



QUIET

MATTER

Honking horns. Dinging phones. Aeroplanes, sirens, jackhammers. This is the soundtrack to our lives. And by most measures, the hubbub produced by street noise, air traffic and mobile phones is on the rise. In the US alone the number of passenger flights is expected to double the 2011 figure by 2032. Other parts of the world will see significant increases as well.

This acoustic assault has an impact on our health. Studies show that noise pollution affects our sleep, boosts our stress and puts us at increased risk of cardiovascular disease, kidney failure and dementia. Doubling down on this problem, researchers have also found that we recover from everyday anxieties much better and faster in quiet environments. One study at Duke University in North Carolina showed two hours of silence each day actually

No to noise:
acoustic
ecologist Gordon
Hempton
chronicled the
rare remaining
spots on Earth
that are free
from man-made
sounds in his
book *One Square
Inch of Silence:
One Man's Quest
to Preserve Quiet*.
Lake Crescent,
pictured, in
the Olympic
National Park in
the US state of
Washington was
such an example

FERS

The virtues of silence are being embraced by an ever-growing contingent of spas, hotels, airports and even entire countries. **Kelly DiNardo** reports on the pleasures of peace

encouraged cell development in the hippocampus, a region of the brain involved in memory, learning and emotion.

"The noise of life, the constant tethering to work has changed us profoundly," says Beth McGroarty, research director with the Global Wellness Summit, which listed a focus on silence as one of the top trends in wellness tourism for 2017. "A lot of the trends like flotation beds, forest

bathing and mindfulness are about quiet disconnection in some way. It speaks to a real need."

It was that need that inspired **Mandarin Oriental** (mandarinoriental.com) to start its Silent Night initiative. One evening in December 2015 all of its spas offered normal treatment menus, but after 5pm there was no talking and no music. Following the night's success, the hotels repeated the event last year and are planning →

"WE NEVER GIVE OUR EARS A CHANCE TO REST"

another Silent Night for this December. "The modern solution for noise pollution is to drown out the thrum of city life by constantly streaming content on our devices," says Jeremy McCarthy, the group director of spa and wellness for Mandarin Oriental Hotels who conceived the initiative. "We never give our ears, and more importantly our brains, a chance to rest."

If a longer respite is required, **The Alpina Gstaad** (thealpinagstaad.ch) created a four-day Silent Retreat, which includes meditation, yoga and massage at the Swiss hotel nestled in the Bernese Alps. While the retreat is only available in the summer months, "Silent Pins" that let other guests and staff know you'd prefer not to chat are always available. In a similar vein, **Rancho La Puerta** (rancholapuerta.com), the famed resort in the Mexican desert just south of San Diego, offers a week-long digital detox. The Ranch, as guests refer to the 1,214ha property, has no TV or wifi in rooms, limited mobile-phone service and takes the din out of dinner with weekly meals where there is no technology or conversation at the table, just inspirational music meant to give the experience a meditative feel.

Spas are taking on a multitude of experiments in the quest for inner peace. In the medieval city of Pärnu, Estonia, the **Hedon Spa** (hedonspa.com) looked to the Roman baths for inspiration for its Silent spa. Guests make their way through a series of saunas, warm baths and pools, including one filled with saltwater where the air is similar to that of the Dead Sea, in a two- to three-hour noiseless ritual.

In warmer surrounds, at the heart of Arizona's Red Rocks, a region known for its crimson-coloured sandstone, **L'Auberge de Sedona** (lauberge.com) features the 90-minute Quiet Mind treatment, which was crafted by a team of massage therapists and yoga instructors to include breathing exercises and facial acupressure to help guests to more deeply calm the mind, as well as a Swedish massage with essential oils meant to deepen the tranquillity. Farther south, the spa at **The Cape** (thompsonhotels.com) in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, forgoes music. Instead, the space was designed so that the halls capture the ocean breeze and the natural environment serves as the acoustic backdrop.

Architecture plays a strong role in this quest for quietude. Monasteries, convents and abbeys are being converted to modern retreats that nod to their austere past. In the heart of Umbria, Italy, the **Eremito de l'Alma** (eremito.com) turned a former hermitage into a contemporary cathedral to silence and peace. There's no television, phone or wifi. Meals, built around ancient monastic recipes and produce from the hotel's vegetable garden and local farms, are enjoyed in serenity. Across the border in Tuscany, meantime, the Accademia del Silenzio (Academy of Silence) is creating a

catalogue of the quietest hostelries, towns and other places in Italy (ranging from the Aeolian to Pelagie Islands) for the ruminatively inclined.

Over in the Weinviertel region of Austria, on the border with the Czech Republic, the recently opened **Therme Laa – Hotel and Silent Spa** (therme-laa.at) complements design elements of monasteries and churches with high-end materials and technology to create a spa that encourages quiet, peace and reflection. "It's not about religion," says Florian Perteneder, the manager. "If you go to a church, you become more quiet. You slow down. We wanted to create that experience."

Slowing down was also the motivation at another fabled *therme* town, Germany's Baden-Baden. In the grounds of the grand Brenners Park-Hotel in this Black Forest hamlet, **Villa Stéphanie** (brenners.com) built cutting-edge technology into the very bones of the building. Shielded cables were used to reduce the electromagnetic field. The walls have metal shields and a special coating that blocks all high-frequency signals. And, all of the rooms have a bedside "kill switch" that cuts off all electricity to the room. The intention is to encourage guests to switch off and completely focus on their health – and in addition to standard spa treatments, the villa includes a state-of-the-art medical facility run by a team of doctors, trainers and nutritionists.

Even price-wise hotels are trying to turn down the volume. **InterContinental Hotels Group's** (ihg.com) Crowne Plaza brand offers "Quiet Zone" rooms where there's no attendant, housekeeping or engineering during certain hours unless specifically requested by a guest. And **Quiet Hotel Room** (quiethotelroom.org), a Dutch company, tests rooms for sound and certifies them as quiet. Meanwhile, airports, usually unending cascades of cacophony, are looking at dissonance more closely. In Barcelona, Warsaw and Helsinki, for example, gate announcements are made through silent kiosks, text message and mobile apps to cut down on the racket.

Even entire countries are getting in on the idea that silence is golden. In 2011, the Finnish Tourist Board kicked off its now popular "Silence, Please" campaign, which plays up the country's vast areas of untouched nature and encourages visitors to come and "hear yourself think". And more recently a European Union report pointed out that Scotland is one of the quietest destinations in Europe and Visit Scotland suggested businesses promote the health benefits of the country's peace and tranquillity.

The word noise itself is traced back to the Latin *nausea*, and our modern world seems to be catching on to the idea that the constant uproar is bad for our physical and mental health. The message that quiet matters has become loud and clear. ●

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