



COURTYARD: The grounds of the Glenstal Abbey in Ireland are lined with trees and flowers.
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A surprising path to inner peace

A Jewish woman finds pure joy while visiting an Irish abbey.

By Margie Goldsmith

from the December 26, 2008 edition

The 20 robe-clad monks of Glenstal Abbey, a Benedictine monastery in County Limerick, Ireland, stared at me from behind the altar. Everyone else had gotten up to take communion, and I was the only one still in the pew. I wanted to hold up a sign that read, "No offense, I'm Jewish."

I stared up at the modern stained-glass windows. The organ had bright blue and green pipes, the walls were magenta, and the ceiling was red and green – not at all what I had expected for the monastic life. The rest of the complex looked like a 12th-century castle.

I'd come here as a retreat from my stressful, overprogrammed Manhattan lifestyle, hoping for a few days of no e-mail, no phone, and no deadlines. My plan was to do nothing but wander the 500 acres of woodland paths and listen to the monks chant.

Since 1927, Benedictine monks have lived here, assembling five times a day for prayer and chanting. They claim that this 7,500-year-old area has kept its relationship with the divine and that this can be felt the moment you walk through the gates – something I would do many times because I was staying in a small bed-and-breakfast outside the back gate. And every time I entered the grounds, my thoughts slowed down.

The one-mile walk from the gate to the abbey was lined with blooming rhododendrons, towering trees, and a grazing donkey family. Whenever I walked by, the baby donkey seemed to smile, especially if I sang, which I usually did; and because I was in a religious setting, I always sang the Hallelujah chorus from Handel's "Messiah," wondering if the donkeys knew that hallelujah is a Hebrew word.

I hadn't planned on attending so many church services, but I was drawn to the beautiful chanting. I would have breakfast and then walk to the church, arriving just as the bells chimed. I'd choose a pew, then drift into my almost-not-a-thought-in-my-head mode. A few times I nodded off, not from exhaustion, but from my relaxed state. The only sounds were church bells, wind rustling through the trees, and birds.

It took a while to get used to being alone and doing nothing. Even though the abbey was only 12 miles from Limerick City, it felt like a million miles from civilization.

In the beginning, I wondered what I was going to do for three full days with no one to talk to except donkeys. It was raining hard the first day, so I took shelter in the gift shop, where I recognized Nóirín Ní Riain. This famous Irish singer makes recordings with the monks and has sung for the Dalai Lama and performed with Paul Winter and Sinéad O'Connor. She's also the only woman allowed to live at Glenstal Abbey, and teaches chanting workshops.

I introduced myself and I told her how disappointed I was that there was no chanting workshop this particular weekend. And then a miracle happened: She offered me a private lesson. Leading me to a room upstairs in the abbey, she smiled and said, "I have to sing every day, and the best venue for singing is in a church because everyone listens."

We listened to the rain pounding against the window.

"Every sound is sacred," she said. "When you chant, you listen to the sound of God, you sing your way to God."

She sang a phrase of the prayer Kyrie Eleison, (Lord, Have Mercy) and told me to sing it back to her. I felt a little shy, but I repeated it anyway. Next, she sang "Christie Eleison," and I sang back.

Then Nóirín harmonized. We sang together while walking three steps forward and one step back in a circular path around the room. The idea of walking combined with our two blended voices was so calming that, for the first time in my life, I understood what it meant to be at peace. It was something akin to pure joy. And just at that moment, the sun came out, cutting a swath of golden light on the floor.

Together, we walked outside to the biblical garden, where she pointed out Mary Magdalene roses and plants that she called devil's patch and St. Michael's protection. We sat on a stone bench, and I admitted that I wasn't Catholic. Then I asked if it would be OK to take communion. "At Glenstal Abbey, everyone is welcome," she said. And I suddenly realized that the monks hadn't been staring at me at all – they'd probably been totally oblivious. It was a pivotal moment.

I decided that from then on, I wouldn't worry about other peoples' opinions of me. I would accept exactly who I am. I could take communion or not and still be welcome, which is what I explained to the donkey family on the way back, as I sang them a rousing Hallelujah chorus.