

A person wearing a green and yellow cycling jersey and a helmet is riding a mountain bike away from the camera on a dirt trail through a dense forest. Sunlight filters through the tall trees, creating a dappled light effect on the ground. The trail is surrounded by large tree trunks and fallen logs.

restore YOUR MIND

Let nature improve
your mental health

Colleen Friesen | photos Scott Yavis

Studies are piling up, and the news
is all the same—being surrounded
by nature is good for us. ➤

It is already accepted knowledge that exercise is a key component to good physical and mental health. But there's exercise and then there's exercise. Compare sweating in a city gym on a computerized treadmill while plugged into your iTunes with scuffing through leaves on a mossy forest trail as you listen to the crackle of twigs under your feet and the occasional birdsong. It's no surprise that we feel better in nature.

CITY HEADACHES

Researchers at the University of Michigan observed cognitive deficits in people who simply *looked* at a photo of a busy urban street. When we look at, or are immersed in, a busy scenario, our prefrontal cortex is overloaded leading to less self-control and a tendency toward impulsive behaviours.

The sciences are beginning to realize what we already intuitively know: we are limited creatures, and too much stimuli leaves us unable to make good decisions and feeling lousy.

NURTURE YOURSELF WITH NATURE

Attention restoration theory (ART) is the idea that immersion in nature has a restorative effect on brain function. An ART study demonstrated that, unlike the detrimental effect of the urban photo, a view of nature from a hospital window improved a patient's health outcome. So if we already know the incredible benefits of working out, then imagine the benefits of exercising while immersing ourselves in nature.

Richard Louv, author of the best-selling book, *Last Child in the Woods* (Algonquin Books, 2008) coined the term "nature deficit disorder." In his book, he cites dozens of studies demonstrating the beneficial effects of wilderness outings on physical and mental health.

THE ALL-NATURAL PRESCRIPTION

Mental health practitioners are starting to prescribe walks in the woods to their depressed patients. Other recent findings suggest that the benefits of an orderly city park are helpful, but health improvements escalate when we spend time in wilderness areas. Our bodies and minds can discern the difference.

Canada, then, is the perfect prescription for all that ails us. Ninety percent of our population dwells in the stress-inducing 160 km urbanized corridor above the US border. But that same fact means that we have vast tracts of the medicinal effects of nature within easy reach.

So the next time you get a headache, don't reach for that bottle of pills. Instead take a walk in your local city park or, better yet, plan an escape with nature and discover the healing effects it has on your mind.

CANADIAN ECO-ACTIVITY OUTFITTERS

Feeling adventurous? Get a full dose of nature with one of these guided eco-active outfitters—your brain will thank you.

Eco-active travel is the environmentally responsible way to travel, leaving behind nothing but your footprint. Everything is taken care of for you—your camping equipment (or lodging if you choose a more luxurious trip), the itinerary, and perhaps best of all, your meals. With nothing to worry about but the paddle in your hand or the terrain ahead of you, an eco-active trip is sure to calm your mind.

North River Kayak Tours

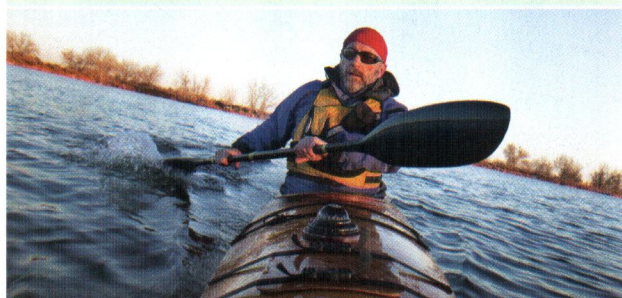
This Nova Scotian kayak company offers guided day trips as well as extended trips up to five days. They have several one to two day trips suitable for beginners and also offer paddling and wilderness training certifications. northriverkayak.com

ENF Canada

Since 1991 this Quebec-based company specializing in ecotourism and adventure travel has been giving people the opportunity to experience nature in all its glory. ENF offers hiking, biking, snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, and customizable tours. enfcanada.com

Northern Soul

This Manitoban award-winning ecotourism outfitter offers guided canoe day trips and canoe tours up to 14 days. They also offer customizable trips for whatever your needs may be, including a belly dancing and canoe tour! northernsoul.ca



Sea Kayak Adventures

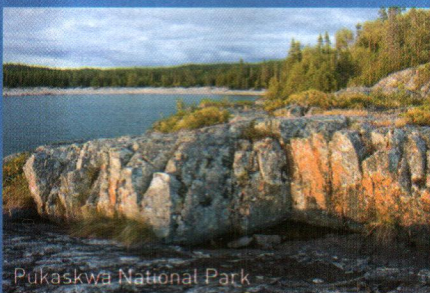
This company offers guided sea kayaking and whale watching tours in the Queen Charlotte and Johnstone Straits. They also organize dozens of yoga, kayaking, hiking, and snorkelling tours overseas in Mexico and Ecuador. seakayakadventures.com

CANADA'S PARKS— FOR THE INDEPENDENT NATURE LOVER

If you'd prefer to plan your own outdoor adventure, check out one of these beautiful provincial or national parks.

Butter Pot Provincial Park

Located on the Avalon Peninsula, Newfoundland, this park has 175 campsites, several leisurely day hikes, trout fishing, and in the winter, cross-country skiing on the park's groomed trails. Many animals call Butter Pot home including moose, beavers, and over 200 species of birds—it's a birdwatchers' paradise!



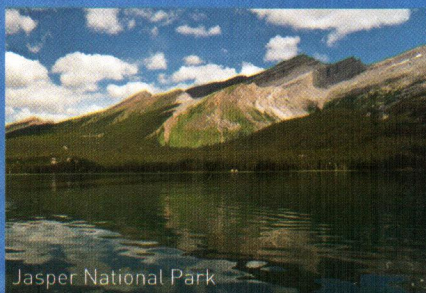
Pukaskwa National Park

Pukaskwa National Park

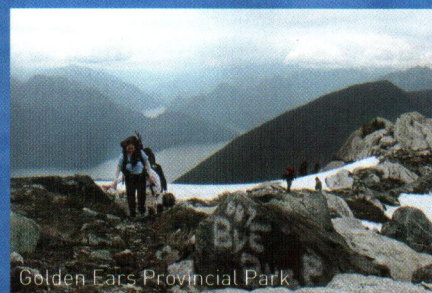
Ontario's Pukaskwa National Park offers both front country and backcountry camping, and several day-hiking and backpacking trails. Try the Manito Miikana trail, a 2 km hike with several scenic lookout points, and varied terrain from mossy boreal forest to rocky ravine. Or try the Beach Trail, a 1.5 km hike along three of Lake Superior's beaches.

Jasper National Park

The largest of all Canada's Rocky Mountain parks, Alberta's Jasper National Park boasts over 1,200 km of hiking terrain, including day trails and overnight trails. If you're set on seeing wildlife in its natural habitat, Jasper National Park is home to elk, bighorn sheep, deer, coyotes, and black bears. Be sure to educate yourself on bear safety before you go!



Jasper National Park



Golden Ears Provincial Park

Golden Ears Provincial Park

This charming BC park and campground has plenty to do, both on land and on beautiful Alouette Lake. With kayak and canoe rentals available and swimming areas galore, Golden Ears is the perfect summer hangout. If you're looking for a scenic hike, Golden Ears has many, including the Alouette Mountain Hiking Trail—a 10 km trek with spectacular views. **a**

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