

The author on a hike in Canada's Banff National Park



COURTESY OF ERICA BRAY

Natural Instincts

Slow down, embrace your surroundings, and soothe your soul on a nature-inspired getaway.

By Erica Bray

A few weeks before getting married, I retreated into the woods of Washington state. It was during the most stressful time of the wedding planning, that time when all the nitty-gritty details are to be finalized and a bride's brain swirls with to-do lists. I opted to pause and do something healthy for myself that would ultimately benefit those around me: calm down.

During that retreat, I spent as much time taking long solitary walks in the winter woods as I did sitting on a meditation cushion. The crunch of the snow beneath my boots, the crisp mountain air against my face, the sparkle of ice clinging to otherwise empty branches. All of it invited me to turn inward. Instead of clutching my cell phone and organizing last-minute



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wedding plans, I was coming home to myself out there in those woods, and I returned a less-stressed bride-to-be.

As a yoga and meditation teacher, I help others manage stress, and one of my favorite stress-reduction practices is taking a vacation in nature to relax, restore and recalibrate.

This isn't a novel idea, of course. John Muir, the legendary naturalist and environmental philosopher, perhaps anticipating our 21st-century world, is quoted as saying: "Keep close to Nature's heart...and break clear, once in a while, and climb a mountain or spend a week in the woods. Wash your spirit clean."

The big plus for you: There is a growing body of scientific research that proves the benefits of spending quality time in nature. Those benefits include boosted immune function, enhanced creativity, elevated mood and lower stress levels.

A Sweet Spot

Wow-inducing natural settings exist all over the globe—from national and state parks to expansive

deserts to quiet countryside. The key is to pick a setting in which you can truly immerse yourself and, ideally, where there's no Wi-Fi.

I plan at least one family vacation each year in which nature is the experiential centerpiece. My 2-year-old daughter has already gone on hikes in Yosemite and Great Smoky Mountains national parks and dipped her tiny toes in the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. Next up for us is a family trip to Maine's Acadia National Park.

While my daughter may not remember all the details of our

extended nature-centric adventures, I'm planting seeds that will, I hope, instill a love, respect and kinship with nature at a time when her sensory antennae are extremely receptive and undeniably pure. It's one of the greatest gifts I can give her.

It's also one of the greatest gifts that you can give yourself. Here are a few ways a vacation in nature can help to reduce your stress and inspire you to weave some simple practices into your everyday life.



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Cape May, New Jersey



COURTESY OF ERICA BRAY

The author (right) with her husband and daughter in Yosemite National Park, California

A gentle slowing down

There's something about being in a natural setting that calms the nervous system, hugs the soul and slackens a frenzied pace. Sink into the rhythm of nature, and invite a slowing down of body and mind.

A plea to pay attention

When we slow down, we typically become more aware of our thoughts and emotions, and this translates later to staying present with the people around us.

A place to be curious

Turn off the phone and welcome the senses to lead you on a curious investigation of your natural surroundings. When we look at the world through the lens of curiosity, we strengthen our ability to stay present and nonjudgmental.

A setting to stir wonder

As we get older, there's a tendency to lose appreciation for the small miracles around us. So many of us lead fast-paced lives increasingly driven by screens and technology. Nature has a way of snapping us out of that. When taking in a dazzling sunset or a spectacular waterfall, those internal (and external) "wows" come more easily.

An opportunity for mindful movement

Whether it's a hike, a swim or a horseback ride, external exploration can ultimately become a moving meditation that opens us to inward exploration.

Nature nourishes and refreshes body and soul, and that's reason enough to take an outdoors-focused vacation.