

SLOWING DOWN AND S

Forest bathing provides a new way to ex

By Holly Riddle

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For travelers seeking something to do in the Adirondacks, some of the most popular activities include hiking and paddling in the summer and skiing in the winter — but what if you're looking for something a little more low-key and relaxing versus strenuous or high-energy? For visitors (and locals, too!) who don't quite consider themselves outdoor adventurers, but still want to connect with the region's abundant nature, forest bathing could be the perfect fit that also comes with some unexpected health benefits.

"There is a scientific consensus that [exposure] to nature is good for our health and well-being," explained Alex Gess, executive director of Forest Therapy Hub, which provides forest therapy-related programming and resources for professionals, and Erika Di Pasquale, one of the organization's forest bathing guides based near New York. "Scientists from different disciplines have built a robust body of evidence [that] being in contact with nature improves perceived health and well-being, has a co-therapeutic effect, contributes to mental health, promotes interaction and social cohesion, strengthens the immune system and helps maintain cardiovascular health."

Recent interest in forest bathing and forest therapy in general has been rising around the world, according to those in the field.

Gary Evans, director of The Forest Bathing Institute, based in the United Kingdom, said, upon the institute's launch in 2016, "there was almost zero awareness of forest bathing among the population and media. We are delighted to report that interest has dramatically grown since our launch. We are now in discussions with 30 universities and government departments and have a large team of guides running sessions for thousands of people."

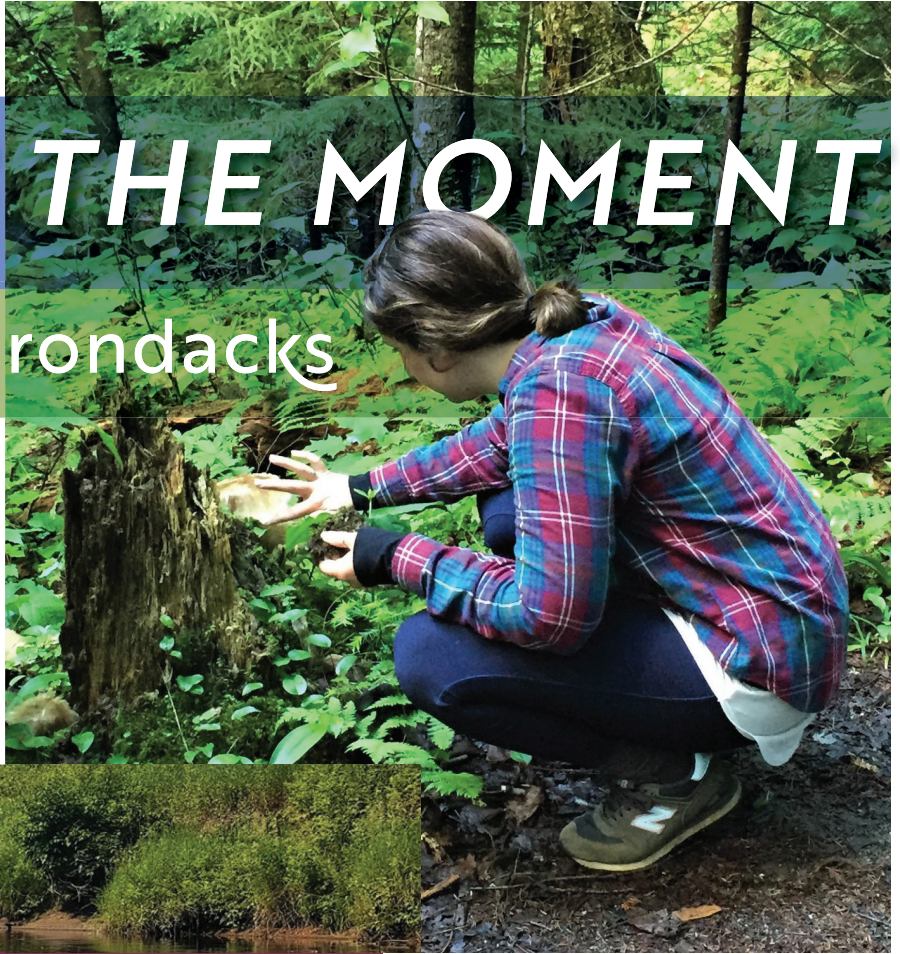
Like the team at Forest Therapy Hub, Evans noted that he and his wife and co-founder

AVORING THE MOMENT

perience the Adirondacks

have experienced the mental health benefits of forest bathing, which he said, in many ways, comes down to the instinctual knowledge that “we feel better after being in green spaces” — and there’s science backing that up.

But the health benefits and growing popularity aside, what exactly is forest bathing?



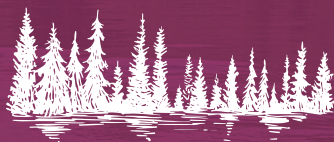
WHAT IS FOREST BATHING?

No, you won’t need to strip down to your skivvies to enjoy this growing trend. Instead, participants on forest bathing tours partake in mindfulness activities that engage the full range of senses, inviting them to slow down and pay attention to their current environment in a way they might not otherwise.

Helene Gibbens, a certified forest and nature therapy guide at Adirondack Riverwalking & Forest Bathing, said, “[Forest bathing] opens a doorway to a different way of being in nature... It enables [participants] to slow down and relax... They use all of their senses.”

For example, she said, “We might give them a little activity that invites them to just explore

all the textures in the forest — how often do we do that? Maybe we use sight and we use our hearing and maybe smell now and then, but we don’t use touch and we don’t really use smell in a systematic way. So it opens up these doors for people to become closer to, and



FOREST BATHING HOW TO:

1. Slow down.
2. Meander - no goals, no destination.
3. Use your senses and notice what you see, hear, smell and touch.



RIVERWALKING AND FOREST BATHING. Photos courtesy of Adirondack Riverwalking and Forest Bathing via Facebook

become more intimate with, nature.”

Adirondack Riverwalking & Forest Bathing first started offering forest bathing in 2017 and Gibbens said she’s seen a sharp rise in interest in the last few years, particularly during the winter months, which she attributes to both the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as the rising awareness of forest bathing.

“I think that COVID was a part of that. People felt really cooped in,” she said. “Even if it wasn’t about forest bathing, we all started to get the message in the media to get outside, particularly for your mental well-being, but certainly also for your physical well-being. Forest bathing also received a lot more press in the last couple of years than it did before.



"I see forest bathing as sort of a subset of mindfulness meditation. It helps us feel more comfortable in our own skin. I think it helps us handle the challenges in our lives."



Last year, we found that people came with much more awareness, anything from a little bit to some pretty decent knowledge, fundamentally, about what forest bathing is. We've certainly seen an increase in demand, particularly in the winter. That was our biggest shift ... We watched our number of

trips likely more than double."

Adirondack Riverwalking & Forest Bathing offers private group and individual forest bathing experiences, and can personalize the experience location and date and time to fit participants' needs. Each forest bathing walk lasts typically two and a half hours, though length can also be tailored as needed.

The exact details of a forest bathing experience will differ according to your tour guide, however.

Ed Kanze, an Adirondack naturalist guide, began offering guided forest bathing experiences seven or eight years ago, after receiving feedback from prior guiding clients, who noted that he was already providing similar experiences, just without the forest bathing name.

"It's simple," he described. "What we do out on the trail is sort of a mindfulness meditation kind of exercise. I have everybody find a spot to stop, a spot that they like. We're not too far from each other. You can sit down on a log or on a rock or on the ground or you could just stand. We try to pay attention to the senses. I always have [participants] write things down... You just start to scribble a few simple notes on what you're taking in. It's amazing how you really can just feel a certain tranquility come over you. You really start to relax."

Like Gess, he also points to the medical research that shows the connection between forest bathing experiences and health, with impacts on blood pressure, stress hormones and more.

He added, "I see forest bathing as sort of a subset of mindfulness meditation. It helps us feel more comfortable in our own skin. I think it helps us handle the challenges in our lives."

When participants sign up for a guided forest bathing experience with Kanze, he keeps the logistics simple and personalizes the experience based on the individuals.

"A sense of wonder and awe"

Beyond the much-touted health benefits of forest bathing, both Kanze and Gibbens noted a range of other aspects that visitors to the Adirondacks love about forest bathing.

Gibbens said, "I think part of what people really love about it is that it also opens up their sense of playfulness. For so many of us, we grew up, even if it was in an urban area, with

a park or a backyard where we were curious. We were curious about the bugs that crawled, we liked to look at the butterflies and we got a lot closer to nature. I think of forest bathing as an opportunity to do that again. It opens up that playfulness, that sense of wonder and awe. It's good for the soul, good for the mood, good for us in so many ways."

Another big part of the appeal is that, compared to other outdoor activities, forest bathing requires very little skill or fitness level. Kanze noted he's led forest bathing experiences for clients ranging from children to visitors in their 90s.

There's also a conservation aspect. Kanze said, "Ultimately, as someone who's concerned about conservation in the Adirondacks, I think [forest bathing] helps us engage with the Adirondacks. If we did a little less marching up and down the 46ers at high speed, and a little bit more taking it more slowly out there, really savoring and appreciating all the nuances of these places we'd visit, I think the park would be better served. There are all sorts of positive spinoffs from forest bathing, that I think are really exciting."

WANT TO TRY IT YOURSELF?

While a guided experience can certainly make first-time forest bathers feel more comfortable, Kanze noted there's no special instruction needed to enjoy the practice on one's own — no matter where you are.

He said, "The whole focus of my guiding business is to help and teach people so they can go out there and do it on their own, without me. I've really been a successful guide if I take people out and help them feel comfortable in the Adirondack wilds or any wilds where I lead walks, and then at the end, they think, 'Hey, I could do what he does. I could go out and do it just as well.' That's a victory for me."

Evans of the Forest Bathing Institute reiterated the simplicity of forest bathing. He explained, "The forest bathing approach is to go into nature with the intention of enjoying the environment. With this goal in mind, we can visit any area of nature, including parks or the beach ... Research shows that any exposure to nature is better than nothing. Having a house plant has been measured to offer benefits, and the positives of nature scale with more complex environments."

Learn more about available Adirondack forest bathing experiences by visiting Ed Kanze's website at www.edkanze.com or the Adirondack Riverwalking & Forest Bathing website at adirondackriverwalking.com. 🌿