



Finding Spiritual Connection on Montserrat

by Katie Rose Nicpon

Spiritual experiences come in many forms. Synagogues. Mosques. Cathedrals. Prayers. Songs. Meditation. Yoga. A feeling of connectedness to something greater than ourselves. This connectedness is what I feel when I have a spiritual experience. Hiking always brings me into this experience: A connectedness to myself, to the person passing me on the trail, to the earth, to the sky, to all of humanity, to love that is greater than myself. Spiritual experiences are so different for each person, but they can also bring us together.

I wasn't thinking about spirituality or connectedness at 8AM when we exchanged the Plaça d'Espanya underground station stuffy tunnel air for the slightly stale air conditioning on the R5 train. I was thinking about Andi, and all the things we needed to remember.

"You took your motion sickness pills an hour ago and you've got your wristbands, right?"

"Right. And you packed the mint pills, right?"

"Right. And 5 kinds of cheese. And 2 kinds of granola bars. 6 bottles of water. Honey roasted peanuts. Fresh bread. And a Redbull for you later."

"You're the best."

We spent the first part of our honeymoon learning that Andi needed the works when it came to preventing and managing his motion sickness. Needless to say, after the sequence of planes, trains and automobiles, now we had it down to an art. We had a 90 minute train ride outside of Barcelona, and then we had tickets to take the fifteen minute Cremallera de Montserrat, or rack railway, up the mountain.

Shades of tunnel opened up into hues of deep green fields and hills as we made our way outside of Barcelona. The hills began to grow and valleys began to deepen as we passed small towns, some organized as if they were climbing their way to the top of the hills, and others content to stay below, hugging small rivers. All of a sudden, what began as a looming presence began to rise out of the distance, larger than the green hills, stretching toward the sky. As we drew closer, the sunlight illuminated a complexity of points and crevices, unveiling the shape that inspired its Catalan name *Montserrat* or "serrated mountain."

I promised that if I ever wrote about my experiences, I would tell people who decide to go to Montserrat that there are several options that you can choose from. My advice: go to a tourism

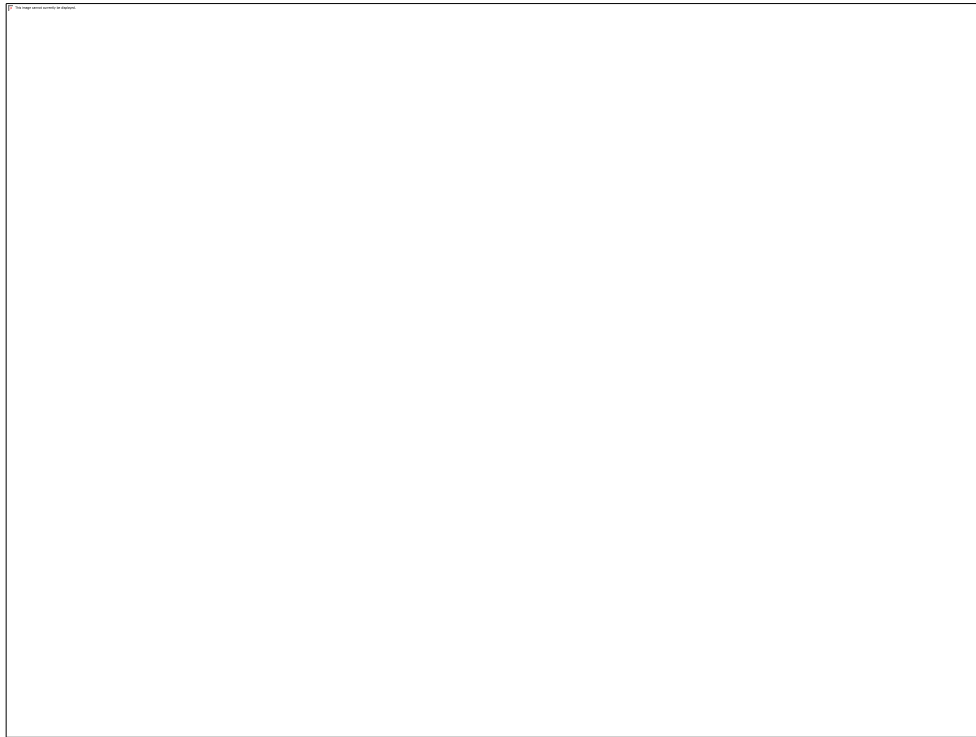
office in Barcelona, they are everywhere, and the extremely friendly people inside will tell you everything that you need to know about finding the train station, and the options that you have in traveling to Montserrat. You will have to choose, in advance, whether to get off the train at the first Montserrat stop for the Aeri, the cable car that glides its way up the mountain, or the second stop for the rack railway/funicular/Cremellera de Montserrat (they're all the same thing and are used interchangeably) that remains anchored to the ground on its way up the mountain. My husband gets motion sick and I have a fear of heights so when the friendly lady from office of tourism asked us which option we would like when purchasing our tickets, we both blurted out "the rail one!" like we were on a game show and trying to say the answer first.

So here we were on the Cremellera de Montserrat, Andi sitting forward next to the window, I was facing backward, holding his hand and *drooling* out the window (it's the only way I can describe how giddy I was at the views.) The funicular began winding its way up the mountain and we began to see the monastery peeking out. Suddenly, the ground gave way to the illusion that we were suspended over the air, and the funicular began rocking toward the edge of the cliff. I was seized by my fear of heights - more a fear of falling from high places - with the rocking of the train back and forth. "I can do anything for ten minutes," I gasped. Andi let out a quick laugh and said, "yeah, I guess that does makes sense." I don't know where the "ten minutes" expression came from or why it helped, but it did, and I began to say it like a mantra with every sway tipping us toward the ground. (Andi and I have actually started saying this to each other whenever either one of us is going through a tough moment.)

Stepping outside of the station, we had our first full views of the Benedictine abbey, Santa Maria de Montserrat. Behind the historic monastery, it looked like a group of giants silently stood watch in the morning light. Beneath the abbey complex, we walked into a gift shop and got in line for the video describing the history of this place suspended in the heavens. The history told the story of the legend of La Moreneta, or "the little dark one" - the statue of the Virgin Mary. The legend explains that shepherds were tending their flocks, and all of a sudden they heard heavenly music accompanied by an angelic light. They left their flocks to find the source of this phenomenon, and came upon a cave (now called La Cova de Santa Maria) where they found La Moreneta. The legend continues that they tried to move the statue to the mainland, but the statue would not be moved, as this holy mountain was the place that she had chosen to be venerated. For hundreds of years, people have been making the pilgrimage to Montserrat to pay homage to the statue of the Virgin and to be a recipient of the reported miracles here.

Something really moved me about this legend. The video continued to document hundreds of factual history of the monastery, but it was lost on me. I was caught up in a feeling of spiritual connectedness. I was not a subscriber to the Catholic faith, nor to veneration of spiritual icons, but something really touched me about this legend. Something about the miracle of the story and the faith of hundreds of thousands of visitors that have journeyed here for their faith for over one thousand years. I shivered with excitement of feeling connected to those that had traveled here before me.

Walking through the museum, we also saw a video on the life of Montserrat monks. Today, there are around 80 monks that reside here following the Rule of Saint Benedict, devoting their lives to prayer, welcoming pilgrims and visitors, and working. The camera followed them around with titles and times of the activities they were doing. I was entranced by this film that I lovingly titled, "The secret life of monks." Other Montserrat claims to fame include the printing press and operation beginning in 1499 as well as the Escolania, or *Boy's Choir* founded in the 14th century and is one of the oldest choirs of Europe.



Preferring a mall to a mountain, I had to learn the recipe for getting my husband to go for long hikes with me: snacks, lots of snacks. This is the part of the day where I got out the 5 kinds of cheese, 2 kinds of granola bars, honey roasted peanuts, fresh bread and Redbull. As he munched away, I read through the hiking directions that we had received from the attendant at the information booth by the train station. We were going to the highest peak, St. Jeroni at 1,236 meters or 4,055 feet. Hike duration listed: 2 hours.

First stop: the Sant Joan funicular that would take us farther up the mountain to begin our hike. Something about this small little box - that we were being herded into - at a steep angle to the mountain - created a panic in me. As people began to crowd in around me, I also began feeling extremely claustrophobic. "I don't think I can do this, I think I really need to get off, Andi," I tried to whisper, but I was freaking out.

Andi put his arms around me and said lovingly, "You can do anything for ten minutes." He's right. I think. I began chanting this as the doors shut and the funicular began to move.

After two minutes of the slow, uneventful and unscary motion, I sheepishly turned to Andi and said, “this is not bad at all, I don’t even need my mantra.” About 5 minutes later, the doors opened up and we got out, turned right, and followed signs for Sant Jeroni.

Not 10 feet from the funicular station, we stopped, leaned up against the wooden fence, and looked down over the monastery below, and the rolling land even farther beneath. Absolute beauty. I felt that molasses-like peace start to run through me, spilling into my center and down through every branch of my being. It’s a feeling that comes over me every time I feel a spiritual connection. Standing on this mountain, connected to myself, connected to Andi, connected to the pilgrims and monks below, connected to the wind, connected to the people and the land beyond. Whenever this feeling comes over me, my normal operating mode (which is what I call “verbal communication broadcasting”) quiets and I fall silent. Overwhelmed by peace, all thoughts fall away, and I am just a loving spirit. We begin walking down the dusty path, and my spirit soars.

Soaking in the enormous formations, we begin a game that many play with clouds, calling out what shapes we see. “That one looks like an elephant!”

“That one looks like an ape!”

“That one looks like a giant nose!”



I never would have guessed that this enormous rock formation jutting high into the atmosphere was the result of a river delta. The delta, bringing sedimentary rock from far and wide, deposited those heavy materials here. When this delta dried up, the conglomeration of sedimentary rock

and limestone was left susceptible to 10 million years of interaction with the elements. Pushed and pulled by wind, rain, sleet, etc, erosion left us these beautifully carved, serrated masterpieces of rock. Decorating these figures are those tenacious plants of the mediterranean family that can survive the heat and higher altitude. The website for Montserrat describes that in addition to the “evergreen oak and laurustinus...” there is “...a total of 1,250 different species, the vegetation [ranging] from oak, yew and pine woods to species that grow on the surface of rocks, such as borage and sunflowers.” That is amazing diversity for such a unique landform. Maybe, one of the first monks to live in spiritual separation up here thought, “Well if they can survive here, so can I.”

We wound around the mountain points, picking out shapes, pointing out crosses built into peaks, and stopping to watch mountain climbers....and of course, tons of selfies. As we made our way, gradually upward, that cell phone tower that had looked so tiny in the distance and that I had complained about trying to shoot around, became closer and closer. Throughout this hike, that feeling of sweet peace never left, and the feeling of connectedness only became stronger. I began to think about the monks that lived on the mountain in their chapels, and their belief in something so great, it was worth pursuing their faith into living in the mountains. Seeing the chapel of St. Jeroni, we peeked inside to see a small sanctuary with a small beam of light shining into the darkness.

Once we passed the chapel, we began our greatest ascent via a stairway. “How long do you think all these stairs will take?” Andi huffed.

“Ten minutes!” I smiled.

“Then we can do it!” We laughed.

We began a steady incline and even the mountain faces and figures began to shrink away below us. We reached the top, and felt as though we were at the top of the world. It felt like we could see all of Spain for its beauty in its hazy green expanse. A large compass shaped table pointed toward the horizon in all directions labeling all of places in Spain that you felt like you could almost see. I stood silently and as still as I could, feeling the wind, feeling Andi’s hand in mine, feeling my heartbeat, feeling the earth beneath my feet. This was my spiritual experience. I was connected to the world.



After completing our 4 hour hike (yes, you probably remember how the description I was reading earlier said 2 hours - well, whomever hiked this trail to write the guide probably would have been constantly chastising us "Stop taking pictures," or "No time to sit, eat snacks and point out shapes, children!" But we're glad that he or she was not hiking with us) we made our way into the complex and over to the monastery to get in line to see La Moreneta.

Waiting at the bottom of the stairs that lead into the small room with La Moreneta, we were able to look up and see inside. Panels of silver surrounded the small figure, created in 1947 to enshrine their patron, with a glass case enclosing her and her child. Virgin Mary, sits with her son, Jesus as a small child in her lap, rests one palm lovingly on his shoulder. Her other hand holds an orb, symbolizing the world. It is this orb and hand that people come from near and far to touch while they pray. Both Mary and Jesus, with their dark faces, are adorned in golden robes with crowns resting on their foreheads. Jesus' first hand holds a pinecone, symbolizing fertility and everlasting life, and his other hand stretches out, extended to bless those passing before him.

I watched the first woman approach the statue of the Virgin, place her hand on the small orb she was holding, close her eyes, and whisper a prayer. The next man pulled out his rosary, made a cross motion with his hand and bowed, touched the orb and walked out. The next two women placed their palms together and touched their foreheads, a tear running down one woman's cheek. A son helped his father up the last step and held him while he prayed. I felt so honored to witness one of the most personal and meaningful expressions we possess, love and faith. I was able to share this spiritual moment with those who journeyed far in their adoration and belief. I felt the molasses that filled my being before as I watched the family in front of us. Then it was our turn. As Andi and I stood in front of the Virgin's dark and caring face, I thought of all those that have stood in this holy place, and now I was connected to them.