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News of a shooting brings flashback to Polish trip



Worshippers kneel before the altar in the sanctuary next to the chapel of the Black Madonna in Czestochowa, Poland.

The travel experience often lasts long after the journey is over. I was reminded of this last week when I was listening to a news report about the hospital recuperation of Pope John Paul II.

Among the details given from the hospital was one that I would have missed if I had not visited Poland last fall: A religious symbol of the Black Madonna of Czestochowa graces the papal sick-room.

As the newscaster spoke, I was transported back to the Avenue of Our Lady in Czestochowa, on the bank of the Warta River, southwest of Warsaw.

I was once again climbing the hill to the ancient walled monastery of Jasna Gora, which is poised on a hill across the river from the town. I could hear the voices of those thousands of pilgrims who knelt in the Church of the Black Madonna inside the monastery, where the centuries-old painting of the Black Madonna hangs above the altar.

The painting of the Black Madonna, also known as Our Lady of Czestochowa, is shrouded in ancient mystery and legend. It first appeared in the monastery two years after the monastery was founded by a group of Hungarian monks in 1382. It is assumed now that the painting was brought to Czestochowa by the ruling Ladislaus Duke of Opole, but the religious value of the painting is in its origins.

The picture of the Virgin Mary is painted on an old, dark piece of wood. Worshippers believe that the wood was once a table owned by the Holy Family, possibly made by Joseph. The painting has been attributed to the Apostle Luke.

The presence of the picture, hallowed by ancient legend, has made Jasna Gora a center of pilgrimage for centuries. Two large church sanctuaries and a treasury of valuable objects can be found now inside the ancient stone walls. The walls and the treasure they contain have been defended against the armies of Sweden, Russia, and more recently, the Nazi armies of Germany.

Pilgrims have always journeyed to Jasna Gora. When the pope made such a pilgrimage during his visit to Poland in 1979, the number of Polish pilgrims increased dramatically.

In 1980, 50,000 pilgrims walked from Warsaw and another 20,000 from Lublin. They approached the monastery along the Avenue of Our Lady, which leads through the modern town of Czestochowa under apartment windows draped and aglow with religious symbols.

It was an ordinary day and not a feast day when I visited Jasna Gora. The walls made a skyline of turrets and statues from the parking lot to the ancient gate, where we walked through into another world.

Women in ancient costumes and striding priests, mixed with tourists from many lands and with worshippers. Jasna Gora is a large complex. From one end of the wall you can look down the hill to the town.

The chapel of the Black Madonna is only open at certain times, but an adjacent sanctuary, which rises in great arches of stone, is always open. Worshippers kneel from the pews and on the stone floor in front of the high ornate altar.

It is only a few steps through a doorway to the Chapel of the Black Madonna, but the experience is intensified one-hundredfold. There, during mass, you can look across a great sea of heads from the kneeling priests at the altar through the wrought



travel log
Iris Jones
contributing travel editor

iron gates to a faraway wall of glistening gold. The glistening gold is an entire cathedral wall of personal treasure left by individual hands: lockets,

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