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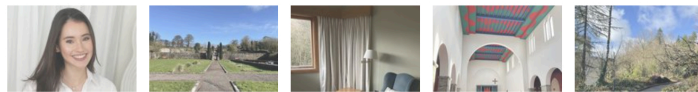
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What happened when I swapped my hectic London life for a Benedictine monastery in Limerick...

Anxiety-addled and teetering on the brink of a 'quarter-life crisis', this always-on high-flier ditched TikTok and phone overload for some peace and quiet with the monks of Glenstal Abbey. But did any of their habits stick?



London-based Veena McCoolle's remote job working with New York meant she felt in a constant fight-or-flight state



Veena McCoolle

Today at 02:30



In February, I was reaching the end of my tether. My anxiety was a growing knot in my chest, making itself known through late-night heart palpitations and a constantly spiralling mind. I turned 27 in mid-February, blew out my candles in a crowded pub in London, and wished for something to shift me out of this perpetual fight-or-flight state.

My remote job, with colleagues based mainly in New York, means I am used to my phone pinging with emails and messages late into the evening — so it often feels like work is never really "done". This constant need to be online, coupled with the sensory overload of life in London, cemented the knot of anxiety in my chest. What I needed was a drastic change of scenery, an ability to fully unplug, and enough silence to let my racing thoughts grind to a halt.

I booked myself into the guesthouse at Glenstal Abbey, a Benedictine monastery in rural Limerick, for three nights. My father is Irish, but my siblings and I were born and raised in Singapore. Having spent every summer since childhood between my grandparents' house in Limerick and the sandy coastline of Spanish Point, Co Clare, returning to Ireland has always been a great comfort.

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Glenstal is home to a community of monks, and also the school that both of my brothers attended for a few years. Their beautiful guesthouse is tucked away amidst 500 acres of farmland, grassy fields, walled gardens, a cemetery, a 19th-century Normanesque castle (now the boarding school for boys), rivers, lakes and streams. Staying in the guesthouse is simply a matter of booking online and making a donation of your choice upon your departure: the website says most donate €80-plus per night.



The grounds of the monastery

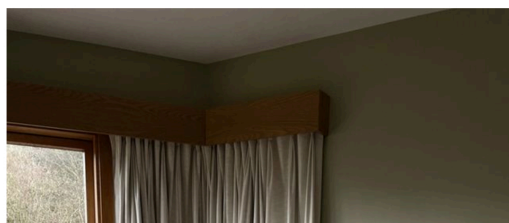
It's an idyllic, peaceful place connected to my family in several ways, and experiencing it firsthand had always been a distant hope of mine — until this “quarter-life crisis” of existential confusion led me up its scenic, winding path.

Unsure of what to expect, I overpacked. Books, notebooks, magazines, clothes for every season, even snacks, in fear of going hungry. As my grandparents and I approached the quiet roads of Murroe, a village with little more than a petrol station, post office, church, pub and pizza place, I wondered how my brothers must have felt coming back to school here, from 2011-2016, after the holidays in the humid flurry of city life in Singapore, halfway across the world.



“ ‘Turning off my phone set me free – free from the incessant pinging of Slack, free from the urgency of email, free from the dopamine distractions of social media’

I arrived, and immediately it was quiet. Turning off my phone entirely and putting it at the bottom of my suitcase set me free: free from the incessant pinging of Slack, free from the urgency of email, free from the dopamine distractions of social media. There's Wi-Fi on site and technology isn't prohibited, but many guests take the opportunity to unplug. It was just me in Room 14, with simple but comfortable furnishings and the most divine armchair in which I would come to enjoy daily naps, with a view of the trees and the church.





Veena's room with simple but comfortable furnishings

They say routine and discipline set you free, but I scoffed at how this could possibly be true in a place where monks are in church and chanting by 6.35am for Matins and Lauds, hold Conventual Mass at noon, attend Vespers at 6pm, and Compline at 8.35pm. Hours a day of focus, dedication, chanting, prayer, in the same place, every single day – on top of several other monastic responsibilities, day jobs in the school, and the general running of an Abbey. Here I was, struggling to get out of bed at 6am each morning and taking naps throughout the day, despite enjoying the best nights of sleep I'd had in a long time.

After a day or two, I became swept up in the disciplined rhythms of monastic life, along with the other guests I met. When the bells rang, I'd put down my book (or, more realistically, rise from a nap), grab my jacket, and head out to the church four times a day.

“ **Life felt really peaceful when it was the hypnotic notes of Gregorian chanting echoing in my brain, instead of the high-speed frazzle of TikTok**”

There wasn't much participation from the congregation at most of the services, and I soon gave up trying to follow the Latin booklet word for word (since I kept losing my place in it), and just sat and listened.

Life felt really peaceful when it was the hypnotic notes of Gregorian chanting echoing in my brain, instead of the high-speed frazzle of TikTok trending sounds and sped-up voiceovers. It didn't matter that I didn't always understand what was going on, or being said. Sitting with it, and letting the soothing harmonies wash over me, felt like enough.



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You don't have to become a monk to benefit from simplicity and routine, which, together, breed greater focus and ultimately free up mental space and time. The four non-negotiable commitments (coupled with the accountability of being in a certain place at a certain time) create clearly delineated rhythms for each day.




Other elements of life at the monastery were more foreign to an outsider, such as the silent suppers at which excerpts from rather dry academic-sounding books are read aloud by a monk through a disconcertingly deafening speaker system.

On my first night, I'd hardly eaten my fill before the pots of tea, brown bread, butter, jam, and now-empty platters of ciabatta bread with melted cheese were whisked away after 15 minutes by Fr Denis, who piled a cart high with empty plates and used crockery.

The monks here don't seem to be "above" any menial tasks, including sweeping the church and cleaning up after guests. "We don't eat here — we inhale," joked Brother Colmán.

The Guestmaster and former Abbot, Fr Christopher, is known for his hearty breakfast porridge, which is prepared in a slow cooker for guests to enjoy at their leisure. The delicious combination of sultanas soaked in whiskey, creamy pinhead oats and crunchy seeds is moreish, especially when topped with honey and a generous spoonful of yoghurt.



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After partaking in Fr Christopher's restorative recipe, I resolved never to pollute my morning porridge with protein powder again. The two women across from me looked down at their dry Ryvita crackers; guests with food allergies or intolerances often bring their own sustenance. They don't know what they're missing.



Veena headed to the church four times a day

After breakfast, I joined Fr Christopher in his office, where a plump cat was curled up in a patch of morning sunlight. He had kindly offered to help me select some Mass readings for my wedding next year, and we read some beautiful Psalms together. He insinuated that his shortlist included the more "open-minded" of readings — that is, less patriarchal. Together, we landed on a few top contenders for me to discuss with my fiancé back home in London.

On my final day, Fr Mark Patrick escorted a small group of guests down into the Icon Chapel, which houses a collection of Greek and Russian Orthodox icons. He

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gave us a tour of the highlights, before leaving us to explore at our leisure. "I'm off to watch the Ireland-Wales match," he said. "This crypt is full of icons but, then again, so is the Irish rugby team."

My two words for 2024 were "inner world": cultivating a sense of peace, self-knowing, profound inquiry, and learning more about myself in an effort to be a better friend to myself.

Glenstal, it turned out, was a beautiful place to honour that intention. No longer are my days solely measured by my output, or defined by who I am to the world: an employee, a manager, a writer, a daughter, a fiancée, or a friend. For four days in Glenstal, I left behind all of these roles and didn't "accomplish" anything — and felt more like myself than ever.



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Now, back in London, there are still sirens blaring and litter-strewn pavements, threatening to disturb my peace. But I now know there is also a place of refuge I can turn to within myself (with the help of some noise-cancelling headphones) to meditate, reflect, and just be.

### Three things I learned staying at the monastery



A peaceful walk in the grounds

**1. Removing distractions = inner peace** After spending a lot of time on social media in the first two months of the year, literally powering off my phone for just a few days gave me back so much time and perspective. It allowed me to connect more deeply to the other guests I'd just met; it stopped me "numbing out" by scrolling endlessly and made life feel so much more full.

**2. We need other people** I will long cherish the wonderful people I met and the stories they shared with me along the way. Encountering others from different parts of Ireland and from all walks of life, who'd each decided to escape to Glenstal for their own reasons, was an unexpectedly memorable part of my experience. I met B&B owners from Co Mayo, a retired journalist, an artist, a nun who lives in Pakistan, a man who lost his wife 10 years ago, two chain-smoking women from Dublin, and someone from my grandfather's hometown of Cahir in Co Tipperary, who'd heard local lore of a "Miss McCooole" who ran the Cahir House Hotel back in

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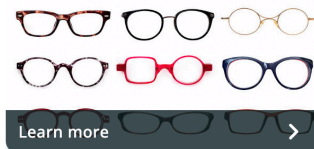
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the day (who turned out to be my grandfather's aunt Eileen).

**3. Show up every single day, no matter the circumstances** Quiet consistency and a steadfast commitment to honouring whatever is important to you has an incredibly transformative power: more than any gimmicky planning tool or productivity hack. And in doing so, search for meaning in the process.

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