



If you need a break, consider a 'holy day'

Matthew Cranston discovers there are many benefits to staying in a religious retreat, starting with the tariff.

How often do you hear people say they need a holiday straight after they've just had one?

The ambitious activities schedule, the over-indulging in luxuries, the exhaustion of socialising and fretting about where to eat and shop; the agony of how to frame the next Instagram shot.

The meaning of holidays – “holy days” – has been completely lost these days.

But there is a brilliant way to rediscover it – monasteries. Around the world these sacred places of worship are welcoming travellers. Set in such diverse landscapes as the French Alps and the canals of Venice; scattered from Portofino to Cinque Terre in Italy, and from America's midwest heartland to its deep south, there's quite literally a monastery for everyone.

Monasteries are not usually found in the lexicon of high-end travel itineraries. They are so ridiculously cheap that visitors frequently leave multiple extra offerings.

Finding them though is the first challenge. Books, remember them? Well, they are a great place to start the hunt for what often ends up being an extraordinary travel find.

I discovered the incredible Abbey Tamie – a Cistercian monastery in the Bauges mountain range of southern France – in a 2006 edition of *Lodging in France's Monasteries*, which I picked up at a garage sale.

I spent a week there hiking the mountains in perfect silence (scary for some), before returning to enjoy the hearty meals the monks had made. The Tamie cheese and absinthe are some of the best France has to offer.

My credit card was cancelled because the bank did not know I was travelling – so I couldn't withdraw cash in time to pay for my stay when the time came.

Instead, I offered to work for the monks and soon found myself cracking

1200 walnuts for the monastery's marzipan production. It was a pure joy, but I've avoided marzipan since.

In the north-west of France there is the Abbey Solesmes, established in 1010. The setting is like a giant Garden of Eden. Much of the produce grown or made here is consumed on the grounds, including a delicious salad comprising blue vein cheese, beetroot and caraway seeds.

Even if you aren't religious, attending the chanting of the monks (which takes place several times a day) is so harmonious that it can have the effect of instantly dispelling all the thoughts and worries you've tried to shed for years.

At €40 (\$60) a day for full lodging, it was worth every penny. Sometimes, when I am not feeling as studious in discovering these places, I will turn to MonasteryStays.com – probably the best website for figuring out exactly what you're going to get if you plan to stay at a monastery overlooking the Italian Riviera or next to Rome's Spanish Steps, for example. There's even a delightful “customer favourites” tab.

The site has been going for 18 years and is the trusted booking service for more than 500 authentic monastery and convent guest



Clockwise from top left: Delicious cheeses are ripened at the Cistercian monastery of Notre Dame de Tamie in southern France; Solesmes Abbey is as grand looking as any five-star hotel; Saint-Pierre de Solesmes dates back to 1010.

Left: If you're visiting Indiana, you could always stay at St Meinrad. PHOTOS: ALAMY

houses located throughout Italy, Austria and Slovenia. All options listed are owned by a religious order or the local diocese. In other words, they are the real deal.

The site's director, Mark Logan, says he started the online service to solve the problems he and others encountered in dealing with monastery and convent accommodation.

“All the questions like: Where are they located and what is the quality of accommodation? Is there availability when I want to travel? Can I pre-book? Will I have a private bathroom? Is it possible to travel to this monastery with a family?” Logan says.

His website has featured in the likes of *Vanity Fair*, *The Times*, *National Geographic* and *Lonely Planet*, to name a few publications that take alternative travel seriously.

“Visiting a monastery may begin as a simple stopover, but one cannot ignore the presence of peace in these places and the associated ‘wellness,’” Logan says, adding that it's the type of experience you can't buy in any of Europe's most expensive resorts, spas or wellness centres.

“Interest is increasing year-on-year – with the obvious challenges of the last two years – and we book many thousands of happy guests every year,” he says.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, dozens of monasteries have stayed (and remain) open in the United States. In the midwest, Saint Meinrad Archabbey, near Santa Claus, Indiana, took me in for several days after Christmas.

Aesthetically, to me, it was not as special as being in the French Alps or staying on a Venetian canal.

But it was well worth the visit. Saint Meinrad was the home of America's first African American monk, Cyprian Davis, OSB (Order of Saint Benedict).

Davis heard Martin Luther King jnr deliver his “I Have a Dream” speech about having seen the promised land.

I departed the monastery feeling energised and inspired.

So maybe it's time to second guess the usual holidays you're planning, and venture out for a few holy days in a promised land you haven't seen. **L&L**

from his studies. “Surselva,” I ask about the dairy's name.

“Something to do with a forest?”

“Above the forest,” Soliva replies.

“Sutselva – below the forest.”

Soliva muses that he will most likely become part of the Romansh brain drain

Humankind should care about all its languages. Every language is a way to see the world.

Professor Rico Valär

who leave for better opportunities elsewhere. He skips down the steps towards the train that will take him a few stops down the line towards the Oberalp pass and his home at Sedrun: the source of the Rhine.

(I learn subsequently that he has enrolled at the University of Zurich to study German literature – and Romansh.)

That night I head to a local restaurant for the regional delicacy of capuns, a sausage wrapped in Swiss chard (silver beet) served with a broth sauce and plenty of Alpine cheese. The dish seems to whisper the words “crisp white wine”, and I oblige.

I leave the curtains drawn and wake to a vivid blush cut out from the dawn sky by the black spurs of the mountains. An equally mountainous breakfast of pastries, coffee and juice, cold cuts and cheese is waiting for me in the abbey's dining room.

Fortified by my heroic breakfast and intrigued by the story of Romansh, I return to Zurich and track down Rico Valär, a professor of Romansh Literature and Culture.

At Disentis abbey, Father Ioannes had described Romansh as the closest of all Romance languages to the Latin taproot.

Valär regards this as a myth, but one with a thread of reality. Some words of Latin origin are found only in Romansh, he

explains. “The word for white, for example, is *albus* in Latin,” he says. “But most Romance languages look to an old German word *blankaz*, from which they get *branco*, *bianco*, *blanco* and *blanc*.”

“Romansch, on the other hand, has retained ‘alb’.” “So, for example, the white cross that is the symbol of Switzerland – for us, it's *la crusch alba*.”

Valär has a ready answer to the “Why Romansh?” question. All languages, he argues, are part of a shared patrimony. And much like rare animal species surviving in remote habitats, languages such as Romansh demand conservation and preservation for their own sake. They have survived, miraculously, the turmoil of the ages. They have lived to tell their tale, in their own way.

“Humankind should care about all its languages,” he says. “It's not important if they are small or they are big, but every language is a way to see the world, to describe the world. Every language has its richness.”

“In the north of Europe there are 15 words for snow because snow is very important.

With Romansh, which has been a language of poor people, many of them forced into economic exile, we have the word *increschantum*, which gets at a particular kind of nostalgia. You find it in many Romansh folk songs, with their theme of lamentation.

“It means something is growing inside of you, something is becoming heavy inside of you. It exerts a kind of pressure. The feeling of *increschantum* can be a longing for someone, or some place, or for God.

“Or it can be a longing, from your isolated home in the Alps, in the middle of winter, to be somewhere else.”

I suspect that my Romansh tutor Not Soliva already suffers from a form of *increschantum* – that the urge to leave his mountain home had been growing for some time, and that it will accompany him for the rest of his life in its alternate form: as a longing to return. **L&L**

Luke Slattery visited Disentis with assistance from Swiss Tourism.



Need to know

Disentis Abbey has about 40 rooms, each priced at around \$200 per night.

From the abbey a hiking path leads to several mountain chapels and churches in the municipality of Sumvitg. Also within hiking range is Caplutta Sogn Benedetg, the modernist chapel designed by Swiss architect Peter Zumthor.