

Escape Room

Find space for meditation with a silent retreat at one of these welcoming Southern monasteries

BY KATHRYN DAVÉ

■ Spending a day or two in full silence may sound impossible—impossibly appealing or perhaps impossibly difficult. But a growing number of monasteries offering silent retreats to outside visitors are making it a little easier to experience the power of silent reflection. Dotted across the Southeast, monasteries and spiritual centers quietly open their doors to seekers of all kinds. Each retreat varies in setting and style, but all offer a threshold to spiritual insight.



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MEPKIN ABBEY CHARLESTON, SC

The loss of cell signal within the space of Mepkin Abbey turns out to be a gift—one that mirrors and deepens the commitment to silence that marks a personal retreat at this serene Trappist monastery. Located on the banks of the Cooper River just outside of Charleston, the abbey houses a retreat center where individual rooms feature clean architecture, spare furnishings, and a wall of windows where natural light slants in. Guests of all faiths or no faith are invited to practice silence, share in the prayer rhythms of the monks if desired, wander the woodland grounds, and “come home to their truest self.”

\$300 suggested donation for 3-day individual retreats, register online; mepkinabbey.org

IGNATIUS HOUSE SANDY SPRINGS, GA

Peace settles on you like a blanket from the moment you arrive at Ignatius House, located on the lush Chattahoochee River just outside of Atlanta. Inspired by the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius, retreats include wholesome meals, a private room, sacred silence, optional discussions, and contemplative time to explore the forest and grounds. People often choose to embark on a silent retreat at a personal crossroads or when making a weighty decision, but the space created for thoughtful reflection is valuable any time. **Rates vary, register online; ignatiushouse.org**

MAGNOLIA GROVE MONASTERY BATESVILLE, MS

If stillness rather than total silence is what you're seeking, a short retreat to this inclusive Buddhist monastery in the quiet landscape of northern Mississippi may be the right path for you. Established in the tradition of Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh, the monastery welcomes all to join the rhythm of monastic life and practice deep mindfulness and connection. Guests typically stay in a simple, shared dormitory and enjoy meditation, community meals, Dharma talks, working meditation, and time in nature. **Rates vary, register online; magnoliagrovemonastery.com**

MONASTERY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT CONYERS, GA

Just 30 minutes outside of Atlanta, this Catholic monastery also serves as the gateway to the Arabia Mountain National Heritage Area—a vast, protected green space crisscrossed by hiking and biking trails. The monks here follow the rule of Benedict and offer a variety of retreats, some themed (and available online), as well as private retreats for individuals to experience the peace of monastic life. The monks sustain their livelihood through their bakery, so don't miss their renowned fudge, fruitcake, or biscotti. **Suggested donation \$90–\$110 per night. Call (770) 760-0959 to register; trappist.net**

SOUTHERN DHARMA RETREAT CENTER HOT SPRINGS, NC

Meditation is the emphasis at this peaceful Buddhist retreat center nestled in the mountains of Western North Carolina. Noble Silence is practiced for the majority of all retreats, but retreat themes and leaders vary. A typical experience includes sitting, walking, and working meditation; mindful movement such as yoga; evening talks; and ample time for contemplation. Guests can choose from accommodations that range from a shared dormitory to a personal tent pitched outside. As each



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A silent retreat invites you to turn down the volume of daily life and discover mindfulness.

retreat begins, guests relinquish their devices and surrender to silence, creating space to tune in and tend to their inner landscape. Rates vary. View schedule and book retreats online; southerndharma.org

SPRINGBANK RETREAT FOR ECO-SPIRITUALITY AND THE ARTS KINGSTREE, SC

Silence is not the only tool of transformation at the Springbank Retreat. Guided by the Franciscan and Dominican traditions, the center has been cultivated as a sanctuary for those seeking to “rest the body, renew the spirit, and refresh the mind.” (In fact, author Sue Monk Kidd wrote one of her books during such a stay here.) Expect to experience a quietly vibrant escape that incorporates the arts as soul work, as well as Native American practices that honor the earth. Anchored by an immense grandmother live oak tree, the center offers guided sabbaticals and short private retreats on 80 acres of forest, gardens, and sacred sites.

Rates vary. Contact Sister Anita Braganza at (843) 373-6311 to reserve; springbankretreat.org