

places



Monastery REBORN

A former Belgian monastery, built in the sixteenth century by a group of Cistercian monks, is now a charming bed and breakfast.

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The drive to The Little Monastery might feel like a kind of pilgrimage. The most scenic route to the bed and breakfast begins in the medieval town of Bruges, a place of hump-backed bridges and classically gabled canal houses.

From there, a journey along a country road, sandwiched between poplar trees and a glinting canal, leads to the village of Damme, where visitors pass the Gothic town hall and a windmill, its sails whirling like a lazy lowlands ferris wheel.

By the time you traverse the front drive of the Little Monastery, you'll feel like you have already entered an Old Master Flemish landscape, but no museum guard is going to stop you. Owner Brigitte Garnier will likely be on hand instead, flanked by boxwoods, hydrangeas, and some squawking chickens. In the background, you can discern a cluster of landmark buildings that provide the night's accommodations.

This tranquil vision is exactly what drew Belgian antiques dealers Brigitte and Alain Garnier to the property when they bought it in 2000. It's probably what lured the monastery's original sixteenth-century founders, a straggling group of ten Cistercian monks looking to establish a place of serenity and contemplation.

"But by the time we came," Brigitte says, "the abbey had become a farm and then was abandoned. It was a wreck." The monastery itself, burned and reconstructed several times, was refurbished as their private home before the couple turned to the other structures scattered on the property. While the largest barn was reconfigured as a showroom for their antiques, it was another barn, dating to the seventeenth century, that exhibited an especially appealing architectural austerity.

"The original oak beams were still running through it and the handmade sandstone façade was chalked, not painted," Brigitte says. Deciding ultimately that it was too beautiful not to share as a B&B, the couple debuted the Landlord's Room and Marguerite's Room in



Opening page: Guests at The Little Monastery gather for breakfast around the oak table on the terrace. This page: The Landlord's Room living area features an open fireplace, sisal rug, and a walnut Louis XIII armchair upholstered in Belgian linen. The entrance of the Summer House is framed by yew trees.

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The Summer House Room bathroom, left, makes use of a sculptural, contemporary Belgian soaking tub positioned by an arched window. Other suites on the property have walk-through rain showers and marble sinks. The bedroom features black terra cotta Flemish floor tiles and the trademark oak beams that mark the property. The curtained, eighteenth-century Italian cast-iron four-poster bed is dressed with snowy white Italian percale linens.

the barn in 2013. The modest names are misleading. Much more than simple rooms, each suite comes complete with a living room anchored by an open fireplace, a sprawling bathroom, and a mezzanine bedroom.

The real draw, though, may be the antiques picked by Brigitte from the Garnier's own Flemish-goes-pan-Euro showroom, pieces that might range from a walnut chaise lounge to an eighteenth-century German chest and an Italian wardrobe. All of the antique items in the rooms are

for sale, but even if you stripped them clean, the elegant skeleton of the oak-beam planks and tadelakt plaster (which combines lime and olive oil) floors would be enough.

A third smaller suite, the Summer House Room, is in the old stable above an orangerie, and two more rooms are slated to open in the sandstone barn in 2014.

While each quarter functions as its own haven, guests tend to gather on one of the brick terraces in sunny weather for breakfast. "We have five chickens running around," Brigitte says, "so there are always fresh eggs! And wonderful smelling fresh-baked bread, young Dutch cheese, plum jam."

A hike into Damme will help you walk off the meal, but Brigitte suggests savoring the immediate surroundings. "Sunsets and sunrises over the green pastures, behind our apple and pear orchards, are the most beautiful. And our ash trees lie almost flat to the ground in the wind." If they seem to be bowing to the reborn Little Monastery, that makes for a fitting salute. thelittlemonastery.be ■

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