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The best retreats

As well as providing a space for quiet contemplation, convents and monasteries can be a great source of cheap and characterful accommodation. So if you have overindulged and overspent this festive season, get thee to a nunnery

Compiled by **Sarah Turner**
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Convento di San Francesco, Cetona, Italy

• Singles with showers from €37; doubles from €70; family rooms from €120. 00 39 055 213856; fmmfirenze.it

11. Convento di San Francesco, Cetona

The most glamorous, most worldly monastery in [Europe](#). These days, it gives former addicts a leg up in a career in the hospitality business, overseen by priests from the small Mondo X community. The vaulted restaurant was once a prison that held rebellious priests, and the food is excellent. Expect to feast on several courses, mostly with produce grown in the convent's gardens, accompanied by local wine.

• Doubles from €240, including breakfast. 00 39 0578 238261; lafrateria.it

12. Villa Palazzola, near Rome

Bought by the Venerable English College in the 1920s so that its students - trainee Catholic priests - could escape the Roman summer heat, the Villa Palazzola overlooks Lake Albano, 29km south of Rome. Retreats run throughout the year, but individuals can also stay here. Prices are very reasonable and the facilities, including a swimming pool, are superb. The villa is surrounded by 65,000sqm of protected forests with walking trails. The church at the centre of this former Cistercian monastery dates back to the 13th century. Castel Gandolfo, the Pope's summer residence, is across the water.

• Full-board accommodation in the new wing from €65. 00 39 06 947 49178; palazzola.it

13. Mount Athos, Greece

Deeply posh and for men only, this is almost a rite of passage for an English aristocrat

in the throes of a midlife crisis (Prince Charles is a regular visitor). A spiritual centre since 1054, Mount Athos's 20 working monasteries even ban female animals (although hens get a dispensation). A stay here - which can last up to four days - is largely conducted in silence, with just two meals a day, albeit washed down with monastery-produced wine.

- Mount Athos Pilgrims Bureau 00 30 2310 252578; ouranoupoli.com. Contact at least six months before travel

14. Cavtat Monastery, near Dubrovnik, Croatia

In this 14th-century, former Franciscan monastery there are eight rooms and one suite. The rooms are authentically simple, but the setting is superb - right on the waterfront in one of Croatia's most attractive villages, with Dubrovnik a short water taxi away and a shingled beach outside the front door. Breakfast is taken in a nearby hotel and all guests are welcome to attend the monks' services.

- Bond Tours (01372 745300; bondtours.com) offers a week at the monastery from £468, including flights and transfers

15. Hotel Jeneralka, Prague

Run by the Baptist church, this 18th-century mansion is both a hotel and an international Baptist theological centre. There are 60 rooms, including some apartments with kitchens, suitable for families. Surrounded by parkland, in a beautiful village-like setting, it's only 20 minutes from the centre of Prague, and 10km from the airport.

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- Twin rooms from 1,690 CZK (£59) per night. 00 420 296 392111; hotel-jeneralka.cz

Usefull websites

monasterystays.com; retreats.org.uk; retreat-holidays.co.uk.

Further reading

Bed and Blessings Italy: A Guide to Convents and Monasteries Available for Overnight Lodging by June and Anne Walsh; The Guide to Lodging in Italy's Monasteries and The Guide to Lodging in Spain's Monasteries by Eileen Barish.

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www.AssisiRetreats.org

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