

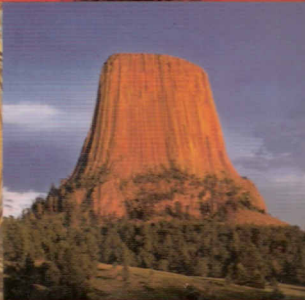


NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

SACRED PLACES *of a* LIFETIME

500

*of the World's Most Peaceful
and Powerful Destinations*





RETREATS

Of all the sacred places on the planet, those within ourselves can be the hardest to reach.

Daily life, with all its distractions, impedes the habit of reflection. This is nothing new. Sages and saints have always left the material world behind to seek out tranquil places where they could meditate, refresh their spiritual energies, and listen to their gods or their own hearts. Religious communities throughout the world welcome seekers after truth—or simply silence. Their locations are part of the magic and some defy all expectations. Buddhist retreats, for instance, are found not only in Asia but on the red earth of Australia and in windswept Nova Scotia. Hospitable Christian communities perch on hills in Italy and France, or float alluringly offshore on the tiny islands of Iona and Caldey. Some places avoid denominational connections—such as Scotland’s Findhorn Community, an eclectic, holistic retreat for all shades of New-Age belief.

A voluptuous statue of the Hindu god Vishnu graces the holy Indian city of Rishikesh, which offers many paths to spiritual awareness, from spaces beside the sacred Ganges River in which to meditate to classes in yoga.



The monks' *kutis*, or meditation huts, are simply made and command open views in all directions.

AUSTRALIA

BODHI TREE FOREST MONASTERY

In the rolling landscape of New South Wales, this monastery and retreat center opens its doors to all practitioners of Buddhism.

From the tall flagpole at the edge of the wooden balcony, a warm humid breeze ripples the striped flag colored to represent the hues of the aura surrounding Buddha after his enlightenment. On 95 acres (38 hectares) in a beautiful area of northern New South Wales that used to be known as the Big Scrub, the center was established in 2005 by Venerable Pannyavaro Thera. While devoted to Theravada Buddhism, the monastery is a nonsectarian community for monks, nuns, and lay yogis of all traditions of Buddhism. The buildings are corrugated iron shelters painted blue, in part or entirely, to represent the purity of turquoise, the Buddhist symbol for the sea and sky believed to enable limitless heights of spiritual ascension. At the heart of the monastery a statue of a Borobudur Buddha in meditation sits serenely under the sacred Bodhi tree, where inspiring views unfold of red earth and tree-lined valleys.

When to Go Anytime—temperatures are mild to warm year-round.

Planning Lismore is the closest town to the Bodhi Tree Forest Monastery and Retreat Centre. The monastery relies on donations, especially those given as payment for meditation retreats, which may last for days, weeks, or months. (The practice of generosity is the first step in characterizing the Buddha's teaching.) There are three lay hermitage areas in a wooded valley for lay yogis to practice meditation. Monks are available for guidance, and people stay in small meditation huts, or *kutis*, each with its own walking meditation area.

Websites www.visitlismore.com.au bodhitreemonastery.org

HIGHLIGHTS

■ Attend a **meditation retreat**, available for weekends, ten-day sessions, and also for longer periods. *Vipassana* (the deep interconnection between body and mind) and *metta bhavana* (unconditional and unattached loving kindness) meditation courses are held in the new meditation hall, while accommodations are in the new dormitory.

■ Dedicated to replanting the landscape, the monastery has planted more than **1,500 rain-forest trees** in the valleys and along the creeks.

■ Visit **Boatharbour Reserve** east of Lismore town—all that remains of the original 185,329 acres (75,000 hectares) of the lowland subtropical forest that was felled after European settlement of the area from 1843.

