

# Nature Calls

Could the cure for burnout be as simple as a walk in the woods? MARISA MELTZER finds zen in the most unlikely of places.



THIS EARTH DAY, APRIL 22, TREAT YOURSELF TO A MOMENT OF REFLECTION OUTSIDE.

**N**ext month, Kate Middleton, Duchess of Cambridge, will unveil a Back to Nature Garden at the Royal Horticultural Society's annual Chelsea Flower Show in London. The showpiece, which she codesigned, is meant to "build on Her Royal Highness's passion for the outdoors and the proven benefits that nature has on physical and mental health," according to the official statement from Buckingham Palace. One of Middleton's collaborators, landscape architect Adam White, has shared that the duchess drew inspiration for the woodland space from the Japanese tradition of forest bathing.

Known as *shinrin-yoku* in Japanese, forest bathing is the act of absorbing nature through all five senses. Despite sounding like a *Portlandia* sketch, the practice has deep roots as a method for combating stress. The term was coined in the '80s, when Japan's government, concerned that its deskbound workers had divorced themselves entirely from nature, launched a campaign encouraging citizens to get outside. Communing

with the environment was, and still is, considered a form of preventive health care. Studies have shown that a walk in the woods can reduce anxiety and depression, lower blood pressure, and boost the immune system.

But what originated as a relatively simple, and free, act is now a commodified wellness trend. Forest bathing appears on a growing number of resort spa menus. And in cities like New York and L.A., certified forest therapy guides provide expert sessions at a cost. Even the duchess's garden is part of a ticketed exhibit that will most likely sell out.

I live in Brooklyn, where every square foot of space comes at a premium, so it doesn't strike me as that odd to pay for a little slice of fresh air. In fact, I once forest bathed on vacation in the Douro Valley in Portugal, where it was offered at the Six Senses hotel. For me, full forest immersion seems to require a trip to a place where getting lost in nature is the point—like Portugal or the Catskills. How beneficial can a forest bath in a big city really be?

To find out, I sign up for a two-hour journey in Central Park with the company Treebath ([tree-bath.com](http://tree-bath.com), \$100 for two hours). "Forest bathing

is like yoga was 30 years ago,” explains Treebath cofounder Nicole Joy Elmgart, a certified nature and forest therapy guide. In other words, people are hearing about it and are curious but don’t really understand what it means to explore the forest together. Elmgart, who also works as a lawyer, founded the company with her husband to provide New Yorkers of all ages with the opportunity to get in touch with nature—and away from their phones.

I meet Elmgart and two other women, all of us clad in some version of a jacket and leggings. It’s a brisk 50-degree Friday morning, not even 10 A.M., and we make our way to the Ramble, a hilly section of the park. As Elmgart invites us to heighten our senses, I’m distracted by the tourists in search of the so-called “hot” Mandarin duck that made headlines last fall. It isn’t lost on me that I’m trying to connect with nature in a city where the appearance of a duck has generated as much excitement as the Beatles coming to town.

The four of us gather at the top of a hill for what Elmgart calls Counsel. She passes around a twig, and we say our intentions (get energized, spend more time in the park). “This land was bought from Lenape Indians,” she says. “And Frederick Law Olmsted”—the designer, along with Calvert Vaux, of Central Park—“re-created his own version of nature here. I want you to think of what it would have been like sitting on this island off the Atlantic before all that.” We close our eyes and settle into an earth meditation of sorts, whereby we are invited to hone our senses to our surroundings. The air smells somewhat sweet, maybe from sap, but also a little like exhaust. After five minutes or so, Elmgart instructs us to open our eyes and take in the landscape as though it were a Polaroid developing. I watch as bark sharpens into focus. Brown leaves sparkle. Birds rustle in trees. Dogs bark. Teenagers vape.

We venture deeper into the park, following Elmgart on a meandering walk with instructions to listen and watch what is in motion. I notice the brilliant red of a cardinal; the purple, almost metallic tint of some branches. My mind wanders to whether I should wear a dress or a pair of new Celine pants to a party later. A squirrel digging madly for something in the ground snaps me back to the present moment.

We’re tasked with finding rocks to assign our worries to and encounter a couple posing for engagement photos. I think about how corny they look, but then, who am I to judge while I’m telling a rock my problems?

Together we observe and share the details of our worry rocks—their temperature, colors, crevices. We drop them one by one into a stream, then disperse for a 15-minute solo reflection, during which I struggle to tune out a pair of Brits loudly trying to find their way to the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Elmgart summons us back with a coyote call that cuts through the jingle of a distant Mister Softee ice cream truck. She’s set up a closing tea ceremony for us with berries, biscotti, trail mix, and fresh rosemary and mint tea she’s brought (you can’t forage in Central Park). We pour the first cup of tea into the ground, an offering to the forest. Upon sipping the second cup,



FOR NEW YORKERS, A SHORT, MINDFUL STROLL THROUGH CENTRAL PARK (ABOVE) CAN STAVE OFF ANXIETY.

I realize just how spa-like this moment is. Snacking and drinking tea in the middle of the park feels like a real treat, exciting in a childlike way. Spending time outside on a crisp day is energizing. I take one last deep inhale before exiting the park. On my way home, I find myself seeing the pigeons and median planters with a whole new set of eyes. And, it turns out, some time in the forest makes boarding a crowded F train a little less stressful.

## Trail Essentials

Even urban hikers can benefit from some special gear.



FROM LEFT: TOM FORD SUNGLASSES (\$375); FITBIT VERSA LITE EDITION (\$160); BURT'S BEES ALL-WEATHER SPF 15 MOISTURIZING LIP BALM (\$4); AVEDA DAILY LIGHT GUARD DEFENSE FLUID BROAD SPECTRUM SPF 30 (\$42).