

Let nature renew you...

The world and all its busyness isn't going to stop, but head outdoors and immerse yourself in a quiet, gentler existence, you'll reduce stress and find your own personal peace.

The Japanese have a name for it – *shinrin-yoku* or 'forest bathing'. But it doesn't involve getting wet, rather the idea is to fully immerse yourself in your surroundings – to bathe your senses. Japanese research shows that the benefits of forest bathing include a reduction in cortisol levels (which increase with stress), a slower heart rate, lower blood pressure, improved mood, increased self-esteem and a greater sense of wellbeing.

"Sometimes described as the 'unhike', a forest therapy walk provides the opportunity to experience the benefits of slowing down and enjoying just being in nature," explains Susan Joachim, a certified forest therapy guide who conducts guided walks through the Dandenong Ranges and Mt Macedon in Victoria.

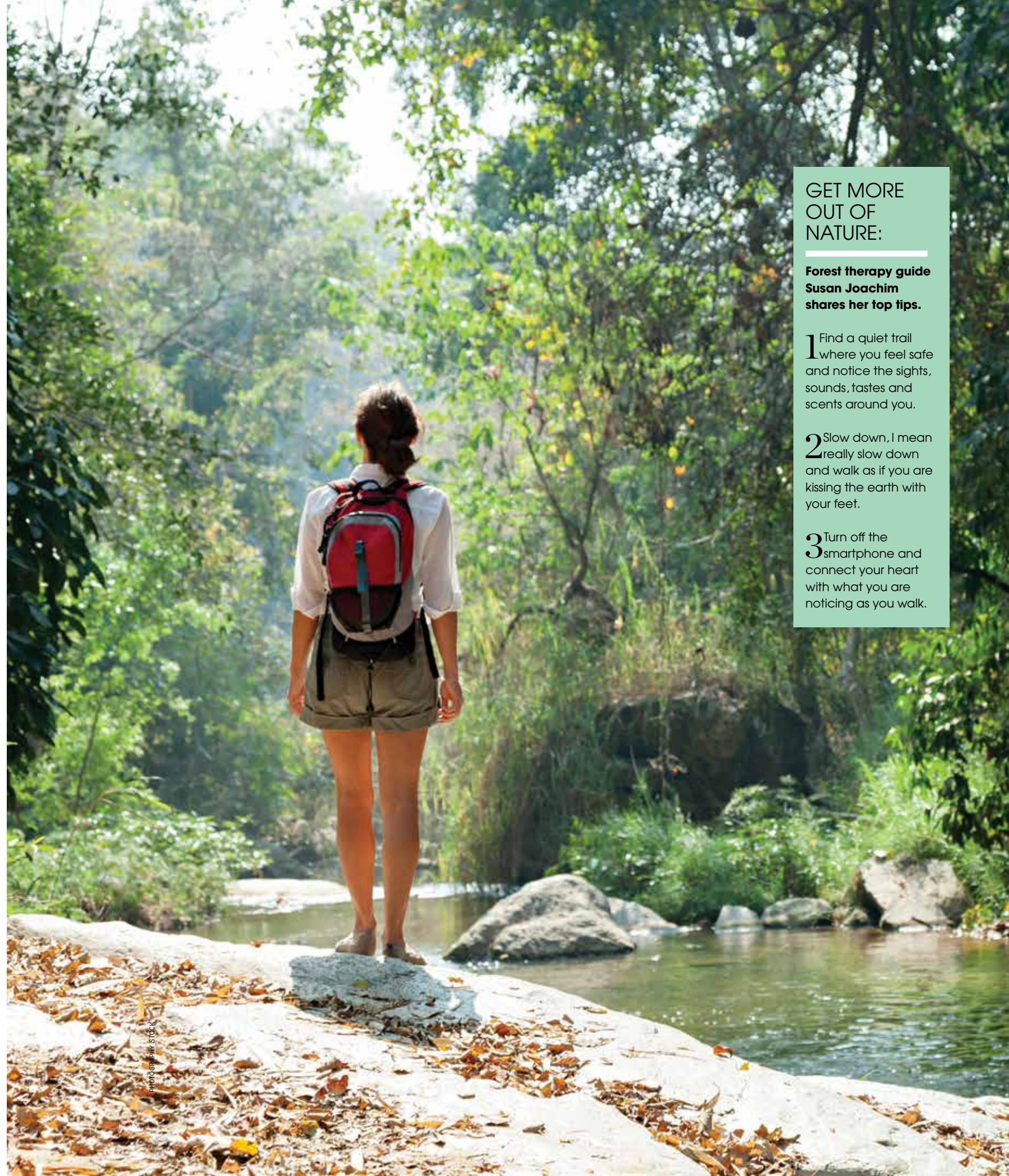
"The key is not to cover a lot of miles, but to slowly walk with intention through the green space and take it all in," she explains. "It's an opportunity to engage our five senses – listening, touching, smelling, tasting and noticing the pleasure to just 'be' in nature."

In Japan, forest bathing became part of its national health program in 1982 and it now has forest therapy trails in many of its parklands. Initially a way to reconnect with nature, science has now shown that trees and plants emit phytoncides, organic compounds that protect them from harmful microbes. These same compounds when breathed in can support our own immune system.

Dr Suzanne Bartlett Hackenmillar, sometimes prescribes forest bathing to her patients as a remedy for stress and anxiety.

"We're all seeking wellness," she says. "In western medicine we approach it in convoluted ways. What if it's not that difficult? It's a deeply healing practice to slow down, experience the senses, get outdoors and explore."

Key to stepping into nature is to unhook yourself from distractions – and that means leaving your phone, fitness tracker and headphones behind. "As the saying goes," Susan recalls. "There is no wifi in the forest, but you will find a better connection." **P**



GET MORE OUT OF NATURE:

**Forest therapy guide
Susan Joachim
shares her top tips.**

1 Find a quiet trail where you feel safe and notice the sights, sounds, tastes and scents around you.

2 Slow down, I mean really slow down and walk as if you are kissing the earth with your feet.

3 Turn off the smartphone and connect your heart with what you are noticing as you walk.