

# OBSESSIONS FOREST BATHING

## A Walk in the Woods

The Japanese practice of forest bathing uses trees to calm, boost creativity, and reconnect with nature

By Kelly DiNardo

I rub the pine needles between my thumb and forefinger. “Really get in there,” Josh Heath says, grabbing a fistful of needles, crushing them between his bearlike palms and inhaling deeply. I follow his lead and roll the prickly red-spruce needles between my hands, bring my palms to my face, and breathe in the citrus scent.

After I do, Heath shows me how to do a fox walk, placing my foot down in a semicircular fashion so I strike the ground with my heel, then my big toe,

followed by my little toe. We creep down the path, and he asks me to notice what is moving. I feel more like Elmer Fudd than an observant fox, and I have to quiet my skeptical inner monologue and concentrate on my surroundings. When I do, I notice the ferns bowing and waving. I spot a chipmunk skittering across the path. As we approach the lake, I watch a damselfly skim along the dock.

By the time we reach the dock, I realize that having something specific to look for helps me focus and stay present. The sun warms my face as we watch a few kayakers paddle along the small inland lake in Pennsylvania’s Poconos where I’ve come for a forest-bathing lesson.

The Japanese practice of *shinrin-yoku* works to soak up nature with all the senses. Whereas hiking is usually about reaching a destination, and a nature walk would take an inquisitive look at plants and animals, forest therapy encourages participants to engage slowly and deliberately with nature. Guided forest-bathing sessions typically include deep breathing exercises, suggestions for aspects of nature to focus on, and invitations to share what you’ve noticed.

This mindful approach to nature has interesting health benefits. Research studies in Japan and Italy have shown forest bathing lowers blood pressure, heart rate, and concentrations of the stress hormone cortisol. It increases sleep duration and boosts the number of natural killer cells, a type of white blood cell that fights infected or tumor cells. There are theories as to why it works, but science has yet to prove them.

In the meantime, the practice continues to spread. Introduced in Japan in the 1980s, it’s now a common custom there, with the government certifying more than 1,700 guides to date. In 2012 wilderness guide Amos Clifford founded the California-based Association of Nature and Forest Therapy, which certifies programs and trains guides.

I called Clifford to ask how he discovered forest bathing and, most important, why I need a guide to go play in the great outdoors. He explained that you can do it all on your own, but a guide slows you down and deepens the discipline. Several resorts offer forest bathing, and I traveled to Pennsylvania’s Lodge at Woodloch, one of the first resorts in the U.S. to have gone through Clifford’s certification.

I fight my cynicism and try to approach it with an open mind. That Heath, my guide, isn’t straight out of central casting for this role helps. Over six feet with spiky blond hair that looks like he’s growing out

## Three Spots for Tree Time

Find certified forest-bathing guides at [natureandforesttherapy.org](http://natureandforesttherapy.org).

### MAINE

Jeff Brogan leads three-hour forest walks along the coast of Maine, including at Acadia National Park. [mainecoastexplorers.com/forest-bathing](http://mainecoastexplorers.com/forest-bathing)

### LOS ANGELES

Several local arboretums offer an urban forest-bathing experience. The two-hour sessions at the Los Angeles Arboretum end with a tea ceremony utilizing plants foraged on-site. [arboretum.org/events/forest-bathing](http://arboretum.org/events/forest-bathing)

### SINGAPORE

Guide Youmin Yap helps busy Singaporeans slow down in parks such as the Singapore Botanic Gardens. [xiunatureconnections.com](http://xiunatureconnections.com)

a boot-camp buzz, the former park ranger admits he didn’t think much of forest bathing at first, but he realized that whenever something was gnawing at him, he would go fishing or head out into the woods. He found that forest bathing essentially took that instinct one step further and encouraged more mindfulness.

On a small campfire, he heats up a thermos of tea made from local herbs and pours us both a cup. Heath, who used to run a skills-building program for middle school kids, says children ask why all the time. Adults don’t do that as easily, but nature encourages us to do so, even subtly.

I wonder if he realizes he’s touching on an idea known as attention restoration theory, which is one of the arguments for why nature is so healing. At its simplest, the theory says our urban environments are draining because they bombard us with a level of stimulation that requires constant, directed attention (responding to emails, navigating traffic). Nature, however, engages our attention in a much more effortless way, and this allows us to restore and reset.

While forest bathing is having a moment, many cultures believe being outside is a balm for mind, body, and spirit. I suspect it’s why so many Swiss skip church and head to the mountains on Sundays. It’s the idea behind the Norwegian word *friluftsliv*, which means “free air life” but really defies translation, as it’s a deeply rooted philosophy that embodies a profound appreciation for nature and a way of living in and with the world. Or part of what the Germans mean with the word *waldeinsamkeit*, which is a feeling of solitude when you’re alone in the woods.

The next day I attempt forest bathing on my own. I nestle into the hammock, set the timer on my phone for 15 minutes, and try to settle in. The muscles in my back are tight. I feel like I should be doing something. I close my eyes and watch the intensity of the sunlight shift behind them and listen to the birds chattering above me. Despite my initial resistance, when the timer goes off, I’m relaxed.

That night, I meander back down to the lake, look up, and see the full brilliance of a starry sky unobscured by artificial light. I lie down on the dock, listen to the wind and the waves. I glimpse a shooting star disappear behind the trees. It is an astonishing natural display—and I fully understand the need to soak it up.

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The state with the most forest cover, Maine is lush with green spaces for forest bathing, such as Acadia National Park.

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