

Easter



HCPT's annual pilgrimage to Lourdes is a special experience for every child, helper or leader

Background

HCPT - The Pilgrimage Trust was formed in 1956 when a young doctor, Michael Strode, took four children with disabilities to Lourdes. From the outset he insisted that they should be treated just like other pilgrims, and should be accommodated in hotels rather than hospitals.

Fifty years on HCPT now takes around 2,000 children with disabilities, or social and emotional needs, on a Pilgrimage holiday to Lourdes each Easter. The children come from all walks of life and may belong to any religious background, or none at all. The children and helpers travel in small family groups from all over the UK and Ireland as well as groups from Croatia, Romania, Slovakia, USA and the West Indies. It is the largest children's Pilgrimage from the UK. The holiday features visits to the Lourdes Grotto, outings to local attractions, or cafés and villages higher up amidst the spectacular scenery of the French Pyrenees. Longer trips could include beach trips to coastal towns of the Atlantic. The aim of the week is to give the children a safe, exciting and enjoyable holiday infused with the warmth and affection of caring friends.

Preparation

HCPT regards preparation as a key part of the trip. Children come as part of a locally organised group, which arranges meetings between helpers, the children and their parents, so they all have a chance to get to know each other before the Pilgrimage. Regular home visits are made to ensure that the

children get to know and have confidence in their helpers

Care

The children are assisted by helpers, many of whom are young people. A number of volunteer doctors, nurses and chaplains also travel to give specialist support. Group Leaders are all previous helpers with a strong track record in caring for children with disabilities. All helpers and volunteers are carefully vetted, undergoing an interview and reference process, as well as Criminal records Bureau checks to ensure that the children receive the highest level of care and attention while away from home.

The Trust also has its own medical center in Lourdes which has close links with the local medical services in order to provide a comprehensive service in case of need.

Travel and accommodation

HCPT Charters planes from various UK airports and has built strong relationships with a number of the best hotels in Lourdes. These are carefully selected and well used to accommodating HCPT Groups.

Cost

HCPT takes children on the basis of their medical or social needs, and raises the funds for the sponsors of all the children. Parents are welcome to make a contribution to the Trust, if they wish. Leaders and helpers pay their own costs, but a concessionary scheme may be available for those who find it difficult to pay the full amount



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What will the children and helpers be doing?

From the start of the trip (and that starts before we leave the UK) the emphasis is very much on ensuring that all the children in the Groups have a wonderful fun filled week. Each Group designs its own programme of events and activities but a few things are common to all Groups:

Tuesday evening, the Torchlight procession. This is a wonderfully visual and emotional event. All the pilgrims in Lourdes are invited to come together for a torchlight procession, singing along. The procession finishes in the Rosary Square and on Tuesday night, when HCPT lead the procession, there is a great sing-along at the end.

Thursday morning - the Trust Mass. All 5000+ members of HCPT, IHCPT, ASCPG and many many friends, come together in the Underground Basilica. For many this is the highlight of the week.

Apart from these events, each Group will be visiting many of the locations in Lourdes which are relevant to the life of Ste Bernadette - the house where she grew up, the 'Cachot', and some of the many museums in the town.

Most Groups have an excursion day out. A traditional and still popular destination is Gavarnie, high up in the Pyrenees. This is a spectacular venue where some days Groups make snowmen and other days it's shorts and t-shirts!

Preparation

Getting ready for a trip away can be very exciting, and if it is a child's first trip away from home, can be an anxious time for children and parents alike. Please keep in touch with your Group Leader who will be happy to answer any questions which occur to you as the trip draws near.

Some things you will need to do:

- Ensure your child has a valid passport
- If your child does not hold a passport, ensure the Group Leader has added your child to the 'Collective Passport' list - before Christmas if possible. (A passport sized photo will be required for this).
- If your child has a non UK passport, do they need a visa to enter France? More details can be found on the website of the French Consulate in London, which also includes details of how to go about applying for a visa.
- An EHIC card. The European Health Insurance Card (EHIC) has taken over from the old E111, which is now no longer valid. EHIC can be requested on-line, or through the post office. We strongly recommend that you apply for an EHIC as soon as possible. This card ensures that in the event of any medical treatment being required in France, that the NHS will pay most of the bills.
- Pack a range of clothes - but not too many! The weather in Lourdes can vary quite quickly from being warm and sunny to heavy rain. Your Group Leader will be able to give you a suggested clothing list.
- Spending money. Don't send too much! Your child will not need any money through the week to join in the activities - everything will be provided by the Group. If you do want your child to bring home some souvenirs, speak with your Group Leader about what you think you might like and they will advise you how much to take.

Getting in touch with the Group during the week. If there is an emergency, you can contact your Group Leader by phoning the Hotel. If you cannot find the number, you can call HCPT HQ at the Hotel Solitude (+335 62 42 70 70) and we will try to pass on a message. If you are just phoning for a chat or to see how things are going, please remember that the groups are out and about most of the time and the schedules are usually quite tight.