

In March, 2004 I made a pilgrimage to Magdalen country in the South of France as part of my research for *The Way of the Dove*, volume 3. The stories of Marie Madeleine's presence in Provence are considered legend not hard historical fact. But as Maeve's mothers are wont to say: "A story is true if it is well told." And I say: Southern France? What could be bad? Who wouldn't want to go there? My trip there confirmed that sentiment. Highlights of this trip follow:

PILGRIMAGE TO MAGDALEN COUNTRY

At the end of February, 2004, my husband and I flew to France and met my daughter who had been studying there for five weeks. Our trip had a three-fold purpose: to celebrate my daughter's eighteenth birthday in her favorite country, to visit some 5th century sites for my husband's research on the late Roman Empire and its collapse, and to see Mary Magdalen's legendary haunts in the South of France. Our travels took us from Paris to Toulouse, then through the Pyrenees to western Provence. From there we took a side trip to Tunisia, returning to Marseilles before taking a high-speed train back to Paris.

What follows is an account of my encounters with Herself in a country that has claimed and celebrated this controversial saint as their own. In addition to their excellent wine and 365 varieties of delicious cheese, their devotion to Marie Madeleine is another great reason to love the French. No one knows if the historical Mary Magdalen really went to Provence. But I say, if she didn't, she sure as hell should have. It is just too good a story not to be (at least poetically) true.

First Encounter

My first encounter with Marie Madeleine, as the French called Mary Magdalen, was unexpected. The day after we arrived in Paris, we went to the Left Bank (as all tourists must) with our French-speaking daughter as a guide. It was a still-wintery day of changeable light. We had spent the morning gazing at the stained-glass windows in Saint Chappelle, watching for brief flashes of light that transformed the almost opaque windows into luminous scenes and cast bright, intricate patterns of color on the stone floor. Almost randomly (there were so many choices!) we ate lunch in an open-air Greek café heated by a brazier. Fortified by omelets, falafel, hot tea and ouzo, we set forth to wander. On a quiet side street, we happened upon the church of St Severin. An old gypsy woman sat by the door of the church, smiling and nodding.

"Do you want to go in?" we all asked each other. Yes, why not.

I stopped to give coins to the woman who murmured some sort of blessing, and we stepped into the deserted church. I stopped immediately in disoriented delight, taking in the spiraling pillars that looked like huge trees and gave the impression that we had stepped out of Paris into a sacred grove. Down the nave, behind the altar shone bright blue stained-glass windows in a wild, tossing pattern like a windy sky or sea. Instead of a cross, bare tree branches adorned the altar. Most old churches in France have many side chapels, and so we started on the left side and made our way around the church. When we were about three-quarters of the way around we came to a chapel dedicated to Marie Madeleine with a stained-glass window depicting her arrival in France. In this modern image (in an old, old church) Marie Madeleine's bearing is authoritative, priest/essly—and full of attitude. She stands with one hip outthrust, her palm raised in blessing, and she is wearing a very red dress. In short, she looks like our Maeve.

“Light a candle to her, Mom,” my daughter urged.

I had to find one at a neighboring chapel, as there was no place for votive candles at hers. I placed the candle and my offering coins on the floor in front of the window and struck a match.

“Look! Oh, look!” said my daughter

As I lit the candle, the sun suddenly burst through the window and made it blaze, and I felt welcomed to France by the saint they call Marie Madeleine.

On the way out I stopped again to give another coin to the gypsy woman. She nodded and smiled as if she knew I had met the saint.

How many Saintes Maries are there?

I was very excited the day we headed for Saintes Maries de la Mer, for a guidebook had told me that, according to legend, Mary Magdalen had landed there with Martha, sundry other Marys, and Sarah the Egyptian, patron saint of Gypsies. The town is in the Camargue, flat marshy low country with huge skies, famous for white horses and all kinds of birds. At the end of a peninsula, Saintes Maries de la Mer is a sprawling beach town with a big fat 12th century church in the middle of it, apparently once a popular stop for Medieval pilgrims en route to St James of Compostela in Spain. When we finally got inside the church, which was closed for a long, leisurely lunch break, I was surprised, a little dismayed, and very confused to find no mention of Mary Magdalen in the official church “historical” pamphlets—just two Maries—Marie Salome (mother of James and John the disciples nicknamed by Jesus the Thunder Brothers) and Marie Jacobe (sister of the Virgin Mary; there seems to have been a shortage of women’s names in 1st c Palestine!). The other resident saint is Sarah, who might have been the Maries’ Egyptian servant—or a Libyan abbess, so the literature says. In any case, the crypt of the church is all Sarah’s. A black Madonna figure, she stands welcoming her devotees, dressed in sumptuous gold brocade, with hundreds of candles burning all around her. You can stand close enough to touch her, no protective barriers, a very intimate encounter. Each May, thousands of gypsies from all over the world mass on the town for Sarah’s feast day and parade with her statue to the sea.

But no there was no sign of Marie Madeleine, not even a side chapel. Yet only a block from the church there is a walkway beside the sea called The Four Maries, all of which inspired me to make up a joke:

Q: How many Stes Maries does it take to change a light bulb?

A: I don’t know; I keep losing count.

A Sign Please

It did not seem necessary to stay overnight in Stes Maries de la Mer and our time was limited, so we drove east from the marshes into the mountains of La Ste Baume (holy balm), a dramatic change of landscape in a short distance. These mountains of Provence are dryer than the Pyrenees, with many long rock ledges, fewer trees, but lots of aromatic plants, rosemary, gorse, lavender, and thyme. Our destination that evening was the town of St Maximin where a huge basilica of the same name dwarfs the village around it. During the middle ages, several churches boasted that they held the remains of Ste Marie Madeleine, but tradition has settled on the crypt at St Maximin.

On the road, I had a little chat with Maeve (novelists are people who continue to have, well, imaginary friends or friends of the imagination). Though I was very happy to be on holiday in France, and despite the welcome at St Severin's church in Paris, I felt I bit discouraged by Marie Madeleine's absence in the town I thought was named (at least in part) for her. I had been so emptied out by completing Volume Two, the book I felt I was born to write, I was beginning to wonder if I would have the energy or impetus to write another. Where was the story? Where were those unmistakable, physical sensations—goose bumps, spine chills, rising neck hairs—that signal I'm following a live scent? So I put to her: "Listen, Maeve, if you really want me to write Volume Three, give me a sign." We arrived in St Maximin at around 5:30 with the Mistral blowing forcefully. This famous Provençal wind is not just cold but relentless. No clothing or shelter can keep it out; it blows right through your skin to your bones.

We went straight to the basilica, a massive medieval structure that was under construction for over two hundred years, with work halted several times due to plague, till it was finally completed in 1532. The interior was vast, dimly lit, and unheated. I didn't register any signs as I wandered around the drafty church to Marie Madeleine's chapel, which features a painting (a copy of a 17th century mural) that makes our saint look fat and baleful. She is gazing up at heaven, perhaps waiting to be wafted there by some muscular angels. According to one legend, she went to heaven everyday for a feast, which may explain why she is so hefty. Again, as at St Severin's, there is no place to light candles in her chapel—though down the nave a bit, Mary the Virgin's chapel was all lit up. I felt a bit miffed on her behalf. A church built in her honor, though named for St Maximin, and still no candles?

But of course we had not yet visited the piece de resistance: the Crypt.

On the way down the steps to the crypt, a chamber underneath the altar, we encountered a white plaster statue of Marie Madeleine on display in a lit alcove, behind a small wrought-iron fence. The saint is half-reclining on her side near a lopsided cross, and she is looking very depressed. There is a place for candles before the statue, but none were burning, so I lit one.

Then I proceeded into the crypt where I found myself eyeball to eye socket with Marie Madeleine's blackened skull.

Yes, a black skull, bizarrely and richly adorned with a gold wig, but a real skull encased in protective glass. The be-wigged braincase is set on a gold neck. A broach, embossed with the face of Jesus, fastens her gold cloak just above a glass reliquary that hold a shred of her flesh or bone tissue from her chest—the exact place where Jesus (gently, we hope) pushed her away on Resurrection morning when he warned her *noli me tangere*.

(Apparently, it was all right for him to touch her.) Two sets of gold wings spread out around the reliquary, though whether they are meant to be hers or some angel's is not clear to me. Perhaps (really) they are the wings of Isis.

The winged, cloaked reliquary and skull sit on a sarcophagus, which is supposed to contain the rest of her bones. But unlike black Sarah (both saints share an association with the numerous Black Madonnas that crop up all over Europe) Marie Madeleine does not have the crypt to herself. She shares it with the remains of two bishops Sts Maximin and Sidoine—whom I later learned lived in the 5th century, not the 1st, despite the historical pamphlet's assertion that the Marie Madeleine died in St Maximin's arms. I

admit to being a bit scandalized. “Sleeping eternally with two bishops,” I muttered to Maeve. “Isn’t that a little kinky, even for you?”

Maybe you are wondering how I felt about the skull, venerated for centuries and still paraded in the streets every July 22nd, the saint’s feast day. Did I have a sense of awe? Did I feel as though I was in the same room with a part of the real Mary Magdalen’s body? Was there a collision between fantasy and reality (I do not claim to channel; I am a fiction writer). In truth, I didn’t feel any rapport, so to speak, with the skull, or any certainty that it belonged to the historical person. Though I did remark to Maeve that having her skull on display (even if it wasn’t actually hers) was a fitting fate for a headhunting Celt.

On the way out of the crypt, I glanced at the statue again, and considered that she might have some reason to look glum, positioned as she was directly across from the dead threesome. After stopping once more at the ugly painting, we left the basilica and went to find a hotel and dinner.

It was only later that I realized I had seen Maeve in the church. Soaring over the altar, the visual centerpiece of the whole church is a stained-glass dove with wings outspread, wreathed in rays of gold. Even more significant, I remembered that the whole time we were there, an actual, living dove cooed softly from somewhere inside the church. Our Maeve in her dove form, answering my appeal for a sign.

Madeleine! Madeleine!

The next morning I went back to the basilica by myself. It was open—for the funeral of Janine. I sat respectfully in the back and said some prayers for the repose of her soul as her coffin was carried in to a piped-in jazz dirge that featured a lot of saxophone. While the priest conducted the service, I gazed at the dove window and wrote a little in my journal. When the congregation sang a hymn, I decided it would be all right to tiptoe discreetly to the crypt. My lone candle still burned before the sorry statue, the flame reflecting in the surface of the black skull, just above the nose hole.

Alone in the crypt I did feel a sense of connection, if not with the skull itself, then with the tradition of veneration. There is something moving about being in a place where thousands of other people have prayed to a saint, so I got on my knees down there in the crypt, and at precisely that moment, another piece of recorded music blasted forth. The only word I could make out was a kind of a wail: “Madeleine! Madeleine!”

Maeve: it rhymes with Cave

Later that morning, we drove higher into the mountains on smaller and more harrowing hairpin roads to seek Le Grotte (cave) de Marie Madeleine. A semi-deserted convent sits at the base of her mountain. Though the convent appears to operate a hostel, café, and museum, only the chapel was open; full of bad modern religious art depicting Marie Madeleine’s life in France. We asked the lone nun in evidence how to find Le Grotte, and she told us where to park for what turned out, to my great joy, to be a climb on foot. Her cave can be reached in no other way. No cars, no busses. No crowds.

The trees on Marie Madeleine’s mountain are mostly small oak, and partway up there is a spring that is the source of a river whose name I forget. As we climbed, one bird kept singing. At the top, we first mistook a shelter among the rocks for her cave. A scene of the crucifixion, with Marie Madeleine at the foot of the cross, had been set up under a

rock shelf. It appeared to be sheltered from the North, but hardly seemed livable, even for a penitent, which she supposedly was during her long sojourn in the cave.

And then we came to the actual cave, which has been enclosed by a front wall with a door and stained glass windows. But when you step inside, no matter what has been added, you are in a cave—and what a cave: vast and warm with the sound of water dripping from the rocks into hidden pools. Pentinence, schmentinence, I thought. A keg of local wine, some goats' cheese, I could be a very happy hermit here.

There were many altars to the saint all over the cave at different heights and depths, all with candles burning and lighting up the stalactites. Of course, I lit a candle at each one. St Maximin's church seemed to have spared the odd fingernail clipping or bone, for there was a jeweled reliquary box, too, behind glass on a small natural shelf. Affixed to the rough walls was bronzed plaque after plaque thanking the saint for healings, births, safe journeys.

Though clearly many pilgrims visit the site, a few just leaving before we arrived, we had the place to ourselves. After they had explored, my husband and daughter tactfully stepped outside to enjoy the wide, wild view, and left me alone in the cave.

Alone with Sainte Marie Madeleine aka Maeve.

I find I don't want to say more. I will save it for the story. You will have guessed by now that my spine was tingling, hairs rising, and flesh puckering. Instead I will share the memory of eating lunch afterwards a few miles away, pizza Provencal, with four kinds of cheese and numerous cloves of roasted garlic, red wine. We sat outside on a deck—it was just warm enough that day—and I looked back towards Maeve's cave feeling perfectly happy.

The Oldest City in France

Our last stop before returning to Paris for our flight was Marseilles. I wasn't expecting much, as I am not a great city lover, no matter how many famous sights/sites there are to see, but I was won over by Marseilles. It is the oldest city in France, founded by the Greeks (perhaps as early the 4th century BCE?) with street patterns that date back to that time. The city is more accessible to pedestrians than to cars, as it is built on steep hills and cliffs with lots of winding stairs leading up and down. The coastline is dramatic with views of islands rising sharply from the sea, misty with spray from crashing waves. (On one of these islands stands Chataeu d'If, setting for the tale of the Count of Monte Cristo.) When you look inland, the mountains of La Ste Baume rise above the city. Even though we were staying near the old port, there were virtually no trendy, chic shops or restaurants for tourists, although that is about to change, our hotelier explained, because of the high speed train from Paris and because tourism must be developed as, sadly, the ship-building industry in Marseilles is failing.

On our first night in Marseilles, our hotelier gave us careful directions to a square where we could get good, reasonably priced food; he was at pains to have us avoid a certain undesirable area en route. But we got lost and saw what we suspect he wanted us not to see: a warren of narrow streets where prostitutes cheerily greeted each other as they set up their chairs outside their doors. We eventually found a little neighborhood dive and ate delicious Provencal food, salad with warm goat-cheese, pasta filled with Roquefort. We had only one full day in Marseilles—a Monday when the ferries to Chateau d'If weren't running—but we spent it well, climbing to Notre Dame de la Garde in the

morning, eating outside in a square for lunch with people and cats leaning out their shuttered windows to watch. In the afternoon we took a city bus to the edge of the suburbs where we got out and went hiking in the calanques, mountainous cliffs that rise straight up from the sea.

The next morning, we visited several other churches, looking for one that might have a chapel to Marie Magdalen without success—or so we thought. We had walked to a church in the oldest part of the city and circumambulated it, finding it closed, perhaps for renovation. Only later, while doing further research back at home, did I learn that some legends say Marie Madeleine landed not in the Camargue but in Marseilles. And the locked church by the sea stands on the place where Marie Madeleine is said to have stepped ashore. So without even knowing it, I ended my pilgrimage at the site of the scene depicted in the stained-glass window in Paris: our Maeve stepping jauntily out of the boat, hand raised in blessing, hip thrust out, wearing a red dress to match her red hair.

That's it for now. Check back for any further research adventures with Maeve!