

Luxury

Is the Future of Wellness Travel in Going Niche?

Leslie Barrie, Skift - Jan 02, 2020 10:00 am



Wellness travelers don't just want cookie-cutter retreats anymore. In 2020, expect more creative, specialized wellness experiences that cater to more of what this style of traveler really wants.
— Leslie Barrie

Yoga retreats and spa getaways used to be the definition of wellness travel. Guests would fill their days with beachside yoga classes or couples' massages, dine on healthy fare, and lounge poolside. And yes, those types of trips still exist, but the days of one-size-fits-all wellness travel are long gone.

Guests in 2020 want more than just a copy-paste wellness getaway — they have developed more nuanced and personal ideas of what wellness means to them.

"People are expecting more personalized experiences all around, not just with travel — the more personalized an experience or product, the better," said Alexander Timmons, owner of Mountain Trek, a luxury hiking and spa retreat company in British Columbia, Canada.

And the wellness travel industry is growing fast to cater to this set. According to the Global Wellness Institute, the wellness travel market is now estimated at \$639 billion, with a growth rate of 6.5 percent a year — which is more than twice the growth rate of tourism overall.

To capitalize on this uptick and evolution of wellness travelers' wants, the hospitality industry is offering more bespoke getaways, whether that's stays at a local farm or far-off monastery, treks to see the northern lights, or experiments with sound therapy.

"Travelers looking to enhance or kick-start a healthy lifestyle will have a specific goal in mind, be it learning how to become more mindful or finding new ways to get a better night's sleep, and the pursuit of that goal will all lead to a niche experience," said Anne Dimon, president of the Wellness Tourism Association.

Also, as "permanxiety" is on the rise, more and more people will look to wellness travel as a way to cope and will want varied ways to help them do so.

"The world is searching for a better way of life as an antidote to the stressful present way of living," said Diana Mestre, spa consultant for Velas Resorts in Mexico.

Faced with these changing goals of wellness travelers, hospitality companies will likely move fast to adapt, and if they don't, competitors will surely seize the opportunity.

TRAVELERS HAVE DIFFERENT WELLNESS WANTS

While most people hope to leave a wellness trip more relaxed and rejuvenated than when they first arrived, that's often where the commonalities in wellness travel end.

"It's about travel tailored to travelers' own personal development or needs," said Tom Marchant, co-founder of [Black Tomato](#), a luxury travel company. "The core of wellness travel is identifying what someone will connect with, tapping into their passions, thought processes, and comfort levels."

So if a traveler is looking for a spiritual reboot, they may consider a visit to a traditional Guatemalan sweat lodge, heated by volcano stones, said Marchant. "The Temezca offers a meditative transforming cultural experience to purify, detox, and heal one's soul with copal incense burning and scattered rose petals."

If sweating it out isn't a traveler's idea of a rejuvenating time, they might prefer a trip to Thailand for Loy Krathong. "It's Thailand's most spiritual and romantic festival in honor of giving thanks, wishing for a good year ahead, longevity, and the release from sins," said Marchant.

Mountain Trek, meanwhile, makes adjustments to their hikes, based on a traveler's goals, capabilities, and preferences, said Timmons. "The program is incredibly customized — hosting only 16 guests each week certainly helps."

Other players in the wellness travel space have created unique trips that cater specifically to stress-inducing events, such as the U.S. election. One such trip: [Aruba Tourism Authority's](#) first Election Disconnection, offering guests wellness experiences to "escape the election noise in 2020."

Some getaways are even geared to narrower health needs. [Escapada](#), a Europe-based wellness retreat company, offers a women's health retreat for help with fertility, PMS, and menopause issues, as well as a cleanse retreat, complete with acupuncture sessions and a personalized health plan.

One resort, the [Four Seasons Oahu](#), is even trying out wellness technology. The luxury property is partnering with the tech company [Sensync](#) for virtual reality wellness experiences. Guests recline in a pod called The Vessel and for 20–80 minutes can see, smell, hear, and even feel different virtual nature settings — all with the stated goal of creating a "more tranquil state of mind." Considering guests are already in Hawaii, it does seem like overkill, but it still could be a way to lure in customers looking for something unique.

SMALL PLAYERS VERSUS LEGACY BRANDS

The shift toward niche and tailor-made wellness travel offers a competitive advantage to smaller players in the hospitality space.

"Our business is built to facilitate exactly these kind of requests," said Marchant. "We've enhanced these offerings by further tapping our hyperlocal contacts on the ground and

in our own R&D with travel experts. And staff who travel make this a part of research trips.”

Larger hotel groups and hospitality companies, however, may have a hard time adapting to accommodate niche offerings, due to the time it can take to implement the changes and the need to appeal to a broader audience. Still, some larger chains have been able to get with the times and offer creative, local, and specialty experiences.

Take the [Carté Hotel](#) in downtown San Diego, part of Curio Collection by Hilton. It has partnered with [Saffron & Sage](#), a San Diego-based holistic health club. When guests who have opted for the special package check in, they get to choose between Awaken or Dream Saffron & Sage Flower Essence oils (the former helps guests “be more present” in their day, while the latter, the hotel said, helps promote a deep sleep).

Partnering with a local wellness establishment is a smart way to help visitors feel connected to the local scene and not have a cookie-cutter experience. Another way larger hospitality players are creating niche wellness excursions? Bringing in experts.

At an upcoming wellness retreat at [Grand Velas Los Cabos](#), for example, guests can experience sound bathing from guru Roberto Gopar and take a plant-based culinary class by nutritionist Sabra Seligman.

“Wellness experts come for a weekend to share their knowledge and expertise with hotel guests celebrating physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional wellness through special gourmet, vegan, and healthy meals as well as yoga, fitness, meditation, skin care, aromatherapy workshops, sound therapy, and spiritual fire rituals,” says Mestre.

While some of their offerings — like spiritual fire rituals — might sound over-the-top, providing an array of unique experiences likely translates into all guests discovering something they’re passionate about.

WHAT NICHE MEANS IN 2020

So is the future of wellness travel more specialized and unique? “I think it’s inevitable, because it’s a better product for consumers,” said Timmons.

“The future of all travel is tailored experiences — as people start to explore and create their own definition of wellness and self-care routines in their daily lives, we can craft travel around their own personal experiences and preferences,” said Marchant.

Even as most experts agree that niche travel will help the industry expand, however, not everyone is convinced it’ll be the only direction. “While I believe niche experiences under the umbrella of wellness travel will grow, I do not believe it is the future of wellness travel,” said Dimon.

For one thing, Timmons warned that one drawback of tailor-made wellness trips is energy consumption. “We can use economies of scale and create a travel experience that is cheap to consumers and has little waste, but it will be rather vanilla. Or we can pour resources into creating an incredibly unique experience but consume a lot of energy in the process,” he said.

Nonetheless, he’s optimistic. “I believe we can have both unique and niche experiences that are energy efficient,” he said. “But we have a lot of work to do to get there.”