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

BY KATE SILVER

T he most recent version of the 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 surrounded by religious people made me nervous. An added uncertainty was spending a night at Holy Wisdom Monastery, a Benedictine abbey near Madison, Wis., to realize that I was missing out.

On a Friday afternoon in April, I check in at my homestay — a spacious room in a house where visitors can stay, with a private bedroom and shared bathroom. The house is surrounded by woods, a bedroom, living room, bathroom, kitchen and deck — and immediately put on my running shoes. Unfazed by the gloomy skies, I wander the woods, the path that leads to a little stream, the path from the house to the monastery.

At 10:30, I join three of the monastery's four nuns and two novices (women in a one-year program studying and living at the monastery). Their only rule to follow, besides the traditional Benedictine prayer rhythm, is one that Dr. Mary M. pes still holds to be a best practice, even for non-practicing people.

"Benedictines are guided by the rule of St. Benedict," says Sister Mary Judith Walgenbach, between bites of bread and buttered squash, which was grown in a garden a few hundred feet away. "Let all guests who arrive be welcomed like Christ." In other words, everyone is welcome. The nuns tell me that they've hosted people from all walks of life, and even now people still come in, an occasional family and even the owners of nearby businesses.

At the Benedictine monastery, part of the monastery is a welcoming guesthouse. In 2006, the nuns invited guests to eat together on a table surrounded by a square, which was for a time in a garden, then on the porch. "At Benedictine monasteries, part of the monastery is a welcoming guesthouse," adds Sister Suzanne Kollasch. "You can come here, you're looking for a spiritual goal, they're ready to be there for you.

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