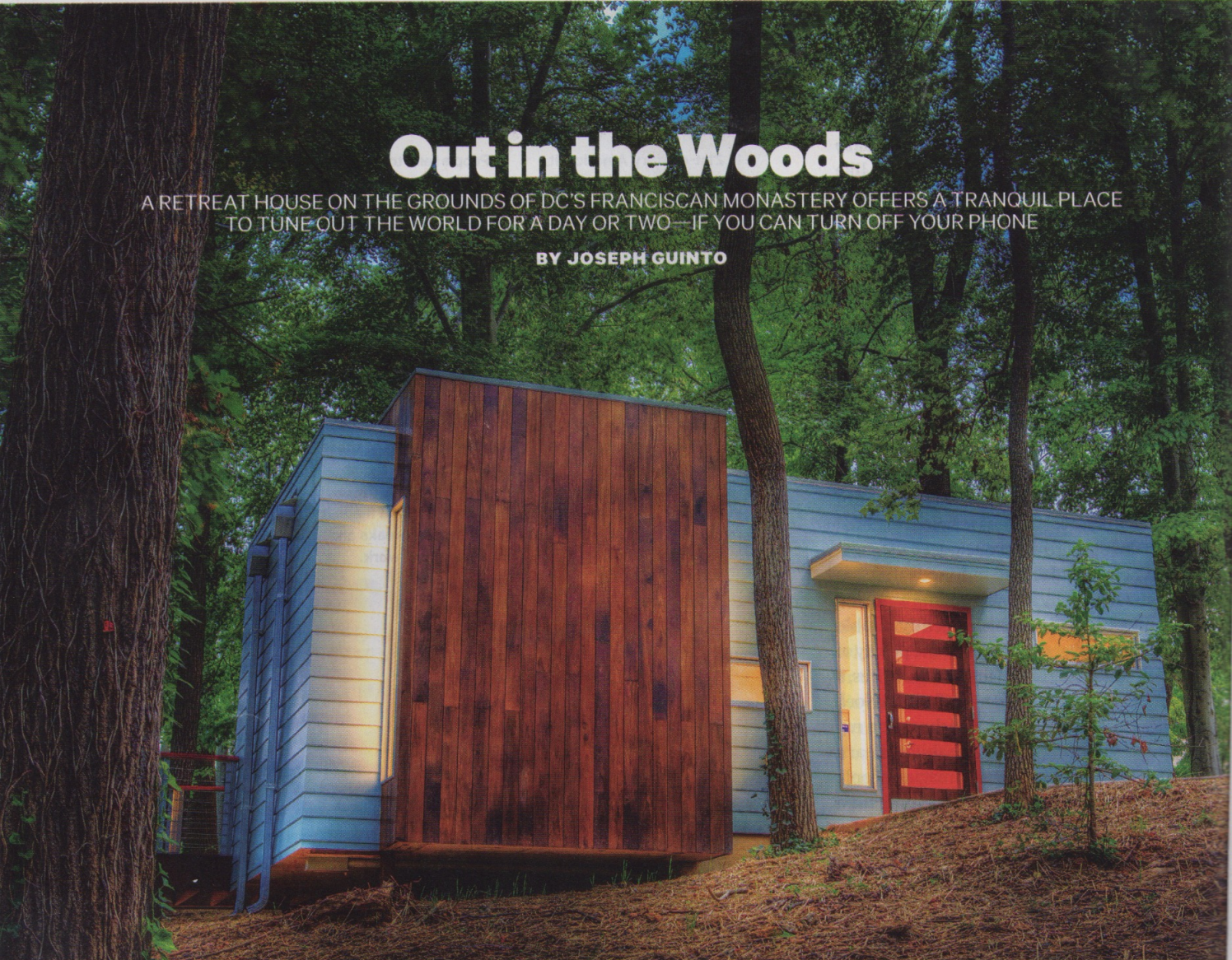


Out in the Woods

A RETREAT HOUSE ON THE GROUNDS OF DC'S FRANCISCAN MONASTERY OFFERS A TRANQUIL PLACE TO TUNE OUT THE WORLD FOR A DAY OR TWO—IF YOU CAN TURN OFF YOUR PHONE

BY JOSEPH GUINTO



The Hermitage at the Franciscan Monastery feels wonderfully secluded, as if it's in the middle of nowhere—yet it's right in DC.



One hour and five minutes into

my stay at a tiny, private retreat house on the grounds of the Franciscan Monastery of the Holy Land in America, in Northeast DC, a perverse thought occurs to me. This would be a great place to work.

The friars who had this contemporary, 350-square-foot building constructed on the densely wooded slope of a hillside two years ago would likely be aghast at that thought. The Hermitage, as they call it, is a place where solo visitors can spend a couple of nights in quiet contemplation and maybe even prayer. Because the

Catholic retreat house is open to visitors of any faith, the prayer is optional. The quiet contemplation, though, is inescapable. There's no TV. No radio. No wi-fi. Together with the wooded setting, that makes the Hermitage feel as if it's somewhere deep in the forest, even though it's in the middle of Brookland.

In a seemingly secluded place like this, I could really get stuff done. If I tire of that, well, because I'm not really out in the woods, my iPhone has a strong signal. Before I realize what I'm doing, I've pulled out my iPad and am typing up my next writing assignment.

This was not the plan. I came here hoping to disconnect from digital devices for at least one night. No Twitter. No Netflix. No instant messaging. No work. Just that contemplation and, sure, maybe some of that optional prayer, too. Before my arrival, Friar John-Sebastian, who oversees the Hermitage, told me that the idea of being here was “to be quiet and try to hear what God is saying inside you.”

The \$70-a-night retreat—which has drawn visitors from Alaska and South Africa—is a nod to the time the ascetic Saint Francis spent in caves, deep in prayer. Even so, Friar John-Sebastian also told

me, almost every priest who has stayed at the Hermitage has left abruptly after receiving an emergency phone call from his parish. "I tell them, 'You know that when you're here you're supposed to shut the phone off,'" he said.

Those words are now ringing in my head. So I switch off the ringer on my phone (though I leave the power on), put away the iPad, and go for a walk.

The monastery sits on 42 acres atop a hill. There's a massive stone church, constructed in 1899 in the style of Istanbul's famed Hagia Sophia. There's also a friary where 20 Franciscans live, a small cemetery, recreations of many shrines from the Holy Land (a Grotto of Gethsemane, a Bethlehem nativity), and acres of manicured gardens that burst with color in the spring.

My visit is in the fall, and it's raining my first night. So I cut the walk short and duck into the Alverna Chapel, a small red-brick building that dates to the 1920s and is open only to Hermitage guests. My plan in this spare space, which has an altar and just two chairs, is to say the rosary. Although I hardly ever go to church anymore, I did grow up Catholic and have long collected rosaries and other prayer beads when I travel. The one I've brought is from the National Shrine of Saint Francis of Assisi in San Francisco.

But I cut the praying short because it's getting dark and I want to take pictures of the Hermitage before nightfall. I take one great shot and decide to send it out on Instagram with the caption "Spending the night at an undisclosed location." Then I again remember the friar's admonishment

to shut off the phone.

Why haven't I yet? I just might be scared. Not only because I'm alone in the woods, steps away from a cemetery, but because who knows what I might hear with nothing to listen to but the rain and whatever God might be saying inside me? Suppose I end up hearing only the rain?

Either way, I recommit to the original plan and settle in for a quiet night. I put my rosary on top of my phone, in case I'm tempted by technology again.

I wake up around 2 AM wondering what Saint Francis would think of all this. He famously wore a tattered robe and prayed alone in a cave. I wore a \$100 pair of jeans to the heated Hermitage, which also contains a Splendide washer-dryer combo. To make some sense of that, I want to learn more about Francis—right here, right now, even if that means turning on the phone. The technology, I rationalize, will be serving me rather than me serving it. So I lift my self-imposed phone ban and start researching. I'm fascinated enough to keep on reading about Saint Francis until 6 AM, when church bells ring the call for morning Mass.

I don't attend. Instead, I again walk the grounds and visit the chapel, then sit on the Hermitage's back porch and look out into the trees. Hours pass like this. Meditative, technology-free hours in which I contemplate

Saint Francis's life and my own. I don't exactly hear God saying something. Yet I'm not worried about that anymore, because I also don't hear my phone chiming with e-mails, status updates, and calls. For a change, I find myself at peace with that kind of quiet.

WHERE TO GET THE SILENT TREATMENT

To book a retreat at the Hermitage at the Franciscan Monastery, call 202-526-6800 or e-mail hermitage@myfranciscan.com and include your requested dates. The suggested offering is \$70 a night; retreats typically last one to seven nights. This region has about a dozen retreat centers within a few hours' drive. Don't want to stay overnight? Most welcome visitors who want to come for the day and explore what they offer, such as a meditative garden or a wooded walking trail. Two other close-by options are **Dayspring Silent Retreat Center** in Germantown (11301 Neelsville Church Rd.; 301-916-1131), the place to go when you're serious about silence, and **St. Anselm's Abbey** in DC (4501 South Dakota Ave., NE; 202-809-5915), where guests stay in the monastery. For a fuller list of retreat centers, see washingtonian.com/silentretreats.

SOUNDS OF SILENCE

Want to escape the din of traffic, construction, and people? Decibel meter in hand, we went searching for solitude. Because noise levels vary—with a passing car or person—we've noted maximum readings. In decibels, a hushed library might measure 40, a chainsaw 120. For comparison, we've also included readings at a few not-so-tranquil spots.

PHILLIPS COLLECTION

Rothko Room

53.5

FREER GALLERY OF ART

Arts of the Islamic World galleries

56.1

BROOKSIDE GARDENS

Azalea garden on a sunny Sunday

56.3

C&O CANAL TOWPATH

Near lockhouse 6, off busy Canal Road

59

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

19th-century French galleries

59.9

ROOSEVELT ISLAND

In front of Theodore Roosevelt statue

60.7

REFLECTING POOL

On a bench along the water

64.4

GRAVELLY POINT PARK

Next to Reagan National Airport

61.8

No plane overhead

94.8

Plane coming in for landing

WASHINGTON CAPITALS GAME

During "Unleash the Fury," October 18

115

