

A practical guide to tapping into nature therapy tourism

Nature therapy – or eco-therapy – takes many different forms. Perhaps the most widely known is forest bathing, but it also includes grounding, meditation, awareness exercises and even blindfolded guiding. It's set to transform the traditional safari, but capturing this opportunity requires an intentional and nature-first approach.

Here's a step-by-step guide to developing meaningful nature therapy experiences.

1. Understand the market

Nature therapy moves beyond standard wildlife viewing. It's about facilitating a deeper connection to nature, one that promotes health, wellbeing and personal transformation – while rooted in science.

Key Takeaway:

As more travellers seek personalised, experience-driven adventures, this niche offers a unique opportunity to do something out the ordinary in a way that benefits both visitors and the environment.

“ Guests may forget what you've told them on a drive, they may forget facts and figures, but they're never going to forget how they felt during a guided eco-therapy experience. ”
- Grant Hine, eco-therapist and founder of Zen Guiding

2. Know your audience

Nature therapy is perfect for guests who want to see the Big 5 but also want to feel something. They're looking for experiences that allow for introspection, reveal personal insights, and foster connections.

This includes travellers who are:

- Well versed in nature therapy, especially forest bathing.
- Keen for a Big 5 lodge experience, but with a deeper connection to the natural world.
- Ready for a total break from the 'always-on' digital world they work in.
- Looking to African nature experiences as a form of self-healing; a “coming home” so they can discover their own true nature and live a happier, healthier life.
- Interested in personal growth, wellness and nature conservation.

3. Take a slow and steady approach

Nature therapy works best when facilitated by trained guides who understand the healing power of nature, the science behind it, and the different types of forest bathing, awareness and meditation techniques.

Key takeaways:

- Invest in proper training – guides need to understand different mindfulness techniques and nature connection exercises.
- Select your guides carefully – guides themselves need to be connected to nature and lead a certain lifestyle before they can facilitate these experiences with guests.
- Start small – introduce elements gradually to gauge interest before expanding programmes.
- Focus on the science behind nature therapy – this helps sceptical guests understand its benefits.
- Keep it simple – use basic tools like blindfolds or drawing materials to enhance sensory experiences.

4. Reinvent the safari experience

Nature therapy offers a number of different experiences, including:

- Forest bathing – a direct translation from the Japanese term Shinrin-yoku, it means to bathe in the atmosphere of the forest using your senses.
- Barefoot walking safaris – to practice grounding and to view animals in a different state of consciousness.
- Guided water meditations at rivers or lakes – combining reflection with nature's calming presence.
- Blindfolded walks – to remove visual stimulation and to focus on the other senses.

5. Prioritise comfort, accessibility and authenticity

Even though nature therapy focuses on disconnecting from digital distractions, modern travellers still expect a well-supported luxury experience.

Key takeaways:

- Consider enhancing your lodge experience with guided walks, organic meals and mindful activities.
- Provide a seamless, smooth and stress-free booking experience.
- Build-in science-backed education to reassure guests about the physical and mental benefits of eco-therapy.
- Avoid overly structured itineraries, as nature therapy needs space and flexibility.
- Focus on depth, not volume. Smaller, focused group sessions allow for more personal transformation.
- Encourage a 'tech-free' experience – guests should be encouraged to step away from devices and immerse themselves in the present moment.

6. Experience the power of nature therapy

For those struggling to imagine what a nature therapy session might look like, Grant Hine of Zen Guiding recalls one of his favourite moments:

"Once on a walking safari, we stopped, took our shoes off, and walked down to the river to do a water meditation. The next thing, a large herd of elephants came into the river. We sat there for 45 minutes, just connecting with about 60 elephants, grounding. So, we're touching the rocks. We're touching the water. And we're connecting with the elephants in a different state of consciousness. What's special is that animals pick that up, and they're not threatened by it, they don't want to attack, and they don't run away. They just carry on with their normal behaviour. The guides, who had worked at that lodge for many years, said it was the best elephant encounter they had ever had."

Why now?

The demand for wellness tourism and mindful travel is rising globally. Nature therapy presents an opportunity for Africa's safari industry to lead the way – showing how nature is not only worth protecting but is also key to our health and well-being.

“ When people truly connect with nature, they protect it. We're not just creating experiences – we're nurturing environmental stewards. ”
- Grant Hine, eco-therapist and founder of Zen Guiding

