

WELLNESS *reimagined*

Wellness is booming, but it looks a little different this year. Here are just some of the key trends reshaping the wellness industry – and the way we travel, writes Sarah Reid.

Virtual wellness retreats, therapeutic baking and ‘hot girl walks’ were just some of the self-care strategies we embraced during the pandemic. In 2023, the raging success of Netflix dramedy *Wellmania* isn’t the only indicator that wellness remains a firm priority for many. “According to the latest Global Wellness Institute research, the wellness tourism sector is worth US\$436 billion globally, and it’s expected to grow 20 per cent annually for the next three years,” says Katherine Droga, Chair of the Global Wellness Institute’s Wellness Tourism Initiative and Founder of Well Traveller, which connects consumers with wellness retreats and travel experiences across Australia.

Not only are we putting more value on wellness post-COVID, adds Droga, the pandemic has also opened our minds to exploring new ways to achieve our wellness goals. And the global wellness industry is listening.

Mental shift

A renewed focus on mental health during the pandemic shows no signs of abating, with luxury hotels and retreats increasingly turning their attention to guests’ mental wellbeing. Last year Kimpton Hotels doled out 1,000 free psychotherapy sessions to guests as part of a partnership with mental wellness company Talkspace, and the Ritz Carlton New York, Central Park recently rolled out hypnotherapy sessions for guests. Outside Manila in the Philippines, The Farm at San Benito offers a two-day mental health retreat, while closer to

home, the Gold Coast hinterland’s Gwinganna has added an extra day to its popular, five-night ‘Sleep, Sugar and Stress’ retreat designed to empower guests to manage stress.

Alternative mental wellness therapies are also gaining traction, particularly in Thailand, where Anantara was amongst the nation’s first luxury hotel groups to launch treatments using CBD (a non-psychoactive compound in cannabis) including a de-stress ‘journey’ fusing CBD treatments with yoga and meditation.

“CBD is known to be very calming, so it’s great for stress management,” says Chunxia Gao, Group Director of Spa and Wellness at Minor Hotels, which counts Anantara among its brands. “Once people know about the therapeutic benefits of CBD, they are more open to trying it.”

Even the use of psychedelics to treat mental health maladies is entering the mainstream. But while we’re not likely to be microdosing on psilocybin (the ‘magic’ in magic mushrooms) – a la *Nine Perfect Strangers* – at Australian wellness retreats anytime soon, in July authorised psychiatrists in Australia will be able to prescribe psilocybin for treatment-resistant depression.

Sleep therapies

With 42 per cent of Australians usually waking up feeling tired, according to a new global study by sleep-based medical equipment company ResMed, it’s no surprise sleep therapies are trending. And hotels are stepping up, with many now offering sleep-enhancing amenities spanning AI

mattresses to snooze-inducing playlists to promote better sleep, both while you’re out-of-office and once you’re back home.

At the Park Hyatt New York, six dedicated ‘sleep suites’ come with Bryte mattresses featuring 90 intelligent cushions that sense, adjust to, and relieve the body’s pressure points. The high-tech mattress also controls the climate, and tracks and provides sleep data that can be accessed on your phone. And if the idyllic setting of The Reef House in Tropical North Queensland’s Palm Cove isn’t enough to help you wind down, the boutique hotel now has you covered with its new Sleep Easy benefits for all guests including an in-room Sleep Support Guide and access to a Sleep Easy Guest Portal offering an online suite of blogs, videos and playlists to support better sleep.

Other sleep-challenged travellers are turning to chronotherapy, also known as light therapy.

Nestled in the Bologna countryside, Palazzo Di Varignana Resort & Spa is a suitably dreamy setting for the Deep Sleep retreat designed specifically for sufferers of insomnia and those who have trouble falling asleep.

Taking a holistic approach, the retreat runs for three or six nights and includes everything from acupuncture to sleep-induction training with binaural stimulation. But you don’t need to leave Australia to try light therapy, with the Qantas transit lounge at Perth Airport fitted with shower suites designed to trick the body into believing it’s already in the time zone of your destination to help reduce jetlag.

Nature-based wellness

Health practitioners in Japan have recommended *shinrin-yoku* or forest bathing, a practice that involves connecting with nature through the senses, since the 1980s. Now, the link between spending time in nature and wellbeing has prompted the rise of nature-based prescription programs globally. In 2020, the UK government announced a two-year ‘green prescription’ pilot in regions that had been hard hit by COVID-19. And doctors in four Canadian provinces are now prescribing time spent in nature and even providing patients with free passes to visit national parks, marine conservation areas and historic sites.

While nature prescribing is not yet common in Australia, we are increasingly getting behind another nature-based mindfulness trend: water wellness. “The concept of bathing as a ritual of wellness is something Australians are really connecting with,” says Droga.

Indeed, bathhouse and hot springs venues are popping up all over the country, from The Banya, a European-style bathhouse in the Byron Bay hinterland town of Mullumbimby, to the new architect-designed Alba Thermal Springs and Spa on Victoria’s Mornington Peninsula, which forms part of a 900-kilometre bathing trail currently in development. Also new on the trail is Metung Hot Springs in East Gippsland, where sweeping views of the Gippsland Lakes encourage connection with nature – and yourself – as you soak in mineral-rich, geothermal waters.

Biohacking and biotech beauty

Recognising that every person has unique wellness needs and goals, spas and retreats are increasingly embracing strategies aimed at improving health, wellbeing and even our skin through strategic, personalised interventions.

Known as genomic testing, the analysis of DNA to assess whether your genes can explain a specific health condition

is a cornerstone of Spain’s SHA Wellness Clinic, which is due to welcome two new properties in Mexico and the UAE in 2023 and 2024. Legendary Thai wellness destination Chiva-Som in Hua Hin has now just added genomic testing to its offering to ensure programs can be more precisely tailored to guests’ needs. And the Six Senses Rome opened in March with wellness screenings and a raft of biohacking treatments.

Meanwhile, in Sydney, the new Spa at Sofitel Sydney Darling Harbour has taken the humble facial to a new level, using state-of-the-art Skin Instant Lab technology to analyse the skin using specialised diagnostic and analytical software developed by French bio-skincare brand Biologique Recherche.

“The information we retrieve allows us to customise the facial entirely to the client,” says Cecilia Ferreyra, the hotel’s Director of Spa and Wellness.

Jet-set wellness

In an era of air travel when simply arriving at your destination with your luggage can feel like a luxury, Swiss skincare brand La Prairie is bringing glamour – and good vibes – back to the pre-flight experience.

The first permanent luxury beauty and skincare treatment service at Sydney International Airport, the La Prairie Art of Beauty Lounge opened in March with a decadent menu of pre-flight facials hosted in private treatment rooms. The second venue of its kind worldwide (the first opened in Singapore’s Changi Airport), the serene space doesn’t only offer guests an indulgent opportunity to safeguard their skin, but also to mentally prepare for the journey ahead, says Rosi Fernandez, Managing Director of La Prairie Australia and New Zealand.

“The lounge is a sanctuary from the stress and noise of the airport,” Rosi explains. “With treatments booked in advance, it gives you the luxury of time to stop and be present before embarking on your flight.” welltraveller.com.au ♦

