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TRAVEL



Fancy a spot of forest bathing?

No water required! Stressed Tokyo-dweller *Danielle Demetriou* tries the Japanese art of *shinrin-yoku* and discovers that spiritual and physical well-being really can be achieved by spending more time among the trees



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## COVER STORY

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

My blood pressure has been tested, my pulse rate recorded and the skin temperature of my left arm noted. I've been quizzed about my sleeping habits and have reluctantly drawn a face to show how I feel (a squiggly mouth reflects my bewilderment).

This may sound like an exhaustive medical examination (face doodles aside). Yet I'm not being quizzed by a conventional doctor, nor am I sitting in a hospital. Instead, I am preparing to take part in an unusual – and increasingly popular – Japanese pastime that promises complete mental and physical rejuvenation: “forest bathing”.

More precisely, my health is being checked by a “forest therapist” before she guides me along an ancient pilgrim route in southern Japan – during which I will stretch, meditate, be told to b-r-e-a-t-h-e, inhale tree aromas, eat healthy food, appreciate pretty flowers and generally be submerged in all things forest.

Japan and forests have long gone together as smoothly as sushi and sake. With vast expanses of the archipelago swathed in mountains – plus the predominant Shinto religion rooted in nature worship – it's perhaps little surprise that forests hold a special place in the national psyche.

It was in the Eighties that the phrase “forest bathing” (*shinrin-yoku*) was poetically coined by government officials at the Forest Agency of Japan. Its goal? To encourage healthier lifestyles by taking regular walks in specially designated forests.

As a working mother of two living in central Tokyo – with a to-do list taller than a tree and a daily juggling act that frequently veers into freestyle chaos – a health reboot would not go amiss.

It's probably not ideal that my default stress-coping mechanism is to eat my body's weight in chocolate and the most relaxing part of my day is cooking the kids' dinner while simultaneously sending emails, running the bath and singing along to *Moana* with my two-year-old.

Alarmingly similar to a salaryman, I tick all the overworked urban boxes – not enough sleep (check), not enough technology-free time (check) and definitely not enough hours in the day (check).

It's not just romantic notions of birdsong and forest smells that seduce me: it's the fact that forest bathing is scientifically proven to improve health. According to countless Japanese studies, it boosts immune



Enveloped by the forest, above and below. Cover image: the Kumano Kodo route

systems, reduces stress hormones, enhances mental wellness, bolsters brain health. One report even claims it lowers blood glucose levels among diabetes sufferers.

Suitably sold, I head to the remote forested Kii Peninsula in Wakayama prefecture to walk part of the Kumano Kodo, a network of Unesco-protected pilgrim routes dating back thousands of years.

The starting point is the Kumano Hongu Heritage Centre – a contemporary wooden structure in a lush green valley surrounded by mountains – also known as the region's “forest bathing” HQ.

Here, I meet my forest therapist (one of 30): Yasuyo Nishiura, a youthful 57-year-old who glows with health. Briskly carrying out a battery



of tests while slapping turquoise support stickers under my knees, she explains: “Forest bathing affects all your senses – sight, smell, taste, touch. The experience is designed to open your mind and your body – from walking on small stones to massage your feet and boost blood circulation to breathing in forest aromas. Let's go!”

We start near a small shrine where I copy Yasuyo-san washing her hands in spring water, tossing a coin and clapping her hands in prayer before she leads me through some yoga-like standing stretches and breathing.

Then, we set off – and are soon enveloped in forest. Venturing along a narrow pathway, we are surrounded by dense lines of tall, straight and skinny Japanese cypress and cedar trees.

As we walk, I wonder when – and how – I'll experience my health reboot. My brooding, however, is interrupted by regular exclamations from Yasuyo-san as she waves her hands in white fingerless gloves.

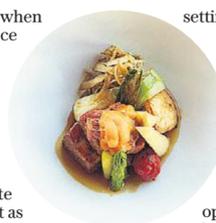
“Look, baby sugi cedar tree!” “Pretty white flower!” and “Leaf as soft as a baby face!” are typical highlights, interspersed with borderline orders such as “Jacket off!” “Sip some water!” and “Take a photo from here!”

Soon, I hear “Stop!” – and I see around 40 “log beds” scattered among the trees, fashioned from neatly tilted clutches of chopped trunks – the

## Essentials

● The writer's trip was organised by Wakayama Tourism Federation (en.visitwakayama.jp) and Walk Japan (walkjapan.com), which offers group guided eight-night walking tours along the Kumano Kodo from 362,000 yen (£2,500) per person, including accommodation, breakfast, dinner and three lunches. Forest therapists can be reserved by contacting the Kenko Labo (Kumano Health Laboratory) at the Kumano Hongu Heritage Centre (0081 735 420 735; kumano1221@amaill.plala.or.jp).

● Amanemu (0081 656 715 8855; aman.com/resorts/amanemu) offers doubles from 134,244 yen (£925) and activities ranging from Zazen meditation and spa treatments to Kumano Kodo hiking. See telegraph.co.uk/tt-amanemu.



setting for our “log meditation”. A pink polka dot plastic sheet is ceremoniously placed on a bed, before I'm instructed to lie down, inhale deeply and close my eyes. Surprisingly comfortable, I almost drift to sleep when music unexpectedly fills the air: I open my left eye a fraction and spy my forest teacher

swaying among the trees as she plays a melancholy tune on a bamboo flute. The overall effect is surreal but calming – so much so that I'm reluctant to stand up when instructed to move on around 15 minutes later.

We continue walking and the forest tableau shifts as the path rises,

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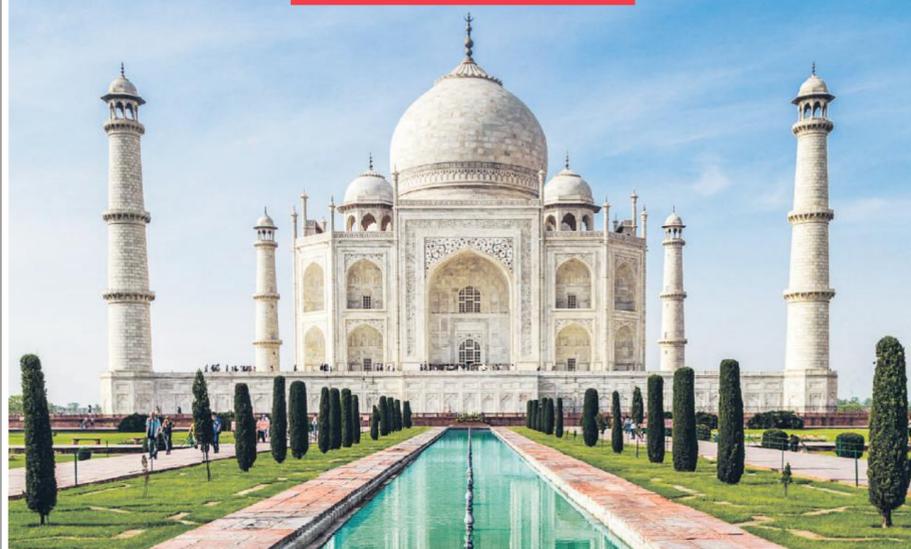
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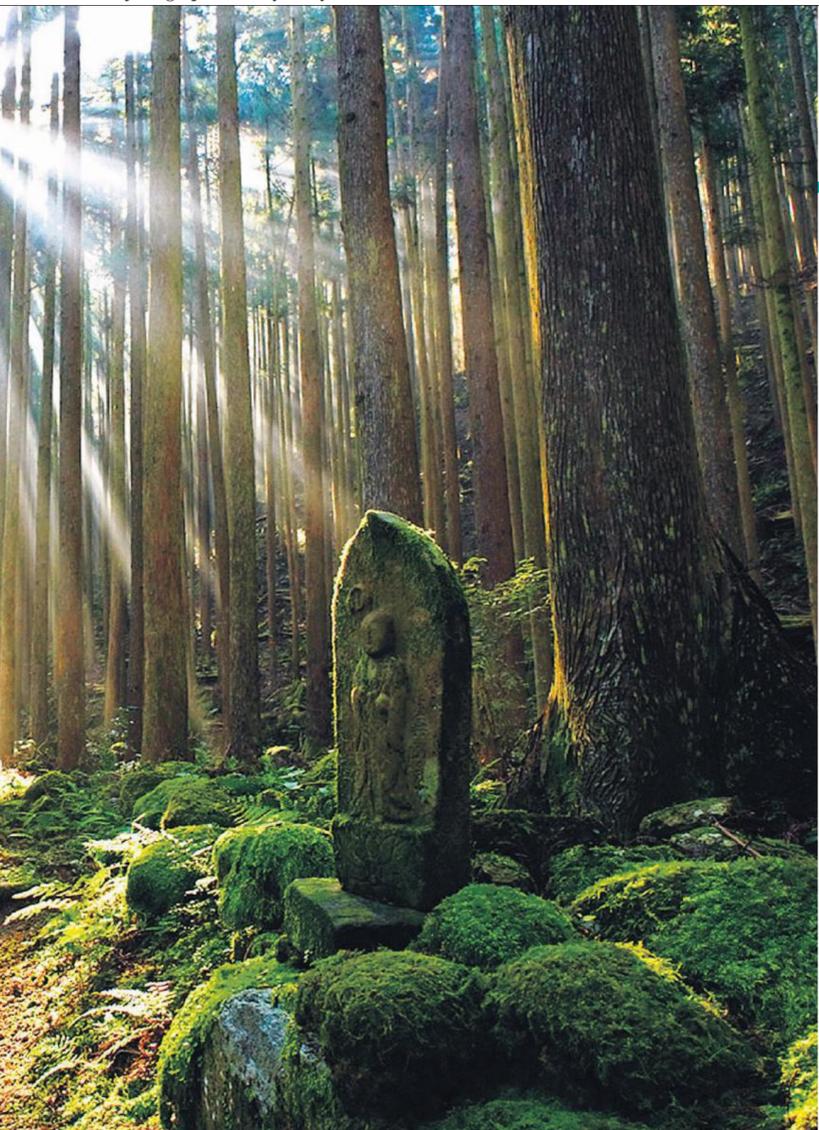
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'I spy my teacher swaying among the trees playing a flute. It is surreal but calming'



HOW TO RELAX IN JAPAN

Gazing at trees, meditating while lying on logs and breathing in forest smells are not the only ways the Japanese relax. Here are some alternatives:

- Hot spring bathing: The nation's default relaxation mode has long been to strip naked and have a dip in one of the countless natural hot spring *onsen* that are scattered around the islands – perhaps the most pleasant legacy of seismically active Japan being home to 10 per cent of the world's active volcanoes.
- Crying it out: Japanese society is not renowned for being one that shows emotion with ease. But not for much longer. Step forward *rui-katsu* ("tear seeking") – an increasingly popular phenomenon that involves groups of people gathering to watch sad films in order to have a good, stress-relieving cry together.
- Moss meditation: Moss (yes, the green stuff that grows on rocks) is having something of a moment in Japan. There are bestselling books about the joys of staring at moss and sell-out tours to famous moss spots. Moss lovers – many are young professional women – crouch in forests across the country, peering at moss through magnifying glasses, with some likening it to a form of philosophical meditation.
- Silent cafés: So-called "silent cafés" are places where the customers are unable to utter a single word, instead writing everything – from their food orders to "where are the lavatories please?" – on provided notepads. The concept seems to reflect a growing urge among younger generation city dwellers to find a moment's peace in the 24-hour chaos of urban life.

giving way to hillside farmhouses, fruit trees and vibrant green tea fields. At one point, I indulge in some shopping, Kumano Kodo style: an empty path-side shelter, with a single wall, a flap of fabric and a shelf with orange biwa fruits and green tea.



The Kumano Kodo trail, main image; meditating on a log bed, left; the Amanemu hotel, above; and one of the dishes served there, inset left

I pop a 100-yen coin into a tin for some fruit (delicious and sweet) and we continue until we reach a wooden building, where Yasuyo-san produces lunch: a bamboo leaf bento box containing a colourful medley of rice and local vegetables (total calorie count: a precise 700).

Before I tuck in, Yasuyo-san produces a white device and tests the skin temperature of my arm: "It's dropped from 30.3 to 29.8C. That's good! It means that you're using your body correctly to walk."

Over lunch, I learn that Yasuyo-san is a former high-flying television drama producer who lived for decades in Tokyo (hence her naturally authoritative demeanour) but returned to her native Wakayama in her early 40s. She laughs when I ask if she always had such boundless energy: "No! I worked very hard in Tokyo and had backaches and stiff shoulders. But they've gone. I'm no longer anxious and I'm very happy. It's because I surround myself with forests."

After a coffee made with hot spring water (a soft, mellow taste), I lose track of time as we continue through sun-dappled forests, stopping for stretches and to gaze at flowers. At steep points, we march for 40-second bursts, before stopping and breathing in deeply while circling our



arms, in order to conserve energy. The walk ends in the deeply serene confines of forest-shrouded Kumano Hongu Taisha shrine, with its thatched roof and altars filling a white pebble courtyard. Finally, back at the centre, my blood pressure is checked – and although it's slightly higher than before, Yasuyo-san interprets this positively: "It's very good! You've been walking a lot!"

That night at an old riverside inn, I am unsure as to whether I am healthier, although I sleep deeply, following a hot spring soak and a bowl of detoxifying black charcoal udon noodles. The next morning, I meet two ladies who dispel any lingering scepticism. Piling baskets

Continued on page 4

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COVER STORY

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

of cedar leaves into a giant steamer in a small workshop on the Kumano Kodo route, they make 100 per cent natural essential oils from surrounding trees.

And – the bit that my rational brain loves most – they are collaborating with university scientists who have discovered that Kumano Kodo cedar tree oils can counter the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease.

"Scientists have found special scientific elements in these trees," explains Manami Takehara, founder of tree oil company M'affably. "This must be connected to their history as pilgrim routes. In ancient times, people came here to be healed, smelling the forest aromas as they walked. They do the same today."

It's enough to convince me – and armed with a bag of brain-boosting oils, I continue to my final destination: the luxury hotel Amanemu in neighbouring Mie Prefecture.

With its sea views and forests, life at the hotel (minimal, contemporary and impeccably

# Take the plunge closer to home

The good news is that you don't need to travel halfway around the world to experience *shinrin-yoku*. Research has demonstrated that even as little as 15 minutes spent among trees can lower cortisol levels, boost the immune system and reduce anxiety, and there are plenty of places in Britain where you can experience the healing power of trees, albeit in a less structured, more DIY style than in Japan. So here are our suggestions for where to go to experience forest bathing in the UK. Just remember to switch off your phone before you go – and leave your camera behind.

## Hampshire and Norfolk

Forest Holidays – the holiday arm of the Forestry Commission – has trained rangers as forest therapy guides, and from early September, guests booking cabins at its Blackwood Forest site in Hampshire and Thorpe Forest in Norfolk can take a three-hour forest bathing walk with a qualified guide (booking from July 10). The gentle strolls encourage people to experience contact with nature. Each outing will end with a tea ceremony – the brew made from foraged local plants. From £545 for a three-night weekend break in September in a cabin for four at Thorpe Forest (03330 110495; forestholidays.co.uk).

## Powys, Wales

Glamping specialist Canopy & Stars has just launched a *shinrin-yoku* collection of woodland sites. Among them is Eco Retreats in Powys, with a forest tepee sleeping two set in a private leafy glade. If forest bathing isn't transformative enough, you can also book in for sessions of reiki, spiritual healing or meditation sessions with local practitioners. Tepee from £84 a night (0117 204 7830; canopyandstars.co.uk).



## Cornwall

Another Canopy & Stars suggestion is Lost Meadow in Cornwall, where you stay in a spherical, cedar-clad pod suspended in the trees. There are lovely views down to the river and 20 acres of woodland for secluded forest bathing. Reach your bedroom in the trees via a wooden staircase and share your space with owls. The tree pod sleeps two and costs from £95 a night (booking as above).

## Lanarkshire

You can find otters, badgers and more than 100 species of bird at the Falls of Clyde reserve near Lanark in Scotland – not to mention four spectacular waterfalls alongside well-marked woodland trails. "This would be where I'd head for forest bathing," says Rory Syme of the Scottish Wildlife Trust. "It's



very beautiful and peaceful." The reserve is on the Clyde Walkway, which leads to the nearby New Lanark World Heritage site, a 18th-century former cotton-spinning mill village on the banks of the Clyde (scottishwildlifetrust.org.uk/reserve/falls-of-clde).

## Devon

Imogen Tinkler of the National Trust suggests tree bathing in Horner Wood on the Holnicote Estate in Devon, one of the largest and most beautiful ancient oak woods in Britain. Historically it was used to produce wood for fuel and crafting hand tools, and winter fodder for stock. Today the ancient oak pollards provide a home for wood warblers, pied flycatchers and deer. Another trust property ideal for a spot of *shinrin-yoku* is Colby Woodland Garden in Pembrokeshire. Set in a leafy valley, it has striking sea views and you can de-stress beneath the tallest Japanese redwood in Britain (nationaltrust.org.uk).

## Somerset

Children as well as adults can benefit from spending time in the woods and a special trail in 16-acre Towerhouse Wood in Somerset helps them engage with their environment. This area of old oak pollards and an unusual bubbling pond appeared in the Domesday Book and local volunteer Piers Partridge has created the Ty



Clockwise from main: Happy Valley, Lost Meadow, Colby Woodland; Eco Retreats

Sculpture Trail, 14 stone carvings of animals in memory of his son, who died aged 21. By searching for the figures, he hopes that children will get to know the animals that live in the wood but can't always be seen, including a dormouse, badger, fox and hedgehog (tysculpturetrail.co.uk). For details of Towerhouse Wood see woodlandtrust.org.uk.

## Norfolk

The owner of Happy Valley glamping retreat in north-west Norfolk is an enthusiastic advocate of forest bathing. Katy Coe's shepherd's huts, tree cabin, tepee and bell tents are set among lofty trees and she hands out maps and information to all guests, offers a guided tour of the immediate woodland space and provides hammocks for guests to absorb the



forest atmosphere. A new treehouse will open later this month. From £79 a night for a two-person bell tent; book through hostunusual.com

## Nottinghamshire

A spa day might not be entirely in the spirit of *shinrin-yoku*, but the new Aqua Sana spa at Center Parc in Sherwood Forest does include a forest meditation immersion zone with a glass wall overlooking the forest and a 32ft high treetop sauna with views across the canopy. There are two open-air hot tubs in the forest and a wide range of de-stressing treatments. Spa days cost from £85 per person and spa sessions for Center Parc guests from £38 a session (0344 826 6205; aquasana.co.uk).

## The New Forest

You'll find miles of ancient woodland, much of which has remained unchanged since William the Conqueror declared it his royal hunting ground in 1079. Footpaths and cycle tracks lead to peaceful glades conducive to meditation and forest bathing – there are particularly beautiful forested areas around Bolderwood car park and visitor site. See forestry.gov.uk/newforest, thenewforest.co.uk and newforestnpa.gov.uk for details.

## Kent

According to the team at Cool Camping, Badgells Wood site on the Kent Downs is a "dreamy woodland escape" where you feel as though "you've driven into the woods and found a tranquil coppice clearing". Perfect for shrugging off the pressures of the modern world. Camp in tents and campervans from £13 a night adult, £6.50 child (coolcamping.com).

Joanna Symons

More information at shinrin-yoku.org

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