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## THE OFF THE GRID RETREAT

## EREMITO, ITALY

This isn't usually a compliment. It's the beginning of a three-day stay at Eremito, and I can't stop yawning. I pace the lawn, looking out over the forested valley beyond, and yawn. I yawn at fellow guests trying to introduce themselves, at the owner asking after my journey from the nearest road (30 minutes in a 4WD, tackling potholed tracks, a bridge-less river, and half a mountainside, since you ask), at the resident bulldog, Peppo, who's desperate to make friends.

I retire to my *celluzza* — a room modelled on a monk's cell, with a stone-carved desk set into the wall, a bed slotted into an alcove — for a quick nap. And awake to the bell ringing for dinner.

Eremito tends to have that effect. On my first visit, last year, I fell asleep within minutes of my afternoon arrival, and was out for the count until the following morning. It's that rare, spectacular place where, instead of a gradual winding down as the holiday progresses, you switch off the second you arrive. Literally, that is, as well as mentally. One of Eremito's central precepts is that it's a place of digital detox. There's no wi-fi, no TV and no phone reception — unless, that is, you sniff out the one place by the gate that catches a single bar.

This is, of course, a new kind of luxury: an off-the-grid retreat, deep within an Umbrian wilderness you never knew existed, for the time-poor, email-frazzled, 21st-century rat-racer. Eremito sits within 7,415 acres of forest reserve, where boars, deers and even wolves roam freely. It's largely self-sufficient — water drawn from a well, food mainly grown in

the organic garden. And — modelled on a traditional Umbrian monastery — it's built to blend into the landscape. You sleep in a cell, and eat in a refectory; Gregorian chants are piped through the public areas. Niches house little statues of saints; the candleholders are cross-shaped. But despite having all these typically Umbrian monastic trappings (remote monasteries are common in the region), it's not a religious retreat. Rather, it's a hotel — with all the five-star retained comforts but none of the excesses. One of the reasons I sleep so well, for instance, is that my single bed has a memory foam mattress. The sackcloth acting as a bathroom door conceals a rainfall shower. The vegetarian food — grand, four-course affairs accompanied by pitchers of wine from a neighbour's vineyard — could convert the most dedicated carnivore, such as myself.

The biggest luxury of all, though, for those of us who find it hard to wind down, is its remote location. An uncomfortable ride means it's not practical for sightseeing. The lack of pool, spa, tennis court or yoga programme, apart from occasional themed weekends, means there's zero compunction to be doing something. You don't even need to make awkward small talk, since dinners are eaten in silence.

I emerge the next morning, revived. The only noise is the constant loop of forest birdsong; the only thing to do is observe the mist gently bouncing along the valley floor below. With nothing to do for the next two days, I sit and watch. And it's bliss. *JB* ►

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IS FOR THE  
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RAT-RACER

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Dining area at Eremito