



DESTINATION
JAPAN



A WALK IN
the woods

Only a few hours from downtown Tokyo, forest bathers wash away the cares of urban life.

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY DANIEL ALLEN



THERAPY IN PRACTICE

With their lush forests, well-signposted trails and funicular railways, both the sacred Mount Mitake, and the nearby Mount Takao, are great places for Tokyo visitors to make a *shinrin-yoku* day trip. The summit of the latter boasts stunning views over Mount Fuji when the weather gods are benign, while the Yamano Furusato-mura Forest Therapy Centre in Okutama, located close to Mount Mitake, offers guided walks and forest-based yoga, pottery, and noodle-making classes.

For those looking to travel farther from Tokyo, the Nakasendo Trail is the perfect option for indulging in some multi-day *shinrin-yoku*. Meaning "path through the mountains," this 534-kilometre former trade route between the Japanese capital and the city of Kyoto was established during the Tokugawa Shogunate (1600-1868). Today it offers hikers tree-lined paths, forest waterfalls, and a conveniently-spaced selection of post towns, each filled with picturesque wooden architecture and welcoming *ryokan* (traditional Japanese inns).

"People come here to see cities," says Baba Yoshihiko. "But they forget this country is 70 per cent forest. *Shinrin-yoku* is the perfect way to experience green Japan."



Caption

Autumnal weather on Mount Mitake is, according to many Japanese, a law unto itself. While residents of Tokyo, just a 90-minute train ride away, enjoy glorious sunshine, the forests around Mitake's 929 metre-summit are frequently enveloped in a dense, eerie mist, as tendrils of hazy water vapour weave their way between the trunks of towering Japanese cedar and crimson-leaved Japanese maple.

Yet **Baba Yoshihiko**, a Shinto priest and long-time owner of a local mountaintop *shukobo* (temple guesthouse), never complains about the quirks of the Mitsake microclimate. In fact, he's more than happy to wander the mountain's serpentine hiking trails in the fog.

"Sometimes I can be out for hours here and not see a single soul," says the diminutive, spectacle-wearing 60-year-old. "It's very peaceful when the mist comes down. At times like this, a walk among the trees is perfect for inner reflection and connecting with nature."

Today, however, Yoshihiko has three Western travellers for company. Negotiating moss-clad steps,

*Blurb Omnia quuntur
maximus ad et imet evendus
es elessedi aut ressend
isquiducil millaccabor ma*

fast-flowing streams, and heavily gnarled tree roots, he guides them slowly through the forest towards a dramatic mountain waterfall, pausing from time to time to let the group reflect on their surroundings.

Once they arrive at the fast-flowing cascade, Yoshihiko will lead the trio in *takigyō*, an ancient Japanese waterfall ritual designed to cleanse the mind and soul. Following a series of warm-ups, songs, and chants, the intrepid (and fully naked) participants plunge themselves into the waterfall's icy waters. While it's not an experience for the faint of heart, the Shinto priest remains a passionate advocate, even in his sixtieth year.



Caption

GIVE FOREST BATHING A TRY

THE ART of forest therapy, or *shinrin-yoku*, is a cornerstone of Japanese culture. Combine a visit to Tokyo with one (or all) of these trips:

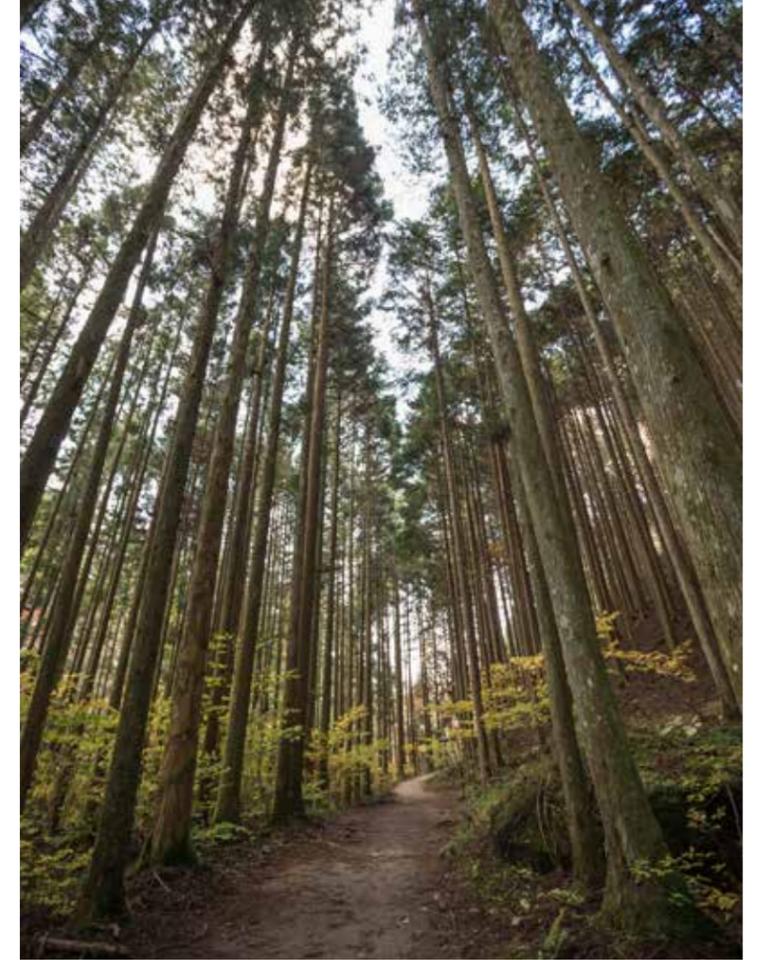
OKUTAMA FOREST THERAPY CENTRE

Tokyo's first approved forest therapy site – just a 3-min. walk from Tokyo's JR Okutama Station.

SHUKUBO KOMADORI SANJO
(for Baba Yoshihiko & Mount Mitake)
A mountain lodge a few hours west of Tokyo.

NAKASENDO TRAIL TOURS
Custom or private tours by Oku
Japan

okujapan.com



Caption

*Blurb Omnia quuntur
maximus ad et imet
evendus es elessedi aut
millaccabor ma*

“Being surrounded by the trees and then immersed in the water makes you come alive,” says Yoshihiko, whose family have been practicing *takigyo* for 17 generations. “You relax, your body chemistry changes, and you see the world differently. This is the essence of *shinrin-yoku*.”

PLANT-BASED PRESCRIPTIONS

Shinrin-yoku, or forest bathing, is now catching on fast in the West. But it's nothing new in Japan, with roots in venerable Shinto and Buddhist practices. While the old-fashioned term “a walk in the woods” still applies in most other countries, *shinrin-yoku* has been making its way into the Japanese lingo since a government agency coined the expression in the early 1980s.

“*Shinrin-yoku* is a bit more than just walking in the forest,” explains **Sahoko Ma**, a yoga teacher and regular forest bather from Tokyo. “To get the full benefit, practitioners must engage with nature using all five senses.”



Ilmoitus Treddea



Caption



Caption

“Some people like to be led by a *shinrin-yoku* guide, but it’s not essential,” adds Baba Yoshihiko. “Basically, go to a forest. Walk slowly, breathe, and open your mind. And leave your smartphone and camera at home.”

These days, many of us spend an unhealthy amount of time isolated from nature. In 2001, a survey in the United States found that the average American spends 87 per cent of his or her time indoors. In Japan, a country where terms for commuter hell (*tsukin-jigoku*) and death by overwork (*karoshi*) are common expressions, the need for forest therapy may be even more acute.

“When I’m out here in the forest I don’t think about things,” says **Yoshio Sato**, a 41-year-old Tokyo businessman who regularly comes to Mount Mitake at weekends to practice *shinrin-yoku*. “Out here you can leave the stress behind.”

To many it seems obvious that a walk in the woods can be good for body and mind. But a growing body of research is now backing this up with science, with studies demonstrating that *shinrin-yoku* can lower blood pressure, heart rates and stress hormones, and improve memory. One of the biggest benefits may come from breathing in chemicals called phytoncides. Given off by trees and plants, these have been shown to stimulate the activity of cancer-fighting white blood cells.

“The forest is the therapist,” says Sahoko Ma. “You’ll never look at trees the same way again after you’ve tried *shinrin-yoku*.” ●



Based in London and Asia, award-winning writer and photographer **Daniel Allen** has journeyed widely across the globe.