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Surfing for Serenity

By Lani Luciano, November & December 2005

Photo by Dave Lauridsen

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These four websites provide retreat directories that can help you find a center that suits your needs and interests. It's good to keep in mind that some of the centers that appear in the directories are paid advertisers—use the information provided as a starting point to make your own choice. For more retreat spots near you, it may be best to inquire at a local place of worship or check the yellow pages.

[Findthedivine.com](#)

Search by location

Listings More than 1,200 centers of all faiths in the United States and Canada, including Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, and Jewish

You'll also find free referral service, message board with personal retreat stories, directory of spiritual advisers

[Retreatfinder.com](#)

Search by location, religion, activity (e.g., yoga), environment (e.g., desert)

Listings More than 1,000 retreats, events, and facilities of all faiths and interests around the world
You'll also find employment and volunteer opportunities at retreat centers, plus a free e-newsletter

[Retreatsintl.org](#)

Search by location

Listings About 350, mainly Catholic, in the United States and Canada

You'll also find speakers bureau, internships/education at spiritual centers, reading list or topics

[Spiritsite.com](#)

Search by location

Listings Around 100 Zen, yoga, health spa, and other retreat centers in the United States

You'll also find book excerpts and columns on spiritual topics, books and audiotapes for free e-mail newsletter

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Photo by Dave Lauridsen

Where the Spirit Moves You

By Lani Luciano, November & December 2005

When it's time to step away from the distractions of everyday life and get back in touch with your spiritual core, you don't have to go far to go deep

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Sometimes old poets say it best. Consider these lines from the great English Romantic William Wordsworth:

*The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
Little we see in Nature that is ours...*

Wordsworth wrote that 200 years ago, but he could have written it yesterday. In an age of BlackBerrys and e-mails, iPods and Xboxes, we find ourselves disconnected and adrift, in need of renewal and healing in a world that is "too much with us."

But how does one step off the grid of modern life and reconnect with the spiritual? The answer for millions of Americans is to go on a retreat. Retreats are a means to look within ourselves in stillness and silence, to locate what may be missing in our lives, but to also appreciate what has always been there. They require that we set aside only the deadlines and obligations that besiege our daily lives and find solace and sustenance in comforting quiet and simple routines. Ultimately, the attraction is in the subtraction.

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As many have discovered, you don't have to go far to go deep. Spirituality websites can help anyone longing for some inner renewal find a place to retreat. (See "[Surfing for Serenity](#)".) [Findthedivine.com](#) lists more than 1,200 opportunities for retreats in the U.S. and Canada. According to Phil Stone, the website's cofounder, 55,000 retreat seekers visit the site a month. In a recent survey, Findthedivine asked what these people were looking for. More than 50 percent said they were looking to enhance spirituality, while 23 percent were seeking personal growth, and 6 percent were hoping to improve their appreciation of the outdoors or to express themselves artistically.

Retreats require that we set aside only the deadlines and obligations that besiege our daily lives.

Anne Luther, director of [Retreats International](#), a nonprofit organization representing more than 350 largely Catholic retreat centers, sees retreats as a starting point for a pursuit of peace and contentment. "Every spiritual search has to start somewhere. Even the smallest yearning for meaning is appealing to some kind of hunger in people. Spiritual seeking is all about listening to that hunger," she says.

If so, there are a lot of hungry travelers out there: according to Luther, some 2.5 million North Americans went on a spiritual retreat last year through her organization. And while most of the retreats RI represents have a Catholic affiliation, many of the

visitors are not Catholic but are simply looking to jump-start their journey toward healing, growth, or enhancement of faith. "There's a lot of disillusionment with religious institutions these days, but interest in spirituality has never been greater," she says. "We are attempting to be ecumenical to meet these needs."

Stone and Luther both emphasize that retreats come in all sizes and missions. Visitors can follow a formal program or their own instincts; ponder God, nature, or self; spend nights in sleeping bags or between organic-cotton sheets. And prices can range from pay-what-you-choose to \$500 or more a day. The variety can be a bit bewildering to newcomers, but it is helpful to loosely categorize retreats as faith-based, nonreligious, or meditation-oriented.

Deepening Your Faith Religious retreats

Often, people find themselves confused or discouraged when they begin to think about faith and the divine. A religious retreat can help those who may feel spiritually lost and don't know where to turn. Martha Thomas, 55 and mother of three, found herself in that state six years ago when she realized, while sitting in church one Sunday, that she had no relationship with God and no idea how to get one.

It wasn't a personal crisis that made Thomas begin to think about God. She says she just "woke up" and thought, Where was my religious experience? She looked at people in her Great Falls, Virginia, Methodist congregation who "by virtue of how they lived, acted, and treated other people seemed to have a relationship with God," and she asked them for guidance.

"They told me they prayed and read the Bible every day and, when they needed to talk to God, He was there." Thomas joined a centering prayer group and found that sitting with others also trying to open themselves to God gave her support and inspiration. Encouraged, she began going on group

retreats, including two weekends at [Bon Secours Spiritual Center](#) in Marriottsville, Maryland, which she found through Findthedivine.com.

An ecumenical center, Bon Secours is run by the Catholic order the Sisters of Bon Secours and is set amid 313 acres of rolling hills and hiking trails. The rooms are simply furnished, containing one dresser, a twin or double bed, a rocking chair, and a desk. The bathrooms are down the hall from the rooms and are communal, though separated by gender. Meals are served cafeteria-style with options for vegetarians, a full salad bar, and different entrées every day. Across the hall from the main dining room are two smaller dining halls for silent retreats.

A 55-foot labyrinth is one of Bon Secours's more striking features. The focal point of a one-acre "sacred space," its stonework is laid in a pattern based on the design of the famed Chartres labyrinth set on the floor of the Chartres Cathedral around 1220. "Everybody does the labyrinth," says Thomas, describing the thoughtful slow walk visitors take. "It can take as long as you make it; it is a very individual thing."

Not all the retreats at Bon Secours focus exclusively on religion and faith. One that Thomas attended was based on yoga and another was a near-silent, contemplative meditation retreat.

Though the retreats were structured, Thomas says that of her two experiences at Bon Secours, she enjoyed her solitary nature rambles best. "I liked to get out early in the morning and jog for an hour or so in the woods. I would see lots of wildlife, like deer and foxes. It gave me time to be alone with my thoughts," she says.

For Tim Siegel, 48, who frequently visits the [Friends Wilderness Center](#) (FWC) near Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, being in nature engenders closeness with God. The FWC is located in 1,400 lushly wooded acres and sponsors events such as silent retreats, music festivals, and poetry readings. Siegel, the director of major gifts for a Washington, D.C.-based conservation group, has been a board member of the FWC for two years. A few times each year, he heads off alone to the center, where he either camps in its meadow or sleeps in a rustic wooden yurt, a domed shelter that sleeps four or five. He cooks on an open fire pit, hikes miles of the seldom-used trails, watches wildlife, and marvels at the night sky. "The quiet and solitude help me think," he says. "I'm a practicing Quaker, and it fits very well with our concept of dwelling in silence."

The FWC also offers a tree house, which has a roof and no walls and sleeps up to 15, and a cabin with two bedrooms. When Siegel brings his teenage daughter or a friend or two with him, they tend to prefer the cabin, with meals prepared by the preserve's resident manager.

Religious leaders too seek and enjoy the benefits of solitude that come from a retreat, even one hosted by another faith. Five or six times a year, Nancy Copeland-Payton, 55, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Sandpoint, Idaho, drives 200 miles to the [Monastery of St. Gertrude](#), a community of 60 Catholic nuns in Cottonwood, Idaho. "There's always the smell of fresh-baked bread, and the sisters pray together three times a day. It's just such a nourishing atmosphere, and I feel a deeper sense of being grounded in God's presence," she says.

St. Gertrude's hosted more than 1,000 retreat participants last year. It offers peace and quiet, spiritual

direction, an extensive library, and a museum of the history of northern Idaho. Most retreatgoers stay in the new \$3.4 million Spirit Center, which has 22 double-occupancy rooms with individual bathrooms and either two twin beds or a full bed for couples. Most rooms have views of the surrounding prairie, which is covered with rivers, lakes, and ponderosa pine, fir, and spruce. Accommodations are also offered at the Farmhouse, a large single-family home that sleeps 14 and is perfect for group retreats, and the Solitude House, which serves as the chaplain's residence but has four bedrooms with full beds, a kitchenette, and a living room area for guests.

When she is not participating in a formal retreat at St. Gertrude's, Copeland-Payton enjoys filling her time with walking the monastery's grounds, praying, eating, and talking with the devout sisters. Mostly, the minister loves deepening her own spiritual understanding through the ideas and perspectives of a different tradition. "Retreats help me discover more of God's possibilities," she says.

Finding the Real You **Nonreligious retreats**

For those who are not necessarily looking to strengthen their relationship with God but to strengthen themselves, secular retreats provide comfort and support. They are likely to target specific challenges like forgiveness, addictions, or the courage to face life-threatening illness or otherwise trying times. Some promote personal growth in general.

At [The Ashram](#), in the Santa Monica mountains near Los Angeles, guests undergo a weeklong intensive physical schedule and limited diet to help them tap their innate power to overcome life obstacles. The days have a spartan simplicity: an hour of yoga in the morning; a five-hour hike; classes in weight training, Pilates, water aerobics, or dance; more yoga; then bed. The meals are organic and vegetarian (a typical day's fare: fruit salad, eggs, and raw yogurt for breakfast; salad, hummus, vegetarian sushi, or organic tacos for lunch; and raw-food soup, spinach salad, or coconut curry for dinner). The austere conditions are described as "simple spirituality and loving punishment" by the organizers.

The Ashram has been dubbed "boot camp to the stars," and its guests have included Oprah Winfrey, Dan Aykroyd, Shirley MacLaine, and Cindy Crawford. It attracts people who are willing to spend a lot of money (\$3,800 a week) and energy to develop inner strength. Only 12 guests a week are accepted, and they stay in either one of the three private rooms or four shared rooms, each with two queensize beds. None of the rooms have televisions, phones, or private bathrooms.

Not all the guests at The Ashram are celebrities, and for some, it offers an ascetic environment to sort out the competing demands in their busy lives. Chris Coates's import business—she distributes Australian hardwood flooring in Novato, California—was just beginning to take off in 2001 when the events of 9/11 made her take stock of her lifestyle. "I had wanted to run my own business so I'd have more time for myself and my family. Instead, I had less." A firm believer in the mind-body connection, Coates, 48, decided that a week combining physical exertion with inner reflection at The Ashram would help her find the right balance between her personal and professional lives.

The program's short rations were not a problem for Coates. "Getting skinnier is good," she says. And she found that the 10- to 14-mile daily hikes provided a form of meditation. "There's nothing to fill your head but the sound of rustling leaves, chirping birds, and your own hard breathing as you climb into

beautiful scenery." At the end of each day, says Coates, "I reveled in knowing I had the physical and emotional strength to complete that day's task." Since her first visit in 2001, Coates has been back five more times, and she credits the stays with helping her manage her growing business while still carving out private time for herself as well as family time with her five nephews and nieces. "When problems come up, I handle them like I handle those hikes—one step at a time."

Last year Richard Wilson, 59, who lives near Atlanta, decided it was time to figure out why his life wasn't working and extricate himself from toxic patterns of behavior. Among other things, he was mired in debt and aware that his job as a food-service manager would be ending soon. He decided to visit [The Crossings](#), a retreat center and meeting place in the Texas highlands outside Austin. Set on a 200-acre campus, The Crossings features a hot tub, sauna, steam rooms, and à la carte spa services, as well as walking trails and a chapel-like building called The Sanctuary adorned with symbols of all the world religions.

At The Crossings, Wilson attended a three-day workshop on "The Shadow Process" held by bestselling author and integrative coach Debbie Ford. The Shadow Process is designed to help participants let go of corrosive emotions and make peace with their pasts, and Wilson spent his weekend participating in group exercises designed to build trust in himself and others. For example, says Wilson, "we told one another the worst things about ourselves and the best things, so we could get used to accepting the feelings that went with each type of disclosure."

The point, he says, was to recognize his own emotions fully enough to mentally steer them in a more positive direction. "How you feel is all about how you think," says Wilson, who reports the retreat helped him to acknowledge the self-defeating thoughts and habits that brought him to his present circumstances.

Wilson accepts that the task of transforming his life will occupy him for years to come. "I know exactly who's responsible for the mess I'm in and who has to clean it up, but it's been hard to summon the imagination to make the necessary changes," he says. "I'm hoping that I'll turn out to be a late bloomer."

In Search of Mindfulness Meditation-based retreats

An ancient Eastern practice to calm and focus the mind, meditation exerts a strong appeal to overstressed Western lives and is incorporated into nearly every retreat, religious or otherwise. There are, however, retreats devoted specifically to meditation, like those offered by the [Insight Meditation Society](#) (IMS) in rural Barre, Massachusetts, where for the last two years New Yorker John Corwin, 58, has spent a summer week. "Managing our easily distracted minds is far more difficult than it sounds," says Corwin, describing the meditation process and its difficulty. "At first I could barely meditate for five minutes. Now I can do as much as 30 minutes at a time."

So why do it? Calming and focusing the mind allows him to more fully experience the individual moments in his life, Corwin believes, "rather than thinking about a time when things were or will be different than they are now." As a result of his practice, he says, he's more satisfied with the present, less consumed with the future or past.

It doesn't hurt that the IMS is situated in a beautiful 160-acre wooded compound. Program participants stay in appropriately modest quarters, just two dormitories attached to a main building and meditation center. The bedrooms are small, and bathrooms are shared. The food is ovo-lacto vegetarian (eggs and dairy allowed) and simple. Breakfast and lunch are the main meals, with a small snack for dinner. Retreat participants help prepare all the food as a form of community work.

Retreats at IMS are conducted in near-total silence, with the only interruptions being 45 minutes of daily instruction in a range of meditation techniques or optional help sessions in which you can seek counseling about problems that arise during meditations. During the day everyone has a communal task, such as salad preparation for the large midday meal, which is also performed in silence.

Otherwise, the time at the IMS is filled with structured 45-minute meditations, both sitting and a walking variation in which participants walk in a straight line, focusing on the physical sensation of their footsteps. Whatever the meditation, the goal is always to train the mind to return to the focal point when it wanders.

Corwin credits the self-mastery gained during meditation with helping him to have the focus and confidence to start his own business and to lose the fear of not having a steady income. Formerly a high-pressure lawyer, he's now a self-employed consultant to nonprofit organizations. "Fear is mainly a physical sensation. It's not the same thing as danger. Sometimes it is just fear that stops you, not danger. Overcoming that feeling can help you trust yourself enough to move toward your goals," he says. "I'm happier now than I ever expected to be."

Lani Luciano has written for Barron's, Worth, Self, and many other publications. Additional reporting by Claire E. Fisher.

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