

The Great Outdoors

BY DOMINIQUE BROWNING



THE WORLD FEELS extraordinarily full of woe. Signals of climate peril, affecting everything from the tiniest bees to the tallest trees, are intensifying. Temperatures climb. Polar icecaps melt. Species crash. Where to turn for comfort, much less optimism?

A few years ago the Danes offered a therapy for stress called *hygge*, a concept that gave us any excuse to drape ourselves in blankets, nestle into armchairs and enjoy the beneficence of cozy moments. This winter, Japan exports its balm for battered souls: *shinrin-yoku*, or forest bathing.

In his reassuring and nicely illustrated guide, **FOREST BATHING: How Trees Can Help You Find Health and Happiness** (Viking, \$20), Dr. Qing Li, chairman of the Japanese Society for Forest Medicine, prescribes an exercise akin to sunbathing or seabathing, but among the pines. This isn't any mundane walk in the woods; Instagramming prohibited, please. Move deliberately. String a hammock between cedars. Better yet, sprawl on the moss and let the weight of your body sink onto the earth. Try not to worry about ticks.

Li offers "a wealth of data that proves" that *shinrin-yoku* can reduce blood pressure, stress and blood-sugar levels. I was pleased to learn about phytoncides, the natural oils that trees release "to protect them from bacteria, insects and fungi." As "part of the communication pathway between trees," they also provide a boost to the human immune system; try a diffuser sprinkled with *hinoki* cypress oil if you're housebound this winter.

Yoshifumi Miyazaki, a professor at Chiba University in Japan and author of **SHINRIN YOKU: The Japanese Art of Forest Bathing** (Timber, \$16.95), shares test results of forest therapy on men with high blood pressure (why must it always be

men?), office workers and "mature" women (ah, there we are). A companion volume, the handsome **AMONG TREES: A Guided Journal for Forest Bathing** (Timber, \$18.95), contains excursion logs and instructions to "count the various shades of green." Friendly enough, but the bossiness may thwart that aimless spirit.

In these books, Japanese forests look open and pristine; pine needles pad the ground invitingly. The forests of my longing are more Germanic in sensibility: shadowy, disconcerting places echoing with the voices of Grimm's fairy tales. They raise the blood pressure. At times it feels best to skip the forest and instead see the trees — each in its unique glory. **AROUND THE WORLD IN 80 TREES** (Laurence King, \$24.99) is an exquisite way to do just that. Beautiful illustrations by the French artist Lucille Clerc, strewn generously throughout, have the limpid calm of vernal pools. The book's author, Jonathan Drori, whose sunny prose sparkles with authority, grew up near the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, where he later served as a trustee. His childhood passion for plants branched into a study of the ways humans and trees interact.

Drori and Clerc's book abounds with discoveries. The London plane trees that line many of the city's squares have adapted well to polluted air; their bark "drops off in flakes the size of a baby's hand," sloughing away layers of grime to unclog pores that allow the exchange of gases, leaving behind the trunk's characteristic army-camouflage pattern. Leyland cypresses owe their popularity to issues of privacy, class and property rights; in 1990s London, strife over these hedges was responsible for a suicide and at least two murders. Moroccan goats climb into the branches of the argan tree to munch on its fruit, the size of a small plum, which protects one or two small oil-rich seeds. In Japan, the Chinese lacquer tree gave rise to a cult of assisted suicide among monks hoping to achieve Buddhahood.

Vajragupta's seductive **WILD AWAKE: Alone, Offline & Aware in Nature** (Windhorse, paper, \$12.95) might inspire you to drop everything and tramp across the fens. Or nestle into your pillows with this lucid, thoughtful and important memoir, setting off on a journey into stillness and contentment. Ordained into a Buddhist order in 1994, Vajragupta began a practice of annual solitary retreats, over decades, beginning in a caravan by the sea in Wales. There he found "sorry-looking sheep, wind-slanted gorse, wind-stunted ash." And "a whole new person I had never really met before — me."

In Spain and Scotland, across Cornwall and Cumbria, Vajragupta muses, in tussocky swales of sentences, on the yellow-eyed glare of a sparrow hawk, "a dark tarn full of tadpoles," the glisten of tens of thousands of pale-pink jellyfish washed up on a beach. All is not silent: One dark night, a huge boulder breaks off and slides down an escarpment, stopping miraculously short of crushing his cabin.

All is not sitting, either, though the retreats began as a way of prolonging meditation, practicing "disciplined idleness." Vajragupta begins to walk farther and farther, confronting his fear of being lost, meeting his own wildness, until the walks themselves become the meditation. He walks to mourn the death of his father, walks both to quiet and enliven his mind. And he becomes "astonished by how alive" the places he visits are.

He urges us to imagine the lives of other creatures as best we can, "to be intimate with all things," as a Zen master put it. Your blood pressure may rise within days of emerging from your forest bath, but Vajragupta demonstrates that the muscles of resilience — and the habits of regeneration — exercised through a sustained, empathic mingling with the natural world will serve you for a lifetime.

"It was a matter of love," Vajragupta says. Learning to empathize feels necessary — for the sake of nature too. That's the message from Merlin Tuttle, the founder of Bat Conservation International. This new edition of his 2015 book, **THE SECRET LIVES OF BATS: My Adventures With the World's Most Misunderstood Mammals** (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, paper, \$15.99), is proof that teenage passion can change the world.

One autumn in Austin, Tex., in the mid-1980s, more than a million Brazilian free-tailed bats moved into crevices under a bridge near the State Capitol. People panicked and called for the bats' extermination. Never mind that they could consume 15 tons of insects nightly. Alarmed by the headlines, Tuttle resigned his position with the Milwaukee Public Museum and moved to Texas to rescue the bats, meeting with city officials to convince them that "bats make wonderful neighbors."

Within a few years, the mayor announced that Austin was the bat capital of America; the bats now bring in 12 million tourist dollars every summer. Over the course of 50 years of studying bats, from Tennessee to Thailand, Tuttle engineered many more such conversions from revulsion to devotion. Nowadays, architects design special bridges and houses to accommodate urban bats.

Tuttle and his father, a high school biology teacher, began exploring caves in his hometown near Knoxville, Tenn. The teenager, armed with field notes, persuaded his mother to drive him all the way to the Smithsonian to meet with scientists — without an appointment — who might teach him more about the gray myotis, whose migratory patterns entranced him. In that magical way of great love affairs, he met the man who would later become his mentor.

Grad-school spelunking in dangerous terrain meant confrontations with angry bulls and suspicious moonshiners; caves were often full of illegal stills guarded by armed outlaws. He befriended some of them; one man in his late

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