

TRAVEL

Hotels Are Taking Wellness to Extremes, From IV Drips to MRIs

It's not just the spa anymore. Luxury hotels have upgraded their wellness offerings to include in-room sleep training, stem-cell therapies, on-site psychologists and more.



Soaking in a porcelain tub with petal-thin lime slices fluttering around my limbs, I can't shake the feeling that I'm stuck inside one of those fruit water dispensers that used to proliferate at co-working spaces. I'm actually taking the waters, by way of an elaborate DIY Ayurvedic "bath ritual" now on offer at the Peninsula Hotels. Minutes earlier, the disembodied "wellness concierge" on the other end of my "wellness portal" (a text chat with a real live human, just a QR code away) dispatched a spa attendant to bring a flight of lovely-smelling bath-time products to my door. The bath-time accoutrements arrived in tiny ceramic bowls on a wooden tray, like so many banchan dishes at a Korean restaurant, with an instruction card for the bathing and slathering and self-massaging that was to follow. A few hours later, my portal pal is back, this time to check in about my pillow plans—feather, buckwheat or memory foam? The latter, my chatty caretaker says, "might be a good option for you to have a restful night with proper neck support to start your day tomorrow with the Physique 57 class!"

I've traveled the 5.8 miles from my apartment to the Peninsula New York to avail myself of the hotel brand's Life Lived Best initiative, whose health-oriented offerings are as manifold as its title is ambitious (if vague). The aim is to imbue every corner of the luxury chain's 10 properties around the globe with micro-upgrades geared toward the pursuit of well-being. "Wellness shouldn't be something you only address when you cross the threshold into the spa," says Gareth Roberts, the hotel group's director of brand and operations support. "That outdated concept of 'Now you're in the World of Wellness'? That's not authentic."

Hard to say what constitutes "authenticity" as far as five-star amenities are concerned, but banishing the lot to a single corner of any property is definitely not good business these days. As travelers re-emerge from their fugue states, ready to attend to out-of-whack immune systems, thickened waistlines and scarred psyches, the race to win the wellness war is on.

According to a 2021 report by the Global Wellness Institute, a Miami-based nonprofit, the global wellness tourism market declined nearly 40 percent from \$720 billion in 2019 to \$436 billion in 2020. To help jump-start the recovery process, luxury hotels are coming up with a seemingly endless supply of next-level treatments and out-there remedies, from mists designed by biochemists and "mitochondrial training" to biorhythm-enhancing bedrooms and hour-long stem-cell therapy sessions.



At the end of my day at the Peninsula, still digesting a multicourse lunch of dishes from the new low-heat, high-vegetable menu (standouts include pesto-slicked hemp pasta and fat fingers of white asparagus dressed with truffle shavings), I affix a “sleep inhalation” aromatherapy patch (picture one of those circular Band-Aids) to my stomach and prepare a pot of the hotel’s bedtime tea. As I wait for the date and melatonin-packed goji berries to steep, I hit up my wellness portal and binge on a couple of bedtime meditations. Taking slow, cool breaths, I am reminded of Hans Castorp, the young protagonist of Thomas Mann’s classic novel *The Magic Mountain*. At the beginning of the book, he visits his cousin at a luxury sanitarium where the head doctor tells Castorp he looks unwell and posits that he suffers from something called “sine pecunia.” Castorp has planned on only a three-week visit, but he ends up staying on the property for seven years. I, too, could get used to seven years of this.



“The pandemic put a spotlight on our baseline health, and a lot of people climbed on the wellness wagon,” says Kane Sarhan, co-founder and chief creative officer of The Well, a health and wellness company based in Manhattan. The Well’s team, including chief medical officer Frank Lipman, has partnered with Auberge Resorts to come up with a “science-backed” sleep program called Better Sleep. “Before the pandemic, it was like [hotels] had to have a spa with massages and basic facials and one or two mediocre fitness classes a day that folks didn’t go to,” says Sarhan. The group has also helped Auberge come up to speed, installing outposts at the chain’s properties in Connecticut and Costa Rica. Menu highlights at the latter resort include a river bath “immersive experience” and muscle recovery treatments that use such innovations as a Hypervolt muscle gun and a dynamic air compression technology for “lymph boosts.” The Well’s team worked to beef up the wellness offerings at several of Auberge’s 24 properties. Guests at these locations will find more organic fare on the restaurant menus, and rooms stocked with “science-backed” sleep guides and Relax Everything mists whose formula of essential oils was designed, Sarhan says, “by a biochemist and a scientific team to stimulate an olfactory response that mimics the brain’s response to relaxation.”



Next month marks the opening of Austrian medi-spa Lanserhof's new outpost on the north German island of Sylt, which is shaped like a craggy stiletto heel. The new getaway, overlooking the Wadden Sea, will comprise a cluster of buildings, one of which boasts the largest thatched roof in all of Europe "and maybe also in the world," says Nils Behrens, Lanserhof's chief marketing officer. "When corona started we thought: Well, that could be the end of our business," he says. There was a sharp drop at first, but soon enough visitors eager to partake in the mix of natural healing and high-end medicine were back to booking their stays. Travel restrictions being what they were, the clientele profile went from 30 percent German guests to an all-German crowd. "They wanted to relax here and forget about corona, so we were fully booked at that time," he recalls of the brisk business Lanserhof saw in the middle stretch of the pandemic. "And then more and more long Covid patients came to us to seek help."

A cornerstone of the Lanserhof's program is the Mayr Cure, which involves a multiday fast, lessons in proper chewing (more than 30 times per mouthful) and abdominal massages. The new Sylt outpost is overseen by medical director Jan Stritzke, a cardiologist

whose boyish face lights up when he talks about fasting's effect on inflammation (a common effect of long Covid, he points out), and the MRI machines and CT scanners that will soon be fixtures of the clinic for preventive diagnostic sessions. For now, guests can make do with bedroom lighting systems that hew to their biorhythms; the dedicated on-site psychologist, a Lanserhof first; and CellGym sessions, which simulate oxygen deprivation and involve sitting in a chair wearing a

mask that calls to mind Darth Vader. “This is the perfect training for your mitochondria,” says Dr. Stritzke. “Mitochondria are the power stations of your cells. And these power stations are the stations that are really suffering [when a body is infected with] the coronavirus.”

At the Ranch Malibu’s new European outpost, bloodwork is the big draw. The “results-driven” Southern California retreat, where days kick off with four-hour hikes and wind down with restorative yoga classes and deep-tissue treatments, just opened a new program at Palazzo Fiuggi, an art nouveau medi-spa about an hour outside of Rome, near the mineral water springs that made the town of Fiuggi a popular wellness destination starting in the Middle Ages. Today, bottles of the mineral-rich water abound at the property, as do doctors. Participants in the Ranch’s program have access to the medi-spa’s eight on-site physicians, who conduct medical diagnostics. “Before Covid, people would typically book their stays a couple of months in advance, but now they’re booking at a greater pace, up to six months in advance,” says Alex Glasscock, CEO and co-founder of the Ranch. He’s also seeing an increase in stays from two to four weeks, especially among European and Middle Eastern visitors.



The Four Seasons Resort Maui at Wailea, Hawaii, is also jumping aboard the medical tourism party bus. The resort has a new partnership with Next Health, a Los Angeles-based preventive and diagnostic healthcare center. Thanks to the Next Health center at the Maui property, guests can select from among a menu of IV drips as well as cutting-edge treatments called Ozone Therapy, Exosomes and Stem Cell. The 45-minute ozone treatment involves fortifying blood with oxygen with the aim of enhancing the immune system and energy levels. Sixty-minute stem-cell therapy sessions, which involve the infusion of cells from umbilical cord blood, are on offer for \$12,000 per session. Next Health president and co-founder Kevin Peake says, “According to research, [stem cells] can help orchestrate and improve cell communication, optimizing the efficiency of a variety of bodily processes, which may improve overall vitality.” The FDA has issued multiple warnings against unapproved and unproven stem-cell therapies. Peake says, “At Next Health we only utilize these services for the purpose of health optimization and general wellness. We do not claim any benefits. We are able to explain to customers the science of these treatments but beyond that they must do their own research to decide if the services are right for them.”

Peake is a fan of NAD+ (nicotinamide adenine dinucleotide) therapy, an intravenous treatment that is said to stimulate cell regeneration. “Last time I was [in Hawaii] I was sitting in the IV lounge and I was getting an IV with NAD and I was watching those whales jump in the background,” he recalls. “You can literally see the ocean while you’re doing your treatment. So it’s a pretty amazing experience.”



Darshan Shah, a reconstructive surgeon and Next Health's CEO, founder and medical director, says another major new offering is biomarker testing, which can look for thousands of genes, proteins and other substances that can be indicators of body processes and disease. Guests who arrange to have their biomarker testing done in L.A. or New York prior to their arrival can meet with a Next Health representative on-site and curate a holiday itinerary based on their profile. "We're guiding them on all of their decisions, the foods they should eat at the different restaurants, if they should kayak in the morning and do NAD in the afternoon," says Dr. Shah. "The whole experience can really be custom-tailored to them."

"Before Covid, people took their city holidays and left their wellness concerns to their beach getaways," says Roberts of the Peninsula. "I think coming out of the pandemic, people realize having this balance of life and appreciating physical and mental health is not something we should leave as a part-time pursuit."

Home from my stay at the Peninsula, feeling exquisitely rested, well fed and pleasantly sore from the punishing Physique 57 class I took after a sound night's sleep on a memory foam and buckwheat pillow, I look up the mysterious malady that afflicted Hans Castorp in Mann's novel. "Sine pecunia" is not a medical condition, but Latin for "without money." Which is a bit rude, because hobnobbing and hyperventilating beneath a massive thatched roof on that swanky German island sounded quite nice.