



WARD OFF THE WINTER BLUES

These cold winter days are the perfect opportunity for some self nurturing.

Tracey Davies gives us her tips on how to banish the winter blues.

As our Native American friends annually profess, “winter is a time for reflection”. It’s when we say “so long” to one year and “hello” to the next and with shorter days and long nights the temptation to hibernate, sup rustic soups and read dusty classics, hangs seductively in the air.

But, don’t get too settled! Winter is one of the best times to travel in the UK and there are hundreds of places that extol their finest virtues during the cooler months. Plus, with no pressure to perform, the weather treats us to crisp winter days that are best spent roaming through skeletal forests, warmly wrapped with only our breath visible to the world.

Even the steeliest of cities has a genial appeal in winter. There’s something quietly invigorating about walking through icy grey streets, the blue December skies peeping between office blocks and cosy Victorian pubs on every corner doling out mulled wine and winter ales.

Then there’s the environment to take into consideration. Taking holidays in the sun is certainly not for the eco-aware. Sun-seekers have to fly four or more hours in search of a temperate beach during the winter months. So dust off your favourite muff, find that missing mitten and, with a frozen nod from winter solstice, embrace our chilly lands.

Seasonal affective disorder (SAD) affects more than half a million people in the UK so we need to look after ourselves during the darker months both physically and mentally. A winter retreat is the ideal opportunity to reflect on the past

year, and, when combined with complementary therapies, it can work towards combating some of the symptoms of SAD.

All you need is a quiet space away from your natural home environment in which you can restore your mind, relax your body and, in turn, revive your soul ready for the brand new year ahead. A retreat can be anything from a month residing in a seafront studio in Whitstable to a weekend in a shearling-lined tipi in mid-Wales. For some, a true retreat may lie in a draughty caravan overlooking the broad sands of Prestatyn or even in your mum’s spare room with a copy of a 1976 Jackie annual. It’s anywhere that you can switch off from day-to-day stresses, recharge your energies and reflect on your current state of life.

Loch yourself away

Scotland really comes into its own in winter. There is nowhere better to restore a weary mind than by overlooking the melancholy stillness of a great Scottish loch. The highlands are heaving with dramatic scenery and the soft palette of greys, browns and auburns makes for an inspiring winter break. Natural log cabins (www.logcabinscotland.net) are as aesthetically pleasing as it gets and combine creature comforts with environmentally friendly materials. Try the solitude of the Inchmurrin Island on Loch Lomond, which allows for personal reflection of the most natural kind.

Canvassing for peace

Fair weather campers may not be keen to sleep under canvas in midwinter. However, the traditional Native American tipi has been designed to protect from harsh environments. When insulated with sheepskins and warmed with a woodburning stove, there is no cosier place to spend a cold, winter’s eve. The north Norfolk coast is an ideal location for a spot of self-reflection and is well-served by the tipi community in winter (www.deepdalefarm.co.uk/tipis; www.tipi-heaven.co.uk/).

Trip the light fantastic

The northern lights are one of nature’s most spectacular phenomena and you don’t have to trek to the arctic circle to see them. Known in Scottish Gaelic folklore as *Fir Chlis*, they are often visible in the very north of Scotland where from late autumn until spring these “merry dancers” throw an eerie glow over the night sky. Rent a traditional Scottish croft in Dunnett Head, near Caithness (www.winterbreaksscotland.co.uk) for the most opportune sightings and by day enjoy the quiet serenity of the northern limits and by night witness the ethereal wonders of aurora borealis.

Snow for the soul

There are three things that eternally lift the soul through the darker months; a crisp winter’s morning, a steaming mug of hot chocolate and the gentle wisp of snowfall. Last February’s surprise downfall lifted the heart of the nation like a public holiday. Snow is never guaranteed here in the UK, but one place that annually gets a sprinkling is the Cairngorms, Britain’s highest mountain range and Scotland’s answer to Val d’Isere. You can try your hand at skiing or snowboarding at Britain’s premier ski resort, Aviemore, but with our temperamental snowfall you may be disappointed. A better way to experience the natural delight of the area is with a winter walking weekend in the Cairngorms (www.scotmountain.co.uk). Tackling Scotland’s highest peaks in midwinter is not for the faint-hearted, but under the expertise of professional guides it can be an incredible life-affirming experience.

Detox rocks

During the cooler seasons it’s important to restore our physical strength, as well as our spiritual wellbeing, to start the New Year afresh. A proper detox is as much an emotional journey as it is a physical one making it perfect for a winter retreat. Try a residential detox break in the beautiful Sussex country countryside (www.vitalitydetox.com).

Vitality runs four- and seven-day breaks in which you embark on a juice diet combined with therapies and exercises including meditation, chi gung and yoga, all of which ensure holistic support for “a safe detox journey”.

Creativity breeds happiness

During the quieter winter months it’s important to nurture our creative minds. This doesn’t necessarily mean we have to embark on a huge design project, or attempt to recreate the Sistine Chapel in the conservatory, but perhaps expand our artistic potential by learning a new skill or hobby. The Woodside Villa (www.woodsidevillawhitby.co.uk/artcourses.aspx) offers regular two-day art retreats from a beautiful Victorian guest house in Whitby, North Yorkshire. First-time artists can experiment with painting, drawing, collage and printing using a number of different materials, plus there is expert one-to-one advice on hand to boost a beginner’s confidence and creativity. For those whose words are their chosen form of expression, Devon is home to a writer’s retreat that offers solitude without distraction, plus the opportunity for reflective feedback on your work from the resident journalist, Deborah Dooley (www.deborahdooleyjournalist.co.uk/retreat.html).

Quick-fixes for the time-poor

Of course, many of us are short of time but this doesn’t mean we can’t nurture our mind and body. The Catapult Club’s (www.thecatapultclub.com) personal development programme is perfect for the time-conscious. If your life needs a boost, try the half-day Zest Express workshop, a series of practical exercises to address your breathing, posture and attitude. A holistic approach aims to “reconnect you with your senses, enriching your daily existence”.

Before too long the spiky green shoots of spring will arrive and we’ll miss the quiet serenity of these cool, winter months. Go on, make the most of them.