

A chance to observe belief, taste contemplation

► **RETREAT**
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They purchased a farm, woods, and fields in Spencer, and built a church, cloister, dormitories, and guest house of brick and stone, much of it fieldstone from this very land. The architectural style of the complex is rustic retro-medieval: solid, simple, and right out of the 14th century.

Driving the half-mile paved road that leads past cropped green fields and rows of trees to the hilltop abbey, my ride exclaims, “This place looks like France.”

I’m dropped off in a downpour. I meet my first monk, the retreat master. Kind. I like the look of the retreat house: a squat, brick and green-slate roofed structure, with three corridors forming a triangle around a small planted courtyard. Austere. I park my bags in my room, stash my bike behind the retreat house, and say goodbye to my ride.

The evening prayer service, Vespers, begins promptly at 5:40 p.m. every day. The six other retreatants and I hurry into the church, with its turret-like bell tower, where the monks pray seven times a day. Here the quiet is absolute. One by one or in pairs, the monks trickle in, dressed in white robes with hoods and leather belts. Then come hymns, prayers, Bible readings, organ music. Immediately, I fall in love with the stained-glass windows pulsing with indigo-blue light, like the first lilac calling from the corner of a sleeping garden.

Then, the silent dinner. Then, the silent retreat house. The rain outside the window. The small bed. The dim lamplight. The crucifix above my desk. I open the Bible. I think about the monks filing out of the church, serene and satisfied, their thoughts hidden.

Day 2:

The rain is a blanket, a wall, a bed of nails. The lawn pulses with fresh green. It’s late April, and maple trees are only beginning to bud. All seems to be waiting for sun and growth and change.

The retreat house sits separate from where the monks live, but its schedule mirrors the monastery. Prayer, meals, and services occur at regular intervals throughout the day. Vigils at 3:30 a.m. (!); Lauds and Mass at 6; breakfast at 7; dinner at noon; None (pronounced KNOWN) prayer at 2 p.m.; Vespers at 5:40; supper at 6; Compline (pronounced COMP-lin) or night prayer at 7:40. The monks move toward bedtime around 8. For the retreatants, there’s ample time for reading, walking, and contemplation. Monks give talks. But nothing is mandatory. Signs in each retreat room explain the schedule with the open-ended advice: “Set your alarm clock and rise when you wish.”

It’s simple, and surprisingly comforting, to fall into the routine. The guest master rings a bell



ETHAN GILSDORF FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

The 2,000 acres of abbey grounds in Spencer are fenced for the monks’ privacy.

before each major service and mealtime. The retreatants file into the refectory to eat. A monk or a lay staff person leads the group in a prayer. We eat in silence. We listen to a Bible commentary on audiotape. After meals, the guests are asked to do the dishes and set the tables for the next meal. Bell, eat, bell, pray. I begin to feel like one of Pavlov’s dogs.

But I worry the others suspect I am a fraud. I never learned to make the sign of the cross. Is it forehead-chest-right shoulder-left shoulder? Or forehead-left-right-chest? I mumble, “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, amen” and hope no one is watching too closely.

Then the question hammers in my mind: Is it sacrilegious for a nonbeliever to make the sign of the cross? Thankfully, no questions were asked when I registered. No tests had to be passed. Thanks be to these monks, discreet and grateful and accepting.

The sky clears so I decide to walk to the gift shop, where jams, books, and products from other monasteries are sold. On the way back, the rains return with a vengeance. No umbrella. I duck under the trees to find cover. I slip on the muddy bank. I plod on, stumbling through thorny brambles, scratching my face. I’m soaked. I want to go home. I try to find the apt metaphor or irony here: not a religious martyr, just a fool in the rain.

Back inside, the monk-in-charge calls me aside. He’s just worried my bike will get wet.

Day 3:

I cheat. I bike the three miles to town with my laptop to check my e-mail. Convenience store, post office, newspaper: an infusion of the real world. I am a bad retreatant. I bike back, repent, attending Vespers and Compline that evening.

I have come to the abbey, partly, for answers to intractable problems. To choose new trails and passageways through my life. To make decisions. Not that I expect



to solve the problems. But perhaps I can chip away at them.

I sit in a living room of the retreat house to write. Is this a kind of prayer? I ask questions. How to be happy? In the words of voice-on-tape at each meal, I “ponder.” I speak briefly with one of the retreatants, a dreadlocked musician who’s trying to quit smoking and get his life back on track. It’s the most I’ve spoken in almost two days. No talking is allowed at dinner or in the guest quarters. Speaking to others is permitted outside or in the retreat house’s common rooms, as long as it is kept to a minimum and privacy is respected. Contrary to what I expected, the monks have not taken a vow of silence, but they seem to discourage idle talk, and their

meals, like ours, are taken in contemplative silence.

I’ve come to admire these monks and their choice to turn their backs to the world. They make music together and work together. I want to walk where the monks walk. I want to wear one of their robes. I want to make Trap-pist jam. But much of the grounds are fenced off as a “monastic enclosure” to give the monks privacy. Observe, imitate, be inspired — but please, do not speak to the monks unless spoken to.

In 1957, Saint Joseph’s was 186 monks strong. Today, their number is closer to 70. Theirs is a dying breed. They need recruits. Or, as one staffer told me, “We need a few good men.”

Before bed, I send a text mes-

Restored iron works forges Saugus history

By Ellen Albanese
GLOBE STAFF

SAUGUS – It ran for only 22 years, but the iron works established on the banks of the Saugus River in 1646 would free a colony from dependence on British manufacturing, create a model for the American factory town, and launch the world’s most powerful steel industry.

The Saugus Iron Works National Historic Site earlier this month reopened to the public after 18 months of construction to upgrade the facility, improve access, and restore the waterways so critical to its operation. The site celebrates the stories of the earliest Puritan inhabitants and the English iron workers and Scottish prisoners of war who helped lay the foundation for America’s iron and steel industry.

Most of the 8-acre site replicates the layout uncovered by archaeologists in the 1940s. Those digs revealed the remains of the blast furnace and mill buildings

and structures, including remarkably preserved tailraces, water wheels, anvil bases, and thousands of artifacts.

Today the reconstructed site includes a blast furnace, forge, rolling and slitting mill (where large pieces of iron were rolled thin and cut into slivers to make nails), and a house. Seven waterwheels power equipment in the three main mill buildings; fires glow, giant bellows and gears clatter, and a 500-pound trip hammer strikes with deafening blows. In the museum, tools, equipment, and objects from the original iron works are displayed, along with artifacts indicating habitation of the site more than 10,000 years ago.

A short video takes visitors back to the pre-Revolutionary Massachusetts Bay Colony when Richard Leader recognized the ecological bonanza provided by the Saugus River in an area that was then Lynn. The river would provide water power and transportation; the local bogs and streams contained iron in the

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providencezen.org
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sage to a troubled friend. “Let not your heart be heavy.” I’m even talking like a monk.

Day 4:

I rise at 3 a.m. for Vigils. I stayed up till midnight reading (not the Bible, but Nick Hornby’s “High Fidelity”). I open the door to my room and pad to the church under a great awning of stars. I hear the “hush hush” of robes as the monks pass in ritual, in performance, in a movement of simplicity and fidelity reaching back to the order’s origins in France in 1098. I’m half-asleep as the organ begins. The wall I’ve built around the Bible crumbles. I don’t need to hear the meaning of the prayers. In part trance, part dream place, I begin to finally *feel* what these monks might be feeling.

After breakfast, and a nap, and lunch, the sun blazes at last. I feel released as if from school. I can’t resist these acres of woods. I trespass in the monks’ area.

If I’m going to find godliness this week, or some version I could call my own, it’s going to be in moss, and brook, and frog. It’s going to be in the spiral eye of fiddleheads testing the air, in the patient work of beaver gnawing at a birch tree. To believe that birch tree is going to fall takes faith.

I keep walking. Lost but not lost. Aware of how to get back. If I’m going to meet God, he or she is going to inhabit these woods. And the more I walk, the more I believe in the need to love, to belong, to risk. Jesus is probably not for me. But communion with another, this I can believe.

I notice those buds from Day 1 are now delicate maple leaves, each a chartreuse butterfly emerging from its chrysalis.

Day 5:

The retreat ends after breakfast, in rain.

I’m going to miss the silence. The way the other retreatants and I cleaned the refectory without speaking, each intuitively sensing his task. I’m going to miss the permission I gave myself to ponder. I have proof: 70 pages of handwritten prayer. I’m going to miss the monks’ faces, open as pages in a book. I’m going to miss me in my cell, pretending to be part of the order.

I don’t care if I’m a fraud. I’m trying.

And I did learn one ritual: first head, then heart, then across the shoulders, from left to right.

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JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

Students at the site that dates to 1646 and perhaps has been inhabited for millennia.

form of bog ore; and the region had thousands of acres of woodland needed to make charcoal to feed the blast furnace.

When the operation went bankrupt in 1668, the workers who had honed their skills there fanned out across the Colonies. “In a way,” said park ranger Curtis White, “it was the bankruptcy that spread the trade of iron and steel-making. It forced talented workers to disperse across the young country, carrying their skills with them.”

One of the most striking aspects of the site is its marked levels of elevation, from the hilltop visitors center to the marshy riverbank. You can almost sense the

If you go . . .

Saugus Iron Works National Historic Site
244 Central St., Saugus
781-233-0050; nps.gov/sair
Daily 9 a.m.-5 p.m. through Oct. 31; closed Nov. 1-March 31. Free.

movement of water through wooden millraces that powered the blast furnaces.

A switchback gravel trail offers easy access to the three main buildings for wheelchairs, baby carriages, or anyone who has difficulty with stairs. In addition, a large, raised model of the original iron works’ complex water system familiarizes sight-impaired visitors with the area’s topography.

Key to the success of the early iron works was the Saugus River, which bisects the park. Its waters supplied power to operate waterwheels, and small sailing vessels called shallops or lighters entered its “turning basin” to bring in raw materials or ship out iron products. The renovation restores open water to the area by removing invasive vegetation and improves biodiversity by enhancing native plant, fish, and wildlife habitat. Visitors can clearly recognize the pivotal role the river played in this historic enterprise.

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