

Pilgrimage or Tour? Vacation, Holy-day or Retreat?

Nevern, Wales. Pilgrims and video journalists - starting differently, ending on the same path.



Tours and vacations are wonderful and meet the needs of thousands of people every year. Pilgrimages, retreats and holi-days are wonderful in a different way and are undertaken for different reasons. Holidays are the successors to the Holy Days when a religious celebration was the ordinary person's only break from work in the whole year. Retreats are a mini-version of the inner or spiritual pilgrimage. They developed from the monastic ideal of moving away from distractions, and placing God at the centre of our existence. Retreats ultimately trace their roots, in the Christian tradition, to the Desert Fathers and Mothers of the early centuries after Christ.

Going on pilgrimage is different again. The aim is some kind of transformation or refreshment, or new learning. In the best situations this will enrich our relationship with God and each other, particularly after we return home to our own communities and, in most cases, to our own churches.

Pilgrimage is about engaging with the people and places we visit to learn from them, to support what they are doing, and certainly not to pass by in an air-conditioned bus rejoicing that we are better than they are! Pilgrimage often involves some effort, whether spiritual, mental or physical. As we encounter other ways of being and believing, our own spirituality and beliefs are challenged. The discussions within each pilgrim group are equally enriching, bringing together people from different backgrounds and denominations, with differing previous experience of travel in the countries we visit. As we travel and meet people, see, listen and experience, we sometimes feel confused - normal and reasonable. We find that pieces fall into place months and years later. The fathers and mothers of spirituality, including Christianity, in Ireland, Wales and Scotland travelled mainly by water, and often sought seclusion. The wonderful sites they chose are not necessarily beside main roads, or even any road. Reaching some of them requires effort. Even if people decide not to attempt a particular walk or boat ride, we all find that we stretch our capabilities, doing more than at home, and thoroughly enjoying that achievement.

Because pilgrimage is about transformation, we reflect on what we have seen, heard and felt. We think about how it will change the way we relate to each other, to God, to our communities at home. Several times during each pilgrimage we are helped in this through the leadership of spiritual leaders who have agreed to spend time with us. And, on every pilgrimage some of the group lead worship and reflections. Many pilgrims bring readings, prayers or songs to share with others.

Patient pilgrims waiting for cautious Vanessa on the climb down to St. Mary's Well, north Wales.



Pilgrims are human! We spend several weeks in unfamiliar circumstances, in quite small vehicles, with people we have never met before and with whom we may feel we have few interests in common. But the overall atmosphere is inevitably one of goodwill, mutual help and enjoyment. Even in our serious discussions, we have wonderful fun, with lots of laughter. The opportunity to meet others from such differing backgrounds, in a group that is never larger than 12, leads to some strong friendships across borders and denominations.

Pilgrimage is about moving to inner or exterior sacred space, and about deepening our relationship with God and each other. Our inspiration for making a pilgrimage may be a need to understand the motivation of those who shaped the way we live our faith, or a longing to connect with the landscape of the past generations of our families. It is often the pull of a "Heart's Desire" that seems to have no logic! Whatever our motivation, making a pilgrimage is part of a world wide tradition. It is active, not passive. It involves moving, thinking, feeling, relating. The places we visit, the people we meet, each and every experience along the way can become significant in the most amazing way.

John at Clonmacnoise, bathed in the peace of the River Shannon.

