

organic spa

MAGAZINE



THE **ART** OF
WELLBEING

Into the Wild

travel

Wellness resorts are tapping the power of nature, offering outdoor experiences that bring a whole new level of health and happiness—so you emerge with a truly fresh perspective

By Isabel Burton

Getting away to the mountains or beach extends beyond the desire to downshift from regular life and lounge tranquilly in a hammock beneath a palm tree. Though that's pretty wonderful. Something much bigger is at play when we immerse ourselves in nature—verdant landscapes and stunning seascapes offer very real transformative benefits. It's a phenomenon many of us inherently sense, and one that science is starting to better understand.

The human-nature relationship is proving to be incredibly dynamic, according to Eva Selhub, MD, a physician and author who studies how natural landscapes optimize health. She explains that there's a striking parallel between the planet's ecology and our own internal ecosystem, or microbiome. Simply said, our insides share matter with the earth. "Because of this link, we have an unseen exchange with the natural world that benefits our livelihood," she says. "Transferring certain compounds makes our heart rate go down, blood pressure decrease, and stress levels reduce dramatically. That's how remarkably synergetic our existence is with the environment." A growing body of scientific research is proving that mere exposure to the outdoors boosts physical health, enhances immunity, and even extends life expectancy. One such study published in 2023 in *MDPI* looked at the benefits of going a step further to actively engage with the landscape, and discovered that paying keen attention to the wild sounds, breathing the air filled with trees' essential oils, and visually taking in the environment had even greater impact on wellbeing, leading to less stress and pain, better mood, and improved performance.

Another analysis published in the journal *Scientific Reports* found that all it takes to get those perks is spending two hours per week among trees, grass, or beach. "We are designed to thrive in nature," continues Dr. Selhub. "Sure, we have the ability to adapt to various environments, including cities, but it doesn't mean we're biologically compatible." When you think about it, traveling to a green (blue, mountainous, snowy...) place

isn't really getting away, it's returning to our natural habitat.

Even further, a rustic setting has the ability to awaken something paramount in our psyche. There's a profound sense of connectedness that sets in—to the surroundings, the scents, the sounds, the universe in whole, according to Dr. Selhub. "This feeling of belonging to something much larger than ourselves mitigates the stress of uncertainty by encouraging us to stop trying to micromanage life and surrender to the flow." That, she says, fosters positivity and contentment, and leads to a mental flexibility that inspires creative ideas and an openness to experiences.

And as you've likely noticed, relaxing in bucolic bliss will even show up in your looks, and that's not just due to a luxe resort's spa treatments. "The pressures of

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urban environments can disrupt the skin's microbiome, triggering inflammation," explains Dendy Engelman, MD, a board-certified dermatologist in New York City. "In contrast, serene surroundings that make you feel calm promote healthier skin that mirrors our mental state. When we feel happier, we tend to look better."

In our increasingly urbanized and digitized world, the craving for a connection to nature is strong. Following this understanding, resorts worldwide are making the environment a focal point, adding new experiences and treatments that draw on the therapeutic benefits of the outdoors. These six innovative locales are not only expanding the horizons of traditional spa and wellness practices, but are also redefining what it means to recharge and reconnect with one's roots.



Yoga in the wild at Tutka Bay Lodge

“Sometimes, making meaningful change means shifting your mindset. That’s much easier when you can retreat to a place that supports your desire for a life adjustment through physical, psychological, and spiritual offerings.”

—Mandy Dixon, general manager, Tutka Bay Lodge

Reiki in the Wild

Tutka Bay Lodge, Kenai Peninsula, Alaska

Tutka Bay Lodge, a secluded resort within a dramatically beautiful ancient glacial fjord at the tip of Kenai Peninsula, offers a chance to reset and reconnect in the midst of Alaska’s untamed wilderness. “The intention with our regenerative wellness program is to offer tools that lead to presence—no obligations, no destination, no expectations; simply increased awareness, appreciation, belonging in nature and space to breathe,” says Mandy Dixon, general manager.

Guests venture on grounding expeditions into an old-growth rainforest or the nearby Kachemak Bay State Park, as a form of forest therapy. Within the tranquil setting, they

can experience **Reiki in the Wild**: While lying on the moss-covered forest floor, a Reiki expert guides the flow of healthy energy through the body, describes Dixon. This ancient healing technique is meant to reduce stress, and foster a sense of rejuvenation. “Sometimes, making meaningful change means shifting your mindset,” Dixon explains the further benefits of this practice. “That’s much easier when you can retreat to a place that supports your desire for a life adjustment through physical, psychological, and spiritual offerings.”

Taking advantage of the lodge’s coastal location, there’s also **Floating Meditation**. Use a kayak or paddleboard as a platform, and with the ocean as your backdrop, drift into a sense of calm and connection with the present moment. withthewild.com



Paddleboarding tropical waters Kokomo Private Island, Fiji

Water Wonder

Kokomo Private Island, Fiji

The “blue mind” describes the strong connect between water and our brains, and the neurological phenomena that causes us to feel calmer, less anxious, happier, and healthier when we’re near the ocean. It’s all about that blue mind at Kokomo Private Island, situated in Fiji within the stunning Astrolabe Reef, a great coral body that stretches for over 100 kilometers, and is home to manta rays, reef sharks, turtles, and marine life in shocking rainbow colors. This, according to dive supervisor, Walter Mitchell, is a sanctuary in which to connect with the natural wonders of the sea. “We believe in the joy of outdoor experiences that allow our guests to fully immerse themselves in the beauty of this phenomenal reef,” he says.

It’s a water-focused perspective here, relying on the crystal-clear ocean and wildlife to help guests leave their familiar worlds on land, and enter a whole new, exotic and restorative aquatic universe. With its **Astrolabe Adventures**, you explore vibrant coral gardens, swimming among unusual fish species. **Sunset or Night Snorkeling** provides the rare opportunity to observe marine life as darkness descends. With underwater torches illuminating the corals and fish, you see a different side of the reef’s ecosystem. For on-land nature bonding, there are also immersion hikes through the lush rainforest to natural waterfalls. kokomoislandfiji.com

Experience Earth’s Energy

Rancho Valencia Resort & Spa, Rancho Santa Fe, California

“We felt called to incorporate the healing power of Mother Nature into our wellness programming,” says Lisa Rosenthal, club director of Rancho Valencia Resort & Spa. The retreat sits on 45 acres of lush gardens, citrus orchards, and olive groves in southern California, so one can see why the spectacular landscape would set the tone for its guests’ stay.

Join its **Root to Rise** class and you go on what’s described as a “yogic journey,” involving a combination of poses, landscape and sensory exploration, and outdoor meditation. It is, according to Rosenthal, the opportunity to reconnect with the elemental energy of the earth. “Our goal with this offering is to guide our guests to let go and allow nature to lead them back to their most primal selves as a way to feel grounded and earthed again,” she explains. “The breeze on our skin, the sound of leaves rustling, and the vivid colors in nature holds our attention without demanding intellectual processing, so the mind can be present but still relax and reset.”

At the spa, massages take place in the garden, surrounded by fragrant blooms. There’s also an outdoor relaxation pool with warm water to help you fully unwind. ranchovalencia.com



Rancho Valencia Yoga Pavilion



Eleven Taylor River Lodge guided river plunge experience

Wellness Wherever Nature Takes You

Eleven, Locations include: Colorado, Iceland, Patagonia, Alaska, Chile, New Zealand, British Columbia, Bahamas, France

With luxury lodges scattered across the globe, each selected to showcase the unique allure of its surroundings, Eleven curates bespoke itineraries that immerse you in the raw beauty of the natural world.

"We believe that nature is a touchstone, a pathway to your best self," says Caith Norton, wellness program manager. "In nature, one feels completely connected to everything around him or her, and at the same time, feels small and insignificant in the grand scheme of things."

Its wellness program, Eleven Life, offers a variety of

place-based outdoor activities designed to provide exhilaration and a profound sense of awe. These include big adventures, such as **Cat-skiing** down untouched slopes in the Rocky Mountains and exploring glaciers, volcanic landscapes, and soaking in geothermal hot springs in Iceland. But they also provide quieter experiences:

During the **Viking Sauna**, a practice where ancient Nordic traditions meet modern wellness, you're ensconced in nature as you alternate between hot and cold exposure. The power of the elements is intended to revitalize both your body and mind.

Take one of the **Sensory Walks** and you're guided to engage your senses fully, heightening your awareness of the textures, scents, colors, and sounds that surround you in your location. It's a meditative experience that leads to a deep appreciation of the world, and your place within it. elevenexperience.com



Los Campesinos Day Tour, Manuel Antonio, Costa Rica

Jungle Bathing in the Rainforest

Arenas del Mar Beach & Rainforest Resort,
Manuel Antonio, Costa Rica

Arrive at Arenas del Mar, within a private 11-acre rainforest reserve in Costa Rica, and you're struck by the wildlife and lush, animated landscape that surrounds you. Scarlet macaws and toucans fly overhead through an emerald canopy, sloths wander slowly, and playful monkeys swing from tree-tops. At Arenas del Mar, nature plays a pivotal role in nurturing wellness. Hans Pfister, president and cofounder, tells us. "Guests come away with a greater sense of wellbeing when they engage in the landscape." In fact, the outdoors melds with every aspect of your stay. "All areas, except for the guest rooms, are designed as open-air havens, allowing you to fully immerse yourself in the sights, sounds, and scents of the natural environment," adds Pfister. Arenas del Mar is part of Beyond Green, a portfolio of the world's most sustainable resorts.

Jungle Bathing is paramount here. Experts guide you to discover the biodiversity of the landscape that includes

Nauyaca Waterfalls—two immense cascades, with a combined height of 197 feet.

At dusk, you can take the **Evening Hike** and witness the rainforest in moonlight. The sound of nocturnal creatures, the incredibly fresh air, and the scent of dirt, leaves, and bark engage all of your senses, and bring you immediately into the here-and-now.

Yoga and functional workout classes are also practiced outdoors in the rainforest, under the shade of towering trees. arenasdelmar.com

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—Hans Pfister, president and cofounder, Arenas del Mar

Restore on the Range

The Ranch at Rock Creek,
Phillipsburg, Montana

"The ethos of our Ranch is to provide an emotion-based experience that evokes connection to the environment," says Jeremy Belnap, general manager of The Ranch at Rock Creek, a 6,000-acre western ranch in a pristine valley of Montana that has a bounty of nature-centric activities from horseback riding (of course) to skiing and lake swimming.

But sign on for **Respite on Rock Creek**, and you're taken to a serene, secluded location to just be. "It's a profoundly transformative experience that's all about being in the moment, relaxing, and appreciating the natural beauty that surrounds us daily," says Belnap. "Even apprehensive guests come back for a second time because they didn't realize how much they needed this. That's testament to how an immersion in nature can reset one's mind and body."

Master Naturalist Class offers an exploration of the wonders of the Rock Creek Valley. Carved by Glacial Lake Missoula during the last ice age, the area is overflowing with a



Family horseback riding at The Ranch at Rock Creek

variety of flora and fauna. For a more active engagement with the landscape, there are over 20 miles of hiking trails.

The Spa at Rock Creek provides wild-inspired treatments, including the **Creekside Conestoga Wagon Massage** set in a Conestoga wagon along the Rock Creek. Guests sink into deep relaxation with a soundtrack provided by Mother Nature. theranchatrockcreek.com

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