

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

OFF DUTY TRAVEL

Ice Baths. Cryo-Chambers. Hikes at Dawn. Why Spa-Goers Want Hardcore Wellness Now.

Pampering is passé. At medi-spas and wellness retreats, guests are toughing out rigorous (sometimes scary) treatments in pursuit of ‘new year, new you’ renewal.

I HAD SECOND THOUGHTS awaiting my turn for the (then very rare) cryotherapy tank at Carillon Miami Wellness Resort in 2019. I watched, pale-faced and quivering, as a few brave souls rotated upright in that tank like Sam’s Club rotisserie chickens. I’d white-knuckled it through a colonic at Deer Lake Lodge in Montgomery, Texas, years earlier but 3.5 minutes in a minus-160 degree container for a restorative boost felt extreme.

That was then. For 2023, spa enthusiasts are seeking out such grueling treatments almost routinely, and paying handsomely for them, all in the name of wellness. It’s no longer about being pampered but going all in to get healthy.

Luxury retreats and medical-spas have responded with hardcore wellness menus to satisfy that urge. In addition to the “touchless wellness” of the sort of cryo chamber I endured, you can splurge on medically-supervised colonics, brain biofeedback and wheatgrass enemas, one of the tempting components of a holistic detox at the Farm at San Benito, a medical-wellness retreat in Lipa, Batangas, south of Manila in the Philippines. New Yorkers can indulge in \$350 multivitamin IV drips and \$50 ice baths at the Remedy Place, a “social wellness club” in Manhattan’s Flatiron District, while Carillon treats resort guests and day trippers (\$140 day pass) who have signed up for the thermal hydrotherapy circuit to an “experiential rain” shower simulating a Caribbean monsoon. Because, why not?



“There’s been a return to extreme effort for extreme benefit,” said Beth McGroarty, vice president of research for the Global Wellness Institute, a nonprofit in Miami focused on preventative health. “People coming out of the pandemic wanted a radical reset of their bodies and their brains.” Tammy Pahel, Carillon’s vice president of spa and wellness operations notes a sea change in the info guests seek and the treatments booked. “People are looking for a deep dive into their personal health,” said Ms. Patel. “In 2019, ‘wellness’ was laying on the beach and drinking piña colodas.”

Sometimes extreme effort simply means putting in the work—eating healthy vegan meals and hiking for hours—a philosophy guiding the Ashram in Calabasas, Calif., since 1974. Not a whole lot has changed over the 44 years that Houston resident Judy Tate has been visiting the legendary spa in the Santa Monica mountains. Same ultra-spartan, dormitory-style lodging with shared bathroom, same pared-down vegan menu, same grueling, 11-

mile hikes at dawn.

“The Ashram is not glamorous,” Ms. Tate said. But it gets results, said Kyle Ericksen, a New York City photographer, who said she slimmed down so quickly during a week there her fanny pack slid off her waist during a hike.

“I haven’t changed the program because it works,” said Catharina Hedberg, the co-founder and director of the Ashram, who appears impervious to the trends in the global wellness tourism market. “Eating better and exercise; those are the two magic ingredients,” she said. Twelve guests per week receive personalized attention to achieve wellness goals. Ms. Hedberg also offers retreats in Iceland and Majorca, and a 120-mile trek during the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage in Spain.



The Ranch in Malibu, Calif., espouses a similar ‘skip the facials, roll up your sleeves and get to work’ ethos, with visitors signing up for seven hours of exercise per day. “It’s eight, if you include Morning Stretch,” qualified co-founder and CEO Alex Glasscock.

Before arrival, some guests ditch caffeine, alcohol, processed sugar, diet sweeteners, gluten and meat for 30 days. That rigor isn’t universally beloved, said Mr. Glasscock, adding that those who commit to it suffer less of a shock to their systems over a stay and get better results.

The Ranch, which will open an outpost in New York’s Hudson Valley later this year, provides diagnostic testing as part of its “at-home functional health” offerings. Submitting hair, blood and stool samples might seem over the top for those weaned on diamond-dust face peels, but the service is popular. Similarly, the biostation at Carillon tests on 100 biomarkers, including such unglamorous stuff as serum glucose and cholesterol levels, so staffers can prescribe nutrition and fitness protocols for guests to follow.



Guests at the Ranch Malibu enjoy healthy organic plant-based fare. Four-hour hiking excursions in the Santa Monica Mountains start early at the Ranch Malibu.

Ms. McGroarty has seen a steady rise in advanced medical testing at luxury spas such as Lanserhof Sylt in Germany and Chenot Palace in the Swiss Alps with its in-house molecular lab. “It all leads to this kind of personalized prescription for a health regimen,” she noted. “This is what traditional medicine isn’t delivering: prevention-focused diagnostic testing.”

New York internist Holly Phillips has patients who frequent medi-spas and doesn’t have an issue with noninvasive treatments (she suggests avoiding colonics and enemas at spas), but she is wary of the halo of altruism surrounding the marketing. “The wellness industry has really built the consumer’s trust.”

That trust helps sell programs like the seven-night “Revitalisation Premium Program,” starting at \$45,000, on Clinique La Prairie’s website, which includes epigenetic testing and a CT scan as well as an electrocardiogram.

Clearly the path to wellness can be costly, whether you lie in an infrared sauna or hit the hiking trail. “There’s no ‘building up’ to the hikes here,” said the Ashram’s Ms. Hedberg, where a 7-day stay costs \$6,300. “You go for it.

The Transformers: 5 Spas Promising to Reset and Renew

Old Reliable: Everything about [the Ashram](#) in Calabasas, Calif., says “time-warp,” yet fans swear by its spartan meals and bunkhouse digs. *\$6,300 per week.*

Oceans Away: At the [Carillon Miami Wellness Resort](#), hardcore wellness includes chilling out in an igloo after the infrared sauna. *From \$849 per night.*

Happy Trails: [The Ranch Malibu](#) takes its hikes as seriously as its plant-based menu (hello there, quinoa-tahini balls). *From \$7,600 per week.*

The Check-Up: A holistic medical retreat, [the Farm at San Benito](#) in the Philippines has programs that weave in brain biofeedback and blood analysis with body wraps and sound healing. *From \$3,400 per week.*

Daily Dose: Brrrrr! Work up to the “Breathwork Ice Bath” class at [Remedy Place](#) in West Hollywood and NYC. *Monthly memberships from \$595. A la carte for nonmembers from \$50.*

No Hot Stone Unturned: 4 Over-the-Top Outings

Extreme wellness can be costly. A few temptations:

Mountain Mantra: This is the year to perfect your tree pose on an alpine peak, once you've plunked down \$5,710 for Heli Yoga package at the Lodge at Blue Sky: You and an instructor chopper to a Park City mountain top, where the Utah vistas will surely help you get your on on. AubergeResorts.com



A new high: the Heli-Yoga Experience at The Lodge at Blue Sky in Utah

Facial Recognition: Swiss Skincare brand Valmont excels at exorbitant two-hour facials, from the \$1,200 Masterpiece Ritual at Montage Big Sky in Montana (MontageHotels.com) to the \$1,500, two-therapist version at NYC's Carlyle Hotel (ValmontSpaCarlyle.com). Why so pricey? Oxylight, a high-tech beam of microcurrents, ultrasound and LED claims to boost collagen for a luminous glow.

Smoothing Operator: Got jiggly thighs and \$5,500? Consider the 180-minute BAM-CP skin-tightening, with its full body peel and micro-needle peptide infusions at the new House of [Pietro Simone](http://PietroSimone) in SoHo.

Short Cut to Bora Bora: Mandarin Oriental Canouan in the Grenadines transports guests with its \$7,500 full-day trip for two. A boat whisks you post-hike to a glass-bottomed hut for copious treatments (salt scrubs, Tibetan bowl chanting, etc.), followed by snorkeling, a picnic lunch and a four-hands massage. 212-461-8068. mocanspa@mohg.com