

30 WAYS TO TUNE INTO TREES

Travel is severely constrained during the coronavirus outbreak. Check relevant websites. Here are some ideas for when the restrictions have been lifted.

Cycle among clouds

Mashpi Lodge, Ecuador

This 24-room lodge, which has won awards for design and sustainability, is set within the Chocó-Andean cloud forest reserve: a 6,178-acre haven to 100 species of butterfly and 12 species of hummingbird. See it from above on the Sky Bike for two, or a Dragon Gondola for four. **Doubles from \$1,340 a night.** mashpilodge.com

Why a walk in the forest is the perfect antidote to anxiety

Tree-huggers, it would seem, are not so daft after all. Many of us who once scoffed are belatedly discovering that the forest-inspired myths and fairy tales that thrilled and scared us as children had something to teach us all along.

Not only do trees offer the potential of salvation from the ravages of climate change, but they are also a font of mindfulness and well-being, resources that surround all of us, and that we need now – more than ever – during these times of anxiety and isolation.

The old stories warn us that we underestimate the power of trees at our peril. Forests are the home of powerful magic, but also of wicked witches, goblins and the tricksters of the shadow world. Slow to anger they may be, but woe betide anyone who stands in the way of Tolkien's Ents once their wrath is unleashed.

From Shakespeare to J K Rowling, via the Brothers Grimm and Tolkien, woods and forests are places where the rules are changed, where we are often tested, but which also provide solutions to the questions we need answering. They are places of mystery where light, shade, colour and shape are blurred. Nothing is as it seems. At the same time, they allow us to connect with something that feels transcendent and to emerge better able to deal with the challenges of everyday life.

As someone who was brought up surrounded by trees in a remote Cornish valley, I have always seen them as living entities. As a child I dreamed of one day learning to speak to them in Ogham, the Celtic language of trees and, even today, a friendly ancient oak near where I live in Sussex is a source of peace and security. In many of my favourite memories, trees play a central role. For a while, my wife Sarah and I even worked in one. We were managing Greystoke Mahale Lodge on the shores of Lake Tanganyika in the remote west of Tanzania. Our manager's "office" was hidden away in the forests of the Mahale mountains, home to the largest group of wild chimpanzees in the world – the reason for the camp's existence.

It was, basically, a tree-house with the obligatory lopsided floors and views over the tented kitchen area and staff quarters. This was where all the hard work went on behind the scenes, servicing the needs of our guests and organising the complicated logistics of supplying such a remote location. But it was also a place of calm and magic. During the wet season, when the chimpanzees came down to feed from the trees beside the lake, we didn't even have to trek into the mountains to find them. Once, when a family group came into camp, one of the baby chimps even tried climbing the wooden steps to join us in the office. Now that's what I call a transcendent experience.

Our wisest and most respected celebrities also recognise the benefits of trees. [Dame Judi Dench](#), who has planted several different species in her garden in remembrance of departed friends, believes they are far more complex than we realise, communicating between themselves through a vast underground network of root systems. In the documentary, [My Passion for Trees](#), she uses a special microphone to listen to the sound of sap moving upwards inside her oaks.

Small wonder, then, that woods and forests are becoming increasingly valued as places of retreat and restoration, to observe rare wildlife, and to benefit from the healing qualities of the Japanese practice of [shinrin-yoku](#) or “[forest bathing](#)”. The claimed health benefits of walking and meditating among trees are supported by many scientific studies. It has been shown to reduce levels of the stress hormone cortisol, while improving mood, lowering anxiety and boosting the immune system.

Blood pressure is also reduced more than it would be by walking in an urban environment, while an increase in levels of the hormone adiponectin protects against heart attack and even diabetes. One study suggests that creative problem solving is improved by 50 per cent after three days immersed in nature with all access to modern technology removed.

Small wonder, then, that so many of us are now choosing holidays with trees in the starring role. With all the uncertainty that surrounds us, planning a post-coronavirus holiday featuring trees is one way of soothing our fears, at least.

In our collection of forest holidays both in the UK and around the world, you will find everything from a tree-house in the [Forest of Dean](#) – the perfect location for a romantic getaway – to glamping among [California's](#) giant redwoods, taking a spa holiday among the towering oaks of the Château de Raray in Picardy and tracking wolves in Poland. May the force be with you!

Richard Madden