A woman traveling alone all the way from Holland to Bulgaria! And sleeping in a monastery! Villagers, visitors, and monks marveled, for although the small mountain cloister had held its doors open for decades, most lodgers were native families.

The Orthodox monastery near the village of Bachkovo, Bulgaria, founded by Georgian monks in 1083, had been plundered in the name of Allah, liberated in the name of the czar and was now very much in order under the Soviet state, both as monastery and hostelry.

Sacred and secular mingled within the same walls that had secluded seventeenth-century monks from worldly things. Four long, white stucco buildings with wooden galleries and grated windows enclosed the courtyard with chapel and fountains. Over the broken cobblestones chickens, geese, lambs, and pigs wandered about among the tourists, monks, and priests.

I couldn't determine how large the order was, for the men who seemed to be living and working there wore no habit. Old women in long, blue aprons and white kerchiefs cleaned. Women and children, villagers perhaps, helped with the gardening. A half-dozen robed and bearded men strolled about, arms clasped behind their backs, looking very wise, gentle, and meditative, pausing now and then to bless anyone with a head so inclined.

Lodging was cheap—about a dollar a night—and with an austerity befitting monks. In the room where I slept were a small table with four straight chairs and fifteen iron cots, so crowded one could hardly squeeze between them. The scrubbed, worn floorboards creaked. The coarse wool blankets and stiff sheets had been mended many times.

Toilets were the stoop-gutter type, and the washrooms had but three sinks with icy water. At nine-thirty gates were shut and lights went out. Still, everything was immaculate, and after a day of wandering through woods, meadows, and mountains I found the hard cot and early hour quite befitting the sojourner.

The monks, while producing almost everything for themselves, had no food for guests. Visitors brought their own provisions. In my dormitory room a group of middle-aged women in scarves and aprons dined on cold chicken, pickles, and fruit. Under the eaves in the courtyard families breakfasted on cheese and Trappist wine. Two small restaurants at the foot of the hill served more drink than food. Coffee was nowhere to be found.

The crowds that weekend were mostly native. Orthodox visitors were on a pilgrimage; they crossed themselves reverently before entering the chapel. For others the monastery held artistic and historical interest; cameras clicked everywhere. For the majority, though, it was an inexpensive weekend away from home. Bareheaded women in slacks and men and children in shorts visited the chapel to see the icons and frescoes. Villagers and tourists from the nearby camping area came up the hill for the afternoon.

Everyone was impressed that I was traveling so far alone—and that I knew enough Bulgarian to tell them so. Old women patted my arms and pinched my cheeks; small children gazed in shy wonder. A white-haired man in seaman's sweater repeated my story to a tall, bent, bearded priest who looked at me with gentle, twinkling eyes. "Alone on a journey," he murmured in Bulgarian. It sounded like a blessing.

One afternoon I walked the kilometer to the small village tucked into the mountainside and found all three shops closed. As I sat along a path wondering what to do about food, I suddenly had company.

Plump women in printed dresses, aprons, and scarves, laughing deeply from enormous stomachs; ancient, bent women in black, wizened as though shrunk by age, grinning crookedly from toothless mouths; shy children in ruffled frocks, peering from between their mothers' skirts. They all found it a tremendous joke—a woman traveling alone and staying in a monastery!

One old woman handed me two tomatoes from her apron. Other women went off to their houses and returned with bread, sheeps' cheese, cucumbers and salt.
They had their children bring me water from the fountain across the road.

Like mother hens they hovered over me, insisting that I eat not only bread, but tomatoes too; not only cucumbers, but also cheese, and I must not forget to salt my tomato. Suddenly a woman wrapped up the uneaten food and told me to save it for later. Could she see I was sated? Or did she decide for herself I had had enough?

When I approached a shop on Monday morning, an old woman who knew me from the monastery led me inside and called for the clerk to serve me. “Hollandije,” she smiled. “Bulgaria, dobro” (good), I replied, and she blew me a kiss.

Milling about the shop were about fifty villagers, their shopping nets full of empty jars. At last I knew where yogurt was sold. When the delivery truck arrived about an hour later, the crowd had nearly doubled.

It was not so much a queue that formed as a clamorous throng. I’d pushed and been pushed for about an hour when someone asked me something, and I said I was from Holland. A few dozen villagers were still waiting, but they shouted for the clerk to serve me first. Fortunately I’d finished shopping; it was after eleven, and shops would be closed until 4:00 P.M.

Beyond the monastery a path ran through woods and meadows, past fountains and wayside chapels, and high into the mountains. For most wanderers the last chapel, where they were greeted by a priest, was the last point. Only hardy hikers tackled the rugged mountainside.

I had climbed for nearly two hours without seeing another soul and lay on a mossy log, relishing the solitude. All was silent, save the brook, birds, and breeze...until, suddenly, there were strains of rock ’n roll, becoming louder by the second. The same idiots the world over, I fumed. Communist or capitalist, they have no respect for nature!

Four young Bulgarians, shirtless and shaggy-headed, were descending the mountain. We stared at each other before speaking: I indignant that they dare disturb my peace; they amazed at seeing anyone on the path.

We spoke no common language, but among us we knew a few dozen words of Bulgarian and German. They invited me to join them, and I forgot my annoyance as we rambled down the mountain, sharing their rum and my Dutch rolling tobacco and conversing the best we could about the Beatles, the Stones, and the BBC.

In the meadow was a tiny, stone chapel, cool and dark with a stream flowing under the floor, shadowy with ancient frescoes flickering in the candlelight. They turned off the radio before we entered. After we had splashed our faces and drunk deeply from the cold stream they added coins to the pool, took candles from the box, lighted them, and crossed themselves. I made no clumsy attempts to follow suit, but lest I be thought irreverent, I bowed my head.

Outside again, they turned the radio full blast. We finished the rum and reached the monastery to the sound of vespers. By the time they’d bade goodbye to return to their village, I had forgiven them for the rock ’n roll.