

THEME ISSUE **Adult Learning Outdoors**

According to Annette Bernjus, forest bathing is a mixture of experiencing nature, mindfulness training and meditation exercise.

Photo credit: Annette Bernjus

Blissful bathing among mushrooms and leaves

Reportage. "Forest bathing" has become a popular relaxation technique in Europe in recent years. The positive effects of this method have been scientifically proven.

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Beautiful forests, old castles, a village with half-timbered houses and narrow streets – that’s how one imagines rural Germany. And that is indeed how **Annette Bernjus’** home near Eppstein looks.

This is a deeply meaningful and inspiring environment for Bernjus.

“The forest does so much good for us humans. You feel as good here as in a blissful bath,” she says.

“Forest bathing” is also the name of a form of relaxation and therapy that has now spread almost all over the world.

Bernjus is an entrepreneur who offers forest bathing experiences and outdoor seminars for various groups, from stressed city managers to people looking for a few days of peace, to children and dementia patients.

The common denominator among participants, however, is that they mainly come from urban regions and immerse themselves in a world that hardly exists in their immediate surroundings.

Getting involved with the forest

“Please spread out here, off the path. But don’t go too deep into the forest. Everyone, find a comfortable spot and close your eyes. Pay attention to the sounds you hear. What sounds are those?”

Annette Bernjus instructs her group and then observes what is happening. She also trains future forest bathing instructors, and this practical part of the training lasts a week.

This exercise is a mixture of experiencing nature, mindfulness training and meditation exercise, Bernjus explains. It is important to get involved in the situation and listen carefully – the exercise instructor should stay alert so that the others can relax all the more.



Annette Bernjus originally trained as a bank clerk, but then took various further training courses in the field of meditation and relaxation. She has also completed further training in the care of dementia patients.

Something to take into account is the fact that, for many people, the forest is not only associated with relaxation, but also with danger.

“Especially with beginners, you should not go deep into the forest, but first choose a nice, bright clearing.”

Bad weather – feared by many – can in fact enhance the effect of the experience, provided everyone has chosen the right clothes.

Discovering trees in a new way

Deceleration is the basic mood during forest bathing. Through the instruction, thoughts can be channelled and concentrated. Trees are felt, the smell of forest soil is detected, small creatures or the sounds of animals are discovered.

“Forest bathing has nothing to do with esotericism!”

One can of course go to the forest and relax without attending a course, Bernjuss admits. But the various exercises are designed to give the participants the time frame, security and space to truly experience the benefits of the forest.

“I used to just jog through the forest, go in, walk and get out. Now, I take mindfulness breaks in between with breathing or a perception exercise,” says one participant, describing the difference.

Tried and tested relaxation method

Nowadays, forest bathing offers can be found not only in Germany and Austria, but also in other parts of Europe, the US, Canada and particularly in Japan. There is an international [“Association of Nature and Forest Therapy Guides and Programs”](#) with a section for Europe that offers a standardised curriculum.

Yet, the whole field is still very much in development, Bernjuss says. There are no fixed training courses or certificates, and very little regulation.

Bernjuss herself is actually a trained bank clerk, but then took various further training courses in the field of meditation and relaxation. She has also completed further training in the care of dementia patients and goes into the forest once a week with a dementia group.

Bernjuss also publishes books on the subject, has a blog and co-founded the German Academy for Forest Bathing in 2018.

Not for mythology enthusiasts or wood ghost seekers

Bernjus wants to make one thing clear: “Forest bathing has nothing to do with esotericism!”

Mythology enthusiasts or wood ghost seekers are out of place here. Bernjus’ training courses are always based on science and proven meditation and relaxation techniques, but they also draw from the special characteristics of forest.

For example, under trees, the oxygen content of the air is higher than in the city.

“That’s why I want to show others how important and worth protecting the forest is – especially now, when it is threatened by climate change.”

It is no wonder that having being guided into the forest by Annette Bernjus, many see nature there through different eyes.

As one participant put it after a course: “I usually only see the problems the forest has, like dying trees. For the first time in many years, I saw the beauty of the forest and nature once again. That was wonderful.”

“Shinrin-yoku” in Japan – interview with Miyazaki Yoshifumi

The practice of forest bathing comes from Japan. There it is called Shinrin-yoku. Shinrin means “forest” and “yoku” means bathing.

Forest bathing became popular in Japan in the 1980s, and one of the first people to research the health benefits of the forest was Professor **Miyazaki Yoshifumi**, nowadays Deputy Director of the Centre for Environment, Health and Field Research at Chiba University in Tokyo.

“Shinrin-yoku research requires the integration of medicine and agriculture, and I was fortunate enough to have experience in both fields, which was the main reason why I was able to promote Shinrin-yoku research,” Yoshifumi says.



Walking barefoot over wood, touching a tree, seeing, smelling and hearing forests, hiking through the forest or even just looking at a bonsai tree or bouquet of flowers – Yoshifumi’s team has used a wide variety of parameters to study how trees and the forest affect us through psychology, pulse, respiration, hormones and other indicators.

In 1992, Yoshifumi conducted an experiment on salivary cortisol (stress hormone) levels on Yakushima Island in Japan, which became the world's first physiological experiment on Shinrin-yoku .

It has been scientifically proven that relaxation can be achieved either outdoors in the forest or indoors with stimulation of all the senses. In a stressful situation, the immune system is weakened, but can be improved by relaxing.

"In today's society, where personal preference is so important, I believe that Shinrin-yoku offers many options for relaxation. I personally can relax with Shinrin-yoku when I am tired or under stress," says the professor.

The most important findings from recent years are that Shinrin-yoku lowers blood pressure in people with the high blood pressure but raises it in people with low blood pressure, bringing it closer to an appropriate level.

According to Yoshifumi's research, guided forest therapy in particular also has other positive effects such as lowering adrenaline and the stress hormone cortisol, increasing the protective hormone of the heart and strengthening the immune system.