



The greatest escapes

Wellness travel pioneer Stella Photi, founder and managing director of **Wellbeing Escapes**, talks to *European Spa* about the company's decade of success and changing global trends

INTERVIEW BY HELLENA BARNES



Right: Wellbeing Escapes' founder, Stella Photi is also a founding member of the International Health & Wellbeing Alliance

Above: The quality of treatments and activities is ensured by the company's extensive partner vetting process

Above centre and far right: Integrity and authenticity are watchwords in providing transformative experiences for the brand's clients

Back before it caught hold of the global imagination, one woman's personal search for 'wellness' sparked the formation of what is now a 60-strong global partnership portfolio attracting 16,000 guests per year. Ten years after being founded by Stella Photi, Wellbeing Escapes provides significant booking volumes at the world's leading spa destinations, in a sector that, according to Global Wellness Institute figures, has seen 40% growth in the last two years alone.

"My initial vision for Wellbeing Escapes was quite narcissistic and came about during my career with an American corporation," reveals Photi. "I had a young child and a demanding job, so stress levels were high. I would seek to keep things in balance by researching places we could go together as a family, with spas to help me to decompress. But the quality of treatments and activities was hit-and-miss even at good resorts. Obviously things weren't as refined as they are now, but this was precious time to me and I somehow felt diminished by the bill at the end of our stay."

As a result of her experiences, Photi began formulating ideas about how to make wellbeing more accessible. "I remember thinking... what if there was a company that could pre-qualify genuine wellbeing retreats, with dedicated teams and trained



Lefay Resort & Spa Lago di Garda, Italy



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treatment protocols? What if we could pull it all together and become a trusted source to find perfect wellbeing places with inclusive packages, clarity on cost, certainty on booking and endorsement of authentic treatments or wellbeing activities. If I was searching, then surely others must be too?," she recalls.

Photi's research revealed that what she had in mind was not yet available anywhere "A decade ago the spa industry was moving, but less along the wellness route," she recalls. "It was a time when you had to explain what wellbeing meant, so it certainly wasn't an easy-hit market. Spa trends back then conjured up Champagne pampering, and detox was all the rage. I wanted wellbeing and preventative health with therapies to help people help themselves."

Building a business

Driven to create a new concept in wellbeing travel, Photi decided to target 30-something city professionals. "My first set of clients, back in 2006, was a miniscule market of hard-core, high-net-worth individuals who recognised the need to look after themselves in a preventative way," she says. "I went with my gut instinct and decided to be 'experience-led' rather than destination driven. We were not selling holidays with add-on spa treatments, our founding

focus was to source the absolute best inclusive wellbeing breaks."

In bringing this seemingly small market to life, Photi established her bold company ethos, generated online target audiences and injected her own passionate personality to provide trusted levels of personal service for every customer.

"It took some doing," she smiles. "I believe a business is only successful if it is sustainable – anyone can make a quick buck, but when you are genuine then it works for everyone involved. Integrity and authenticity are now overused terms, but we've always aimed to find experiences that help transform clients' lives."

Indeed, the company's 40% repeat booking rate is testament to that trust, while its philosophy has earned Wellbeing Escapes awards aplenty, most recently the *Telegraph* Travel Awards Best Specialist Operator, voted for by 75,000 readers.

The personal touch

From instigating a new era of travel opportunity to strategising for sustainability ten years on, Photi has always focused on providing access to authentic wellbeing experiences, but she reveals a perhaps unusual statistic for the 21st century. "We are very consultative and our website platform is key, but only 20% of





SHA Wellness Clinic, Spain



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▷ bookings are made online,” she states. “Ultimately it is about a personal engagement. Customers want to speak to someone experienced who understands their needs and can provide in-depth information and advice. I am proud to say our team is highly trained, and yes, it has taken many years to build the knowledge we now hold, but this is priceless in guiding our clients on a whole range of health and wellbeing experiences.”

As spa trends changed and new health markets emerged over the last decade, so has the stress factor increasingly taken hold in people’s lives. “Much has recently improved,” says Photi, “but people are at breaking point with technological lifestyle demands that don’t allow time to rest or restore. Consequently we are facing a stress epidemic.”

“I know it sounds like a cliché but it’s tangible,” Photi continues. “When we talk to customers we can hear their distress, so we are not dogmatic or preachy. We are about balanced, happy, healthy solutions and when we connect with clients after a Wellbeing Escape – wow! This is what drives me to take more people on their next wellness step – knowing that 90% return as better versions of themselves.”

Political and social engagement

Photi believes that awareness of the importance of wellbeing has increased for political and economic reasons. “There’s been a tremendous shift in wellness thinking, certainly in the UK where the government recognises its National Health Service is under great pressure, so it’s in politicians’ interest to push wellness to the general public,” she explains.

“Economics also has a part to play and consumers are far more sophisticated in terms of how they spend time and money. Expectations are high and the industry has raised standards with superb companies driving access to wellness forward. Also, people are living longer with lifestyle illnesses, which means health systems are in crisis and the political message to generate self-responsibility for a healthy lifestyle is paramount – anything else is currently unsustainable.”

The strong message from Wellbeing Escapes is that it’s okay to look after yourself. “Thankfully it’s no longer seen as

From above left: The stress of modern life means more people are seeking out wellness travel experiences; Wellbeing Escapes partners with high-end spas in stunning locations

selfish or weak to invest in personal wellbeing,” says Photi. “Clients are prepared to spend time and money travelling up to four times a year to find, boost or enjoy wellness and help themselves heal.” In this respect, Photi believes there is little comparison to ten years ago. “Consumers now want to push the boundaries and learn new healthy lifestyle skills – this also comes with social media bragging rights; the online sharing of everything from nutritional eating to experiential holidays at destination spas has made wellness sexy and fashionable.”

Partners for the future

In holding the wellbeing needs of clients close to her heart, Photi has no time for hidden agendas. “We are straight and to the point; we thrive on integrity and transparency with absolutely everyone we work with,” she states candidly. “Happily, we love what we do and are fortunate to partner with amazing destinations and work alongside incredible people that share our values.”

Approached regularly by organisations looking to be part of the portfolio and carry the Wellbeing Escapes badge of honour, Photi says: “Although we are a commercial enterprise, we’re acutely aware that we provide knowledge to a vast number of people, so we hand-pick partners carefully and carry out an extensive selection process.”

Photi believes wellness concepts will continue to proliferate and evolve, and Wellbeing Escapes’ recent co-branded deal with global travel company Kuoni affirms her beliefs. “We’ve all come such a long way with a greater understanding of wellbeing, our industry can now do so much more integrated thinking to meet current wellness needs,” she emphasises. “This amazing partnership, taking Wellbeing Escapes to the mass market, suggests that authentic wellness is here to stay.”



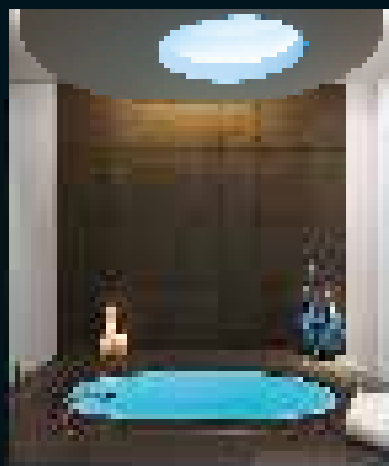
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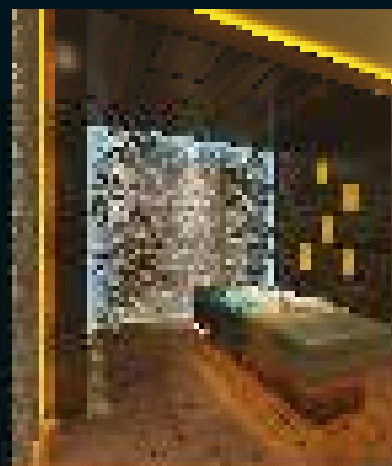
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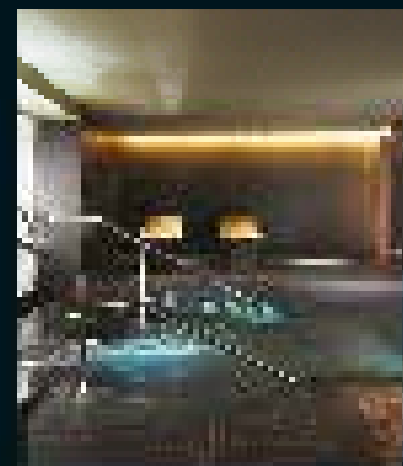
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