

**Appalachia-Science
in the Public Interest**
50 Lair St., Mt. Vernon, KY 40456

HERMITAGES IN APPALACHIA

This is directed to hermitage or retreat cabin providers, the bed-and-breakfast type of folks, who have property with vistas and beautiful land to share, but which are separated by distance from their own dwelling place.

The Need. Many people desire to get away from the ever-increasing tempo of their everyday lives. They seek inner peace, the time to reflect on some personal problems or a chance to deepen one's relationship with God. These are folks who are not interested in traditional formal retreat settings and prefer to be by themselves for a period of time. The modern age is similar to the unsettled conditions of the late Roman Empire, a time when hermitages were popular in the Egyptian desert. Throughout the ages solitude-seekers sought woodlands, mountaintops or lakeshores. Central Appalachia is blessed with ideal locations and is within a day's drive of about half of all North America. Many mountain places can offer a secluded and quiet spot, a beautiful scenic view, an ideal place to pray, a freedom from the bother of providing for basic amenities of life, a place not too far away, and an affordable experience. Our attention here is not only to the solitude-seekers, but to the potential Appalachian providers of hermitages. Know who you seek to attract, the best sites, the most ideal buildings, and a practical program suitable to your resources.



Knowing the Clientele. Granted, some would prefer a backpack retreat in the wilderness. Others, however, who are also nature-lovers, know that hiking and camping involve considerable exertion and attention to unwelcome services and visitors: camping chores, gnats, bugs, wood smoke and aching feet. They prefer time in rustic settings and yet with a little more convenience than a tent or backpack. An ideally situated hermitage, which has seclusion, vista, and relative proximity to the road may prove both suitable for the seeker and a source of income for the provider.

The Goal. Think of providing the best environment for a person seeking to truly get away. This provision differs from services offered at formal retreat facilities with large grounds and buildings. Potential hermitage-goers may prefer a simpler atmosphere, a less formal schedule, and a clean break from urban America — and yours may be the perfect place. The goal is to furnish a clean, safe, cheerful, accessible facility for someone desiring to leave modern life's pressures behind and come to Appalachia. This goal respects the desire for privacy and seclusion by overly active and stressed Americans. It allows a closer contact with God in the freedom of planning one's own schedule and the lack of an annoyance of bells and scheduled routines. It gives one the option to concentrate on resting when resting is needed and on praying when so moved, even in the middle of the night. It is conscious of how the natural setting encourages deeper periods of rest and offers fresh air and full spectrum sun light, as well as proximity to God's creation. Retreat cabins and hermitages are a future growth industry because of the numbers desiring solitary prayerful experiences in simple settings and the ability to get away.

Rates. Costs are generally based on the degree of simplicity and the resident's requirements, and on the ability of the person to pay. Simple places require little maintenance, and providing for one's own meals reduces hermitage services and costs below those at traditional retreat centers.

SELECTION OF PLACE

Ideal hermitages should have the following characteristics:

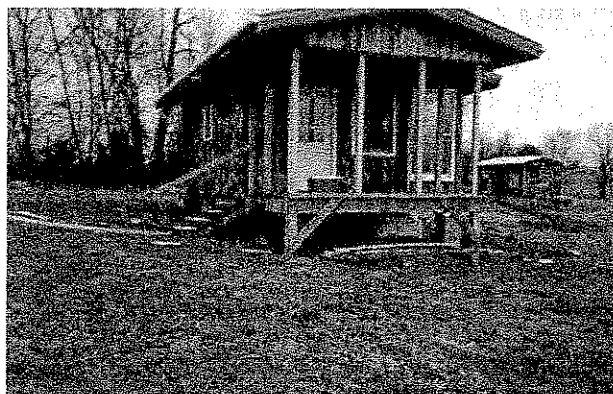
Accessibility — Many users prefer a site which is easily reached, and this generally means in our age, by use of an automobile. How close is the place to where the user resides (most potential users prefer places which can be up to two hours or more away)? Is your place immediately accessible by a major highway? Many traditional retreatants select facilities that are not overly difficult to reach by rough or winding road. Can they park nearby or must they pack in food and essentials over a distance? A good access road to the site is a great advantage for older and disabled people. Ideally, the hermitage would be near public transportation and yet not so accessible as to bring unwanted visitors and sightseers.

Simplicity — Hermitages may be inviting, clean and still quite austere or moderately simple. The seeker may be willing to engage in a simpler life or may require more conveniences. From the standpoint of the provider, the simpler the better. One is able to charge far less for a simply constructed, furnished or heated/cooled building than for a more elaborate one. The site should not be so remote as to hinder the transport of the construction materials. Hopefully, the accessible construction roads will be removed at the end of the building process.

Prayerfulness — Choose specific sites for cabins or hermitages which are known to be quiet and prayerful places. Under normal circumstances people prefer external tranquility, though others can make due with a "silence of the heart." Generally silence holds precedence over scenic view. Silence can be possible even near vehicular arteries by building vegetative, wooden or masonry noise barriers, or selecting sites where the topography deflects the sound. A scenic view is an added benefit whether that be a grove of trees, a mountain vista, a shimmering lake, or a waterfall. Can the user enjoy the beautiful sunrise or sunset? You may wish to create a wildlife gathering place by providing salt blocks or bird feeders.

Seclusion — Hermitage dwellers like to be separated from others, but some would prefer seclusion but not isolation; they prefer not to feel totally alone or vulnerable. Yet they do not want to mingle with others. Often the hermitage may be in a well-chosen enclosed natural space (a cove, valley, hillside setting in dense woods, etc.). Most solitude-seekers prefer relative seclusion, that is a certain amount of privacy, but still being within shouting distance of other people. If two or more cabins are contemplated, place the second or third a short distance away, but with designed-in privacy, e.g., separate entrances and patios. The ingenious placement of the cabins at St. Catherine's at Springfield, Kentucky allows for both physical proximity and yet a sense of seclusion. This is done by rotating the building so that the front of one is not seen by the other. Providers must be sensitive to having places remote, but not too remote.

Ideal Locations — Some locations are obviously beautiful, secluded and peaceful places; other locations may have disadvantages which have to be adjusted. If not rushed for time, consider a temporary hermitage location (for instance, a platform on which a tent is used). When the right site is determined, a more permanent structure is built.



St. Catherine's Earth Cabins I and II

CONSTRUCTION SUGGESTIONS

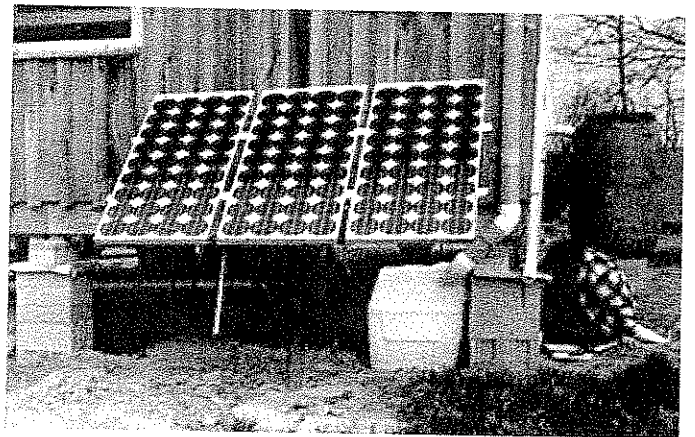
A provider should think of small buildings in natural settings built with native materials. This is targeted to bed-and-breakfast oriented folks who desire supplementary income, do not want to have high maintenance costs, want to share scenic vistas with other mild-mannered folks, and do not want to be bothered with offering many daily services such as meals and daily housekeeping. Small dwellings cost less and have reasonably rapid payback. Make the building a model ecological educational instrument, affording the occupant an opportunity to learn self-reliance and dependence on God's creation for nourishment and life. ASPI has buildings that fit these categories: a yurt for low-cost non-structural framing; a cordwood building for forested areas where trees and forest byproducts are abundant; and a geodesic dome structure reached by a nature trail.

Use Native Materials — Throughout history people built with local materials (rock, rammed earth, cordwood or tree waste materials, etc.). Only in the resource-wasteful times in which we live are building materials transported over great distances. One may also consider a small traditional house using locally recycled materials which are often found in abundance.

Build Small but Comfortable — The provider must decide whether this structure is meant for year-round use or for the milder seasons. Incorporate designs that will keep the place small, cozy and well adapted to residents. The amount of space may be minimized by a loft for sleeping that will be above a single room living, reading, praying and dining area. It is amazing how much space beds take up. A roomy upper floor loft may be lower and yet have a built-in set of drawers for some clothes, a reading lamp and a shelf for books. For those desiring to be closer to nature, the exterior should be equipped with a shady porch (preferably on the north or east side that is shaded in the afternoon) and with shade trees for summer cooling.

Plant Vegetative Thermal and Privacy Barriers — Use native materials for barriers, not fences constructed of wood, concrete or metal. Vegetative materials are more cheerful and will blend in with the countryside. Depending on where you are located, think of using evergreens such as cedar or white pine which can furnish a thick and inexpensive natural barrier. These also serve as winter wind barriers as well as noise & privacy barriers. Plant some herbs, berries and vegetables for immediate use.

Install Simple Living Devices — Hermitages should avoid motel conveniences, i.e., air conditioning, television, carpeting, large beds, roomservice and ample showering facilities. Instead, they should use simple lifestyle fashions, e.g., compact fluorescents, dry composting toilet, and a shower equipped with a solar water heater or a solar showerbag. Use instant demand water heaters if water pressure is sufficient. Consider a cistern for a water source. Direct greywater into an artificial wetlands which can serve as a floral garden. Compost kitchen materials and sort all waste materials into designated bins. Install solar photovoltaic arrays for generating electricity and path lighting, and provide solar space heating according to south-facing building design. Earth berming or super insulation of the sides and roof will be a major long-term savings. Air out the building in the early morning to keep cool without air conditioning. Use window shades to keep out the sun and quilted window shades to conserve interior winter heat.



Photovoltaic panels and rainwater catchment make for environmentally-sound hermitages

PROGRAMS AND PRACTICES

Basic Information — Place all the rules and requirements up front in the literature or at the place of entry. If you have compost toilets or your place has a need to conserve water, tell how and why these are to be used or practiced. Explain the degree of seclusion before the person arrives. In the room, list flora and fauna found in the vicinity. Leaving information on a web page or providing an informative brochure may suffice for most people.

Auxiliary Services — Some hermitage dwellers prefer a little social interaction at certain times, such as at or after meals or at a set worship service. Spiritual direction is not necessarily excluded by this hermitage, even though the provider may not wish to furnish such a service. Likewise, formal prayer times and furnished meals may put a heavy burden on the provider, unless such circumstances already exist. Recreational opportunities may be for individual exercise or interactive varieties. Some prefer to walk about on the grounds, while others prefer the seclusion of a room or a rocking chair on a porch. These expectations should be clearly addressed through the promotional literature or an appropriate web site.

Communication & Maintenance — Hermitage residents may want to reduce the amount of communication to a bare minimum. Outside phones or cell phones in convenient areas may be welcomed. Most want instant communication with the managers should some emergency arise. An intercom system may be too wired-in to the outside, but a cellular phone or a two-way radio at a convenient location may serve the need. A friendly security dog at or near the hermitages may give a sense of security. Retreatants should be expected to perform routine maintenance and services. Obviously, solitude is compromised if a staff attendant is to come around and dust or sweep. It is highly advantageous for the cabins to have a maintenance and clean-up list of dos and don'ts. The goal is to leave the immediate interior and exterior in the same or better condition than when the user arrived.

Worship and Rest — Consider some sacred space, whether interior or exterior, for people to come and worship alone or in common or in small groups. The interior space affords an opportunity to pray in a community place during inclement weather or at night. Those who prefer the great outdoors seek out ideal natural settings — forests, isolated islands, mountaintops, or rock overhangs. In wooded areas, consider the trees' presence as intrinsic to the experience. Porches and outdoor benches and resting places may be provided where possible.

Saint Manchan of Offaly (about 500 AD)

A pleasant woodland all about
To shield it [the hut] from the wind,
And make a home for singing birds
Before it and behind.
A southern aspect for the heat
A stream along its foot,
A smooth green lawn with rich top soil
Propitious to all fruit.

How the Irish Saved Civilization, Thomas Cahill, pp. 152-3, Doubleday, 1995.