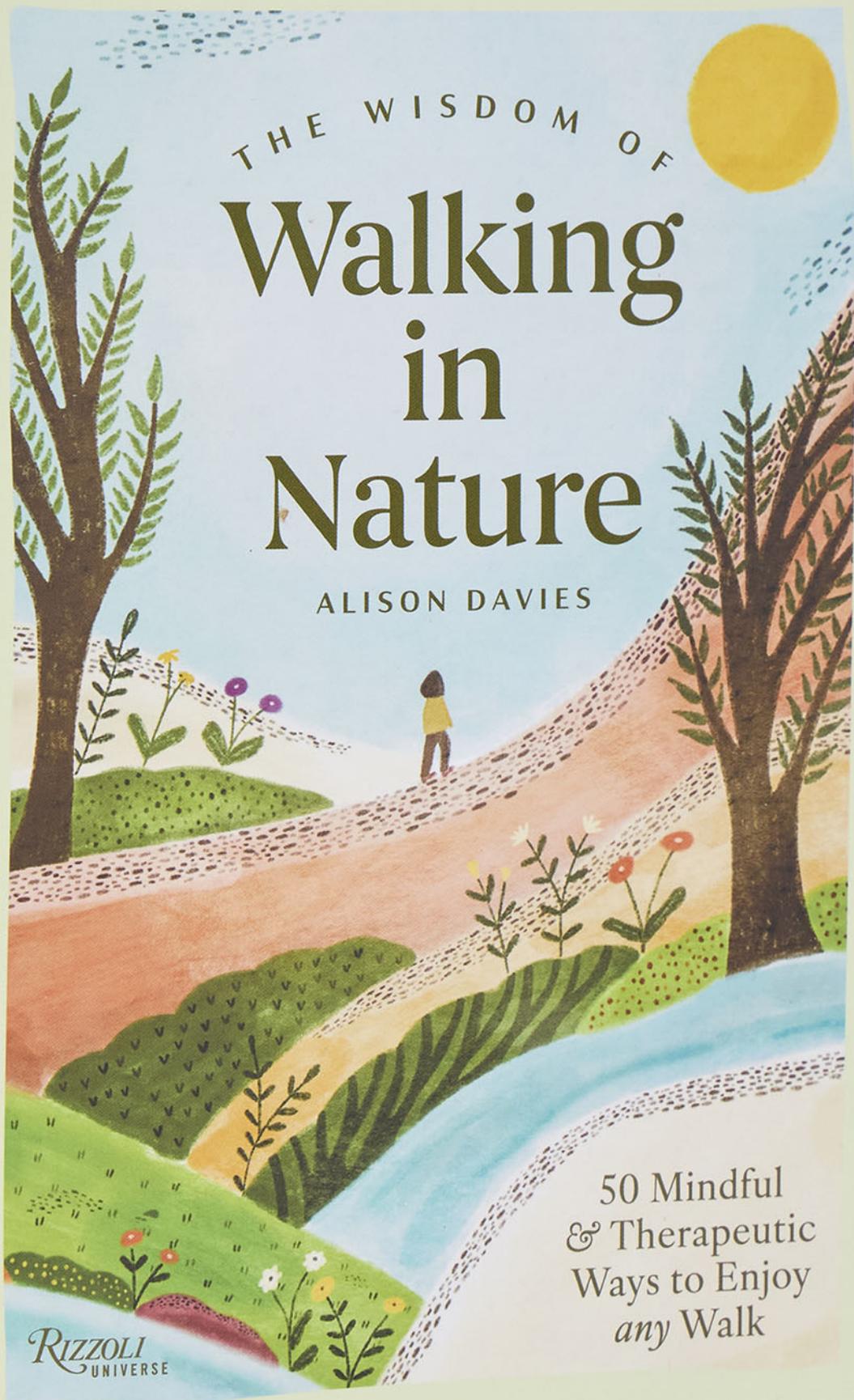


THE WISDOM OF
Walking in Nature

ALISON DAVIES



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50 Mindful
& Therapeutic
Ways to Enjoy
any Walk

RIZZOLI
UNIVERSE



CHAPTER ONE

Woodland Walks

A woodland setting provides a cloak of calm away from the hustle and bustle of everyday life; it is a leafy escape for walkers and offers the perfect backdrop to gather thoughts, clear the head, and trigger the imagination.

Here you'll find an array of mindful suggestions for woodland walks throughout the seasons.

Spring into Spring

A woodland walk is good for you. Being immersed in nature reduces stress and lowers blood pressure. The natural light boosts vitamin D, keeping the immune system in tip-top shape, while also regulating the body clock, which promotes a healthy sleep pattern. A brisk walk increases the heart rate and gets the blood pumping, so your heart will thank you too!

When you walk is just as important as where you take your daily stroll. Evidence suggests a spring amble is deeply therapeutic, thanks to the array of sights, sounds, and smells on offer. Those first stirrings of life, from the unfurling flower buds to the delicate chirp of birdsong, lift the spirits and induce a positive and relaxed mindset.

TOP
TIP

PAUSE FOR THOUGHT

Immerse yourself in the revitalizing energy of spring by taking regular well-being pauses as you walk. Use this time to stand in stillness and feel the peace. Position your feet hip-width apart. Place both hands over your heart in the center of your chest. Draw a long, invigorating breath in through your nose. Imagine you're drinking in the energy of this natural space, letting it permeate your being. Exhale slowly and relax your body.

WALK FOR WELL-BEING

Open your heart and mind and receive the gifts of spring by taking a leisurely stroll through the woods. Treat this as an act of self-care and a way to center yourself. Engage your senses and, most importantly, pay attention to how you feel before, during, and after your walk.

Before you begin, make sure you are wearing the right clothing and footwear. Spring weather can be unpredictable, bringing both sunshine, showers, and chilly winds. Dress in lots of layers, so you will be cozy when it's cold, but you can remove a layer if the sun comes out.

- Take in the general ambience of the woods as you stroll and notice how it makes you feel. Breathe deeply and elongate your spine to stretch out tired muscles.
- Look up at the sunlight filtering through the trees and notice the vibrancy it brings. Look down at the earth beneath your feet and take note of those small changes: how the stony, brittle surface seems to have softened with the extra light and warmth.
- Keep your eyes open for signs of new life. Look out for tiny saplings and new shoots that have emerged from cracks and crevices to greet the sun. See how many buds you can spot and how many flowers have started to bloom. Appreciate their color and beauty, and try to identify them.



- Make this a complete sensory experience by engaging each of your senses in turn. For example, once you've spotted a flower in bloom and studied its appearance, get closer and see if you can smell its sweet scent. What does it remind you of?
- Take in a deep breath of air: what do you taste on your tongue?
- Close your eyes and listen to the breeze as it blows through the undergrowth. What other sounds can you hear at this time? Know that there is no need to rush, that everything in nature happens at its own pace.
- As you wind your way through the woods, be sure to notice all the changes that come with this new season.



WALK 2

Tell the Trees

Trees have existed since before dinosaurs roamed the Earth. These silent sentinels provide oxygen, store carbon, and regulate the water cycle. They're also a safe haven for wildlife, supporting ecosystems, and providing us with a much-needed retreat from the stresses of daily life. The chemical compounds they release to protect themselves, known as phytoncides, boost the immune system, and help to lower blood pressure and the stress hormone cortisol. No wonder a woodland walk makes you feel so good!

TOP TIP
FIND YOUR TREE

Ancient peoples believed that trees were sacred. They thought of them as spiritual guardians with magical properties. The willow, in particular, was thought to be the keeper of secrets and the tree to share your problems with. All trees resonate with a peaceful energy and can help you feel calmer and adopt a more positive mindset.

During your walk, look out for a tree that calls to you personally. Whatever type of tree it is, sit or stand beneath its boughs and look up. Lean your back against the trunk and feel the bark support you. Take a long, deep breath in, and, as you exhale, release any fear or anxiety that you are holding on to. If you feel inclined, tell the tree a secret or a worry that is bothering you, then relax and enjoy spending time with this natural wonder.



CHAPTER TWO

Urban Walks

Cityscapes have much to offer, especially for those who seek stimulation. You may be walking solo, but you're not actually on your own—you are part of a community. And if you really want to get to know a place, then the only way to do this is on foot.



Switch It Up

Walking isn't just about countryside hikes or strolling by the sea. Every day provides the opportunity to get out and about into the fresh air and enjoy some exercise.

Studies show that a daily ten-minute walk lowers blood pressure and improves cholesterol levels, which in turn promotes heart health. It also contributes to the recommended 150 minutes of physical activity that every adult should aim to achieve each week, so, while a casual stroll to and from the store can become routine, it's still very much a game-changer when it comes to health and switching up the mindset.

TOP
TIP

CHANGE YOUR ROUTINE

Walking at different times of the day changes your experience, so if you usually take a lunchtime saunter, mix things up and try the same route early in the morning; or, if you're a morning walker, go later in the day when there's more activity. You will notice new things, which will enhance your walk.

LOOK WITH FRESH EYES

When you only have time for a short walk you can't go far, but there's still plenty of potential for fun. Your usual patch may be well trodden and familiar, especially if it's a journey you do every day like a brisk commute to and from work, but that doesn't mean it can't be an engaging experience.

As you step out onto the street, imagine you're a tourist in your own world. This is the first time you have seen this vista, so everything is new to you. While this might take a leap of imagination, once you start looking at things through fresh eyes you will notice so much more, and this will enrich the experience. To help, follow these easy steps.

- STEP 1** *Start with your breath.* Take a slow, deep breath in through your nose and then exhale gently through pursed lips. As you do this, notice what you can smell. You might pick up the scent of the trees and bushes that line the streets, or the aroma of freshly cut grass from lawns and roadsides. Have you noticed this before or is this something totally new?
- STEP 2** *Focus on what you can see.* Try and pick out something that you haven't noticed before. For example, you may spot a cut-through that you've always missed, or a pretty shrub in bloom. Look for things that usually pass you by and make a mental note of them.



STEP 3 *Acknowledge the usual everyday sights that greet you, but take your time and look at them from a different perspective, such as the slope of the street and how it curves into a beautiful arch, and how this might look from a distance; the way a tree by the intersection towers above you, providing shelter in all types of weather, its gnarled branches stretching in every direction like a spider's web. Look at things from alternative angles to gain a fuller picture. Enjoy picking out objects of interest and engaging with them in a new way.*



WALK 14

Wake Up with the City

There is nothing like an early morning urban stroll to cleanse body, mind, and soul. Watching the day unfold is a powerful experience. Those first stirrings, when movement is slow and slumbering, give you time to adjust to the world, to truly breathe in your surroundings and appreciate the clean slate of a new day.

Daylight emerges gradually; it doesn't charge ahead with bluster, bullying the nocturnal hours into submission. It glides with all the grace of a ballerina, gently taking center stage—a dawn stroll should be the same. Harness the stillness of this transitional time and let your body and mind acclimatize.





CHAPTER FOUR

Short Strolls

A short walk replenishes the brain, and it also boosts attention levels, alleviates stress, and lifts the mood, according to scientific research. The fresh air, regular exercise, and social interaction, especially if you're walking with a friend, helps you feel more energized and increases self-esteem.

What's not to love?



Go Off the Beaten Track

A short stroll doesn't have to be boring. While there are many benefits to taking a well-worn route, especially if time is limited, you can mix things up by going off the beaten track. If something piques your interest, take it a step further. Stimulate your innate curiosity and peek down that lane that always catches your eye, or turn left when you would normally go right. You'll find out where the path leads and may even discover a secret garden or tree-lined track that adds a little extra magic to your day.

TOP TIP

TURN THINGS AROUND

Sometimes taking the opposite direction to your normal route will open up a world of new experiences. With this in mind, choose your favorite short walk and flip it on its head by doing it in reverse. Enter the park at the gate you would normally leave by, turn right around the pond instead of left, and so on. This might feel strange at first, but you'll be amazed at the difference it makes. Once you get into the habit of turning things around physically with a walk, you'll start to do the same mentally; this can shift your perception and help you think laterally.

DISCOVERY WALK

This type of walk will help you get to know your neighborhood. Even if you've been living somewhere for years, you might surprise yourself and find a patch with new delights to offer. All you have to do is keep your wits about you, stay present and open, and observe each walkway keenly. You'll need to keep an eye on time as this is only a short stroll, but if you do find something of interest you can always go back for a longer ramble.

- Set yourself a time limit. You may have a destination in mind, but don't be tied to it. Keep in mind that you are going on something of an adventure!
- Adopt a leisurely pace; you don't want to be rushing and miss anything of interest. This is about observing your surroundings and enjoying the sights and sounds that you see every day.
- Take time to appreciate the flowering borders that line the street, noticing how they frame the view with their pretty shapes and colors.
- Admire the sprawling canopy of a particular tree, as well as the intricate pattern of its branches.
- Gaze up into the sky and watch the birds soaring overhead.
- Look down at your feet and notice the contours of the path you are following.



- Survey your surroundings and watch the natural world unfold before your eyes. Even in the most urban environments, nature finds a way to break through. Wildflowers peep between the cracks in paving stones, moss gathers on stone walls, and bushes become homes for small birds, seeking refuge from the noise and bustle of the human world.
- Give yourself the permission and freedom to sightsee and have fun, even if it is for a limited time. In doing so, you'll open the mind and enliven the spirit.
- Look for openings and opportunities to explore—a rusty gate that leads to a tree-lined walkway, an avenue with blooming planters and hanging baskets. It doesn't matter if the route doesn't lead to your destination; you're allowed to be spontaneous and take a diversion.
- If you do find something of interest, make a mental note, so you can return and explore more fully on another day.



WALK 32

Clear the Path for New Beginnings

A bracing walk on a windy day is an effective way of exercising and ultimately strengthens the body and mind. When you walk into the wind, the resistance you feel forces the muscles to work harder, making it more of a challenge. The effort you put into each step means that a walk around your local park is not dissimilar to a hike across a rugged landscape or walking up a steep hill. Add to this the fact that wind accelerates the evaporation of sweat, which means you'll stay cool and clear-headed for longer, and you have a win-win situation when it comes to fitness and feeling good.

**TOP
TIP**
GIVE YOURSELF A PUSH

This is a brisk walk, so you'll need to increase the pace and length of your gait. It's a good idea to build up to this gradually during the walk. The more energized you feel by your surroundings, the more effort you'll put into each step. It helps to imagine that your feet are bouncing forward and that you're cushioned by the air. This will propel you forward and generate even more energy!



CHAPTER FIVE

Walking BY Waterways

The tranquility of a waterway stroll cannot be matched. The soothing setting, combined with a plethora of sights, sounds, and smells, makes a waterside setting the perfect backdrop for any type of walk. Whether you're in search of peace, or looking to clear away the cobwebs and feel invigorated, you'll find what you need here.



Go with the Flow

Research suggests that spending time near bodies of water, known as “blue spaces,” has a calming effect on mental health. The movement of the water, together with the soothing sounds of the flow, lulls the mind, alleviates stress, and helps us feel more positive.

Rivers, streams, and other natural bodies of water are synonymous with fun, conjuring up memories of happy times spent outside. Make the most of this uplifting energy with a relaxing riverside stroll to release anxiety.

TOP TIP

WATER UNDER THE BRIDGE

If you're lucky enough to come across a bridge during your river stroll, make the most of it. Use this space to release anything that is holding you back into the flow of water beneath you, and then set intentions for the future. You'll need something light enough to float away, like a feather or some flower petals. Hold your offering in both hands and close your eyes for a moment. Think about the future and what you'd like to create. Sum this up in a simple sentence that captures the essence of your wish. For example, you might be hoping to move house and start again in a new location, so you might say, "I manifest new opportunities to broaden my horizons and start afresh." Drop your offering over the edge of the bridge and watch as it is carried forward by the flowing water.





LETTING GO AS YOU WALK

Any body of water works for this exercise, which combines the natural flow of water with the gentle motion of a walk. You can do this at any point in the year, but the chill of a winter setting will encourage you to go within, reflect, and release what you no longer need. Spring is also an opportune time to recharge and release the past. The joyful sight of flower buds coming into bloom promotes positive energy, which can help when letting go of negative thought patterns.

You will need a stretch of water that is fairly long, and one where you can walk close to the riverbank, but at a safe distance. The most important thing is to enjoy this stroll and treat it as an act of self-care. This is not about breaking into a sweat or covering a lot of ground, but about taking your time, reflecting, and reveling in nature's beauty.

STEP 1 *Walk at a steady pace*, and relax your shoulders and arms. Let them fall naturally by your sides. Give your body the freedom to move as it wishes.

STEP 2 *Engage your senses as you stroll.* Listen to the rhythmic pulse of your heartbeat and the way your feet sound as they take each step. Listen to the breeze through the shrubs and trees, and the gentle music it makes. Most importantly, listen out for the sound of the water as it trickles onward. Notice any changes in the sound that the river makes, from the whooshing as it picks up pace to the babbling noise as it rushes over rocks and stones. Listen for the sounds of nature—for example, a group of geese dipping their beaks beneath the surface of the water, or a swan ruffling its feathers as it alights on the riverbank. Watch the steady flow of the water, and let it mesmerize you.

STEP 3 *As you walk, keep your eyes peeled for the gifts of nature*, such as a beautiful feather or stone, or a pretty flower head lying at your feet. Find an object that you are drawn to and pick it up. Take a moment to stand by the river and take in its beauty.

STEP 4 *Hold the object in your hands*, and think about all the things that you would like to release from your life. For example, you might carry guilt or fear, or have a habit that you'd like to let go of.

STEP 5 *Take a deep breath* in and, as you exhale, imagine pouring all these negative emotions into the object you found.

STEP 6 *Take another deep, cleansing breath*, and as you exhale let the object fall into the river. Release it from your grasp and say either out loud or in your head, "I release with love what I no longer need. I let the river cleanse my body, mind, and soul."

STEP 7 *Watch the flow of the water*, and know that life always moves on and that you too can carry on moving forward.

STEP 8 *Continue enjoying your riverside stroll* and absorbing the peaceful atmosphere of this place.

