

SUITS ME TO A TREE

Switch off the 21st century and inhale the goodness of the forest

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MARIAN MCGUINNESS THE WRITER WAS A GUEST OF SUIGOSANTO KANKO SUISHIN KYOGIKAI



Forest bathing, wandering slowly through a forest and engaging your senses, can help improve your immune systems.

I leave my inhibitions in the wicker basket along with my clothes and slip into the hot, healing waters of the Japanese onsen. Sitting with a clutch of women in this single-sex communal bath, with our tiny towels nested on our heads, the conversation somehow drifts to forest bathing.

I imagine the full monty of frolicking in the woods under a luminescent moon. My misunderstanding is soon dispelled as the ecotherapy of forest bathing, or shinrin-yoku, is taken very seriously. With more than 35 million people living in greater Tokyo, open space is limited. In a campaign to encourage city-dwellers to connect with nature, the government incorporated forest bathing into the Japanese healthcare system. It's common for doctors to prescribe a weekly dose as a complementary treatment for high blood pressure, insomnia and depression.

It has nothing really to do with traditional concepts of bathing. There is no water involved. Nor nakedness. It's more like a moving meditation. Of wandering slowly through a forest, feeling the textures in the air, listening to the wind-rustling leaves, engaging our senses and absorbing the essential oils emitted by trees that can help improve our immune systems.

A 2010 study at Chiba University found that a dose of shinrin-yoku had far-reaching physical, emotional and spiritual benefits.

So, it's time to wander and pause; to digitally detox and allow my 2D screen-weary eyes to look 3D long distance. Taking a mini break from Tokyo, I head north to the sacred forest of Kashima Jingu. And there's plenty to wander and ponder with 70ha of cedar forests, ponds and a deer park.

Volunteer guides Tanaka and Maeno greet me at the entrance. Just like the cleansing ritual of onsen bathing, we purify ourselves at the small pavilion called the temizuya. We scoop water into our left palms, rinse our mouths and wash our left palms again. I am now ready to metaphorically immerse myself in the balm of the forest.

"Feel the air change and sense the spiritual energy," Tanaka enthuses as we stand beneath the mighty cedar torii. "We are now separating ourselves from the everyday world and entering the sacred world."

He explains the origin of the torii. "The sun goddess hid herself in a cave and the world became dark. The other gods had to make the sun goddess come out, so they set a cockerel on a perch and as it crowed, the sun goddess appeared. Torii actually means bird perch."

We continue our walk beneath the vermilion Romon Gate and stop outside the haiden (hall of worship). Following my guides, I bow twice, clap twice and bow again, to show my respect. As we wander the winding gravel paths fringed with ferns and moss-knuckled tree roots that are overhung by cedar, cypress and cherry trees, I breathe deeply to inhale their goodness, and look up for the kami (spirits) who are believed to live there. One thing I notice is how massive tree branches are supported by elaborate bamboo scaffolding. Tanaka explains that all trees must be preserved.

It's a day of celebration at Kashima Jingu. Children are dressed in their finest kimonos and are purified in ceremonies to gain protection from the deities. The children are given fortunes written on paper. If it's a good fortune, they take it home, but if it's bad, they tie it to a branch where the fortune returns to the gods.

Shintoism is at the core of Japanese culture. Legend says that the first Japanese emperor, Jimmu, founded this site more than 2600 years ago. It is one of the three great shrines of the East that form a triangle; the area within believed to be filled with spiritual energy. Enshrined here is Takemikazuchi, the god of warriors and victory. It became a sacred place for samurais and shoguns to worship at dawn where they faced east to feed on the cosmic powers radiating from the sun goddess. The thought of walking these same warrior steps and feeding on the same cosmic energy, fills me with awe.

The paths are studded with wooden posts engraved with the traditional form of Japanese poetry, haiku. Matsuo Basho, the great master of Haiku, was born into a samurai family. In 1687, he visited the Kashima shrine. There's more time to contemplate as my guide, Maeno, fingers the haiku and interprets it:

*on the withered branch
crow crouching there
dusk in autumn*

Further into the forest is the deer park. Deemed to be descendants of the ancient divine messengers, they are treated with great respect. Kashima actually translates to “deer island”. The phrase “passing the buck” may have originated here. To find a dying deer in front of your house would have warranted execution, so you moved it to your neighbour’s door.

At the centre of the forest we come to the tip of a granite keystone embedded in the earth. According to ancient lore, a mythical catfish inhabits the bowels of the earth. As it thrashes, it bucks the country, causing earthquakes. Its head is pinned down by the keystone, which is held in place by warrior god Takemikazuchi. I ask Tanaka about the 2011 mega quake and tsunami. He quips, “Takemikazuchi must have gone to drink saké!

I leave my guides and wander downhill. Walking on uneven ground and on varying terrains is another component of forest bathing as it engages your core, stabilises your body and enhances vascular relaxation. There is such stillness as I come to the Holy Washing Pond.

I think of more wise words from my guides, “the quieter you become, the more you can hear”. As I sip the sacred spring water, I find myself thinking in fragments of haiku. In my last minutes of forest bathing, I’m conscious of the forest music. Visiting Kashima Jingu has meant switching off the 21st century. No iPods to intrude, just the nightingale’s song, the breath of cedars and the cracking of crows that to my ears have a different intonation to their southern hemisphere cousins. I guess they have a different forest song to sing.