Witchy wellness
Has Salem’s magic community created the next big thing in self-care?

Meals with a message
The chef changing the world with a 50-dish tasting menu

Beasts of the East
Encounter primeval bison on a Polish forest safari

Mooooove closer
Check out the trend for “cow cuddling”
Salem isn’t just the Halloween capital of the USA. It’s home to a community that uses tarot cards, spells and crystals for healing. Could its witchcraft retreats be the next big thing in self-care?
Paraphernalia at The Cauldron Black in Salem
Justice the Wizard and objects from a ritual at The Cauldron Black
A makeshift altar stands on the cobbled waterfront of Salem’s misty harbour. Fashioned from a wooden cabinet, it’s draped with animal skins and topped with candles that flicker in the cool East Coast breeze. Holding hands, 10 women and two men encircle it, sporting long, flowing robes, wolf-tooth earrings and flowers in their hair. One by one they place offerings: a rosebud, a sunflower, a rabbit’s paw.

Justice the Wizard, an oracle who’s leading this evening’s ritual, rolls up the sleeves of his cloak and tears a sprig of mint leaves into a stone font of water fragranced with rose petals and lemon juice. I rinse my hands before taking the silver chalice of grape juice he’s holding out. “May you never thirst,” he says, smiling.

Welcome to Salem, Massachusetts – or Witch City, as this former fishing port is nicknamed. It’s best known for its leading role in the witch trials of 1692, which saw the execution of 20 people and imprisonment of more than 200 others, most of them women. Over the past 50 years, it’s developed a thriving tourism industry around its gruesome history.

Less well known, though, is that Salem is now home to a community of real-life witches – as many as 1,600 out of a 40,000 population – who’ve been reclaiming the town as their own. Rather than black capes and pointy hats, these enchanters and enchantresses are identified by their liberal politics: performing protective charms for vulnerable groups, engaging in cleansing rituals, and sharing spells on the #witchesofinstagram hashtag.

Salem is now, somewhat ironically, considered one of the most inclusive communities on America’s East Coast for Wicca, witchcraft and paganism. And, although tourist tat shops still peddle a cartoon version of witchery with black-cat coasters and broomstick key rings, the town is now welcoming a growing number of guests for alternative wellness holidays – ones that swap spas for tarot cards and saunas for Moon circles. »
“A lot of people come to Salem to experience modern witchcraft,” says Now Age Travel guide Melissa Nierman, who runs walking tours of the city that aim to tell a non-sensationalist version of the events of 1692 and to unpick Salem’s complex relationship with witchcraft. “People think Salem’s always had witches,” she says, “but we didn’t have any witch shops here before the ’70s. That’s because in the past, the term ‘witch’ was very disempowered and led to the murder of innocent people.”

While on the surface Salem has come to terms with its witchy history, she points out that most of the witchcraft imagery around town still tends to focus either on the tragic deaths of the trial victims, or on a kitsch, cartoonish archetype. The latter is typified by the cutesy statue of sorceress Samantha Stephens (from the 1960s sitcom *Bewitched*), which sits on the site where “the hanging judge”, John Hathorne, lived. Its installation in 2005 prompted protests by real practitioners of witchcraft, who take issue with the patriarchy-friendly image that’s often seen on screen.

Her tours shows how this trivialisation of a violently misogynistic period of history points to a wider tendency in Western culture to neutralise the threat that witches traditionally represent. “I ask how this ties in with cycles of persecution that are happening today,” she says.

While this sub-text certainly doesn’t deter the many thousands of visitors who come here (as many as 250,000 just for its Halloween Happenings each October), Nierman has found an increasing number are eager to learn about how magical beliefs manifest today – and how “modern feminist witchcraft offers an alternative to the status quo”.

Those who don’t move in Wiccan circles might be surprised by this level of interest, but as membership of traditional religions has fallen among younger generations, nature-based spirituality is booming. Surveys show that 40% of Americans now believe in psychics and 30% in astrology. The country’s psychic services industry – which includes astrology, tarot-card reading and palmistry – is worth US$2 billion. »
"Modern feminist witchcraft offers an alternative to the status quo"

MELISSA NIERMAN
Founder of Now Age Travel

“I started hosting walking tours two years ago. I really wanted to cater to those people who want that feminist perspective. I also hold coven weekends for bachelorette parties or birthdays. We start with a Moon circle, to set our intentions, and a meditation. Then I’ll usually do a history tour, followed by tarot workshops where I give them the basics and they read for each other. They start giving each other advice, compliments. Everybody just wants to be seen, and this creates an environment where that happens. Tarot is very therapeutic. It’s about reflecting on what you already know, not seeing into the future.”

nowagetravel.com

Clockwise from top left:
Holding a seance at Omen; Melissa Nierman in the Charter Street Cemetery, Salem’s oldest burial ground; the Witch House is the only building that remains in the town from 1692; Salem harbour; the Witch House belonged to judge Jonathan Corwin
One major highlight for these pilgrims is HausWitch Home + Healing. Opened in 2015 by self-identifying witch Erica Feldmann, its airy, minimalist interior wouldn’t look amiss in Copenhagen. On the white-painted shelves are origami-encased spell kits, velvet-bound spell books and herbal cosmetics. “We only stock things we truly believe are medicine and magic, from makers that are women, queer, people of colour,” says Feldmann. “We focus on self-care as witchcraft. You can effortlessly bring magic into your everyday life, to empower you to create the life you want.”

This idea of witchcraft as wellness isn’t so different from the philosophies seen in popular self-help manuals like *The Secret* and *The Law of Attraction*, where practitioners hope to harness natural forces to manifest positive futures. Books like last year’s *The Witch’s Book of Self-Care, Spellwork for Self-Care* and the forthcoming *Magical Self-Care for Everyday Life*, are part of a new phenomenon that seems particularly tailored to millennials, who are driving the $4.2 trillion global wellness market with their love of yoga, meditation and, now, love spells and moonstones.

In Salem today you’ll find every possible wellness trope given a uniquely witchy bent, with spiritual treatments for a litany of life ills. There are Full Moon, Half Moon or Dark Moon rituals, lessons on the guiding power of *
crystals, tarot card readings and candlelit seances. You can visit a high priestess at Omen (a “Psychic Parlour and Witchcraft Emporium”) and learn to “manifest your life” on a “Ritual Transformation” that involves discarding symbols of unwanted habits into a “dark cauldron”. Or – for those who are particularly worried about Mercury entering retrograde this month – work out which herbs will protect you at a “folk herbalism” workshop.

Across town, Artemisia Botanicals, home to the “Green Witch School of Herbalism”, is the place to find out more about how plants can aid well-being. Stepping inside, there’s a rich scent of dried petals and incense sticks. The walls are stacked, floor-to-ceiling, with essential oils, handcrafted goat-milk soaps, gleaming crystals and dried herbs.

The owner, herbalist and coven-sister Teri Kalgren, points out that historically wellness has always been plant-based. Before we had medicine in the scientific sense, humans put their faith in wise women to cure ills, whether they claimed to have magical powers or not.

She describes casting spells – quite simply – as a therapeutic form of meditation. “If you’re going through a rough time, you might naturally want to have a bath, make a cup of tea, light a candle. When you light it, you’ll meditate on it and visualise yourself getting better. Positive affirmations are so good for the spirit.”

I’m a bit wary of trying some of the more occult-sounding stuff, but in the interests of research I find myself at The Cauldron Black, a Mediterranean folk-magic shop opened on the harbour in 2017. Tarot reader Nick Dickinson leads me behind a velvet curtain at the back of the shop and hands me a deck of cards to shuffle. To soothing sitar playing over the speakers, he leans forward and smiles. “Things have been a bit up in the air lately,” he says softly. “Is there anything you want to talk about?”

“Tarot is about empowering a person to take steps to fix certain areas in their life”

JACQUI ALLOUISE-ROBERGE
Founder of The Cauldron Black

“I grew up just outside Salem and my grandmother was an Italian healer. So, as a kid, I started learning Italian folk magic – how to read coffee grounds and playing cards.

“Our tarot readings are diagnostic. If you have financial troubles or love troubles, we’ll offer meditations you can work on at home. It’s all about empowering a person to take the steps to fix certain areas in their life.

“With readings, nothing’s ever set in stone. If a client gets an answer they don’t want, we ask, ‘Are you willing to dedicate the time and energy to get the result you do want?’”

thecauldronblack.com
Signature spell
Witchcraft as therapy

Weird
For 21 years, Haunted Footsteps has led lantern-lit, night-time ghost tours around historic haunted buildings. Visitors have reported seeing (and have even photographed) supernatural sights.
hauntedfootsteps.com

Weirder
At psychic parlour Omen, mediums guide you through a seance where you'll use pendulums, black mirrors and automatic writing to contact the spirit world, followed by a psychic reading.
omensalem.com

Weirdest
Ever sensed you’ve lived another life, or inherited phobias and traits from a previous self? Take a two-hour journey into the deepest recesses of your psyche at The Salem Center for Past Life Regression.
pastliferegression.salem.com
As my tarot reading progresses into an impromptu counselling session, I start to understand the appeal of these treatments. For witchcraft to work as self-care, you have to be receptive to its influence. Like talking therapies, meditation and arguably prayer, these practices are simply tools for making sense of and coping with daily life.

It doesn’t feel like a coincidence that Americans are turning to these natural touchstones during an era of political upheaval. As Feldman told me: “People are feeling a bit powerless right now, and women and other oppressed people feel a connection to witchcraft as a language. People practised Earth worship for millions of years. It’s only in the past couple of hundred years that it’s been looked at as a wacky idea, but it’s in all of our ancestry.” To seek harmony with the natural cycles of the Earth, when global insecurity weighs heavy, is an act of well-being in itself.

As I meditate on this as I end my stay at Justice the Wizard’s sunset ritual, holding a rose to my heart, then placing it on the makeshift altar by the sea. As I sip from the chalice and pass it back to Justice, to my slight surprise I’m full of calm and feel present on a more fundamental level than a spa weekend could have wrought. I smile back at him. “May you never thirst.”

Salem is 40 minutes’ drive north of Boston; Norwegian flies to Boston from four destinations. Book flights, a hotel and a rental car at Norwegian.com