

Wellbeing Escapes

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What if you could escape to a luxury resort and reboot your gut health at the same time? Alexandra Neagen explores the emergence of the bespoke wellness holidays

ALEXANDRA NEAGEN
1 HOUR AGO



Picture the scene: you've just arrived at one of Europe's most luxurious and exclusive [health](#) retreats. Guests are swanning around in robes and a Michelin-starred chef is busy preparing dinner with fresh, local ingredients. You've swapped the sweat of the Tube for a cedarwood sauna session and the only to-dos on your list for today are acupuncture, yoga and perhaps a soak in a hot tub overlooking the stunning Mediterranean hills.

But there's a twist. You're not just on this high-end escape to unwind and relax, you're here to relieve the symptoms that have been plaguing your day-to-day for the last 12 months. Perhaps it's your [PCOS](#) or your overactive [thyroid](#). Perhaps it's your menopause symptoms or your cortisol levels.

Either way, gone are the days of military-style exercises and starving yourself. Wellness travel is evolving, and this latest iteration involves everything from [meditation](#) hikes through the Spanish countryside to infra-red saunas in [Thailand](#).



TREATMENTS ARE OFTEN A COMBINATION OF WESTERN MEDICINE AND HOLISTIC PRACTICES
STAVROS HABAKIS

"Ten years ago, [wellness retreats](#) were associated with fitness bootcamps and restrictive weight loss programmes," says Max Ball, product lead at [Health Travel](#). "Now, wellness retreats provide a dedicated space to focus on physical and mental health."

Ball appears to be onto something. Health travel is a burgeoning industry, with just over a fifth (21 per cent) of tourists currently travelling for health-driven reasons, and 29 per cent stating interest in travelling for health in the future. Exclusive retreats are already loved and trusted by A-listers, with Oprah Winfrey being a huge fan of Palazzo Fiuggi in Italy (“never have I ever experienced anything like this”), and SHA Wellness Clinic in Spain welcoming the likes of Donna Karan, Barbara Streisand and Naomi Campbell.

The trend of escaping daily life for a full body and mind reset has been growing for a while, as travellers become more educated about health and [wellbeing](#). “Since my company first started in 2006, I’ve really seen a change in the behaviour of our clients and what people are looking for,” says Stella Photi, founder of wellness travel company [Wellbeing Escapes](#), who hosted the company’s first [wellbeing retreat](#) at Tofte Manor in Bedfordshire earlier this month. Her company runs retreats around the world, from Madeira to Mauritius, as well as an [At Home offering](#). Sessions range from three-stage thyroid disease treatment courses with Ayurvedic doctor [Dr Shijoe Mathew Anchery](#), to live women’s health workshops with wellbeing expert Karina Stewart. “A lot of people didn’t even know what the word ‘wellbeing’ meant back in 2006,” says Photi.



OPRAH IS A BIG FAN OF LUXURY HEALTH RETREATS
OPRAH DAILY

As wellness becomes more sophisticated and advanced ‘[biohacking](#)’ treatments become more popular, tourists are demanding more from health retreats — and personalisation is the key. “I’m seeing a rise in enquiries around bespoke retreats for specific health issues,” says Photi. “We have clients who have menopause symptoms, polycystic ovary syndrome, rheumatoid arthritis, autoimmune conditions, and more.”

[Chenot Palace](#), a luxury resort in Switzerland, specialises in wellness programmes for the sleep-deprived, while Mountains of Hope Retreat in the Andes mountains of Columbia offers treatments to those battling cancer free of charge.

Entrepreneur Amisha Patel discovered first-hand how profound personalised health retreats can be, so much so that it inspired her to launch her own wellness travel company, [Tailored Retreats](#). After giving birth to her son in 2017, Patel was left with a debilitating, mystery condition. For well over a year, doctors couldn’t diagnose the uncomfortable and at times crippling symptoms — intense brain fog, full-body aches, abdominal pain, chills and cold sweats. Patel was repeatedly misdiagnosed as having a UTI and was prescribed antibiotics. The stress of not knowing what was truly wrong only exacerbated the symptoms, so finally Patel decided to book a health retreat where she could detox and switch-off — and hopefully alleviate (or even cure) the mystery symptoms.



WE HAVE CLIENTS WHO HAVE MENOPAUSE SYMPTOMS, POLYCYSTIC OVARY SYNDROME, RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS, AUTOIMMUNE CONDITIONS, AND MORE

STELLA PHOTI, FOUNDER OF WELLNESS TRAVEL COMPANY WELLBEING
ESCAPES

"I underwent a health consultation with an ayurvedic practitioner at the retreat's wellness centre," says Patel. "The practitioner listened attentively whilst I explained my symptoms in detail and talked through the tests, checks and antibiotics doctors had prescribed me."

It didn't take long for the practitioner to conclude that it wasn't a UTI after all, and that bad gut health was the culprit of the symptoms, along with a combination of hormone imbalances, vitamin deficiencies and the depletion of good bacteria from prolonged use of the antibiotics. "I was relieved to finally have a confident diagnosis," she says. "It was a genuinely life-changing experience."

Patel was able to enjoy the luxurious and relaxing treatments on offer at the retreat, knowing that they were working to rebalance both her body and mind. Now, there are more ways than ever to revitalise and overhaul your health. "We've seen a number of growing trends in the treatments offered at popular retreats," says Ball. "On the medical side, treatments include cryotherapy, infra-red saunas, acupuncture, hyperbaric chambers, IV infusions, and one-on-one movement classes."



INFRA-RED SAUNAS ARE A POPULAR HEALTH TREATMENT

EUPHORIA RETREAT

Health retreats often include more holistic practices too, such as yoga, meditation and nutrition classes. "It's magical, spiritual," says Sarah Corbett-Winder, a fashion stylist and busy mum of three who attended one such retreat last month. Corbett-Winder had her experience tailor-made by Wellbeing Escapes, and was sent to Euphoria Retreat in Spain to manage her stress. "The choice is overwhelming," she says. "I knew I'd get more out of it if it were personalised."

The process is simple and — as Corbett-Winder is keen to emphasise — non-judgmental. It starts with an initial consultation with the wellness travel company. You explain your goals and needs — and if you have any specific health concerns that you wish to treat. The consultant then matches you with a retreat that can meet those needs. This is dependent upon how far you're willing to travel (would you prefer the exotic climes of Thailand or to bask under the Italian sun?) and of course, your budget. You're given a unique itinerary of treatments and activities, as well as being set up with a doctor or practitioner at the retreat itself.

For Corbett-Winder, the testing at the retreat revealed how her body was functioning and she found out that stress was affecting her liver. "You think it's normal to be stressed, especially living in London," she says. "But when you hear that it's affecting one of your organs, you realise this is something you need to do something about."



Corbett-Winder was given an itinerary that included acupuncture and a 'meditation hike'. "I started charging up the mountain, ready to get pounding away," she says. "But it's a meditative hike, so you have to walk slowly. It was so hard! But so wonderful."

In a world where there's an abundance of choice and endless lists of luxury health retreats offering radical treatments, a tailor-made experience is paramount. "It's the fine-tuning and individualisation that people are looking for," says Photi. "Our intention is to make sure the client always gets the treatment they need."

The trend of personalised health retreats shows no signs of slowing, especially as holistic health testing becomes more advanced and sophisticated. "There's more testing now around how emotions tie into health and I see the future is going to go that way," says Photi. "There's more science coming forward on how emotions can help physical health."

For Corbett-Winder, the future looks much brighter since her retreat. "I was excited to come home, having let go of everything, and get back to my life," she says. "Since coming back, it feels like wearing clean glasses."