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Bufftree Building Co. completes new Welcome Center at the National Shrine of Our Lady of La Salette

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When Bufftree Building Company took on the construction of a new Welcome Center for the National Shrine of Our Lady of La Salette, they knew the schedule would be difficult. It would be under 7 months from the groundbreaking on April 29th to the opening of the Shrine's highly anticipated Christmas Festival of Lights on Thanksgiving Day, November 22nd.

Thanks to Bufftree's experience in successfully bringing a fast-track project in on time and budget, approximately 2,000 visitors topped off their Thanksgiving meals with the annual lighting ceremony at the popular La Salette Shrine.

Actually, a close look at the Shrine's wide appeal reveals that some pretty impressive numbers play a significant role in attracting people to La Salette year round, and especially during the holiday season. Of the hundreds of thousands who visit the Shrine annually, innumerable local families count the lighting of the over 400,000 outdoor lights covering 10 acres an important part of their holiday traditions.

The one-story Welcome Center, designed to complement the contemporary look of the Shrine church built in 2000, contains 20,000 s/f of space that includes a lobby/reception area, a 600-seat auditorium and meeting rooms, a new bistro featuring light refreshments and a candle chapel called the Chapel of Light, which glows with nearly 3,000 vigil lights. Previously located outdoors, this new, enclosed candle room was an exceptional challenge for Bufftree and their engineers to both construct and ventilate. The center's structural system is comprised of a steel frame with insulated, textured metal wall panels enclosing the main body of the facility and helical masonry wall at the circular administrative areas.

A new wheelchair lift provides handicap access between the new facility and the existing cafeteria. The new construction serves to link the previously free-standing buildings together with covered walkways that protect visitors from the elements.

Inside the main lobby of the Welcome Center are 3 stained glass windows from the former 50-year-old chapel that was demolished to make way for the new center. A new gift shop will move into the new area after January 1st, when the Festival of Lights closes. With the relocation of the gift shop, the former store will become a display area for 100s of nativity sets from around the world. According to the Shrine's website, next year's International Display will be even bigger and better than ever, with the addition of 400 new nativity mangers.

The project's financing came mainly from insurance money collected after the 1999 fire that destroyed the site's 96-year-old former monastery.

A number that is known only to La Salette and the utility company - is the Shrine's electric bill for the season. As the website says, "This one you wouldn't believe!"

