

Date: 08/11/2010 Place: Medjugorje Kms walked: 1685

Does anyone remember a film in the late 60's, featured in an episode of Steptoe and Son called Fellini's 8½ (or else 9½, sorry my brain is old and I cannot remember whether it was 8 or 9 and I've probably got the spelling of Fellini wrong as well!)? Well this is my Postcard 9½.

I felt that rather than just dismiss it in a paragraph or two I should devote some space to Medugorje as it has become a major pilgrim destination for many people.

So first a confession. As I set off from Rome I did not really want to think about the enormity of what I was doing. And although if asked, I would say to people "I am walking to Jerusalem", my back-up plan was "Well, if I can just get to Medugorje, that would be something, that would be an achievement."

By the time I got to Makarska (about 100kms from Medugorje, the long way round) I was a lot stronger (and fitter!). The landslide I referred to in Postcard 09 meant that visiting Medugorje was now not just a minor detour. I had to go inland and return to the coast without gaining any distance south. So I did consider giving it a miss altogether and just continuing down the coast from Ploce. But I had promised some people I would pray for them specifically at Medugorje ..... so I was committed.

On 4<sup>th</sup> November I set off from Metkovic with 24kms ahead of me at about 7:20. Almost immediately I found a really novel way to add extra kilometers to the day's journey. I went down the right road, but was the wrong person! I walked down the road shown on my map, reached the border with Bosnia but only local people were allowed to cross at this point! So I was turned back. Luckily the officer could speak reasonable English and realised where I was trying to go and drew me a map to show me the correct border crossing. In addition he had a sense of humour because he smiled when I said "Perhaps I should have pretended I was a local person". Also luckily it was not so very far out of town.

So off I went again and soon was on the correct road having wasted only 45mins – but sure that's par for the course. It was a beautiful day. Clear blue skies. In no time at all I had taken my jacket off and then got really hot and had to turn my trousers into shorts. I had left the coast and was heading inland and going over hills. Colours of the hills were beautiful, they were clothed in evergreen and autumn golds. The contours were soft. It was all quite different to the sharp outline of the sea cliffs I had been walking alongside and the grey/white of the barren rocks. It was peaceful as well because there was very little traffic. Yet again I felt privileged to be able to make this journey. I kept humming the tune of the song "Oh what a perfect day" and wished I knew the words.

I passed several cemeteries, sadly too many to be just due to natural death. They were due to the history of the place.



Hills in autumn colours



Pause for prayer en route

Eventually I reached Medugorje and made for Apparition Hill. The route led me away from the town and after some time I still seemed to be in among houses and rented accommodation and the occasional shop or cafe. I was getting quite tired and was conscious of approaching dusk so I turned back and headed for the Church (dedicated to St James, very appropriate for me!) which was very easy to find. There I said thanks for my safe arrival and then went to the information office. It was here I hit a slight snag.

The kind lady in the office (which, as I discovered later, was not a Tourist Information Office but an Information Office for the Church and events in Medugorje) phoned my pre-booked accommodation only to draw a blank and she just kept repeating to me “I don't know. I don't know” and shaking her head. I had booked the accommodation online a day or so previously using one of those organisations that have lists of cheap hotels & hostels.

It turned out that despite the internet firm accepting my booking, the place I had booked was closed as it was the end of season. By now it was almost dark. The lady advised me to go to an agency as she didn't deal with accommodation problems. To cut a longer story short, out of nowhere 2 Canadian Guardian Angels appeared and made it their business to make sure I had accommodation for the night! Alas I did not get their contact details and didn't see them again as they left early the following morning. One of the Angels even paid for my room for 2 nights.

Next morning I went to my first Mass in English since leaving England. It was a very special one also for the main Celebrant, a young American Priest. Before the final Blessing he said he had been ordained less than a year ago and it was the custom for newly ordained Priests to dedicate themselves to Our Lady at their first Mass. He had wanted to do it at Medugorje but it had taken him a bit longer than he anticipated to get there. He invited the congregation to pray the dedication with him.

Afterwards I went to the St Francis Garden which was so beautiful and peaceful. It's a large wooded area, but not thickly wooded so the sun easily penetrated. It has paths through it but is not obviously cultivated. There was no-one there but some animals (donkeys, small ponies, and I think goats). I chatted to them as they seemed a bit lonely, it being the end of the 'pilgrim season'. A cat came wandering up miaowing at me as well. Again weather could not have been better. Blue skies, warm, wonderful sunshine. I sat on a rock saying my morning prayers again feeling grateful for the day that was in it. Every now and then a leaf would detach itself from its branch and float gently to the ground, a reminder of the passing of the seasons. I could have stayed there all day.



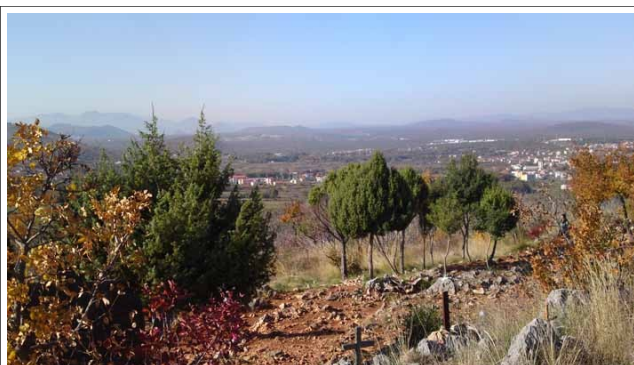
Saint Francis's Garden .....



..... with autumn colours

Next day started chilly with low cloud. I went to the English Mass again, intending to visit Apparition Hill afterwards. By the time Mass was finished, the air was warm and the clouds had disappeared and it was again a glorious day (is this not too good to be true?). Off I went to the Hill, discovering it had been the right decision to turn back that first day – it was much further than I had anticipated. Given the number of pilgrims that come to Medugorje I had expected to find a nicely laid out, easy to walk path. Not a bit of it. You had to pick your way over the stones, rocks and boulders of the hill. The route was 'waymarked' by the lights which guided pilgrims ascending in the dark. The only saving grace was that there were no loose stones, these having already been dislodged by countless previous pilgrims. I regretted not having my walking boots on as my sandals were barely up to the job and I could have done with my trusty staff!

On the way up I prayed a personal prayer and a different one on the way down. At the top I sat for some time and thought about each person for whom I had said I would pray. I said a short but different prayer for each.



Looking towards Medjugorje from Apparition Hill



The Church of St James

## Reflections

I found Medugorje quite different to the other major shrines I have visited. In Santiago de Compostela there is one arrival place – the Cathedral. In Lourdes there is one arrival place – the Grotto. In Rome there is one arrival place – St Peters. But there did not seem to be the same sort of focal point at Medugorje.

And then there was the photography during Mass. Perhaps I am becoming a 'grumpy old woman' but during the first Mass I attended there, someone took flash photos every few minutes, even during the Consecration. I have been on my soapbox previously about tourists wandering into Notre Dame Cathedral and willy nilly taking photos but for someone who is supposedly attending Mass to be doing it .....

And I wouldn't mind but at each Mass I attended, just before it started, a lovely lady would address us reminding us to turn off our mobile phones. "What about the flash photography?" I mentally shouted at her. If someone wants to be disrespectful and take photos instead of concentrating on Mass, then that's their business. But please don't interfere with my participation, turn your flash off. My mind is unruly enough and can do without the distraction of a flash going off every few minutes. Oh and by the way, were there signs as you entered the Church requesting no photographs? Yes there were.

I have been to Mass at the other major pilgrimage centres I mentioned above and I can't actually remember flash photography being an issue, on the other hand I know people were taking photos while visiting, I just don't seem to remember them being so distracting.

And outside of Mass times, regardless of whether people were trying to pray or not, groups of people (again ignoring the signs saying no photos) just had to be photographed in front of the statue of Our Lady, or the altar or wherever.

Then there were the souvenir shops. Ironically although I expected to see loads on my entrance to the town, I hardly saw any because of my odd approach – Apparition Hill (almost) then the Church. So I was spared that as I was when I walked into Lourdes. But the next day I walked up the main street with souvenir shop after souvenir shop after souvenir shop. That same day I treated myself to a rare meal out and was chatting to the waiter. He told me that it was quiet now, but in full season he gets people fighting over tables! It put me in mind of an account I read somewhere of medieval pilgrims jostling in Church over the most advantageous position, fighting one another and blood being spilt. I thought it was at the Cathedral in Santiago but I can't now find the reference.

I have to say that it didn't affect me deeply in the spiritual sense as it seems to have done others. Someone said to me that Medugorje gives messages to those who need it. Perhaps I do not need the message. Or perhaps I am not yet ready to receive it.

I can only tell you about the reactions of those I met when I told them I was going to/had arrived at Medugorje, and those I saw when I was there -

The lady whose eyes misted over and showed me a Medugorge prayer card she carried always in her purse.

The woman who rented me a room (and I am quite sure overcharged me), I saw the dollar signs dropping from her eyes and being replaced by a softness and gratitude when I said I would pray for her at Medugorje as I gave back the room key.

The guy who txt'd me to say I was at the place where Our Lady had turned his life around

The woman I met in Italy who said she would dearly love to visit Medugorje and asked me to pray for her there. I could see that she really did not have much money and it seemed unlikely she would be able to afford to join a parish pilgrimage trip, so perhaps my prayers were the next best thing.

The man in Croatia whose room I rented, when he learned I was going there did not want me to pay for my accommodation.

The group of Italian pilgrims walking up Apparition Hill quietly saying the rosary. There was no posing for photos. They were there to pray.

The young lad I met walking up Apparition Hill in his bare feet.

The very mature gentleman circumventing the outside of St James' Church on his knees

Countless others who have reacted with reverence (to the place, not me) when I have said I would go to Medugorje.

If there is a message for me at all, I think it is twofold. First it is to do with looking beyond the commercialism and what is visible and into the hearts of people and seeing there the God that is within us all.

People have to make a living. Pilgrims want things to remind them of their journey and they want to bring things back to people at home. Hey, I'm no different - I bought a medal for a friend as well as myself.

Secondly it is to do with forgiveness. I still don't think it right to disturb other peoples' participation in Mass, but I need to forgive those who distracted me - "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us".

So that was my experience of, and thoughts about Medugorje.

And by the way, the day I left, the weather broke and it was raining!