

A Day at Carceri/the Hermitage in Assisi



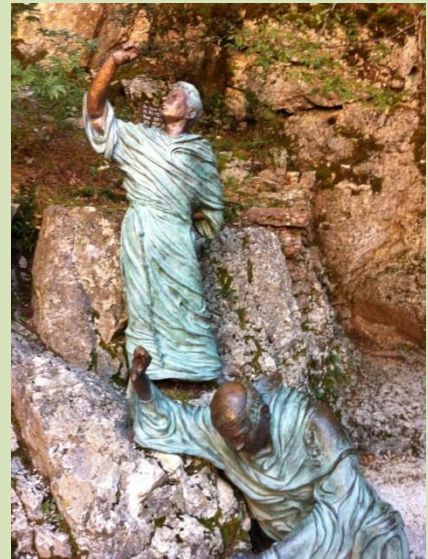
Gracious God, thank you for your companionship on this journey. May my heart and mind, and all my senses, be open to the gifts and challenges you bring. And may I return refreshed and replenished, ready to take my place once again among the people you love. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.

The best context for a pilgrimage to Carceri/the Hermitage is as the middle day of a three-day/two night visit to the town – but do stay for longer in Assisi if you have the time. For pilgrims who cannot manage the 4.5 km uphill walk from the upper township of Assisi, catching a taxi is a viable option. Make sure you ask to be driven to Carceri – there is a hotel called The Hermitage in Assisi and we know of at least one person who was deposited there by mistake. Negotiate with the taxi driver to wait for an hour or so while you explore the buildings and the main tracks before being driven back down to the town. If you wish to spend longer, arrange for the driver to come back at a particular time.

If you are walking from the upper township, make your way to the Porta dei Cappuccini, go through the gate and head uphill on the road ahead. Stay on this road (a winding uphill trek) until you reach the Carceri carpark on your left – there is a shortcut up through the trees for the last few metres of the track. There are bathroom facilities at the top but bring anything else you might need with you. Take a full water bottle and some simple snack food to sustain you for the hours you will be at Carceri. It is not a picnic spot so you need to be discreet about eating and drinking, and you need to take all your rubbish/trash back with you. On the walk down there is at least one restaurant should you wish to eat and to reflect a little longer before heading back into the busy town.

Walking up to Carceri allows you to begin the pilgrimage (in a spiritual sense) from the township itself. This is how St Francis would have approached the monastery. Aim to have an early breakfast and be on the road up Mont Subiaso by approximately 8.00am. The sun moves onto the road quite early in the day so from

late spring to early autumn it will be more pleasant to walk before it is too hot. As you walk, consider the things in your life that make you weary or that create distance between you and God. Arriving at Carceri feeling hot and tired is the perfect way to open yourself to the experience of being refreshed and nurtured by God's creation and by his presence. The downhill walk home is also a valuable time to reflect in silence or to talk quietly with your companions about your experience.



Retreating into the hills

The idea of retreating from the hustle and bustle of everyday life in order to draw close to God is a consistent theme throughout scripture. The psalmist frequently refers to God's presence on a holy hill, and to the idea of God as a shelter or refuge. For example, in Psalm 63 we read: "O God you are my God: and earnestly will I seek you. My soul thirsts for you, my body yearns for you: like a land that is dry and thirsty for water. With this longing I have come before you in the sanctuary: that I may see your power and your glory." And in Isaiah 2: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us his ways so that we may walk in his paths."

Jesus also sought space away from the crowds of followers and interested spectators who pursued him throughout his ministry. In Chapter 1 of the Gospel of Mark we read: "In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed." And in Luke 6: "Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God."

It is no surprise then that St Francis of Assisi was also in the habit of escaping into the hills to pray and to seek God's presence. As you move through the ancient buildings (originally built by the Benedictines and gifted to the Franciscans) that are set into the side of the hill, and as you wander the different tracks and pathways, take time to think about what this place meant to Francis. What might God be saying to you in and through the quietness, the beauty and the simplicity of Carceri?

Just as it was for Francis 800 years ago, a day spent at Carceri is a gift from God for 21st century pilgrims and seekers. As you return home, think about what you can do in response to God's goodness and provision to you through your journey to Carceri. What active steps might you take to bring this kind of refreshment to those in your

own community or homeland? How can you, and others in your everyday life, find or develop a Carceri-like place to which you can retreat and be replenished?



Travel tips

Getting to Assisi: A day trip to the Hermitage from Rome is possible if you catch an early-enough train, but it would be a shame to miss out on other special aspects of the Assisi experience. There is a frequent and reliable train service from many main centres in Italy. Where you have a choice, it is preferable to take a direct train rather than having to change trains en route. From the railway station which is on the flat in lower Assisi, it's a short bus trip to the upper township. There are three stops in the upper township – one at the lower end of the town near the main Basilica of St Francis, one on the

downhill slope nearer to St Damiano's, and one at the upper end of the village. A map of Assisi is essential (they should be available at the Information booths close to the bus-stops), and even then it's easy to go astray. If your accommodation venue has provided you with instructions for reaching the place you're staying, getting off at the correct bus stop (we didn't!) will save you some unnecessary wandering! Having said that, Assisi is a beautiful town to be lost in!

Accommodation: St Anthony's Guest House, via Galeazzo Alessi, is a peaceful and reasonably-priced option as is Albergo Ancajani, a restored convent.

Other 'must-see' places to visit while in Assisi on pilgrimage – the little church of San Stefano which would have been well-known to Francis; St Damiano's, the beautiful chapel and facilities where Francis felt God speaking to him; the Basilica of St Chiara which houses the original St Damiano Crucifix (it was while contemplating this crucifix that Francis received the vision to rebuild the church); the Basilica of St Francis (this can seem overwhelmingly opulent in the light of Francis' desire for simplicity in our Christian walk. A focus on the Giotto frescoes of Francis' life is a possible 'way into' experiencing the Basilica).