

BORN TO BE MILD

Pilgrims and visitors from across the world are drawn to Lisieux by the captivating story of the young Ste-Thérèse. **PIERS FORD** falls under the spell of the 'little saint'



WHICHEVER WAY YOU APPROACH Lisieux, it's impossible to ignore the edifice of the Basilica de Ste-Thérèse. There ought to be a road sign: Beware of low flying domes. As you drive up from Orbec, it's as if some fantastic 100-metre tall hybrid of Sacré Cœur, St Paul's Cathedral and the Capitol building in Washington DC is coming in to land out of your peripheral vision.

Once you've taken in its sheer size—and managed to hold the road—the next impression is of an outrageous riot of Romanesque and Byzantine styles. The bucolic pleasures of the surrounding countryside, which seems to run with fragrant cider and rich Normandy cream, are left behind in an instant.

Few places straddle the line between pilgrimage and tourism with such panache. This is a town which owed its reputation to the cult of personality long before the world started to worship at the altars of pop stars, footballers and supermodels. And the basilica, built between 1925 and 1954 to commemorate and celebrate the life of St Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face—to acknowledge her full title—is the main focus, resplendent in its vulgarity, of a phenomenon that brings hundreds of thousands of visitors to Lisieux every year.

Of the pilgrims who flock here, the majority, on the evidence of the coaches parked at the foot of the imposing building, come either from the far reaches of Eastern Europe or are nuns from Japan and the Indian subcontinent. They know exactly why they have come. They are here to pray at the shrine



tuberculosis at just 24, was canonised in record time, a mere 25 years later, and was made secondary Patron of France, the equal of Joan of Arc, in 1944. She was finally proclaimed a Doctor of the Church in Rome by Pope John Paul II in 1997.

These pilgrims are the ones who constitute the bulk of the kneelers and worshippers at the shrine of Thérèse in the basilica. From

alike. To these ears the story of Thérèse Martin might sound, initially, like that of a hysteria-prone girl, the youngest of nine children prematurely deprived of their mother, raised in a devout and rather strict household, finding a vocation which allowed her to live at one remove from a troubling world and dying an eternal innocent. But how it sucks you in.

Perhaps it's the way Lisieux is a living theme park. The people go about their business. The shops have all the familiar names and brands that you'd find in any modern town. The buildings reflect the changes forced on so many of these places in northern France by the devastation of World War II: the spirit of Thérèse was no protection against the bombs and shells which destroyed much of the medieval civic layout. But as you follow the tour that leads you from the basilica to places that were important at various stages of her short life, Thérèse's personality takes root in your thoughts and ultimately overwhelms your resistance.

Her story is told relentlessly, on plaques and displays at each significant location in the town. Souvenir shops are full of the fetishistic items that represent the commercial value of her cult: endless postcards featuring her image and some phrase lifted from her writing, like "*je feni tomber une pluie de roses*" (I will make a shower of roses fall); luminous, glow-in-the-dark Thérèses; china Thérèses; triptychs and prayers; even Thérèses in snowstorms. In most, her image is idealised beyond recognition, although that doesn't matter to the many who lap it up, or to the shopkeeper for whom this is simply business. "*Merci, monsieur,*" she says as she closes

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of a young woman who felt called to take holy orders at the tender age of nine when she was cured of a serious illness by a vision of a smiling Virgin Mary. This young woman was a nun by the age of 15, after receiving special dispensation from the Pope, and wrote a book describing her simple, loving philosophy, *Story of a Soul* which was to influence thousands of people. She died, without complaint, in a wretchedly unpleasant way from intestinal

a distance, it seems to rise from a sea of shimmering candlelight. For every votive which gutters and dies, another is lit and set in its place. There is a buzz of hushed murmurs and conversations that rise up to the gold and gaudy colours of the mosaics in the vaulted ceilings. It is heady stuff.

But the tale has a peculiarly seductive quality quite capable of ensnaring the imagination of others, too: cynical atheists and casual tourists

her till. "It looks as if it will rain this afternoon." Not rose petals, presumably.

And yet these are not the elements that give an almost palpable sense of her presence throughout Lisieux. Thérèse was born in 1874 when photography was already an established medium. While her relics—arm bones, in fact—do make occasional sorties abroad, most recently to Ireland, in true medieval tradition, she herself was a recognisably modern child in

the sense that the camera recorded moments of her life from girlhood to her untimely death. Her real face is everywhere: placid features, delicate in extreme youth but increasingly doughy in maturity, dominated always by eyes which are uncannily vibrant, even in slightly blurred monochrome.

Thérèse was actually born in Alençon, coming to Lisieux in 1877 after the death of her mother, Zélie. The family made its home at Les Buissonnets, an attractive three-storey, red brick house off boulevard Herbert-Fournet, on the road to Deauville. Nearby, a shrine decked in an array of posies, prayers and toys, faded and new, testifies to the almost constant procession of visitors who make their way here from the basilica.

Set in its own gardens, the house today has a brooding, slightly melancholy atmosphere. An audio tour intones, reverentially, the details of the time she spent here. Most are mundane, but there are key moments: the smile of the Virgin Mary in a vision which appeared to her during a grave illness in 1883; her conversion at Christmas 1886 when she avowed her ambition to cause no distress to anyone; the growing certainty of her vocation; the bedroom where she prayed for a convicted criminal and was overjoyed to hear that he had repented on the scaffold; and the moment in 1888 when she left home for the Carmelite convent at the other end of town, never to return.

Here you will also find her first communion dress, a gown made for her to wear on fête days, various toys which suggest that she did possess some more ordinary childish tastes, samples of handwriting and, in the garden, a crib which she made herself.

A 10-minute walk through the public garden, a pleasant, airy space, leads to the gothic cathedral of St Pierre where she took her first communion. A further 15-minute stroll through the town's main shopping area brings you to the culmination of the tour: the convent where she spent her last 11 years and wrote the book *Story of a Soul* which would be published posthumously, explaining her belief that small and discrete acts of kindness and sacrifice are more potent demonstrations of faith than grand, public gestures. This, her 'little way', was what laid the foundations for her growing following in the years after her death and particularly after World War I when this powerful combination of certainty and naïveté appealed to a country trying to find something to salvage from the carnage and desolation it had endured.

Here at the convent, the Chapelle du Carmel, an exhibition of relics is displayed in darkened cases, their origins explained in a commentary which is itself redolent of the

floridly simplistic prose of *Story of a Soul*. Thérèse's cutlery, her gardening tools, paintings and nun's habit all hover in brief seconds of illumination, before the spotlights fade and return them to darkness. Most poignant—and startling—of all is her luxurious blonde hair, beautifully dressed and preserved, cut from her head on the day she entered the convent as a postulant.

It is almost impossible to reconcile these abundant locks, easily identified in the pretty, smiling photographs of the girl Thérèse, with the wimpled face and modest looks of the nun she would become.

It is equally difficult to reconcile the stark simplicity of the rest of these items, and indeed the unworldly innocence of her philosophy, with the sheer vastness and scale of the marbled extravaganza that sits up on the hill overlooking the town.

The basilica is still the last important religious building to be completed in France funded solely by public donations. That in itself is testimony to the devotion inspired by her words and what really was a simple 'little way'. But it's the dichotomy between the scale of the memorial and the piercing intensity of the image of the young woman who inspired it which makes a visit to Lisieux such a potent and unnerving experience.

As you leave, whether for the chic seaside charms of Honfleur, Deauville or Trouville, or to head back into the comfortingly rolling countryside of the Pays d'Auge, the face of Thérèse Martin will stay fixed on your retina for some time to come. ☺

HOW TO GET THERE

Lisieux is about 30km south of Honfleur and Deauville, on the D519. It is easily accessible by regular train services from Caen (30 minutes), Rouen (90 minutes) and Deauville-Trouville (45 minutes). There is a good bus service from Honfleur (one hour) and daily services from Le Havre (90 minutes) and Deauville (up to two hours).

WHERE TO STAY

Azur Hotel
15 rue au Char
Tel: (Fr) 2 31 62 09 14
Lisieux's finest hotel, close to the cathedral

Hotel des Lourdes
4 rue au Char
Tel: (Fr) 2 31 31 19 48
Fax: (Fr) 2 31 31 08 67
Simple, attractive rooms

WHERE TO EAT

Le France
4 rue au Char
Tel: (Fr) 2 31 62 03 37
Delicious Norman fare reflecting Lisieux's status as the capital of the Pays d'Auge and gateway to the golden land of Camembert

FRANCOISIE

and cider. Menus up to 20€, open daily except Monday

READING MATERIAL

Secular visitors who want to be forearmed will find all they need to know about Sainte Thérèse de Lisieux on the dedicated web site: www.therese-de-lisieux.com, which provides the full facts about her life, plus pictures and details of relevant locations in the town. The seriously interested should read her autobiography, *Story of a Soul*.

OFFICE DE TOURISME

11 rue d'Alençon, 17197 Lisieux
Tel: (Fr) 2 31 48 18 10
Fax: (Fr) 2 31 48 18 11
email: tourisme@ville-lisieux.fr
www.ville-lisieux.fr

The tourist office also opens a temporary branch in July and August close to the cathedral St-Pierre, to accommodate the summer influx.

VISITS

Pilgrims and anyone planning a group visit should contact:
Pèlerinage Sainte-Thérèse
31 rue du Carmel BP 2095
14102 Lisieux Cedex
Tel: (Fr) 2 31 48 55 08
Fax: (Fr) 2 31 48 55 26
email:
accueil-information@therese-de-lisieux.com

CHURCHES

Cathédrale St-Pierre
Rue Condorcet. Earliest gothic church in Normandy. Admission free.

Basilique Ste-Thérèse
Open daily 8.30am to 8pm June-September, 9am to 6pm rest of year, admission free. Between June and September, there is a nightly (except Sunday) laser show, featuring the projection of Thérèse's face on the pillars of the Basilica. Admission free.

Chapelle du Carmel
Carmelite convent contains the shrine of Ste Thérèse (movement restricted during services). La Salle des Souvenirs (admission free) is a display of her artefacts with a multi-lingual commentary.

Les Buissonnets
Bld Herbet-Fournet
Martin family home (admission free, but you may have to wait in line for English audio commentary). Extensive tour takes you through the family rooms, with displays of clothes, toys and mementos, and the garden. Open 9am to 6pm summer, 10am to 5pm winter (closed 15 December until 15 January)

THE BEST OF THE REST

Musée du Vieux-Lisieux
38 bd Pasteur
Old photographs of Lisieux, showing its pre-World War II glories