

children, got amended to some stolen days in the desert of New Mexico. The wish had always been simple: To remove my physical self from the physical world and live in complete silence among monks. Partially, it was because, with each passing year, my life just seemed to get louder and louder. And partially it was because, in the rush of those years, I'd lost track of some inner holiness. Could it be found without phone, Internet, family, gym, dinner parties, strip malls, books, or Noise of any kind? The idea was not just to live among monks but to try to *become* one. Which also meant taking a stab at "praying" (last accomplished as a 12-year-old altar boy) and trying to "find God" (separated in the crowd in a drunken haze at a Police concert circa 1981).

It would be like immersing oneself in a flotation chamber, surrounded only by oneself and one's thoughts and the unbelievably monotonous coping mechanisms of one's

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distractive mind. Could one break through the carnival of that mistrustful mind to the bright, pure thing lying on the other side? Could one ever hope to hear that other voice, find that other person, one's essential self, emerging from the underbrush of modern life?

After 2,000 miles by plane and 200 more by car, here I was to try. This place, the Monastery of Christ in the Desert, was the perfect lost outpost of adobe buildings, peopled by thirty monks (Brother Andre, Brother Christian, Brother José, etc.), ten nuns, and whatever guests happened to be in residence at the moment. The monastery was dwarfed by high cliffs to the east and hemmed by the Chama River to the west, beyond which came more towering canyon walls. Driving in, you might have missed it altogether were it not for the chapel itself, rising from a knoll on the canyon floor, still tiny in that natural cathedral but recognizable by a bell tower and a stunning glass clerestory rising from the center of the church. To its right was a low-slung building, the refectory, with a common area, gift shop, office, and some meeting rooms.

So I'd come all this way, and I was standing in the middle of a...*par-tay!* Brothers were telling stories; sisters were giggling. As parties went, it was tame, almost seventh grade minus spin the bottle. A nice man, one of the younger brothers, came to me and, in that long-practiced act of Benedictine greeting, offered to find me a plate of food. He returned with curried chicken and stir-fried vegetables. The food was delicious (thanks to the brothers and sisters here from Vietnam

and the Philippines) and was completed by a bowl of half-melted vanilla ice cream. Where I expected the kind of rising action a party brings, there was no loud music, no drinking of wine/beer/shots, no boot-scootin' or flirting, no extreme acts of flamboyance, attention-seeking, or suburban self-humiliation. These were holy people who, for most of their days, rarely spoke without purpose—if at all—who were now getting a rare opportunity to speak without purpose. Despite having expertly rolled her superjoint, Mother Superior had no intention of smoking it. In fact, she'd been put up to it by a visitor here like myself, a much younger searcher, a bearded hombre with feet shod in Naots, walking the hippie path with his rolling papers and canister of tobacco (not cannabis at all, but a brand called Bali Shag).

Still, when she was done—her spliff a little lopsided but impressive—Mother Superior wore a mischievous smile. She turned to me, the neophyte, and said, "Your turn now."

II.

FINE. THERE WERE going to be temptations. Like my fellow guests. There were three or four of them, all here on retreats of their own ranging from two days to one month, though none had taken a vow of silence. So they spoke amongst themselves, and immediately they became the most intriguing creatures on earth to me: I wanted to know every last molecule about them. The human animal craved connection, starting with the simple questions—where you from? or: This is damn good vanilla ice cream, isn't it?—and slowly working up to strained marriages, lost jobs, crises of faith. At the very least, it was unnatural to stifle your friendly gene, to invite disconnection, but here I was, trying to think and act like a mute person. To *be* Helen Keller.

There was also the computer. Some years ago, the monastery had made national headlines for being the first of its kind to set up a Web page. Powered by generators, the monastery had a satellite phone line, one that could also receive Internet. And as a courtesy for the guests, a computer sat in the breakfast room, located just beyond the common area. Given my weakness for ten-day weather forecasts and the daily Googling of vacation destinations like Zanzibar, I considered the computer enemy number one.

And then there was myself. Would I bend the rules? Would I allow myself to sing, say, the snatch of song under my breath? Mutter quietly? How silent did silence have to be, anyway?

After dinner, I was directed to my room, which was located in an old ranch house about an eighth of a mile back, near where I'd parked. I walked under clouds, the night so dark without a flashlight—and haunted by a whistling canyon wind—that I was startled by a rut in the rising road that appeared as a man with an ax. Inside, my room was a cramped but cozy space with a window (a

The Quickest Way Off the Grid

HOW TO BE LONG, LONG GONE IN A MATTER OF HOURS



White Sands National Monument

NEW MEXICO

• The sun was low and unobstructed when I pulled into the parking lot. I cut the engine, walked to the end of the pavement, went up one side of a dune and down another, then slipped through a wormhole. Except for a lizard skittering past, the scene was unearthly. Gypsum swirled around my ankles and ghosted off into the distance, where dunes crested and rolled like Colgate-bright breakers. One look around and I was totally gone. There was the world of maps that I used to

belong to (an airport two hours south in El Paso, a Wal-Mart thirty minutes up the road in Alamogordo), and there was this—a vast and rippling field, 275 square miles of powdered rock. Mountains lined up along the horizon like molars, and as the sun sank behind them, the sand started to settle. Everything went still. The desert went from sugar-toned to the hue of dirty snow, and then the sun disappeared completely and the sky blew up, it exploded, and the sand turned a lustrous lunar blue. I walked around, half expecting to float away. To keep grounded, I removed my shoes and dug my feet into the sand. The terrain made subtle shifts in shape and color. I stood on the surface of this moon and watched another one rise.—HOWIE KAHN

For details on camping in White Sands, go to www.nps.gov/whsa.



Boundary Waters

MINNESOTA

• Our soundtrack was the water rushing under our canoe and the creak of our seats as we leaned forward, then pulled back, paddling against the current. This was not my usual Thursday-morning routine. I was more accustomed to a cup of coffee, some cinnamon toast with the kids, and a comfy air-conditioned ride

into the city. It's not like I'd never been outside before—I'm not one of *those* guys—but still: The last time I'd slept in a tent, I was in high school. And I was so stoned, I don't remember it. Now that I was here, though, I was giving it all I had, trying to keep the canoe pointed north.

I'd gotten up at 5:30 that morning to leave for the trip and was jamming some things into a backpack on my way out the door.

"So this place is *where*, exactly?" my wife had asked. She was still in bed.

Northern Minnesota. Way up by the Canadian border.

"You gonna have your phone with you?" Yup, I'll call once >>>

>>> we're out on the water.

Six hours later—a flight to Minneapolis, a quick flight to Duluth, and a two-hour drive to Ely, a fleece-drenched outpost that could very possibly be home to several fursmelling Titans of the Trapper Trade—I was sitting in a three-man canoe with friends, skimming across island-dotted lakes of blue-black water, scanning a horizon of pine trees for bald eagles and frolicking black bears. Cell phone? Please. You'd have better luck from the bottom of a well in the Gobi desert.

In this very moment, as we paddled through a light drizzle, looking north to infinite sky-forest-water, with not another human in sight, two things occurred to me: (1) this landscape probably looks pretty much the way it looked 10,000 years ago and (2) if I were to slip and break my collarbone out

here, I'd be fucked.

Over the next two days, it only got more beautiful, more remote, more wild. We'd paddle all day, stopping only to eat like jackals and swim in water so clean and pure you could drink it, straight up. At night, we'd sit out on big flat rocks by the water's edge, drinking box wine and waiting for dusk to give way to darkness. At which point, we'd lie back and stare up at a sky so big and clear, so full of stars and blinking satellites racing from horizon to horizon in perfect arcs, it made me wonder if I'd ever really *seen* a night sky before. It made me want to drink more cheap wine. It made me feel small. It made me think: If I close my eyes out here, I might disappear.—ANDY WARD

To arrange a trip, replete with canoe and food and all necessary gear, contact Voyageur North Outfitters at 800-848-5530 or info@vnorth.com.



El Yunque National Forest

PUERTO RICO

It's almost like cheating. You step off the plane in San Juan and snag the keys to a rental car, and then three hours later you're pounding a longneck Cerveza Medalla on the deck of a shambling cabin in El Yunque, peering off the ledge of a cliff into the deepest, darkest Caribbean jungle you could ever hope to penetrate. You've got waterfalls pounding around you, giant birds screaming through the air, and ferns the size of sleeping bags—but none of the other aggravations associated with Caribbean travel.

You won't need your passport here, you don't have to go

through grueling lines at customs—in fact, there's no customs at all—and if you live on the eastern seaboard, you can probably book a direct flight for under \$300 round-trip.

Which gives you more time to do what you're supposed to be doing on vacation: nothing at all. Lounging in a hammock. Peeling the skin off a mango. Teaching offensive phrases to wild parrots. You can hike the mountains or swim the rivers, or you can drive down to the local cantina and practice salsa moves for seventy-two straight hours. You can even call your friends and tell them about it—chances are, your cell phone will work. And when it's finally time to return home, it's just as easy as getting there. Except that you won't want to leave. But that's okay. You can zip back down next weekend.

—WIL S. HYLTON

For information on travel and lodging in El Yunque, go to www.elyunque.com.

piece of fabric on a string served as a curtain), a bed, a wooden desk, a chair, and some towels. In addition, the monks had given me an electric Coleman lamp and a ticking windup clock so that I might rise early for Vigils.

There was a small tablet of wood strung with a rawhide lace laid on my pillow. "Gentle Guest," read a note on the necklace, "If you wish to observe a stricter silence during part or all of your time here, wear this medallion. The other guests and monks will respect your desire for silence." I took it in my hands, felt its feathery weight, and draped it over my head.

III.

SILENCE HAS ITS degrees and counterposes. Somewhere there's a cell phone jingling, a soundtrack playing, a siren wailing, a jackhammer progressing, a television blaring. Always. Surfing the Web, even if done in utter silence, doesn't necessarily represent a moment of self-reflection. To the contrary, it tends to feed an internal noise, that overload of information—the excitement of our acquisitive, erotic selves over the contemplative—that has become our common condition.

I often count my daily shower as a sacred time of silence, though that's a hedge: Our three children come and go from the bathroom as if it were a waiting room, asking urgent questions about knights and princesses, but at least, for a moment, there's a curtain between us. One evening at dinner, I undertook the sociological experiment of recording fifteen seconds of family conversation, fifteen seconds to illustrate the usual fifteen waking hours of solid sound.

MAY (AGE 3): Mommy, I don't like badgers!

NICHOLAS (AGE 1): Bop, bop, bop, bop...

LEO (AGE 6): Daddy, why is the losing team in the World Series always so sad?

NICHOLAS: Wa, wa, wa, wa, wa, wa...

MAY: I *hate* this salmon!

MOM: May, don't throw that....

MAY: Look out!

LEO: If I lose the World Series someday, I'm going to celebrate with the winning team.

NICHOLAS: [*standing on his high chair*] Ahhhhhhhh!

ME: Can you sit, please?

MAY: This carrot is yuck and tastes like poop!

MOM: Please don't throw that.

LEO: Daddy, did you know my batting gloves are champagne-proof?

MAY: [*throwing carrot*] Blech! I hate this poop!

NICHOLAS: [*pouring yogurt on his lap*] Poo, poo, poo, poo....

ME: It's not poop, May.

MAY: Then why does it taste like poop, poop-head?

Not exactly the reflections of Thomas Merton. But also not that far from being a microcosm of the world at large, engulfed by this Noise, voices speaking louder and louder, competing and cajoling. And its first

operating principle: The higher the volume, the more attention paid.

Even left alone in a faraway hotel room, the human animal will choose the noisemakers over silence: immediately turn on the TV, check e-mail, study the room-service menu, go to the minibar, make some phone calls, thumb a magazine, suit up for a workout in the hotel gym, which itself is equipped with more TVs and distractions. On a walk, the human animal will listen to the human animal's iPod or increasingly be found speaking on the human animal's mobile, even on mountain peaks, standing before mystical vistas, talking, talking, talking...

An alien lit down here on interplanetary vacation might be left with one question: What are they all so afraid of?

Indeed. Take that guy in the loge seats at Yankee Stadium, remove the music and the fans, the ballplayers and the hot-dog man, remove every commotion and sideshow, the beer from his hand, until he's sitting alone in a vast, silent, empty stadium. Let the city sounds die outside and the winds of time work over the landscape until that stadium becomes an isolated canyon. That man came expecting a ball game and now he's lost and alone. After the first day, where does his mind lead him—and then the second and third? What does he begin to think? What *should* he think? He has no idea.

He only knows this: The silence is absolutely terrifying.

IV.

WAIT. DID HE SAY *terrifying*? How about endless? Day one of my silence, endless. Put it this way: Never has a single day held so many hours, so many empty, stultifying hours. In the history of man. So many hours. Thousands of them, in one day. How did thousands of hours fit into one day? It was not a miracle of God. Just try shutting your yap, put yourself out in the desert minus the BlackBerry, and the math works out perfectly.

V.

I WOKE AT 3:30 A.M. for Vigils—what the Benedictines call the first "office" of the day, or the first of seven daily gatherings in the chapel for Gregorian chants. I didn't allow myself a groan to indicate the need for four or five more hours of sleep. I didn't allow myself any whimpers or whispered expletives about how even the stupid damn birds weren't stupidly up at the stupid damn hour of 3:30 A.M. In his book of rules for monks, Saint Benedict himself issued this admonition to the novitiate: Do not grumble.

So I did not grumble.

Instead, I tripped outside into the freezing a.m. and fuzzily made my way to the bathroom, peed, brushed my teeth, splashed cold water on my face, and then walked up to the chapel through a fascination of snowflakes that sparked in the glow of my headlamp. It was the end of March, and this, I realized with sudden crystalline exhilaration,