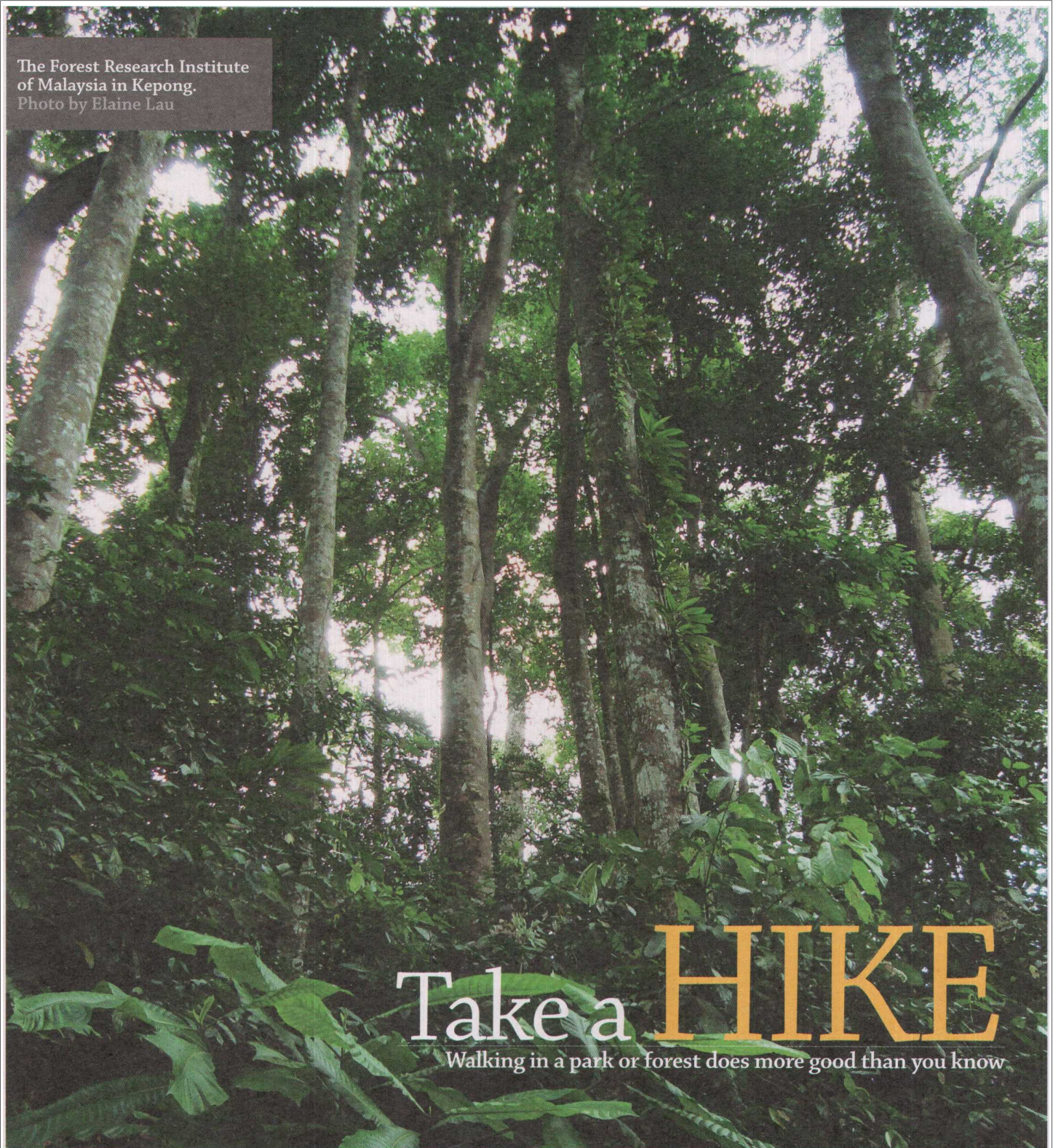


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The Forest Research Institute
of Malaysia in Kepong.
Photo by Elaine Lau



Take a HIKE

Walking in a park or forest does more good than you know

Elaine Lau

Trees are good for us — and I don't mean that in a mystical, New Age sort of way. You know how you just feel better after walking through a park or a forest, or any place with plenty of trees? A sense of well-being descends upon you,

and your spirit feels strangely uplifted. Being amidst nature has a calming effect on the body and soul, but why is this so?

Perhaps it's the beauty our eyes behold that touches a primordial chord within our beings, or the silence inherent in such surroundings that helps quiet down our souls.

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The unadulterated woodsy-smelling air we breathe is no doubt nourishing, and looking at green foliage is traditionally believed to be good for the eyes.

For sure, all this contributes to a sense of well-being. But a series of studies point to a very specific element that does that — phytoncides, the airborne chemicals that plants emit to protect them from rotting and that keep insects at bay. When we breathe in phytoncide-rich air, it has the effect of increasing immune function and reducing stress.

Scientists in Japan have for a number of years been studying the health effects of forests and trees on mental and physical health. Their findings have even led some local governments to promote “forest bathing” as a form of therapy, or what is called *shinrin-yoku* in Japanese.

Yoshifumi Miyazaki, professor at the Centre for Environment, Health and Field Sciences at Chiba University in Japan, is Japan’s leading scholar on forest medicine. He and several of his colleagues have been conducting physiological experiments to examine whether forests can make people feel at ease since 2004.

According to the *New York Times*, the most recent study, published earlier this year, was carried out with 280 healthy people in Japan. One group was told to walk through a forest or wooded area for a few hours, and another group, through an urban area. The groups switched places the next day. The scientists wrote in the published study that “forest environments promote lower concentrations of cortisol [stress hormone], lower pulse rate, lower blood pressure, greater parasympathetic nerve activity, and lower sympathetic nerve activity than do city environments”.

“Humans had lived in nature for five million years,” said Miyazaki in an article in *The Japan Times*. “We were made to fit a natural environment. So we feel stress in an urban area. When we are exposed to nature, our bodies go back to how they should be.”

Studies conducted by Li Qing, professor of

forest medicine at Nippon Medical School in Tokyo in 2006 and 2007 also showed that inhaling air containing phytoncide can strengthen the immune system. One experiment had 12 men take a two-night trip to a forest, and another had 13 women making a similar trip. Li found that the subjects in both groups charted an increase in levels of natural killer (NK) cells, a component of the immune system that fights cancer. The increase was observed for as long as 30 days.

In the same *Japan Times* article, Li is quoted as saying, “When NK activity increases, immune strength is enhanced, which boosts resistance against stress.” She added that forest

therapy for immune-compromised patients might be developed in the near future.

So the next time you’re feeling stressed out, get a health boost by heading out to a park for a leisurely stroll. The Klang Valley has a number of lovely spots to do just that, and here are a few suggestions. Highly recommended is the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia in Kepong. This area boasts 600ha of tropical forest, and there are a number of different trails to choose from. There is even a lovely canopy walk, but stay away if you’re acrophobic. Visit www.frim.gov.my or call (03) 6279 7000 for more information.

Within the city area, there’s Royal Lake Gardens, a popular location for joggers, and Bukit Nanas Forest Reserve. Amidst the 92ha of lush greenery at Lake Gardens, there’s also a Bird Park, Butterfly Park, Deer Park, Hibiscus Garden and Orchid Garden. Bukit Nanas Forest Reserve is one of the oldest permanent forest reserves in the country. Spanning 11ha, it is the only remaining tropical rainforest in the heart of Kuala Lumpur city.

Another popular location is Gasing Hill, a 36ha secondary jungle and only remaining forest reserve in Petaling Jaya, with different trails that takes you through the jungle. A jogger-friendly location is TTDI Park in Taman Tun Dr Ismail, with a choice of flat or rolling terrain.