

## SANCTUARY

Abbaye Notre Dame de Lérins  
Isle St. Honorat, France



**The Island** is stunning! It glistens in the Mediterranean, off the coast of Cannes and the Côte d'Azur in southern France. Vineyards sprawl through the interior, and seven chapels, numerous historical homes, fortresses, forests, turquoise water, and magnificent views hug the coastline. It's a natural preserve, with pheasants and sea birds, eucalyptus and pine, palms, wild blackberries, and the ever-present tower of the abbey.

Just a twenty-minute ferry from the mainland, it's only about four kilometers around its 40 hectares, with a couple of crossroads - an easy walk for day trippers, who come to get their tranquil on, stop at the church for midday mass, pick up a book or a bottle (or other monk-made products) at the gift shop, and enjoy a gourmet lunch at La Tonnelle Restaurant. Perhaps a swim, before returning to busy lives. The last ferry departs at six pm, leaving behind twenty monks, forty retreatants, nine student volunteers. And silence.

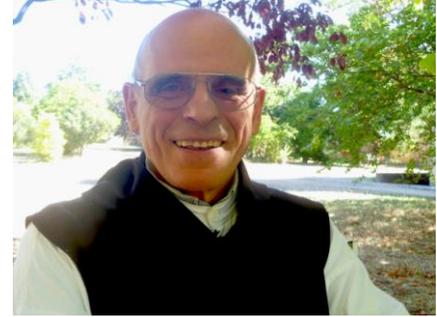
This Lérins isle lies south of St. Marguerite - larger and famous for one of its prisoners, 'the man with the iron mask'. The fort now houses a museum of modern art, and both islands are under the city of Cannes. I am staying for a week (E300, including meals) to photograph the natural beauty of the island and interview residents. And to get my tranquil on.



**The Monastery** is a spiritual resource. Room 12 is spare, tidy, monasterial, with a small bed, desk and chair, sink and shelves. A French Bible. An arched window looks over the courtyard, through the lemon trees to a vast sky, dotted with puffs and billows. There are gardens, a private prayer room, library. Toilets and showers are at the end of the hallway, open by arches, looking down to a garden and a private pathway to the church, open day and night for retreatants, nine to six for visitors. It's quiet except for the cicadas and the sea, which carry on a conversation, competing for my attention until chimes sound with the horn of the last ferry to the mainland.

Vespers is at 6:00. One by one monks, dressed in white robes with belted and hooded black tunics, enter, taking their seats in the chancel in the front. One greets us in the nave, eyes sparkling. A tenor begins to chant, his sound traveling up the piers to the vault's apex, filling the space...and me. The other monks and retreatants respond in antiphony. After ten minutes of this, six monks circle in the center and pray in four-part harmony. We respond. It is mesmerizing. I tone. Frère Etienne reads (his voice echoing) for about two or three minutes. Between the echo and the French, I have no idea what he is saying/praying, but his voice is melodious and kind.

I love that they chant their prayers. The toning heals me, brings me back to some original innocence. More chants and alternating responses are led by different monks in different parts of the church, the sound dancing through the space, mixing with centuries of song embedded in the stone, then embracing the congregation. Standing and sitting, bowing, listening. A prayer is read as twenty monks file out. Silence fills the space behind them.



**A Paradise of prayer and brotherhood**, isle St. Honorat is home for 16 centuries of war and peace to the monks of Lérins Abbey. It is first occupied by Caprais Honorat and some companions between 400 and 410 AD. They form a community of monks, which grows rapidly in this (then) Roman province. A troubadour sings, and we know the stories of Honorat, who becomes the Bishop of Arles later in his life. In the 5th century priests can marry, and the wives are kept on St. Marguerite. Benedictine vows are taken in the 7th century. Over the years Italians and Spanish occupy the island, and in 734 all the monks are massacred. The island is later sacked by Genovese pirates. Monks are captured and enslaved in Spain. French royalty occupy for awhile in the 1700s, and the Abbey is closed during the revolution. Near the end of the 18th century it is nationalized (and protected) under the French.

Today twenty monks live and work here, ranging in age from 28 to 82, most between 50 and 60. A high of forty occupied the island in the 1980s, following a recruitment and revival by the young sisters who came during WWII (when the orphanage was closed) and lived here until 1991.

Respecting the rule of St. Benedict based on prayer and work, the monks rise early for 4:30 vigil, then work and pray throughout the day, overseeing (with twenty paid employees) all the businesses of the island:

- Winemaking (also a distillery for Lérina and five other liqueurs)
- La Tonnelle Restaurant and retail shops (physical and online)
- Boat company - with a barge and two ferries, bringing 90,000 guests and goods to the island
- Guesthouse (runs at virtually 100% occupancy Easter to November) - 3,000 per annum
- Teen and volunteer programs, conventions, exhibits, special events

...all with no days off and only one week to ten days of vacation a year, usually taken mid November to mid December, when the island is closed to guests and visitors.



**Vendange.** It's harvest time, and retreatants and other volunteers work side by side with the monks, picking grapes. Known for their wine-making, the monks have won numerous awards with their Pinot Noir, Syrah, Mourvedre, Chardonnay, Clairette, and Viogner grapes - which excel on coveted terroir. Chardonnay and the reds are aged in oak. An exceptional extra virgin olive oil is pressed from the olives, whose groves mix with the vineyards.

I meet with winemaker, Frère Marie, for a tour of the winery. He reminds me that since the middle ages, wines were grown on only one and a half hectares and for local (monk) consumption only. In 1991 present day monks celebrated their first commercial bottling, and today they grow (without herbicides) on 8.5 hectares, producing 40,000 bottles of premium wines, 60% reds. Frère Marie, a graduate of the viticulture school at Hyères has been in charge of winemaking for ten years. Alongside layman Daniel, the main chemist/technologist, they do it all with only four employees and the other Cistercian monks.

Marie explains that three things create the conditions for great wine-making here: climate (no winter), terroir (protection and isolation), and water (from one of two pure aquifers under the island). I personally think they add a bit of prayer. When I first came to the island back in May, I tasted the St. Honorat 2010. It was the best red I'd had since arriving in France - cherries, earth, silence. I finished with St. Sauveur 2010. Hallelujah, there IS a God!



**It's an oasis of silence**, where participants drop personal histories for introspection, inspiration, breathing...breathing. Where just to be is holy. "*When I find myself in times of trouble...*", and aren't we all in troubled times? War, suffering, crises the world over. Here without the barrage of bad news 24/7, with no telephones (except a payphone on the path by the vineyard - *hello, God*), no internet (ok, for emergencies), no schedules other than those of the laudes, vespers, mass, and meals, we find a safe haven, a refuge. Pheasants know they will not be hunted. Retreatants know they will not be judged. No one is overworked. There is an ease of days, broken only by (voluntary) work or attendance at services and meals.

We break bread communally three times a day, six persons to a table, the meals taken in silence, starting and ending in prayer. Breakfast is self-serve: café, tea, or chocolate, toast and jam. Occasionally grapes are left on the tables from a picking. The main meal is midday - a salad of mixed greens or a caprèse, crunchy baguettes, fish or chicken (finished with a shallot and white wine sauce), dessert, coffee. Cheese and wine of course. It's a meal to look forward to. The evening meal is salad, croque or maybe a wild mushroom quiche, yogurt or fruit salad.

Silence stretches into the night, with the last service ending at nine. I amble back to my room as stars load the sky. A jet, bound for Nice, flies through the big dipper. *Lucy in the sky...* I sleep in peace.

Pre-dawn I hike to the fort, and the sunrise takes my breath away! I circumnavigate the isle for two hushed hours, the silence broken only by sounds of the sea, the trees, birds. After watching three teenage boys camping by the port, I complete my circle tour and sit in silence at the church. And wait eagerly for lunch. And I fall in love with yet another island.

*little island  
oasis of brotherhood  
and silence,  
rest my body,  
quiet my heart,  
lead me to awareness  
and the stillness  
from which everything arises*  
kj 25 Aout, 2014

