

I've swapped spa days for the great outdoors

Really refresh your January with these rejuvenating UK breaks, says **Lucy Perrin**

Once witnessed a fight at a spa. It was a fancy place: embossed slippers, a heated infinity pool, £150 for a day pass before any treatments. The issue was the guest to sunbed ratio which, at 10:1, made securing one feel like a *Squid Game* task.

Two ladies had attempted to bag some by scattering a selection of magazines before heading off to the sauna. Another pair had ignored this territorial marking and flopped down on the now vacant beds. When the original owners returned, voices were raised so high that the spa manager had to scurry along and defuse things before any green smoothies were thrown.

I left my ringside seat for a massage, not daring to leave anything behind, but even that made me stressed. Despite the candlelit calm of the treatment room, the pressure to relax sent my brain into overdrive. In those 60 minutes it pinged constantly with unwanted thoughts: did I definitely send that urgent email? How long before a massage are you meant to eat? And worst of all: had I accidentally put the tiny spa knickers on back to front?

The massage proved pivotal in the realisation that enforced relaxation doesn't work for me. In fact, the moments I feel most at peace tend to happen unexpectedly, and nearly always when I'm immersed in nature, be it during a head-clearing beach walk or a bracing sea swim. Here are some ideas on how to find a more exhilarating way to unwind.

Highland cow walks Argyll and Bute

It's the company that will put you in good spirits on this winter walk at Highland Fold Farm, between Oban and Glencoe. Blondes, redheads and every shade in between are present in this fold of 15 Highland cattle, and walks are led by the farmer, Jane Isaacson, who times sessions for when the cows are relaxed

and resting. She'll introduce you to the whole clan — including Joey, a calf, and Jock, a seven-year-old bull who weighs in at 800kg and also goes by the pedigree show name of Jock the 17th of Woodneuk (£15pp; highland-foldfarm.co.uk). Stay at the Pierhouse Hotel in Port Appin and fill up on langoustines, mussels and lobster harvested from Loch Linnhe and Loch Etive, followed by scoops of ice cream made with ingredients including gooseberries, redcurrants and mint that have been foraged from or grown on Highland Fold Farm.

Details Room-only doubles from £105 (pierhousehotel.co.uk)

Pony trekking Cumbria

There's no better place to blow the cobwebs away than Cumbria, and one restful way to take in its valley views is from the saddle of a Lakeland packhorse, known for having a calming influence. Stressed souls can test that theory on a six-mile guided trek that winds through some of the Lake District's prettiest patches of woodland forest, wildflower meadows and country lanes, and unravels views of Windermere along the way. Halfway through the treks, which run from April through to October, you'll pause for a gourmet picnic lunch of homemade soup with local cheeses, artisan bread and stacks of olives and dips (£165pp, minimum group of two; fellpony.co.uk). Make a weekend of it with a stay in a woodland lodge at Storrs Hall, on the shores of Windermere.

Details B&B doubles from £550 (storshall.com)



Walk with Highland cows in Argyll and Bute



Pen-y-ghent, Yorkshire Dales

Wild swimming Norfolk

Those who take the plunge with this guided wild swim in the Blakeney Marshes will be pleasantly surprised to find that the temperature of the water here, unlike the sea, is nearly always in double figures. It's a safe way to explore north Norfolk's hidden coves, tidal creeks and pristine estuaries, and everyone is welcome, whether you've got little or lots of experience with wild swimming. Blakeney Point is also England's largest grey seal colony, and if you brave it in winter your reward will be spotting newborn pups curled up on the rocks. Stay at the Harper, where you can cosy up on a sofa in front of a toasty wood-burning stove to devour a plate of Cromer crab tacos.

Details B&B doubles from £260 (theharper.co.uk)

Meditation under the stars at Ockenden Manor West Sussex

Helena Skoog, who grew up in a Swedish forest, is on a mission to lift spirits at her woodland retreats in the South Downs dark sky reserve. Held when the moon is full, the idea is to inspire guests to be receptive to change and reflect on their lives by tuning into the sights and sounds of the forest. During each stress-busting session, held over two days, guests stay at the Elizabethan Ockenden Manor and take part in yoga classes, forest bathing and an evening meditation under the stars. The price also includes a session in a floatation tank and a 60-minute massage.

Details Two-night package from £899 (hshotels.co.uk)



Ockenden Manor, West Sussex

Scale the peaks North Yorkshire

The endorphins that come from a good hike last way longer than any resulting aches in your legs, and this small-group hike is your chance to take a leisurely, safe approach to summiting Yorkshire's highest peaks: Pen-y-ghent, Wharfedale and Ingleborough. Each trip lasts two days and your guide will point out the dramatic sights along this stretch

of the Pennine Way as you stroll, including the 32m-high Victorian

Ribblehead viaduct. All accommodation, meals and daily packed lunches are provided, along with transport to and from walks.

Details Three nights' full board plus lunches from £515 (hfholidays.co.uk)

Sensory nature walk Northumberland

A great way to put any worries and problems into perspective is to go for a stroll by the sea, and the Northumberland coastline is one of the UK's most untouched stretches. This two-mile guided sensory walk along the clifftops at the St Abb's Head nature reserve in Berwick is led by a former National Trust ranger who knows the flowers to smell, shells to feel and seabird songs to listen out for. As well as puffins, shags and razorbills, you may also be lucky enough to spy seals and pods of dolphins. Each session ends with a guided meditation and can be wrapped into the cost of a stay at 1 The Bay, a cosy coastal cottage that sleeps four.

Details Three nights' self-catering for four including a guided walk from £854 (crabtreeandcrabtree.com)