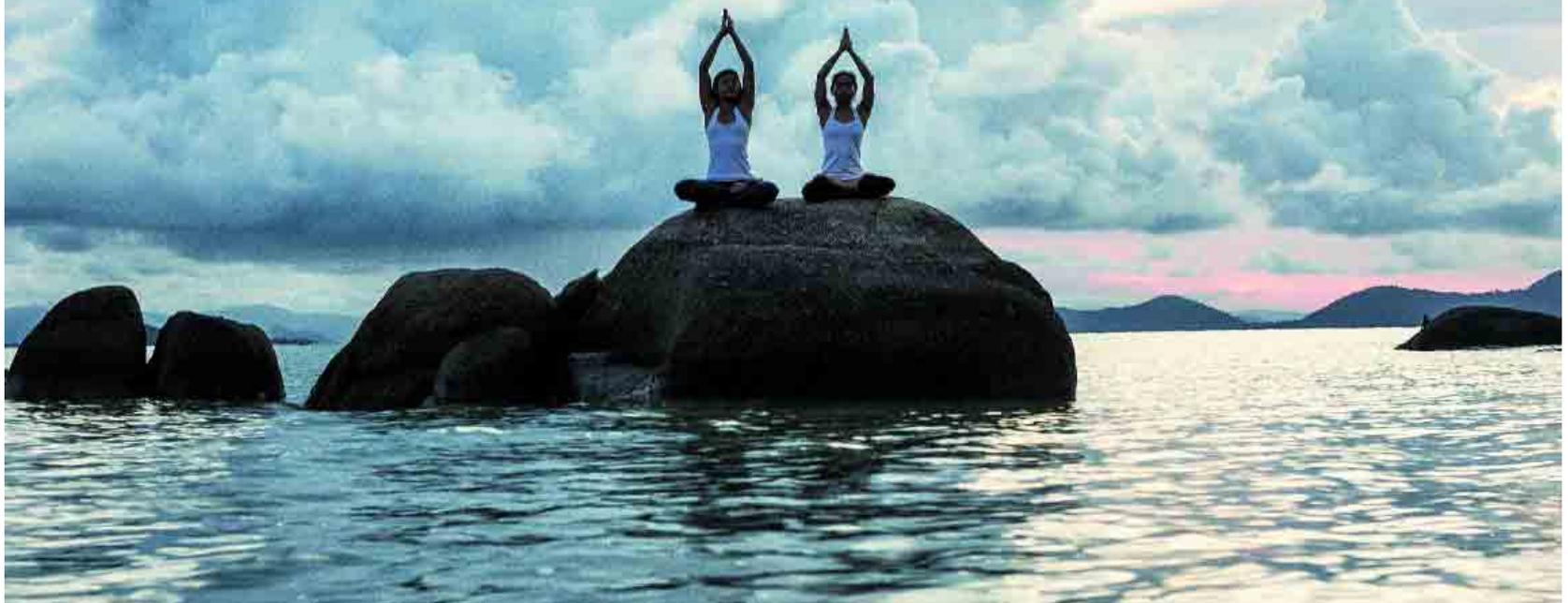


REBECCA WALKER

# WELL AND TRULY HEALTHY

Wellness tourism gains popularity as resorts offer programmes to relax the body, destress the mind and nurture the inner self



**The concept of healthy holidays** is nothing new. Health farms, weight-loss retreats, spa sanctuaries and fitness boot camps have been around for decades, yet in recent years a newly flourishing segment within the travel industry known as “wellness tourism” has taken centre stage.

Loosely defined as “travel associated with the goal of maintaining or enhancing one’s personal well-being”, this health-focused niche includes the pursuit of physical, mental, spiritual or environmental “wellness” while travelling for leisure or business, and has evolved from passing fad to lasting trend.

“Welltality” is the new hospitality. Going well beyond the bygone era of superficial pampering and lip-service spa services, today’s wellness retreats are more sophisticated than ever.

“Until recently, wellness was viewed through the lens of pampering spa resorts. Now, wellness travel is understood to be so much more – it is an investment in time well spent,” says Camille Hoheb, founder and

managing director of US-based consulting company Wellness Tourism Worldwide.

In fact, the global wellness economy is worth over US\$3.4 trillion, according to the research authority Global Wellness Institute (GWI). Furthermore, wellness travel has become one of the strongest growing sectors of the travel industry, and according to research firm SRI International, wellness tourism is worth a staggering US\$494 billion – a figure that is set to rise in coming years.

“With travellers embracing overall healthier lifestyles at home, we are now seeing those behaviours translate and be integrated into their travel and vacation habits,” says Susie Ellis, chairman and CEO of GWI and president of

*Kamalaya in Thailand offers fitness training, stress management mentoring, nutritional guidance consultations and naturopathic lifestyle coaching sessions.*





*Gwinganna Lifestyle Retreat in Australia offers special spa treatments that rejuvenate the body and mind.*

**BELOW LEFT**

*There are shared spaces for meditation at Vana Wellness Retreat at Malsi Estate in India.*

**BELOW RIGHT**

*A dish of healthy fruit jerky is served at The Farm at San Benito in the Philippines.*

Spafinder Wellness. "We are seeing many people commit their vacation time and dollars to wellness travel." This is particularly true in Asia, which is an epicentre of all things wellness. In fact, in 2015, the Spafinder Wellness "State of Wellness Travel Report" ranked Asia as the fastest-growing global destination (wellness travel region) for the first time in the survey's eight-year history. Until then, it has never ranked above third.

Fuelled by a widespread consumer desire for more meaningful travel experiences and hunger for sustainable wellness solutions, health-oriented holidays appeal to those who value restoration and replenishment over hedonism and blatant overindulgence. "More travellers are realising that 'wellness' does not mean 'deprivation'," says Samantha Foster, president of the non-profit association International Health and Wellness Alliance (IHWA) and director of Destination Spa Management. "The days of lettuce leaves, austere environments and grueling regimens are over; today's wellness resorts are a lot more creative and sophisticated. Travellers can enjoy all of the elements of a traditional holiday – relaxation, amazing food, fun and activities – and still look, feel and function better at the end of it."

Time is the new luxury, and wellness travellers want to use their precious vacation time in an enriching way by returning home with their lives enhanced. "Workplaces still demand far too much of our time and energy, and in which the pursuit of material possessions continues to give only passing satisfaction, resulting in an increasing number of people who feel highly stressed and disconnected from themselves," says Caroline Sylger Jones, founder of the healthy travel website Queen of Retreats. "So on holidays they want to switch off, to feel better from the inside out, to have real, sustainable energy, and to live more meaningful, authentic lives."

Although "quick-fix" detox breaks and fitness retreats that concentrate on physical health are extremely popular wellness travel options, consumers are increasingly embracing holistic mind-body practices that nurture mental health and sustainable lifestyle changes while on holiday. "This is one of the biggest movements the wellness industry has ever seen," says Anne Biging, founder of Healing Hotels of the World. "Guests want to learn how to live a happy, healthy life."

This is especially true given that we live in a "24/7 'plugged in' world", according to Stella Photi, founder of the Britain-based healthy holiday company Wellbeing Escapes. "We are constantly contactable, so stress and burn-out is inevitable," she says. "Consequently, more people are ... seeking integrated health experiences, positive change and expert advice while on holiday, so they can incorporate well-being into their daily lives when they return home."

People are asking themselves how they can get more out of their lives, Hoheb says, and are increasingly interested in improving their emotional well-being. Subsequently, wellness packages often include meditation, lifestyle coaching, mindfulness training and stress-reduction programmes.

This interest shift is reflected in the wide-ranging offerings at Thailand's award-winning wellness sanctuary and holistic spa resort, Kamalaya. Revolving around "healthy lifestyle", "detox", "stress and burnout", "emotional balance" and "yoga" themes, holistic spa treatments and expert-led activities encompass everything from traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) therapies, Ayurvedic rituals, and classic Thai remedies, to fitness training, stress management mentoring, nutritional guidance consultations and naturopathic lifestyle

THE DAYS OF LETTUCE LEAVES ARE OVER; TODAY'S RESORTS ARE A LOT MORE SOPHISTICATED **SAMANTHA FOSTER**





**TOP**  
Healthy dishes are offered at Vana Wellness Retreat, Malsi Estate in India.

**ABOVE**  
Crystal healing is part of the treatments at The Farm at San Benito in the Philippines.



PHOTOS: RANDHIR SINGH, LUCA TETTONI

coaching sessions, all of which custom-designed to realign guests with "life's potential".

There is clearly an increased interest in the education aspect of the experience, as noted by Anne Dimon, founder and CEO of the Canadian-based consultancy Travel to Wellness. "The wellness revolution has spawned a whole new focus on being proactive with our own health. The wellness-minded traveller wants time away from everyday stress, healthy food options, fitness activities, and restorative time-out [preferably in nature], along with a 'learning component' that leads to a greater sense of well-being."

It's clear that guests are expecting more than just a series of spa sessions – qualified medical expertise is integral to the success of these resorts. Luxury wellness resort and premier medical spa The Farm at San Benito in the Philippines employs licensed medical doctors, nurses and experienced spa therapists. The resort's "Healing Sanctuary" offers specialised health assessments, clinical detoxification programmes, traditional Filipino spa treatments, yoga classes and meditation

instruction, together with a broad array of purifying and replenishing therapies that promise to purge toxins, restore energy, and reconnect guests to their "inner self". Harvested daily from the property's own organic gardens, vegan-friendly, "living cuisine" dishes are crafted from dehydrated vegetables, nuts, seeds and fruits and morphed into tasty, enzyme-rich meals, for which the resort has won numerous international awards.

As is the case with most luxury offerings, bespoke is the word of the day. Vana Wellness Retreat at Malsi Estate in India is one of the region's newer retreat additions, offering custom-tailored retreat experiences, empowering mind-body activities, and wholesome nutrition. Spread over 8.5 hectares and ensconced within an ancient forest, the luxury retreat's state-of-the-art facilities include an Ayurvedic centre, Tibetan healing centre, wellness centre, hi-tech spa, meditation suites, yoga studios, a 140-square-metre gymnasium, and aqua fitness amenities – including an indoor, outdoor and watsu pool. Standout activities include yoga, Tibetan meditation, aquatic bodywork and nutritional cuisine lessons, while spa offerings comprise a range of classic therapeutic treatments – "Sowa Rigpa" (Tibetan healing) rituals, TCM therapies and a traditional Indian "panchakarma" programme lasting 14 or 21 days.

Looking further south on the global map, Gwinganna Lifestyle Retreat is one of Australia's shining wellness stars. Encompassing 200 hectares of lush hinterland and rainforest, this contemporary well-being refuge offers an extensive range of customised retreats and speciality health programmes, complemented by a variety of healing spa treatments and holistic activities – including *qi gong* classes, naturopathy, live blood analysis, nutritional consultations and stress management counselling. Although hi-tech facilities are part of the Gwinganna experience, the bigger emphasis is placed on "Gwinganna Dreamtime", aka rest. Encouraging guests to switch off from the world by disconnecting from technology, nap or take a stroll in the retreat's surrounding bushland, the resort is geared towards quiet reflection, nourishing rejuvenation and positive transformation.

These retreats are just some of the innovative experiences on offer for today's wellness traveller. In an industry that thrives on fresh, cutting-edge concepts, the future looks bright for wellness tourism. As Dimon confidently claims: "Wellness tourism has become, and will continue to be, popular because it is human nature to want to be happy and healthy. Wellness travel is not a trend. It is a major shift in the way people travel and there is no foreseeable end in sight." Foster agrees. "At the end of the day, wellness is about feeling good, and that is something everybody wants." ✦