

The New York Times

Travel as Healing

Wellness vacations now go far beyond massages and diet advice, instead offering a respite from physical and mental stress. Here's what to expect.



Before the pandemic, when Mary Calliste, 32, traveled, she would try to hit as many tourist attractions as she could. But in early December, Ms. Calliste, who works in the financial services industry out of Plainfield, N.J., went to Guatemala and stayed at an eco-friendly hotel called [Lush Atitlán](#). There, she ate vegan meals, walked around the natural reserve and listened to music.

And loved it.

From now on, she said, “I see myself incorporating a lot more of my needs into my travel instead of what I can see.”

As the pandemic lingers into its third calendar year, it's probably not surprising that travelers are increasingly looking to their vacations to work on their mental and physical wellness. [In a recent American Express survey](#), 76 percent of respondents said they wanted to spend more on travel that improves their well-being, and 55 percent said they would be willing to pay extra for these services or activities.

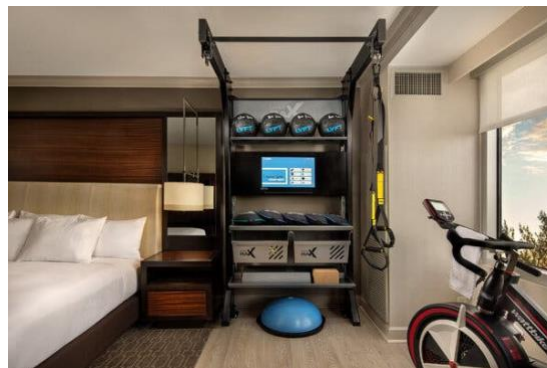
That has hotels ramping up their wellness offerings, from outfitting rooms with Peloton exercise bikes to adding programs that address mental health. Hilton has created a program called [Five Feet to Fitness](#), which includes an interactive kiosk with fitness tutorials and a gym's worth of equipment in some rooms.

At [Miraval Resorts & Spas](#) locations, guests over the past year have come in “having experienced symptoms of stress that they, quite frankly, were unfamiliar with,” said Simon Marxer, the hotel group’s associate vice president for wellness offerings.

In April, Miraval partnered with the National Alliance on Mental Illness to create [Sensory Journeys](#), a meditation and soundscapes series available for free on its website. It also launched [Journeys With Intention](#), a customizable wellness program

In April, Miraval partnered with the National Alliance on Mental Illness to create [Sensory Journeys](#), a meditation and soundscape series available for free on the Miraval website. It also introduced [Journeys With Intention](#), a customizable wellness program that allows guests to choose from a selection of “journeys” according to their health goals. Among the offerings: self-connection, grief and loss, and mental well-being, as well as more standard spa, adventure and fitness programs.

“What we’re seeing, certainly in hospitality, is the need to serve really the whole person,” Mr. Marxer said.



Spas took a hit

Spas, with their focus on high-touch, one-on-one services like massages and facials, were hit hard last year. Hotel and resort spas experienced a 42 percent dip in revenues, while destination spas, which offer an immersive experience, were down 37 percent, according to [a report by the Global Wellness Institute](#) published in December. But the wellness industry has since begun a rapid recovery, the report said, projecting that the spa sector will grow 17 percent annually through 2025.

Still, the downturn forced hotels and resorts — and their guests — to expand their notions of wellness and what activities fall under that umbrella. Before the pandemic, a wellness trip was probably centered on a spa's traditional services, said Caroline Klein, the chief communications officer of Preferred Hotels & Resorts, a luxury hotel group. Now, hotels may offer nature walks, meditation, yoga or any number of creative offerings.

In some ways, hotels are responding to the lifestyles that many people adopted at the height of lockdowns, including making home-cooked meals and taking virtual fitness classes.

“Hotels are really seeing people bring those new mind-sets, routines and preferences with them as they start to travel again,” Ms. Klein said. “What that creates is a definite shift in expectations and experiences that hotels need to cater to, because they’re not catering to the traveler from 2019.”

Emily Rossin, a spokeswoman for a hospitality group that includes [the Ryder](#), a boutique hotel in Charleston, S.C., said that after seeing the surge in popularity of Peloton bikes during the pandemic, the hotel decided to make them an in-room option for guests.

“We noticed that people were still stuck in their habitual routines from when we were in lockdown,” Ms. Rossin said. “When they’re coming to stay with us, it’s within their same routine and they really don’t have to break that.”

Established wellness hotels are also benefiting from the boom. Alex Glasscock, a co-founder of [the Ranch](#) wellness retreat in Malibu, Calif., which offers hours of daily hiking and a vegan menu, has seen an increase in bookings, he said, notably from teenagers and young adults. It’s a significant shift from when he and his wife, Sue, started the company in 2010 and people were confused by the concept of a “luxury boot camp.”

“This is truly a mega-trend,” he said, adding that at the Ranch, “what we’ve noticed from the pandemic is that where people used to book two and three months in advance, now we’re full six months in advance.”

Changing travel styles

What people want out of a vacation is shifting said Chris Kam, the president and chief operating officer of Omnitrak, a Hawaii-based research company that conducts regular national travel surveys. While travel has always been a reset, during the pandemic, “the travel experience transformed and became a place to heal — from mental, physical, spiritual stress,” he said in an email. “People travel for answers now about how to feel better.”

Shasha Du, 33, a founder and the creative director of [Wild Awake](#), which organizes retreats for young people of color, said her travel style had changed. “I used to love traveling to cities a lot more,” she said. But looking back at that travel, which she said included a lot of shopping, Ms. Du realized that it “was enjoyable, but it was also not that fulfilling. It didn’t nurture my soul.”

In 2020, she designed two nature retreats for herself and her friends. And in November, she rented a barn north of Sacramento through Airbnb and, for the first time, signed up for an Airbnb experience: a tea-foraging event where she learned about the ancestral medicinal uses of many plants, some of which she’d been seeing all her life.

“It was just a different form of self-care, but I felt that it was really, really rejuvenating,” she said.



Established wellness hotels, including the Ranch in Malibu, Calif., are also benefiting from the boom. Alex Glasscock, a co-founder, has seen an increase in bookings, he said, notably from teenagers and young adults. The Ranch Malibu

Feeling depleted by the pandemic, Ann Chen, 58, an English composition instructor at George Mason University in Fairfax, Va., recently booked a wellness retreat with a friend for June 2022 “as a way to keep going — find something positive,” she said. They plan to stay at [Ojo Santa Fe](#) in New Mexico, a wellness resort with thermal pools, meals sourced from local farms and a spa. They planned ahead for personal scheduling reasons, but also to give them time to research the area and understand its “culture, attitudes and beliefs,” Ms. Chen said. The idea, she added, was “to be soothed, to work on being calm, to work on eating good food.”

“This kind of resort is getting us back to more of a normal feeling in our lives, where we’re just not so stressed out by worrying about whether we’re going to live another day,” Ms. Chen said.

Industry experts say the wellness travel trend is here to stay. The United States accounted for nearly 30 percent of the global wellness tourism market in 2020, and the sector is expected to grow to \$919 billion by 2022 from \$735.8 billion in 2020, according to the [Global Wellness Institute](#).

“This is where we were headed,” Mr. Marxer of Miraval Resorts & Spas said. “The pandemic has brought the future forward in an accelerated way.”