

## PEACE ON THE PRAIRIE

FOCUSING ON ECOLOGY, HOLISTIC HEALTH  
AND SPIRITUALITY, THIS EASTERN IOWA  
RETREAT CENTER DRAWS VISITORS SEEKING  
RELAXATION AND REJUVENATION.

WRITTEN BY RITA PEREA PHOTOS BY DUANE TINKEY



Prairiewoods Franciscan Spirituality Center provides this labyrinth to encourage meditation while finding the path to its center. The labyrinth experience is said to be based on a 5,000-year-old ritual.



Standing at the entrance of the labyrinth at Prairiewoods Franciscan Spirituality Center, I could hear the words of philosopher Lao Tsu: “The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” I knew that this single step onto the sandy, brick-lined path would influence my own journey. In a prayer before moving forward, I asked for wisdom and insight, and with each deliberate step toward the labyrinth’s center, I felt the release of the grief I’d been carrying since my father’s death. As I retraced my steps to the beginning of the labyrinth, I knew that my journey had changed.

Designed as a transformative walking meditation, the labyrinth is based on a 5,000-year-old ritual practiced in many cultures throughout history. Prairiewoods’ founders constructed the labyrinth brick by brick to help people connect with nature and with their faith.

The labyrinth is just one of the amenities that can be experienced at Prairiewoods. Nestled on 70 acres of wooded land and reclaimed prairie in Hiawatha, the retreat center focuses on ecology, spirituality and holistic health, beckoning visitors to explore and deepen their relationships with themselves, other people, the Earth and the universe. No matter what your cultural background or spiritual

beliefs, you may find a stay at Prairiewoods to be relaxing and rejuvenating, whether you decide to spend your time indulging in spa services, hiking, meditating or working with a trained spiritual director. Each time I’ve visited, I’ve left with a renewed sense of balance and a commitment to creating daily soul-nourishing times of solitude.

Prairiewoods offers private getaways, retreats, workshops, classes and events. What’s more, a visit is budget-friendly; the price for overnight lodging with meals ranges from \$50 to \$95, and the spa services cost \$55 per hour. Of special interest is “A Day of Self-Renewal.” For \$90, you get a private room for the day, lunch, a group session of guided meditation and two 40-minute holistic services.

#### FOUNDING NUNS

Marking its 20th anniversary in 2016, Prairiewoods was founded by six pioneering Franciscan sisters who were influenced by the teachings of eco-theologist Thomas Barry. These women were able to persuade the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, their faith community in Wisconsin, to purchase the land and sponsor an ecologically based ministry on it.

“The idea was to teach the new story of the universe and the sacredness of all living things on earth,” says founding sister Betty Daugherty. “We were planting the

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A cross bears testimony to the variety of faiths and beliefs expressed by visitors to Prairiewood’s 70 acres of native plants and wildlife. Walks through the prairie terrain encourage contemplation as well as good health.







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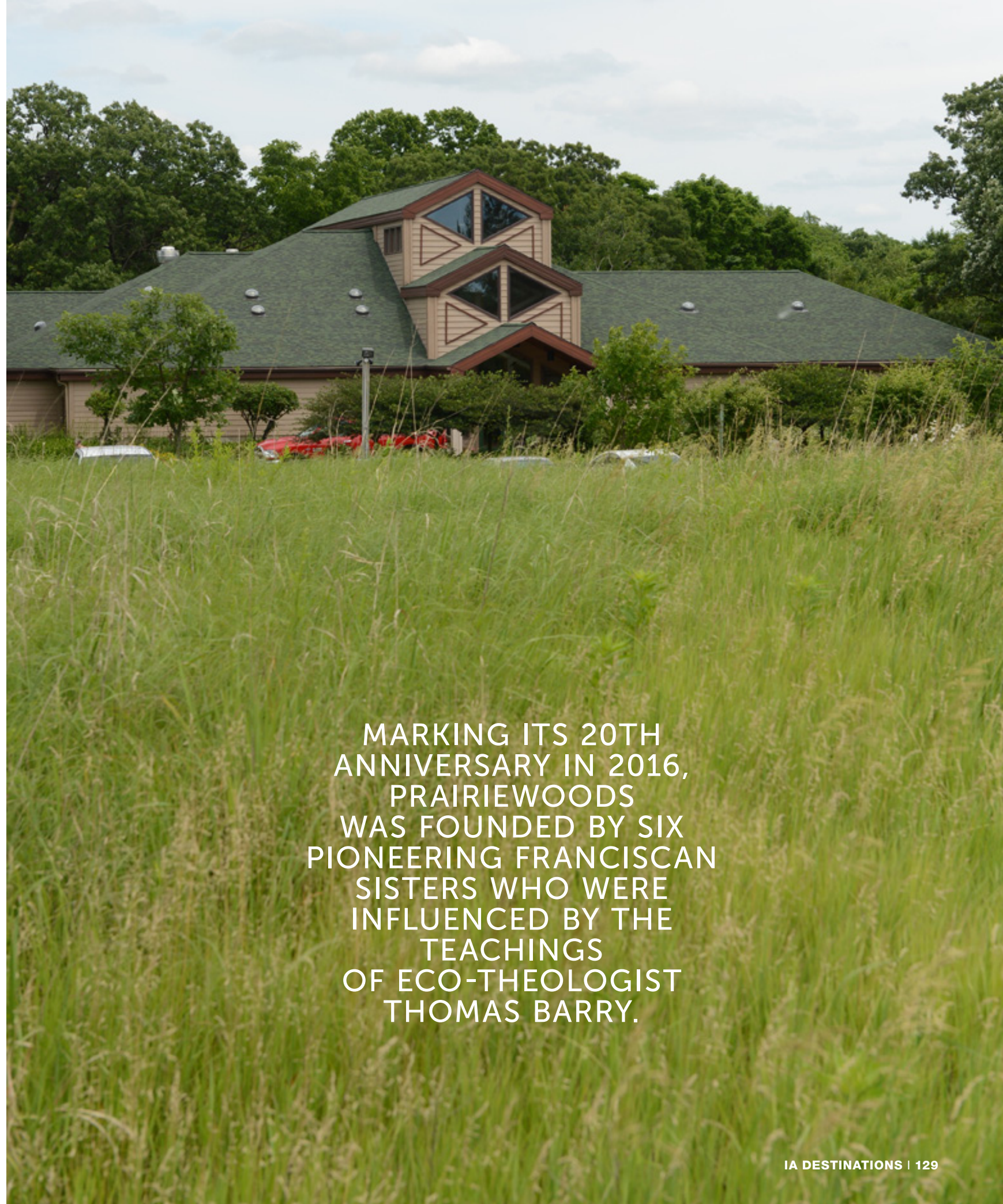
1. Trails beckon visitors for exploration, meditation and appreciation of the trees and other plants that are added every year.
2. White aster makes a happy prairie discovery for butterflies and humans alike.
3. Splashes of lavender punctuate expanses of prairie greenery.
4. In the guesthouse, a central grand hall provides plenty of elevation for the loftiest of thoughts.



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BETTY DAUGHERTY

Continued from page 126

seeds of this new story. Something was calling us to this land—waking us up! We wanted to inspire the waking up of others, too.”

The six Franciscan sisters spent two years laying the foundation of their vision by walking, praying and “listening” to the land. Working with architects, builders and volunteers to move the vision into reality, Prairiewoods opened its doors in 1996. “People just came to help us do things,” recalls founding sister Nancy Hoffman. “They became our friends. It all just came together so beautifully.”

Built around the key principles of sustainability, Prairiewoods in 2014 became the first nonprofit organization in Iowa to receive a gold LEED certification (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design), awarded by the U.S. Green Building Council. A hundred solar modules fuel almost 50 percent of the electricity in the main conference facility. A campuswide practice of recycling, composting and using renewable products reduces the use of natural resources.

GUEST ROOMS

The guesthouse is built according the highest ecological standards, including a solar-powered hot water system. Each of its 20 simply furnished guest rooms has a sink, although most bathrooms are shared. If you prefer more privacy, you can stay in one of two hermitages, or small cabins, on the edge of the woods facing the prairie. Built from sustainable straw bale construction, each one-person cottage has a stove, refrigerator and small bathroom. Whatever lodging you choose, you’re bound to glimpse

wildlife such as deer, fox and an occasional wild turkey outside your window.

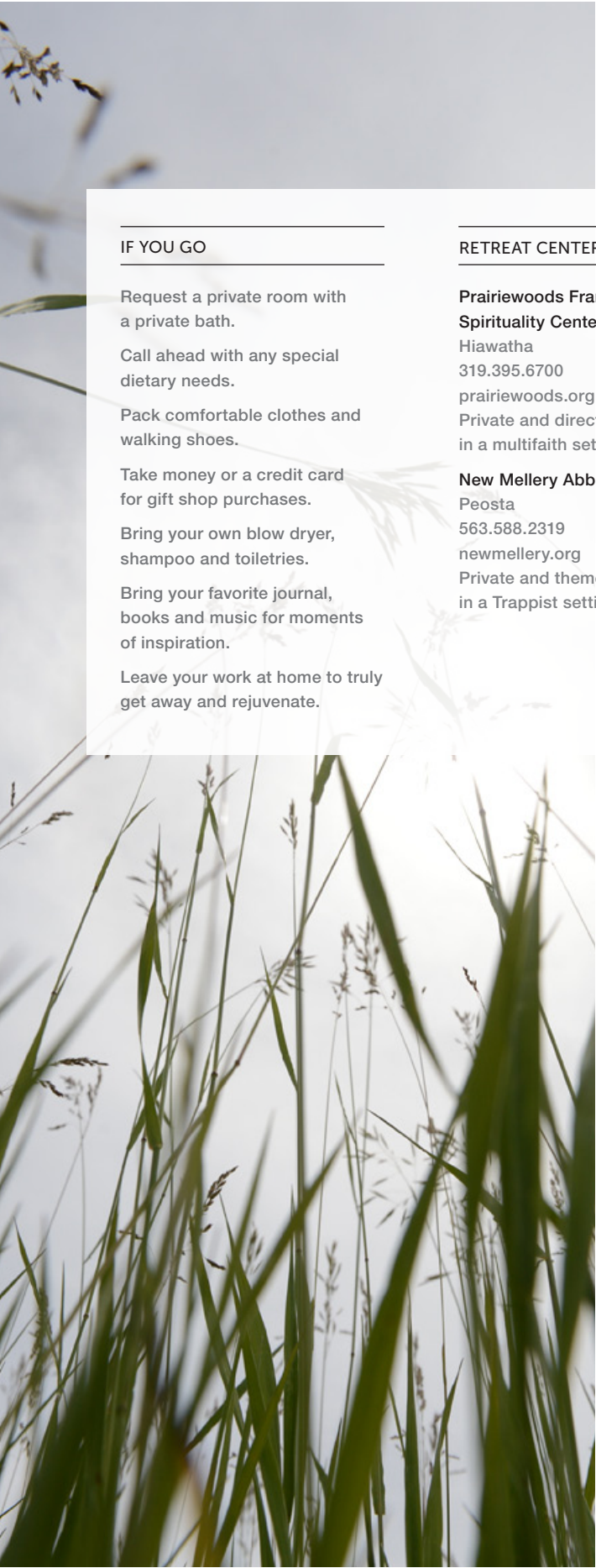
The accommodations may be simple, but the dining experience is not. One of my favorite things about visiting Prairiewoods is feasting on the flavorful and organic meals, made from local ingredients. Chef Diane Welp also accommodates her guests’ dietary needs. The mac and cheese is such a favorite that it became the centerpiece of the 2011 “Prairiewoods Cookbook.”

Having visited spas and retreat centers across the United States, I can honestly say that the best massage I have ever received was at Prairiewoods. I melted into the table as I enjoyed a full hour-and-a-half session. The many choices include both Swedish and shiatsu massage, reflexology, healing touch, foot spa treatment and guided meditation.

You also can spend time in quiet contemplation in the conference center’s meditation room, where floor-to-ceiling windows provide inviting views of nature. One visitor told me that she loves to sit in this room and “get lost in time” by watching the birds on the feeders, the squirrels and the deer. “I feel so connected with nature by watching the animals,” she said.

SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE

If you’re seeking one-to-one guidance, you can schedule a private session with a spiritual director (\$45 for an hour). Prairiewoods has eight certified spiritual directors. Different from therapists, these directors focus on providing spiritual



IF YOU GO

Request a private room with a private bath.

Call ahead with any special dietary needs.

Pack comfortable clothes and walking shoes.

Take money or a credit card for gift shop purchases.

Bring your own blow dryer, shampoo and toiletries.

Bring your favorite journal, books and music for moments of inspiration.

Leave your work at home to truly get away and rejuvenate.

RETREAT CENTERS IN IOWA

Prairiewoods Franciscan Spirituality Center

Hiawatha  
319.395.6700  
prairiewoods.org  
Private and directed retreats in a multifaith setting.

New Mellery Abbey

Peosta  
563.588.2319  
newmellery.org  
Private and themed retreats in a Trappist setting.

Shalom Spirituality Center

Dubuque  
563.582.3592  
shalomretreats.org  
Private retreats and programs offered in the hospitality of the Franciscan tradition.

The Raj

Fairfield  
641.472.9580  
theraj.com  
An Ayur-Veda medical center offering treatments in a spa setting.

guidance in how to meet the challenges of life. Many people have found that talking confidentially and freely with a trained spiritual director in a serene setting can promote healing on many levels.

Prairiewoods is an inviting getaway even during the wintertime. During a visit last winter, Sister Nancy Hoffman knocked on my door wearing a winter coat, big hat and heavy boots. She invited me into the woods to visit her favorite tree, which she calls the “Grandmother Tree.” She said that she has a notebook filled with details on all of the trees on the property—over 500—including their species, when they were planted and what she has named them.

“Just think about it,” she said. “If we all just planted one new tree each year—what an impact we would make on the world. The trees here at Prairiewoods give me hope for a bright future for the Earth.” ■