

Hostels of the holy

Many abbeys across the country offer accommodations and a slice of serenity — regardless of faith

BY KATE SILVER

The word retreat never seemed to fit into my life. As someone who isn't religious, doesn't do yoga and struggles to disconnect and slow down, the concept of just being somewhere solo never really crossed my mind. It took spending a night at Holy Wisdom Monastery, a Benedictine abbey near Madison, Wis., to realize that I had been missing out.

On a Friday afternoon in April, I check in at my hermitage — a small, modestly furnished cabin in the woods with a bedroom, living room, bathroom, kitchen and deck — and immediately put on my running shoes. Unfazed by the gloomy drizzle, I wander the nature trails just outside my door, gazing at placid Lake Mendota in the distance. Once this was farmland, but the monastery, which is home to the Benedictine Sisters of Madison, helped coordinate efforts to restore the wild prairie and oak forests that now encircle the 130-plus acre property. As a Benedictine monastery, caring for the Earth is part of the mission. That commitment shines through in the structure of the monastery itself — a tawny brick building that has LEED platinum certification and generates much of its own power through solar panels.

At 5:15, I join three of the monastery's four nuns and two novices (women in a year-long program studying and living at the monastery) for a dinner prepared by the staff chef. In a dining room filled with about 40 exuberant men and women who are there for a weekend retreat (and a nature walk and bonfire later that night), we talk about hospitality, something for which Benedictines — who follow traditional Christian monasticism — have been known throughout history.

"Monasteries were like the first hotel," says Sister Mary David Walgenbach, between bites of haddock and butternut squash, which was grown in a garden a few hundred feet away.

"At Benedictine monasteries, part of the ministry is welcoming guests in," adds Sister Joanne Kollasch. "They can come there if they're looking for a spiritual place or a place to be at home with themselves."

Benedictines are guided by the rule of Saint Benedict, which says: "Let all guests who arrive be received like Christ." In other words, everyone is welcome. The sisters tell me that they've hosted artists, writers, refugees, nature lovers and people of all faiths. It's an ecumenical monastery and even the sisters are of varying Christian denominations. The Dalai Lama has even spent time here. Guests either stay at one of the two hermitages — at \$85 per night for a single, \$100 for a double for one to six nights — or in basic dormitory-style rooms with private bathrooms (\$61 for a single, \$78 for a double but rates vary according to how long a guest stays). They are welcome to eat together; breakfast is included, lunch is \$12 and dinner is \$15. They are also invited to attend daily services, but are under no obligation.

Kollasch points out that those who wish to stay in a monastery should understand and respect the culture. "It's not a cheap place where [you] can go and hole up. That's not the point. The point is to go to a place that supports your own interior growth. Or your own growth as a whole person," Kollasch says. "It doesn't have to be overtly religious or doctrinal. But you wouldn't want people coming here [thinking] I can do as I please and disregard the whole point of it being a place that's dedicated to this interior life."

Sanctuaries

In a world where hotel brands are tripping over themselves to become more "authentic" and offer meaningful experiences to

travelers, these religious institutions deliver the real deal. Scores of monasteries, abbeys and retreat centers of all faiths in the United States open their doors to people seeking quiet contemplation and personal retreats.

Husband-and-wife team Jack and Marcia Kelly have visited nearly 300 monasteries of all spiritual paths in the United States, sharing travel information in their book, "Sanctuaries: A Guide to Lodgings in Monasteries, Abbeys, and Retreats in the United States." Their interest was

piqued on a road trip in the early 1990s, when they stopped overnight at the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani near Bardonia, Ky., to visit a monk who was a family friend.

"We were welcomed with open arms, had a lovely, quiet place to stay, were invited to come to the services, with that glorious singing and had, probably for the first time in our lives, a completely peaceful and tranquil time," Marcia says. Neither she nor Jack are religious — Marcia is Jewish and her husband is, in his words, a

"retired" Catholic — and so the experience was especially eye-opening. They continued their cross-country journey and stayed at another monastery, New Camaldoli Hermitage, in Big Sur, Calif. From their peaceful roost overlooking the Pacific, they knew they were onto something. "When we discovered these places, we realized that nobody else knew about them," Marcia says. "That all over the country were these gorgeous places that people should know about."

They set out to visit as many as

they could, writing a total of six books — three about accommodations, one about mealtime blessings they heard, one about foods they tasted and another about the religious and spiritual communities' products and services. Every place they visited had its own distinct character — some had chanting, others were silent; some had yoga, others had tennis; some were in cities, others were high in the mountains.

Regardless of the differences, the men and women who work and pray there all had something

in common, Marcia says. "Every place is filled with human beings trying to be their very best selves, and radiating that kindness and compassion and hospitality toward their guests consistently," she says. "And so they glow."

Seeking your own path

For those considering a personal retreat, the offerings are diverse. There are urban options accessible by public transportation, such as the Franciscan Monastery of the Holy Land in America, in D.C., where those seeking silence can withdraw and stay in one of two hermitages. (Each one has a single bed, sitting area, kitchenette, washer/dryer and porch for a suggested donation of \$80 per night.)

At the Sonoma Mountain Zen Center, in Santa Rosa, Calif., guests are welcome to stay in shared or private cabins (\$55 to \$65 per night) on top of Sonoma Mountain and participate in daily meditation, bowing and chanting services, and communal meals. At the Monastery of Christ in the Desert in northwestern New Mexico's Chama Canyon, double and single rooms are available at a suggested donation of \$70 to \$150 per night and meals — which are silent and eaten with the monks — are included. Guests are welcome to participate in daily services and even help the monks with manual labor, all with a backdrop of stunning red rock views.

In Oregon's Willamette Valley, the monks at Our Lady of Guadalupe Trappist Abbey bake fruitcakes, operate a book bindery and run a warehouse that stores and labels wine for area vineyards. They also welcome guests of all faiths to immerse themselves in the quiet of more than 1,000 acres of lush forest, rolling hills and fertile farmland dotted with hazelnut trees and surrounded by Oregon's wine country. Visitors stay in individual, two-story guesthouses and are asked for a donation of \$50 or more.

The serenity can take some time to get used to, says Brother Chris Balent, one of 22 monks at the monastery. "You get here and you get out of your car and step into this sense of peace and quiet and there's really a transition time. What do I do now? You don't have that external stimuli that you do in the world," he says. Perhaps even more powerful, at breakfast and lunch, all of the guests eat in silence at a communal table, while dinner is a time for guests to be social.

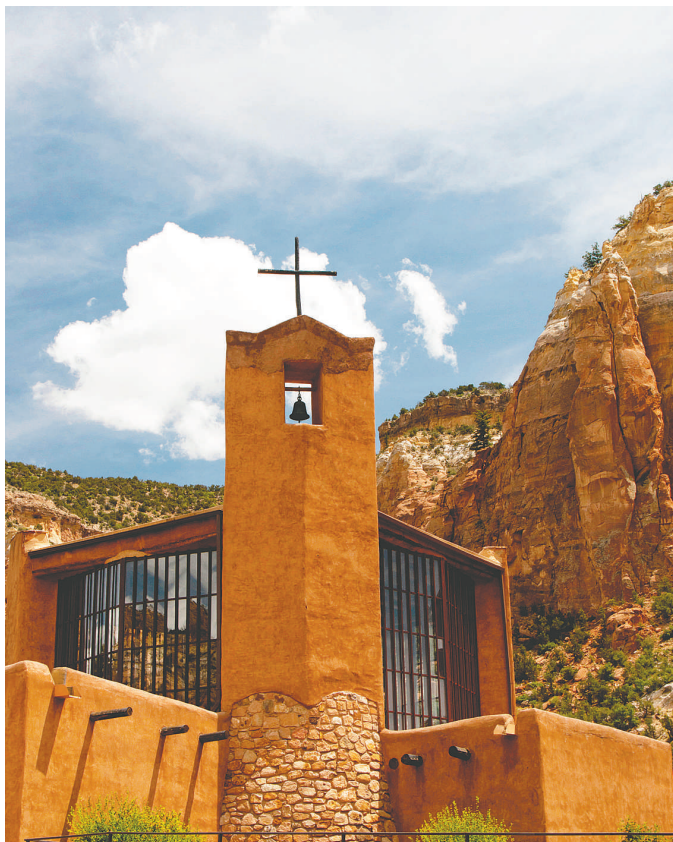
Balent says that guests come to the abbey for a variety of reasons. Many are on a religious or spiritual quest; some wish to immerse themselves in silence; others want to hike the surrounding trails and connect with nature. While people of all faiths are welcome, Balent makes it clear that they should understand and respect the religious community. "You simply cannot understand visiting a Trappist community if you don't understand that you're coming to a place that's all about God," he says.

As for my retreat in Wisconsin, I approached it as a quiet getaway, an escape from the city, a curiosity. In the 15 hours I spent on the grounds at Holy Wisdom Monastery, I heard nuns tell intriguing stories about their history, watched deer sprint through an open prairie, searched for wild turkeys on nature trails, listened to rain fall on the roof of my hermitage and read my book late into the night.

By the time I packed my bags and drove home to Chicago, I felt relaxed and refreshed. Cared for. Sated. And I decided that people like me, who convince themselves they're too busy for a retreat, could probably benefit the most.

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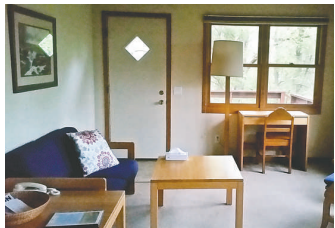
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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: In New Mexico, the Monastery of Christ in the Desert; in Wisconsin, the Holy Wisdom Monastery; a man meditates at Holy Wisdom; the abbey's modest accommodations; in Oregon, Our Lady of Guadalupe Trappist Abbey.