be places where miracles once took place, where they still take place and where they might take place at any moment in the future. A site's reputation as a place where miracles happen is an essential reason for attracting pilgrims. The painting of the Virgin Mary at Jasna Gora comes with a story that tells of miracles that go back to the very creation of the painting.

The people who come here to see the picture want to be part of the story, to develop a special relationship to the picture. Often they want the relationship to include a miracle.



There are three essential elements that connect an image to a miracle. The first is the vow. The vow is addressed to the Saint in the picture and includes a promise to go to a specific place. The Church is not involved and no record of the vow is needed to make it legitimate. You can often discover the content of a vow by watching the behavior of the person at the shrine. They may crawl towards the picture on their knees. They may prostrate themselves on the ground. This is not spontaneous behavior; they are doing what they promised to do.

The second element is the votive offering. A votive offering is

a physical record showing that there has been a vow, and the vow has been performed. The votive offering is brought to the shrine by the pilgrim and proves that the promised visit has taken place. It makes it clear that



visiting Jasna Gora was part of the process. Many votive offerings are placed into a box while making a donation.

The earliest offerings, which are kept near the painting, are Gothic and silver plates engraved with religious scenes. They form a background to the painting and were donated by King Ladislaus in the 1400s.

There is also a tradition of dressing the painting of the Virgin that dates back to the time of its arrival at Jasna Gora. At first, valuable jewels were attached directly to the painting, but during the 1600s, a series of movable panels were placed over the painting and the jewels attached to the panels. Today, there are seven panels that completely cover the area of the Virgin's clothing... they are called robes.

The votive offering always points to the image as the center of the holy place. They are part of the visual architecture of the shrine. The monastery itself was built as an offering to house the picture.

The third element is where the miracle takes place. Many of them have taken place right here in Jasna Gora. But many of them have also taken place at great distances from the painting. The power of the Virgin Mary is not limited to one place. Her aid can be received anywhere in the world.

But the aid is always related to the promised journey to the shrine and that promise must be fulfilled. Every thing starts with the vow and is completed with the offering at the shrine.

### THE LIBRARY

Miracles are not just folktales that are circulated in the neighborhood. These are events that are documented in great detail. The library at Jasna Gora has 11,000 ancient books, including five texts dating from the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> Centuries, that contain the stories of the miracles that have taken place in relationship to this shrine.



### A HELPING HAND

The Saints are in the perfect place to give you a helping hand. They are in heaven in the presence of God. It's a privileged spot where they can offer prayer for both the living and the dead. The idea that the Saints could intercede on someone's behalf is basic to the way people relate to them. The Saints are next to the seat of power and can put in a good word for you or someone you love.

Very often people want something from their relationship with a Saint. They want the Saint to intercede on their behalf. And very often paintings of Saints will show just how effective that Saint is at doing just that.

These miraculous powers are not only associated with

specific Saints but also with specific places. The images of the Saints show holy people, but they also show holy places. The places shown in the pictures are not necessarily the places where these events occurred. They may instead show places where these Saints are easy to contact—like a local shrine.



During the Middle Ages the activities of the church were closely tied to the annual calendar. Feasts, fasts, the celebration of things described in the Bible, specific days given over to honoring specific Saints pretty much controlled life in Christian communities. Pilgrimages were part of the structure, with certain pilgrimages and certain dates being more important than others.

The feast of the Virgin Mary was always a significant date, and there is considerable evidence that visits to Jasna Gora were extremely important during these Marian feasts. The high point was probably the feast of the Assumption on August 15th.

In order to consider taking a specific pilgrimage you need to be aware of the shrine and its legend. It is always a place that is not in your home neighborhood. It requires you to think and then move across time and space.

A distinct feature of Polish Catholicism is a pilgrimage of considerable distance that is made on foot and usually lasts a number of days. The trips give you a chance to meet new people, engage new thoughts and see new things. A pilgrimage is filled with new images both on the journey and at the sacred site. But the most important image is always the image in the shrine.

The Virgin is in heaven, beyond our reach, but because of the picture she is not out of sight. Add her ability to hear our prayers and the circuit is almost complete. When the prayer is answered we are in touch with another world, beyond the one we live in now.

## THE KNIGHTS OF COLUMBUS

When I was at Jasna Gora a group of pilgrims from the Knights of Columbus in the United States arrived for a special mass. Dr. Carl A. Anderson spoke on behalf of the organization pointing out that the Knights of Columbus are over 100 years old and were founded in St. Mary's Church, which has always kept the organization close to the Virgin Mary. And as Pope John Paul II, often spoke about our Lady of Czestochowa the members grew closer to him, and closer to her an experience that helped them, to better understand their faith and to deepen the spiritual journey each of us must take. Dr. Anderson said that at Jasna Gora he felt a solidarity with the many people who were there and who were all looking back through the many centuries during which pilgrims had visited this shrine and been spiritually renewed. He recommended that people of all faiths would benefit from the universal experience of Jasna Gora.



## KEEPING IN TOUCH WITH YOUR SPIRIT

Every society has a series of places that are considered to be sacred and each place is devoted to a specific power. When you visit a sacred site it is easier to make contact with the power. Some sites are religious like Guadalupe, Jerusalem or Mecca. Some represent events in a nation's history like the Alamo in Texas or the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, DC. The trip to a place where both the trip and the destination have a supernatural importance to the traveler is what makes a pilgrimage.

Our most ancient societies believed that every aspect of life was controlled by an individual god, and that the god lived in a specific place with an easily recognizable feature. It could be a mountain that stood higher than any mountain in the area or had an unusual shape. It could be a waterfall that seemed to come down from a spot that was connected to heaven or it could be a volcano. Whatever it was, it was dramatic and clearly a proper space to make contact with the supernatural.

But there were other places without any striking geographic feature that became sacred because they were associated with a specific person or event like the battlefields of the Civil War or the Lincoln Memorial in Springfield, Illinois. A visit to a grave is to a certain extent a visit to the person entombed there.

You can make a pilgrimage to a world famous place like Jasna Gora or you can take a trip to a place that doesn't mean much to anybody except you, like the grave of a family member. Either way they have the ability to put you in touch with your soul and your real feelings.



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