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# MONASTIC HOSPITALITY: EXPLORATIONS

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## INTRODUCTION

In a theoretical model, religious retreats are placed by Lynch (2005a) within the category of traditional commercial homes, noting that the essence of a commercial home is the use of the home as a vehicle for generating income. Lynch (2005b:539) describes the ‘commercial home host’ as “the principal contact whom the guest encounters when staying in the commercial home,” and further states that “the host is central to the product experience in commercial homes. Successful stays from a guest perspective are dependent upon the quality of host-guest interactions” (Lynch 2005c:541). This chapter explores the provision of hospitality within Benedictine Monasteries in order to contribute to insights on the commercial home, and starts by locating them within the context of literature on religious tourism and the umbrella term ‘religious retreat house’.

The literature on religious tourism where ‘participants are motivated either in part or exclusively for religious reasons’ (Rinschede, 1992: 52) has very largely overlooked the importance of the accommodation. The focus has included: classification of forms of religious tourism noting its close interrelationship with holiday and cultural tourism (Murray and Graham, 1997; Rinschede, 1992); aspects of tourism development, management and environmental protection (Murray and Graham, 1997; Rinschede, 1992; Shackley, 1999); pilgrimage as reinforcing social boundaries and distinctions (Eade and Sallnow, 1991 in Murray and Graham); the socially constructed nature of religious spaces (Gatrell and Collins-Kreiner, 2006); religious centres (Rinschede, 1992). Characteristics of ‘religious tourists’ have been explored variously noting an affinity to social and group tourism involving travelling with believers of a similar age (Rinschede, 1992); varying age and gender profiles by location and religion (Murray and Graham, 1997); debate regarding the various tourist motivations along a pious pilgrim-secular tourist /sacred pilgrimage-secular

dimensions (Murray and Graham, 1997; Nolan and Nolan, 1989) and embracing of experiential, existential (pilgrims especially), diversionary, recreational and experimental modes of tourism (Cohen, 1979 in Gatrell and Collins-Kreiner, 2006). Of note is discussion concerning conflict and its management between different socio-spatial practices of pilgrims and tourists (Gatrell and Collins-Kreiner, 2006). Largely, such narratives convey a sense of a distant outsider's perspective and a concern with the macro perspective rather than an understanding of organisational microdynamics.

One should distinguish between visits to religious sites and stays in religious accommodation. Studies of closest relevance for this paper are now considered. Shackley (1999; 2001) discusses the case of the St. Katherine monastery in Sinai and notes the historical and religious significances of this working site where 25 monks live. An estimated 97,000 visitors per annum have access to a very limited portion of the monastery. Shackley (1999: 547) reports that as a result of the number of visitors, the monks have difficulty in maintaining their quality of life, and is pessimistic regarding the ability to balance 'God and mammon'. A further study by Shackley (2004) identifies an international religious accommodation market which includes religious retreat houses defined as: '... a small firm that provides catered accommodation and spiritual input for guests (sic) in search of peace and quiet, whether or not this is associated with a religious or monastic experience' (228). These retreat houses include working convents and monasteries and, based on an analysis of Shackley's (2004) description, show several similarities as well as differences in comparison with the traditional commercial home (Table 1).

**Table 1.**  
**Similarities and Differences of the Religious Retreat House Described by Shackley (2004) and the Traditional Commercial Home**

| <b>Features of Religious Retreat House Usually Shared with the Traditional Commercial Home</b> | <b>Features of Religious Retreat House Usually Differing from the Traditional Commercial Home</b> |
|--|---|
| Home dwelling  | Spartan accommodation   |
| Serviced accommodation   | Rarely en suite   |
| Little or no choice of food  | No mod cons in rooms e.g. television, hairdryer   |
| Weak business motivation of owners   | Facilities for disabled   |

|   |  |
|---|--|
| Weak and idiosyncratic management methods | Guests may be required to assist in clearing tables  |
| Low occupancy                             | Provide a religious or monastic experience   |
| ?Importance of setting and ambience       | Often loss-making  |
| ?Historic building                        | Wide range of sizes of accommodation embraced by the term religious retreat houses not all of a home type. |

Similarities relate to the dwelling being also a home, business motivations and management methods, and low occupancy, whilst differences relate to the level of product investment, the nature of the accommodation experience and the venture often being loss-making. Noticeably the ‘differences’ may also be found, although less commonly, in some traditional commercial homes. Shackley (2004) indicates that the religious retreat house accommodation segment is not homogeneous embracing a range of accommodation types that do not always include a home dimension, for example, religious conference centres. Akin to the commercial home is the description of retreat houses as: ‘deeply conservative product-led organisations whose constricted operating environments mean... little opportunity for flexibility... or innovation’ (Shackley, 2004: 229). Visitor motivations are identified as ranging from doing nothing to engagement with religious activities. ‘Staff’ are people who deal with guest accommodation and the outside world e.g. the abbot and designated community members. Shackley’s description of religious retreat houses is located in the context of a sectoral overview rather than a provider or guest insider perspective of the accommodation experience.

In relation to stays in a Benedictine monastery, Ouellette, Kaplan and Kaplan (2005), surveyed male visitor motivations using a preconceived conceptual framework, Attention Restoration Theory (Kaplan, 1995), and identified four motivation dimensions: being away, compatibility i.e. a ‘search for an environment... supportive of dealing with difficult and perhaps even painful matters..., beauty and spirituality’ (Ouellette et al., 2005: 6). First time ‘visitors’ (sic) were identified as more likely to have personal problems, and repeat visitors had stronger motivations in respect of beauty and spirituality. Over 90% of the 500+ respondents were aged between 30 and over 60 years with a fairly even distribution across age groupings.

## METHODOLOGY

The researcher's presence and personal perspective has to be acknowledged (Lynch, 2005b). This is relevant both to the note taking and the interviews. For a period of six years, whilst undertaking theological studies across Europe, primarily in Spain and Rome, in preparation for ordination into the priesthood, the primary author had the opportunity to live frequently in a monastic environment. These experiences and the contacts made throughout that period allowed privileged access in order to gather information. Familiarity with the environment was achieved as well as a level of access that would not otherwise have been available. Familiarity may mean a tendency to overlook features of behaviours or of an environment well-known to the researcher (Lynch, 2005c), for example, observations of blessings identified by Bruder (1998) as a high frequency communicative practice in a monastery with complex multi-dimensional meanings were not noted despite their frequency whereas a first-time visitor might have captured these.

In addition, interpretation of research narratives is different according to the particular readers. As Lynch (2005c: 543) states

“The interpretation and meaning of research accounts are also affected by the reader's politics of identity, gender, race, age and class, and the construction of these research narratives in turn is influenced by the anticipated audience. Additionally, the reader's ontological and epistemological perspectives impact on interpretation as well as issues of self-perception.”

The information on present day monastic hospitality summarised in this chapter is based on empirical studies in eight monasteries in the United Kingdom and Spain, on average for about a week, with accommodation for approximately 30 guests. Data collection included: guest-participant observations; formal and informal interviews with the resident Monks and guests; and documentary evidence in the form of

monastic constitutions. The empirical data was gathered by living in the monastery with the monks themselves, sharing their day, their life, and their work. Owing to the primary author's religious training and personal contacts, he had a privileged status as a guest reflected in the way he was received and related to as a guest. Field notes were made as soon as possible after events, using a mini recording device and then transcribed in private later that day. Data was analysed in accordance with the sequential structure discussed by Miles and Huberman (1994).

Lynch (2005c) proposes a conceptual framework based upon identification of 8 elements contributing to the commercial home and this is used to structure the following findings. The elements are: setting; artefacts; discourse; politics of identity; sequences; social control; space; product.

## **Contemporary Monastic Hospitality**

### SETTING

Some monasteries receive no more than 100 day visitors a month whereas others can welcome in the region of a million visitors throughout the course of the year. Monasteries are all different, and the hospitality relationship within the modern monastery exists on many levels and locations, for example there are day visitors who do not stay, there are people who stay in a separate guesthouse in the monastery grounds (often women, families and groups) and those that stay in guest rooms within the monastic cloister are only men.

Most synonymous with the commercial home is the hospitality relationship that the monks have with the resident male guests that live within the monastic cloister, therefore the summary of the monastic hospitality being presented is focused on that. The guests are male and live in similar accommodation to the monks. They eat in the monastic refectory and normally have open access to the library and to some of the areas that are closed to other guests. These male guests also have a separate lounge, normally a small kitchen with tea and coffee making facilities and a fridge full of items such as homemade bread and jam, free range eggs and milk.

### ARTEFACTS

On the whole the rooms were well appointed, in a basic but functional style. They normally had a single bed, bedside table and light, easy chair for reading and a desk and another chair. Sometimes the rooms were ensuite, however most if not all of the building existed before the contemporary trend for ensuite facilities, indeed some of them were built before the trend for indoor plumbing! In all cases fresh linen and towels were available, sometimes guests were responsible for the cleaning of their own rooms on other occasion there were chambermaids. Although welcoming, the monks gave definite suggestions of otherness, not least by wearing their monastic habits; one guest expressed disappointment that they did not find a habit on the back of their bedroom door that they could wear for the weekend!

#### DISCOURSE

Making God the ultimate host, the Rule of Benedict makes it clear that the Abbot is the host responsible for meeting and welcoming the guests, however there are two other different levels of hosting within the monastery. There is the guest master who has hour-by-hour care of the guests making sure they are in and seated for communal meals at their place and in their particular place in the church. There is also the other guests who take responsibility for hosting newer guests, showing them where to be at certain times and making them coffee on arrival, washing up after them and in general helping them to relax and feel welcome. Guests asked questions of each other and learned from their experiences, serving as mutual sounding boards to check what they should be doing.

Guests are formally welcomed by the Abbot, although this normally takes place after the first meal. On arrival the guests are greeted by the guest master, one of the monks, who is often the first monk that many of the guests have ever met. The guest masters were very welcoming but some guests felt that they were holding back. One guest observed that a monk-host spoke in a normal voice but he felt that the monks were not normal; the monks were perceived to be of this world but not in the world, they were often considered to emblematic of another world. On the other hand, guest masters knew from their experience what their guests were going through and felt that



normally the guests were not immediately at ease as they were in a strange environment.

The monks have no real opportunities for incidental interaction with the guests, and as the monks proceed through their daily life there is no impression given that they are interested in interaction. However, any guest wishing to talk to a monk is welcomed and accommodated; interaction with the monks is dependent on the guest seeking it rather than it being offered by the host. Defined thresholds are necessary in a monastery, especially for one with thousands of guests, in order to protect the privacy and the peace of the monks, who could quickly become objects of attention for garrulous guests. Silence is observed in the Church, refectory and other monastic areas; guests are also encouraged to keep silence in the individual rooms. In some of the monasteries the monks, with the exception of the Abbot and the guest master, are not permitted to talk to the guests. One monastery had a sign indicating that this does not imply rudeness but was a means of allowing the monks to carry on their daily life.

#### POLITICS OF IDENTITY

The monks welcome Roman Catholics, other Christians, and indeed all people who are broadly sympathetic to the philosophy of place, and do not differentiate between them. The guests are welcomed into the monks' domain, however the monks live within an ordered hierarchy and a strictly controlled culture dimension, but they know that their guests do not normally live this way. As long as the guest behaviour does not disturb the life of the monastic community, the Monks keep their own counsel. On one occasion some guests went out in the evening to watch a football match in the local town, the following morning the monks sought out these guests to find out what the score was! The guests were embarrassed that the monks had realised they had gone out, but quickly realised that the monks did not mind, and a greater understanding of their hosts was realised by the guests.

In the monasteries, where substantial numbers of day visitors were received, the monks are often confused by visitors with actors who are there to enhance the tourist experience. One monk recalled being reprimanded by an objectionable day visitor who complained about the monk's lack of name badge. When the monk patiently explained to the tourist that this was actually his way of life, the tourist was stunned,

amazed and then genuinely moved. In most of the monasteries the services are conducted in Latin and intoned in Gregorian Chant. During the day the monks could often find a congregation behaving more like “an audience at a pantomime.” This does not bother the monks: “if we reach out and touch even one person’s life, that has made a difference, if not we are still serving God.” In the guesthouse, one guest commented, “I don’t like it when the services are conducted in English, it sounds better in Latin. I know it’s silly but I can’t help thinking that God hears the prayers better when they are in Latin and there is a lot of incense.”

The resident guests rarely question the monks’ sincerity. Time and lived experience within the cloister brings much greater understanding. One guest, who found the lack of conversation at meals difficult at first, found each meal got easier. Every week a monk is given the task of reading throughout the meal. In some monasteries this reading is the only source of news and world affairs that the monks hear. During one of the meals, a guest who had just arrived was surprised that instead of some religious work, they were listening to an article discussing the blossoming opium trade in Afghanistan and the effects it is having on the West.

The monks continually manage to confound the inhibitions and expectations that an average individual may have of them, their authenticity is rarely questioned. The monks believe they are carrying out God’s work on earth and hospitality is an integral part of this work so it would be true to say that a visitor to a monastery is not just the guest of the monks but a guest in God’s house. Through the behaviour and personal integrity of the monks, everything that the guest experiences is a symbol for how guests should be treated. The creation of a shared space for hospitality does allow the host and guest to construct a temporary common moral universe. As an example when a guest can be a 20 year old agnostic student and the host is a 70 year old monk, they would normally inhabit very different moral universes. Acceptance as a guest in no way suggests equality with the monks or membership of the monastic community.

## SEQUENCES

The monks' day is centred around Mass and eight other choral services (often all in Latin) starting as early as 4:00 in the morning and continuing at intervals throughout the day until about 8:30 at night; a typical monastic day is given in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
**Typical Monastic Timetable**

| Time    | Activity   |
|---------|--|
| 4.45am  | Rise   |
| 5:00am  | Vigils and Lauds (Prayers during the night and at dawn)              |
| 7.00am  | Prime (1st prayer of the day); Pittance (Breakfast); Private Prayer. |
| 8:30am  | Mass and Terce (Prayer during the morning)                           |
| 9.45am  | Work, and Classes for Novices  |
| 12:45am | Sext (Midday Prayer)   |
| 1:00pm  | Lunch  |
| 2:15pm  | None (Afternoon Prayer), followed by work                            |
| 4:30pm  | Tea  |
| 4.45pm  | Private Prayer   |
| 6:30pm  | Vespers (Evening Prayer)   |
| 7:00pm  | Supper, followed by Recreation (can include conversation)            |
| 8:30pm  | Compline (Prayer before bed)   |
| 9:00pm  | Retire   |

All guests are invited to join in the religious celebrations throughout the day; often they find that prayer in the monastic church is a very profound experience that seems to gain greater significance at daybreak or during twilight and darkness. As one guest commented:

“One of the things I will always remember from my visit is sitting on a church pew at 4:45 in the morning smelling sweet incense and watching the rising sun caress the stained glass windows and project jewelled colours through the smoke onto the church walls; I felt welcomed and relaxed”

Guests are neither forced nor obliged to attend the services. None of the monks would even have noticed if they are there or not and guests were free to come and go as they wished. Attending was considered useful because it removed guests from what they normally did and allowed their daily life to be put into perspective. When

actually attending guests tended to feel included and at ease and often happy during the services, but liked knowing when it was going to end.

Within the refectory every male guest is allocated a place at table, normally with name card placed on top of a napkin; before the meal is served there are short prayers (often in Latin). The meals are typically simple and wholesome, giving the monks enough calories to keep healthy so that they can continue in their daily work. The majority of meals in the monastery are vegetarian but on feast days and Sundays, as a celebration, meat is served. On major feast days the Monks take particular joy in the high quality of food provided. The guest table is served immediately after the Abbot, as required in the Rule. All the food is served on trays in serving dishes and the guest merely helps themselves. The guest has to do nothing but eat during the meal; the individual does not even have to wash up. Guests often perceived that normal interaction time with the monks would be during the meals. However, despite sharing the same space any interaction is removed by the silence. Some guests commented on feelings of isolation and an obligation to keep their head down and eat quickly, despite being surrounded by some 40 other people.

#### SOCIAL CONTROL

The life of the monastery is governed by the Rule of Benedict, adapted to the modern age. Fifteen hundred years ago when the rule was written there were no public run facilities for the sick or the homeless; now things are different. Various guest masters noted that it is not uncommon for the local police to drop off people with social problems such as drug addiction or homelessness. If they arrive at the monastery, they are given soup and sandwiches and are invited to sleep in a lodging in the grounds just a few minutes away from the monastic cloister and main guesthouse. It is “simply not practical to the running of the monastery...we are not here to be saints; we are monks, that is the path we have chosen.”

The Rule of St Benedict is clearly of the utmost importance to the running of the monasteries, older and more solid than even the buildings. However, as with the buildings, an element of change has been necessary to ensure the continuing survival of the monastery and its way of life. During the Middle Ages the monasteries had provided detailed and formalised rules for religious hospitality, the care of the sick

and the poor, and responsibilities for refugees. However monasteries no longer need to look after the sick as there are state hospitals, nor should they be expected to look after refugees or those with drug or alcohol problems, as other agencies exist for this purpose.

Bells, not the Abbot, control everybody's behaviour, as one monk wryly observed, "we live in God's house and the bell is the voice of God, it wakes us up in the morning, calls us to prayer, meals and work and then tells us it is time to go to sleep at the end of the day". With the assistance of paid staff, the monks fulfil the different jobs (cook, cellarer, guest master, gardener, bursar etc.) within the monastery for periods of at least a year, and all the monks who are able serve each other at table on weekly rota with the Abbot serving on Good Friday.

One guest master said "there are no ground rules here, do whatever you want, just change the bed and clean the room when you leave." This of course was not entirely true. Although there were very few written rules within the monastery, guests on the whole knew how to behave through interpretation of unwritten social rules. Guests are not expected to help out with the daily duties although it is very much appreciated. Roughly a quarter of the guests offer to help with daily chores but only a quarter of that number again actually do any work.

#### SPACE

In the public areas of the monastery there were signs that clearly stated where visitors were not allowed to go: parts of the church, access to buildings and gardens were restricted. However different guests have different levels of access. Those who were living in the monastic cloister had privileged access and it is often not clear to others as to why they are going to particular areas and that they had keys (sometimes electronic swipe cards with different levels of access) that allowed them to open doors that were off limits to the day visitors. Limitations in access also meant that many day visitors could pass through the monastery and not even see a monk.

Of course, it seems innate within human nature to be curious: the day visitors wondered what happened in the cloister and the resident guests were intrigued as to what a monk's cell looked like. As one guest stated:

“I know I am just being nosy but just as I want to open all the old books in the library and try and read the Latin on the pages, I want to open all the doors and see inside too”

The guests and the monks have a shared environment, but limited shared space; they pray together in separate parts of the church and dine together, in silence, at separate tables in the refectory. Some guests commented that although they enjoyed joining with the monks at meal times and at prayer, they would also like to have seen them at their daily duties and jobs; they gained great solace and comfort from their interactions with the monks. Another guest stated:

“I’ve been to many places travelling over the past 20 years... I’ve slept in the church of the Nativity at Christmas time but nowhere compares to these guys... there is nothing like this place they are so accommodating”.

## PRODUCT

The monks make no charge for staying in the monastery, however common courtesy should dictate that a donation would be appropriate. This is a difficult issue for some of the guests, as the monks do not seem to care about what is left. Some monasteries did have signs suggesting donations, always with the caveat that it was optional; deed of covenant envelopes were always available to allow the tax to be claimed back. Some of the guest masters seemed slightly put out by people using the monastery as a one night stop off and treating the monk’s hospitality as bed and breakfast accommodation; monasteries are also familiar with high profile figures using their guesthouse in this manner.

On the whole guest masters did not keep detailed statistics of how many people had stayed the total number of guest nights, as this information may have been interesting but of no real relevance to them. That said the monasteries did operate at the commercial level in other areas, for example: conference facilities; apiaries; brewing and distilling; public commercial restaurants; stained glass window manufacturing; printing and publishing; illumination and illustration; farming and agriculture; and retail. The vast majority of these activities were run by a paid professional staff who reported to the monastic bursar on their commercial activities. All monasteries were

however very careful to make sure that these distinct and separate activities did not encroach into the hospitality offered to their guests.

During the research it became clear that the monastery is extremely complex. There were different layers of the commercial home within the monastery and differing levels of hospitality provision. Areas of investigation included the use and division of space for the monks and their guests, levels of accommodation including and hospitality rules and rituals. Within the monastery the hospitality that is offered to the guest's physical and metaphysical needs is not a simple concept. It exists and is offered on many levels and it is up to the guest how much they wish to engage with the hospitality on offer.

## CONCLUSIONS

From the results of this investigation, the dominant themes of modern *monastic hospitality* are summarised in Table 3, which is structured around the commercial home conceptual framework created by Lynch (2005c).

**Table 3**  
**The commercial home framework applied to *monastic hospitality***

| Theme                | Summary of Monastic Hospitality   |
|----------------------|---|
| Setting              | The hospitality relationship that the monks have with their resident (male) guests within the monastery is most synonymous with the commercial home. However other guests can include day visitors, couples and families.   |
| Artefacts            | Furnished in a basic but functional manner, small number of books in the room – but open access to the library.   |
| Discourse            | The discourse is primarily framed with religious and hospitality language focused on the domestic hospitality sphere, commercialism is of secondary importance.   |
| Politics of Identity | The monks provide for both the spiritual and temporal needs of the guests. Hosting takes place at various levels with different people (the Abbot, the guest master or other guests) taking the role of host depending on the circumstances. The apparent sincerity and strength of purpose of the monks is manifest and often has a profound effect on the guests. |
| Sequences            | Significant routines are present in relation to the structure of the  |

|                |   |
|----------------|---|
|                | daily life within the monastery and through the presence of the guest master who subtly marshals the guests. Interaction and full welcome in the daily life of the monastery is as much dependant on the guest seeking it as on it being offered by the monks.  |
| Social Control | Monastic hospitality is governed by the 6 <sup>th</sup> Century Rule of St Benedict, adapted for the modern age. In some ways a highly regulated environment including control by the bell and significant spatial control practices influence the guests.  |
| Space          | Boundaries, delimited by St Benedict 1500 years ago, are necessary for the smooth running of the monastery.   |
| Product        | The monastery as well as being the House of God, is also the monks' home. Guests are welcome to visit or stay but not to interfere with it. Commercial activities exist within the monasteries, but the prime purpose of monastic hospitality is not commercial, hospitality is offered as part of the monastic vocation. |

Table 3 draws out the key features of commercial home hospitality offered within a monastery. The prima-facie purpose of a monastery is not to offer hospitality, it is to house the monks in a community environment so that they can dedicate their lives and live their vocation to the service of God. The separation of the monks from their guests (and by definition the separation of the monks from the world in general) is not an act of inhospitableness, rather it is mandated by the Rule and necessary for the monastery to function. Therefore, the ritual reception of guests and the provision of hospitality play an important role by being both the bridge and the barrier between the monastic and secular worlds.

All the monasteries, to a greater or lesser extent, engage in commercial behaviour that generates income for the monks. However the provision for guests to stay in the monastic cloister is motivated by their monastic vocation. It seems then, that monasteries do not fall easily within the category of traditional commercial homes, not least because the essence of a monastery has very little to do with the generation of income. That does not mean that monasteries need to be excluded from commercial home literature, rather the paradigm needs to be extended and the definition broadened to include one of the oldest and continuous forms of *commercial* home hospitality, that has existed for more than 1500 years.

This chapter has added to the existing literature on religious tourism and in particular one type of religious retreat house; it has drawn attention to how hospitality can serve



as a bridge across the world of a religious community and the outside secular world. It has contributed towards an initial understanding of the nature of one type of religious accommodation where guests usually make a financial contribution towards their stay. Whilst there are similarities between a traditional commercial home and *the monastic guesthouse*, attention has been drawn to distinctive differences arising from both the communal nature of the institutional home and the philosophical purpose and praxis. It is suggested that further research of this fascinating but complex form of hospitality accommodation is required.

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