

THE STATE OF GLOBAL WELLNESS TRAVEL: WHERE THE SECTOR IS HEADED NEXT

Presented by

Skift

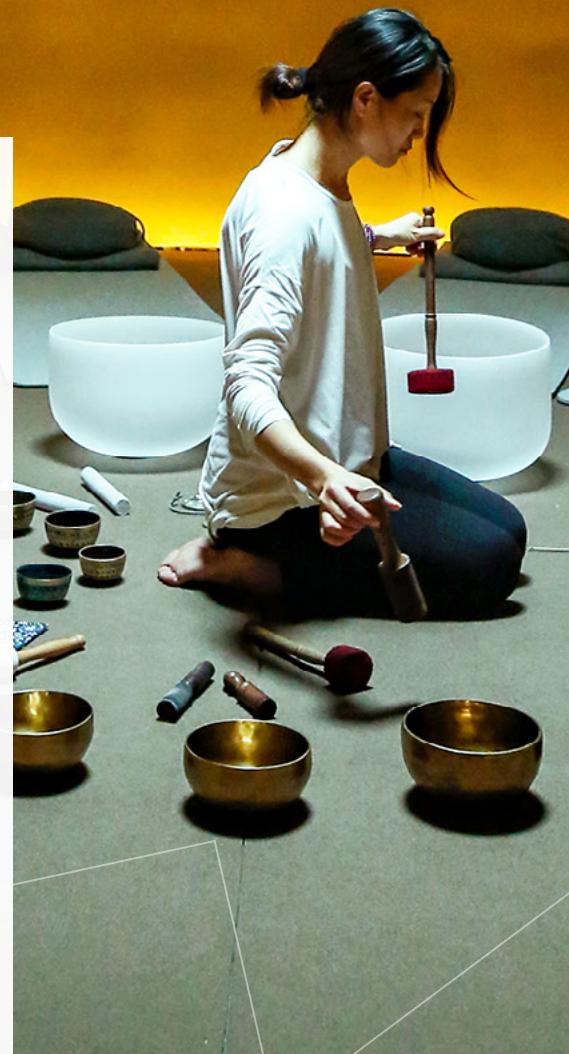


TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Letter	4
Introduction: Finding Personal Well-Being in a Time of Permanxiety	5
East Meets West, as Everything Old Is New Again	6
The Wide World of Wellness	8
Travel's Shift from Experiential to Transformational	9
Minding the Mind	11
Asia-Pacific Deep Dive: The Wellness Orientation of China and Eastern Southeast Asia	12
China's New Consumer Class	14
Up-and-Coming Wellness Tourism Destinations	17
It Takes a Village: How Wellness Travel Can Foster Community	18
Real-Life Social Networks	19
Going Back to Nature Through Wellness Travel	21
The Natural Opportunity	22
Building in Nature for Wellness	23
Conclusion	24

► ABOUT SKIFT

Skift is the largest industry intelligence platform providing media, insights, and marketing to key sectors of travel. Skift deciphers and defines trends for global leaders and executives across travel and wellness sectors through a combination of news, research, conferences, and marketing services.

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SkiftX is Skift's in-house content studio. SkiftX produced this report in partnership with OCTAVE Institute.

SANGHA Retreat by OCTAVE Institute

Your personal journey to Rewire, Reframe and Renew the mind, body, spirit, and to Reskill for a deeper personal connection and lasting transformation.



199 Yangcheng Ring Road,
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EXECUTIVE LETTER



Dear Reader,

What is wellness and how do we know we are well?

We know when we are well, and we are only well when all is well. This means that our family, friends, community, business, society and environment must all be well. Today, we desire well-being more than anything else. After all, life is all there is. We are entering a new era where we need to take responsibility for our own well-being and for a purposeful life mindfully-lived.

As an entrepreneur and fourth-generation family business steward, our founder, Frederick Chavalit Tsao, has long pondered the role of business in society. The 21st century brings unprecedented challenges. While business has a key role to play in this regard, he feels that we need a new paradigm and a new era of well-being. To accomplish this, one must find and embrace holistic wellness, or as Fred calls it: quantum well-being. It is time to redefine wellness.

His personal journey of awakening and shift in consciousness led to the creation of OCTAVE Institute, which is more than a school of life. Within

OCTAVE Institute is SANGHA Retreat, where Eastern wisdom and Western science are integrated to offer the path to transforming your health into sustainable well-being. We need to recapture the harmony nature gave us at birth, where modern life has taken away, and choose a life of greater purpose and personal well-being.

This report shows that stress is the most prevailing issue facing society today. Increasingly, people are looking to discover ways to regain their health and well-being. This has resulted in a significant uptick in wellness travel. Globally, well-being is prioritized and factored into travel decisions. Today, we believe people travel to connect and not to escape. SANGHA Retreat by OCTAVE Institute brings a new narrative to wellness, and we are happy to be part of the wellness retreat community dedicated to improving lives and the environment around them.

— OCTAVE Institute

INTRODUCTION: FINDING PERSONAL WELL-BEING IN A TIME OF PERMANXIETY



Wellness today is all about connection. It's about connecting with nature. It's about connecting with ancient wisdom. It's about connecting the best of Eastern and Western health modalities. It's about connecting with others. And perhaps most importantly, it's about connecting with yourself.

Today's world — although increasingly connected via technology — is more disconnected than ever. People live in their bubbles, often without having significant interactions with nature or other humans for days at a time. At the same time, we're bombarded with news of global unrest, political upheaval, the impact of climate change, and other distressing subjects, causing what Skift has deemed "[a state of permanxiety](#)" — or the near-constant state of anxiety that exists around the world.

Sometimes, the only way to break the cycle is with a change of scenery, literally and figuratively. Perhaps that's why, in a time of discord and distress, growth patterns in wellness tourism are off the charts.

The Global Wellness Institute (GWI) defines wellness as "the active pursuit of activities, choices, and lifestyles that lead to a state of holistic health. Wellness is not passive or static, but rather an active pursuit associated with working toward an optimal state of health and well-being. It extends beyond physical health and incorporates many different dimensions that should work in harmony — including mental, physical, environmental, social, spiritual, and emotional." Wellness tourism, then, is travel associated with the pursuit of maintaining or enhancing one's personal well-being.

Wellness tourism is now a \$639 billion industry worldwide, according to GWI, a clearinghouse for global research on and education for the wellness industry. In 2017, travelers worldwide took 830 million trips that included some kind of wellness component. By 2022, GWI forecasts global wellness tourism revenues will reach \$919 billion, with most of the growth taking place in developing markets in the Asia-Pacific, Latin America, and Middle East and Africa regions.



In its 2018 Global Wellness Economy Monitor report, GWI stated that during the past five years alone, Asia was “the number one gainer in both wellness tourism trips and revenues (trips grew a whopping 33 percent in two years, to 258 million annually). China and India rank number one and number two for growth worldwide, adding over 12 million and 17 million wellness trips respectively from 2015 to 2017.” As we will explore in this report, this massive growth is partly attributable to unprecedented levels of wealth throughout the region and partly due to rapid urbanization.

East Meets West, as Everything Old Is New Again

Wellness travel is certainly not a new concept. Ancient Romans, Greeks, and Ottomans all traveled to seek out healing waters. The tradition of communal bathing dates back centuries in places

like Korea and China. In Japan, wellness seekers have ventured to hot springs for more than a millennium.

As we look at the trends in wellness tourism today, it’s important to understand that, in many cases, they harken back to the wellness wisdom of times gone by. In today’s era, when people are looking to slow down and seek out deeper meaning, wellness tourism often means going back to timeless basics, whether that means communing with nature, seeking out a sauna, or practicing tai chi in the morning.

Both Western and Eastern cultures have long histories of wellness traditions. However, today’s Western wellness concepts take a more scientific approach, while Eastern modalities may, to a Western mind, seem more esoteric or mystical.

But in an interview with SkiftX, Fred Tsao, founder of SANGHA Retreat by OCTAVE Institute, a fully

immersive health and wellness retreat located in Suzhou, China, said those Eastern modalities are not that difficult to understand. “The Chinese concept of well-being is that you have to work on the roots before you become aligned and unified. Moments of well-being aren’t sustainable until you are aware that you have to work on the whole. Then, you can be well.”

Dr. Ka-Kit Hui founded the University of California at Los Angeles Center for East-West Medicine. “At a deeper level, Western thinking is linear, whereas the Eastern thinking is more circular and systemic,” said Hui, in an interview with EastWest Bank, indicating his belief that a comprehensive understanding of both cultures is imperative for wellness integration. That institutions like UCLA and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in the United States — with its National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health — are now paying attention to Eastern modalities and using scientific approaches to prove their efficacy points to a paradigm shift. Diverse practices from different cultures are coming together to create a new holistic way of approaching wellness.

Tourism professionals forecast that the wellness tourism industry will continue to blend the best of the East and the West. “Pioneering brands are now offering retreats with holistic wellness, featuring cutting-edge techniques, technologies, and services,” according to “MindStyle: The New Generation of Health & Wellness Travel,” a Reuters Intelligence report published in conjunction with International Luxury Travel Market (ILTM).

One of those pioneering brands is SANGHA Retreat. “What we are trying to achieve is full integration between East and West, between science and spirituality,” said Jamie Waring, SANGHA Retreat’s managing director of wellness. “We look to meld the spirituality and wisdom of the East with the scientific research and data-driven approach of the West in order to optimize life. We are integrating the philosophy and wisdom of Eastern practices, like traditional Chinese medicine, Ayurveda, and energy, all made tangible through Western data,” Waring added. As an example, he said on-site assessments



Frederick Chavalit Tsao

Founder of
SANGHA Retreat

can identify issues that can then be addressed through integrated wellness techniques. “Our focus on quantum science research and its validation of energetic modalities is a good example of this,” he said.

Wellness destinations are increasingly adding scientific components to their offerings. “You’ll find Harvard- and NASA-engineered brain photobiomodulation treatments for depression at macrobiotic SHA Wellness Clinic in Spain (it’s all about the oxygenation of cells); the latest in genetic testing and biohacking at Red Mountain Resort in Utah; and 3GL testing to analyze your levels of glutathione, the key biomarker of metabolic health, at Euphoria Retreat in Greece,” [according to Condé Nast Traveler](#).

Meanwhile, in Bogota, Colombia, the Wellness Spa Movil Center offers guided meditation combined with virtual reality, taking the guests on a VR journey while the therapist guides their inner journey. Six Senses Kaplankaya near Bodrum, Turkey incorporates clinical and scientific options, including an anti-aging program designed by a renowned neuroscientist, along with Eastern-oriented spiritual healing approaches.



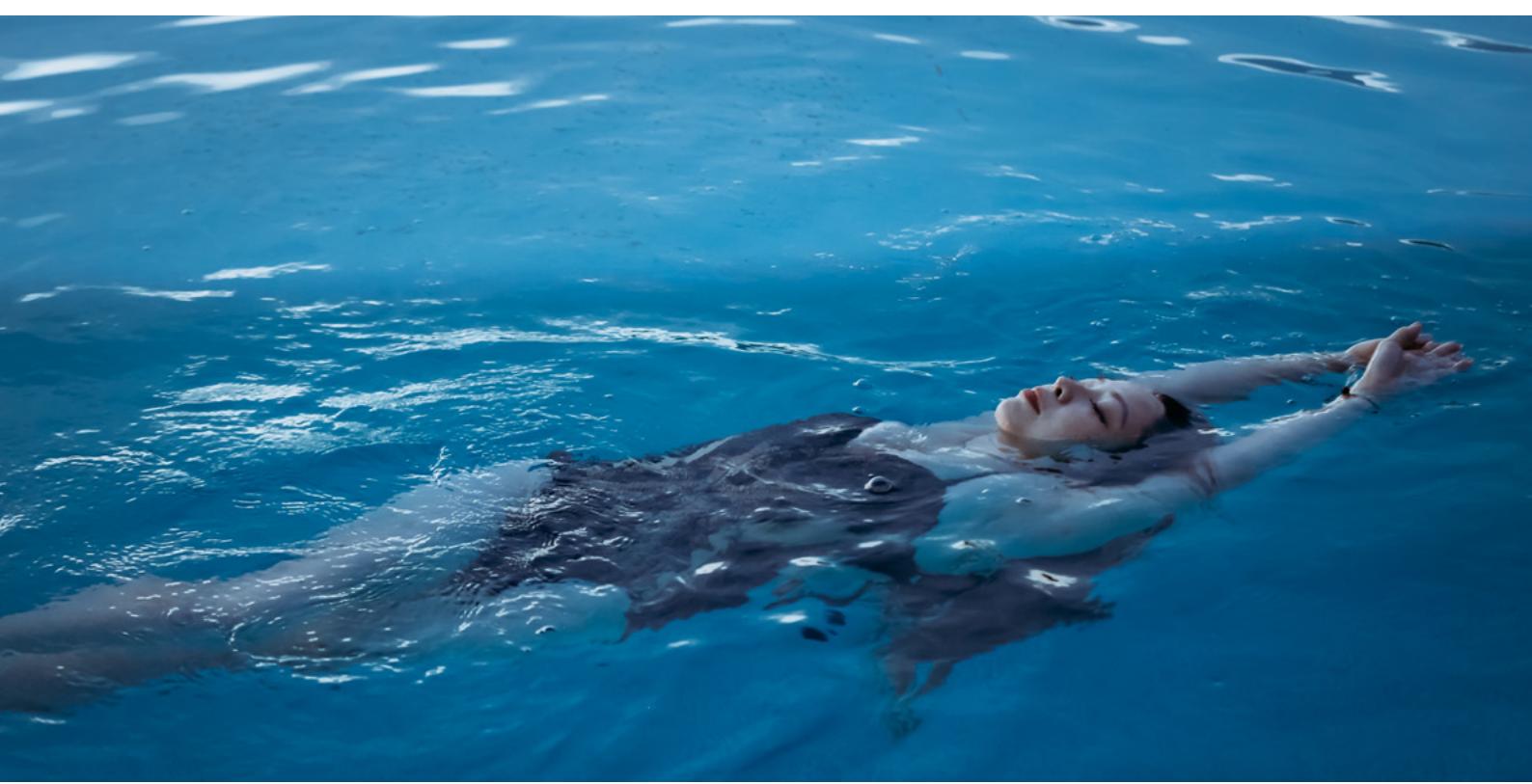
The Wide World of Wellness

Due to the broad nature and wide-ranging definition of wellness tourism, this report narrows the field. First, it distinguishes wellness tourism from medical tourism, although the two can often overlap. Wellness tourism is preventative and proactive in nature, designed to maintain or kickstart behaviors and health, said Katherine Dropa, founder of the Wellness Tourism Summit. Medical tourists, on the other hand, are more likely to be looking for treatments or remedies or are traveling to obtain less expensive curative care, Dropa said.

Second, the geographic focus is limited, for the most part, to Asia, incorporating China, Japan, Thailand, and other neighboring Southeast Asian countries. That said, the trends examined in this report apply throughout the world.

Third, while trends in wellness come and go, there's consensus among experts in the field that those reported upon here will have staying power. They include a focus on nature, the vitality of human interaction, and an increasing focus on mind-body integration.

TRAVEL'S SHIFT FROM EXPERIENTIAL TO TRANSFORMATIONAL



In recent years, the travel industry has been fixated on the importance of creating experiences. These are often crafted to be Instagram-worthy, picturesque opportunities to provide superficial bragging rights. But many wellness seekers have moved on and are traveling with the intention of seeking experiences with deeper emotional resonance and meaning. To meet this growing demand, leaders in wellness tourism are looking to move beyond experience to transformation.

"There's a wider shift from the experience economy to the transformation economy, where the product that is purchased is not an experience but rather the improved self that results from it," Skift research analyst Meghan Carty reported in [Skift's 2018 Megatrends Report](#). "Stemming from consumers' desire to move up Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, luxury has moved beyond the second tier of the hierarchy, 'esteem,' to the inward-looking, highest tier of 'self-actualization' ... This is entirely personal

and contextual. What constitutes a transformative experience can be defined by each individual based on personal values, passions, and aspirations."

For travelers, the core idea is leaving home with purpose and intention, motivated by the internal journey. "With such a specific journey in mind," Carty wrote, "travelers are looking for experiences that will lead to their fulfillment. From high-end yoga retreats and luxury 'glamping' experiences in remote wilderness settings, luxury travelers are being presented with increasingly personalized travel experiences created with the sole aim of guiding them on their journey toward personal fulfillment." The Transformational Travel Council, an industry group founded in 2016, defines the concept of transformational travel as "intentionally traveling to stretch, learn, and grow into new ways of being and engaging with the world." Travel can be the catalyst for personal transformation in a handful of areas, including "health, relationships, ecological footprint,

**On a scale of 1-10, how much importance do you place on transformative travel experiences?
(10 = most important)**



(Source: Skift, 2017)

consumer and travel choices, social purpose and philanthropic commitments, lifestyle and time management choices, and mindful, contemplative practice,” according to the Council.

“Transformational travel is any travel experience that empowers people to make meaningful, lasting changes in their life,” said Jake Haupert, the founder of the Council. “Ultimately, it’s a new philosophy on travel that connects travelers to their truest self and to others, cultivating a sense of purpose and belonging.”

The Wellness Tourism Summit’s Droga said, “As a society, we have increased pressures. Day-to-day life is far more intense. Transformational travel is coming at a time when we are seeking greater meaning. There’s a core within us that feels unsettled. Transformational travel takes us out of our comfort zones and puts us in an environment where we have time and space for reflection and reevaluation.”

Sallie Fraenkel, founder of the Mind Body Spirit Network, added, “When people travel for the sole purpose of change, and you get them in the right environment, they can let go of the artifice of everyday life. That’s when transformation can take place.”

A survey conducted by Skift in 2017 found that the search for transformation is indeed a growing trend among travelers. In the survey of 1,350 travelers, 54

percent of respondents ranked the importance of transformative travel as seven out of 10, with more than half saying they placed increasing value on this type of travel.

A follow-up survey of 500 people conducted by Skift in 2018 took another look at transformational travel. That survey discovered that 32 percent of consumers said they have had an experience while traveling that transformed them, while another 24 percent of consumers had not had such an experience, but would like to in the future.

“The desire for transformative travel is coming from dissatisfaction with the status quo,” said SANGHA Retreat’s Waring. “People are feeling a lack of purpose despite rising levels of wealth worldwide,” he said. “As a result, they’re now willing to dedicate time and money and effort to discover something more. Wellness retreats offer a sanctuary where people can get away from their daily lives. They provide a mental gap while applying a structure so people can stop and reflect.”

Many aspects of a trip can contribute to a transformative experience. Wellness travelers may experience transformation as they participate in a mountain trek, engage in a voluntourism effort, or gaze up at dark skies illuminated solely by the stars. Everything from cuisine to architecture can help the process along, said Mathew Evins, chairman of EVINS Communications, a marketing communications



agency with a specialty in travel. "Serving cuisine made with sustainable, responsible ingredients allows people to experience food in a new way," Evins said. "And hotels and spas that are creating bio-systems, bringing the outdoors inside, brings another level of transformation to the traveler."

Just because a given wellness tourism experience can be catalytic to change and personal growth doesn't mean wellness travel and transformational travel are synonymous, Haupert said. The key to understanding the difference? "Transformational travel is not about the experience itself but about the intention of the traveler and what they take from the journey," he said. In other words, transformational travel is in the eye of the beholder.

Minding the Mind

As mental health plays a more prominent role in the wellness industry and society in general, a large part of the transformation experience takes place between one's ears. "Mental well-being has become an important aspect of any spa break," according to a [2019 study](#) conducted by Germany's Wellness-Hotels & Resorts. "This is particularly true for the under-40 age group. The younger the guest, the

higher the interest in stress management, detoxing, exercise, and yoga retreats."

That enthusiasm from younger guests is one reason why Waring believes that "focus on the mind is an area of wellness tourism that will become more common." Wellness destinations need to "support individuals on inward journeys to help them find out who they really are and how they relate to themselves. This, along with the increasing realization that we are first spiritual beings, will allow an inner journey that may lead to the discovery of self," he said.

JoAnn Kurtz-Ahlers, a luxury tourism consultant, said she sees more demand for mindfulness practices as people seek change. "The meditation aspect of wellness is continuing to grow, with technology tools being used to guide the process," she said.

But while some may picture the transformational traveler holing up in a monastery meditating or chanting mantras, social interaction is usually integral to the wellness tourism experience. That interaction may involve volunteering for community projects or simply engaging with locals as they participate in their established wellness traditions, like morning tai chi or a trip to the communal bath.

ASIA-PACIFIC DEEP DIVE: THE WELLNESS ORIENTATION OF CHINA AND EASTERN SOUTHEAST ASIA



Asia's impact on the global consumer economy has grown exponentially during the past decade as people residing in the region have been rapidly moving into the middle class and beyond. Brookings reported that 2018 marked the first time more than half of the world's population were considered middle class or rich – and most of these newcomers are from Asia. Given their large numbers and their newfound discretionary funds, these middle class consumers are driving global economic growth.

The tourism sector – and demand for wellness travel specifically – has been one of the main beneficiaries of the region's expanding wealth. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization, outbound Asia-Pacific travelers now represent 37 percent of the world's total of international travel

spending. Furthermore, tourism spending among APAC travelers has doubled in the last 10 years.

Asia is also the number one growth sector in the global wellness tourism economy, leading in both number of wellness trips taken and in revenues. According to the Global Wellness Institute, wellness trips in Asia grew by 33 percent from 2015 to 2017 (reaching 258 million annually), and the region is set to grow faster than any other through 2022.

Wellness is becoming a dominant consumer value and lifestyle driver in the region, thereby affecting behavior, choices, and spending decisions, said Cathy Feliciano-Chon, founder and managing director of Hong Kong-based tourism and wellness consultancy CatchOn. “The overwhelming statistics reflect the growing wellness industry in the region. According to the Global Wellness Institute, the annual growth rate in wellness tourism trips between 2015 and 2017 in countries like China, India, Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia increased by more than 20 percent. The Asia-Pacific market as a whole will essentially double from 2017 to 2022.”

But Asia's influence is not just economic: The continent's soft power impact on the global wellness stage cannot be overstated. “Asian traditions and healing philosophies — from yoga and Ayurveda to

traditional Chinese medicine's concept of balance and energy — have influenced virtually every aspect of the wellness industry,” according to [a report produced by ILTM and CatchOn](#).

“Asia is a young market with ancient modalities,” said SANGHA Retreat’s Waring. “The heritage of most of these cultures has been intertwined with a healthy and balanced lifestyle. It’s been lost a little bit over time, but now, wellness in Asia is being reintroduced with a modern twist.” And it’s become a priority not only for millennials, but for the 45-and-older crowd as well.

Top Ten Wellness Tourism Markets in Asia-Pacific, 2017

	Number of Arrivals/Trips (thousands)			Receipts/Expenditures (US\$ millions)
	Inbound/Intl.	Domestic	Total	
China	7,724.3	62,442.2	70,166.5	\$31,705.9
Japan	1,585.5	38,900.0	40,485.5	\$22,466.1
India	4,542.4	51,426.3	55,968.6	\$16,299.7
Thailand	5,691.9	6,764.1	12,456.0	\$12,018.4
Australia	876.2	9,122.1	9,998.3	\$10,520.9
South Korea	1,709.8	17,908.6	19,618.3	\$7,186.6
Indonesia	5,183.5	3,151.7	8,335.2	\$6,928.5
Malaysia	3,331.7	4,956.1	8,287.8	\$5,019.2
Vietnam	3,149.5	6,465.8	9,615.3	\$4,001.1
New Zealand	341.0	2,736.5	3,077.5	\$3,036.0

Note: These figures include both primary and secondary wellness trips. Expenditures data combine both international/in-bound and domestic wellness tourism spending. (Source: Estimates by the Global Wellness Institute, based upon tourism industry data from Euromonitor International)



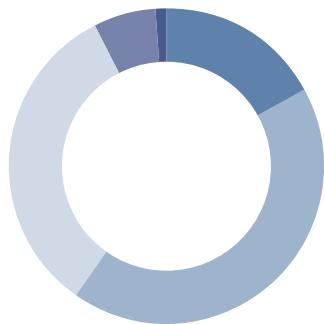
China's New Consumer Class

In recent years, China has been the fastest-growing wellness tourism market in the world.

"Given China's emerging middle class, increased mobility, luxury consumption, and outbound travel, this market is a force of nature," said Feliciano-Chon. The country is fast becoming "the wellness tourism world's center of gravity from the supply and demand perspective, which will have a long-term impact on worldwide development," she said, adding that understanding what's happening in China lends context to what is happening in Southeast Asia as well.

Skift surveyed more than 500 Chinese travelers in 2019 about their interest in wellness-related travel. The results show that personal well-being is becoming a major factor in the travel decision-making process, with 60 percent of travelers from China either agreeing or strongly agreeing that they're interest in spa and wellness experiences have increased compared to three to five years ago.

"I am more interested in 'spa and wellness experiences' when I travel than I was three to five years ago"

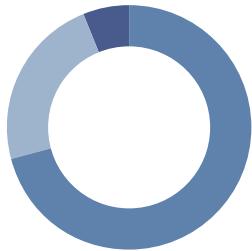


- Strongly Agree (17%)
- Agree (43%)
- Neutral (33%)
- Disagree (6%)
- Strongly Disagree (1%)

(Source: Skift Research, 2019)

Additionally, 94 percent of Chinese travelers reported that participating in physical and mental wellness activities were an important factor in their decision about where to travel. However, about one in four of these travelers said they had difficulty finding such activities while traveling.

Is participating in physical and mental wellness activities an important factor in your decision about where to travel?



- Yes, and I can usually find activities in places I travel to (71%)
- Yes, but I often find it hard to find activities in places I travel to (23%)
- No, it's not important to me (6%)

(Source: Skift Research, 2019)

What types of programs or activities related to wellness would you plan a vacation around?

Meditation or mindfulness retreat	11%
Yoga retreat	27%
Volunteer trip	40%
Stargazing excursion	39%
Digital detox retreat	20%
Spiritual retreat	31%
Fitness bootcamp	40%
Healthy cooking classes	44%
Sound Healing	26%
Art Therapy	29%
New, experimental therapies (cannabis, virtual reality, sensory deprivation/float therapy)	15%
Other (please specify)	0.4%

(Source: Skift Research, 2019)

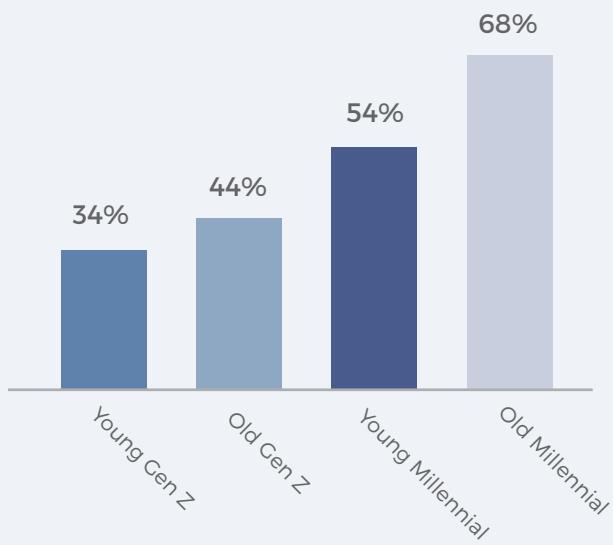
And among the plethora of wellness programs and activities one can partake in while traveling, Chinese travelers are most likely to plan a vacation around healthy cooking classes, fitness boot camps, volunteer trips, and stargazing excursions.



Likelihood of going on a Wellness Trip:

The likelihood of having gone on a cruise or wellness trip in the past year increases as the age groups get older. Old Millennials are about twice as likely to have done either as Young Gen Zs are.

Have you taken a wellness trip in the past 12 months? % Yes



(Source: Skift Research, 2019)

According to the ILTM and CatchOn study, China's "Millionaire Millennials" are a key driver of the demand for wellness tourism. "Wellness is the new status symbol among the 400-million-strong Chinese millennials. To them, wellness has taken a broader and deeper meaning that goes beyond physical fitness and pampering spa treatments. Mental health is a high priority, so is intellectual and social wellness," according to the report. With so many Chinese millennials achieving wealth at a younger age than ever before, then, the wellness travel market is likely to see enormous growth.

Certainly, wellness travel is a priority for this generation. According to Skift Research's [Millennial and Gen Z Traveler Survey 2019: A Multi-Country Comparison Report](#), 68 percent of older Chinese millennials (ages 31 to 38) had taken a wellness trip during the past year, as compared to 54 percent of younger (ages 23 to 30) Chinese millennials.



Rising incomes are also impacting the travel patterns of women, Gen Xers, and baby boomers throughout China and Southeast Asia. The habits of women are particularly worth noting. Feliciano-Chon explained that women throughout the region are becoming empowered and independent as they have opportunity to make more money. Marriage and fertility rates are declining in many of Asia's developed countries as women instead "invest in their own personal and professional growth."

Women in China, Hong Kong, Singapore, the Philippines, Korea, and Japan are making girlfriend getaways a regular part of their lifestyles as well, Feliciano-Chon said. They also tend to travel more frequently for wellness than Western travelers. Women in these regions, whether traveling with other women or alone, will increasingly become a vital wellness tourism market segment.

The ILTM and CatchOn study also identified "Asian Affluent New Agers" as another group to watch. "With the combined factors of longer life expectancy and the means to pursue wellness at a younger age, Asians who are approaching mid-life are recontextualizing aging as aspirational. They're not postponing living well after retirement but are embracing a life-well-lived mindset in their 40s because they can afford it. These Affluent New Agers are younger and changing the notion of age from a chronological construct to biological and mental mindset – '65 is the new 45.' They live very differently from previous generations and consider 'middle age' as the prime of their lives," the study revealed.

Up-and-Coming Wellness Tourism Destinations

This massive growth in wealth and an increasing interest in wellness are having a huge impact throughout the region. Intra-China wellness travel is growing by leaps and bounds. Billed as the Hawaii of the East, Sanya on Hainan Island has become a major domestic destination for Chinese wellness travelers. Countries that are relatively close to China, including Cambodia, Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam, are beefing up their wellness tourism offerings to meet the booming demand from their neighbors.

What Sanya is to China, Phu Quoc will be to Vietnam. This tiny island has had a spate of new openings, including an all-inclusive spa resort from Fusion. The hospitality company is opening similar properties throughout Vietnam. Cambodia is also rapidly becoming a wellness tourism destination. Song Saa Private Island put the country on the wellness map when it opened in 2010, and several new developments are opening on islands near Cambodia's southwestern coast. Indonesia is bringing wellness to islands beyond Bali, including Nusa Lembongan and Biawah Island.

"The tourism chief of the Philippines is bullish on positioning through sustainability and wellness," said Feliciano-Chon. She reports that the country has been experiencing a rapid growth in the wellness and medical tourism sectors, up 31 percent a year between 2015 and 2017. She cited The Farm at San Benito, a holistic medical wellness resort, along with the opening of new island destinations like Siargao and Coron, and the reopening of Boracay after a major cleanup, as additional signs that the country's wellness sector is primed for further growth.

During the past decade, Singapore's "City in a Garden" vision, which introduces well-being through nature, shows up in the architecture of tourism-facing developments. Jewel Changi Airport incorporates trees, waterfalls, and other elements of



nature into its design. Gardens by the Bay is a 250-acre nature park in the heart of Singapore. The Park Royal on Pickering includes 160,000 square feet of sky gardens, while the Oasia Hotel Downtown features an exterior "green wall" covered by 21 different species of plants.

While Japan has traditionally been steeped in wellness culture, that country has only recently started packaging wellness as a tourism asset. New wellness resorts are popping up around the country, as are more ryokans, which provide visitors with a glimpse into time-honored national customs. "The quest for spiritual healing and mental well-being are the two powerful world wellness trends, and 2018 legislation opening up Japanese monasteries to tourists and the rise of Terahaku (the Airbnb of temple accommodations) let travelers tap into zen at Japan's Buddhist monasteries," according to the Global Wellness Institute.

Forest bathing — or guided multi-sensory walking in the woods — is being promoted in a big way by the Japan National Tourism Organization. Dozens of destinations and luxury hotels like the Shishi-Iwa House in Karuizawa are also setting up forest bathing programs. For more on forest bathing, see the Going Back to Nature Through Wellness Travel section of this report.

IT TAKES A VILLAGE: HOW WELLNESS TRAVEL CAN FOSTER COMMUNITY



Some may think of transformation as simply an inner journey. But the fact is, for many people, social interaction is a fundamental part of the wellness tourism experience. By connecting with other pilgrims or wellness providers, or, by becoming immersed in the culture and spirit of a community they are visiting, people can incorporate that in-person experience into their transformational process. The sense of community is a vital part of this interaction.

The paradox of the 21st century is that even as we have developed often countless “friendships” on social media, real life relationships and shared experiences are becoming scarcer, especially among younger generations. “We have a modern-day problem that is based on isolation through

social media, where connections are shallow and hollow,” said SANGHA Retreat’s Waring. That’s why the property chose its name: “Sangha” is the Sanskrit word for “community.”

As more time is spent online, many people may devote less time to creating and nurturing connections offline. In fact, the term “technoference” is [gaining traction](#). Technoference refers to the distraction caused by constant access to technology. Because humans are social animals and require true connections to thrive, the isolation caused by social distraction is having a deep impact on people’s mental and physical wellness. That’s why wellness-focused travel providers need to consider how to build a sense of community into the experiences they offer.



Real-Life Social Networks

New York Times best-selling author Dan Buettner has examined the role of community as it relates to overall wellness in his research on the world's Blue Zones. These are areas around the world where the local population lives far longer than average. His work draws on that of Gianni Pes, M.D., Ph.D., a senior researcher in the Department of Clinical and Experimental Medicine at the University of Sassari, Italy. Pes coined the term "Blue Zone" while studying the exceptional longevity of people living in the mountains of Sardinia.

Blue Zone research attributes longevity to several factors, including diet, exercise, spirituality, and having a healthy social network. It's important to note that when the researchers refer to a healthy social network, they aren't referring to Facebook or other digital tools but rather face-to-face human relationships cultivated over decades.

Professor Lisa Berkman of Harvard University is an expert in social connectedness and longevity. One of her studies looked into the connection between marital status, ties with friends and relatives, club membership, level of volunteerism, and greater longevity. The study found that the type of connection was irrelevant; that there was a bond was all that mattered.

"People are realizing the power of human connection when it comes to wellness travel," said Droga, of the Wellness Tourism Summit. "They're drawn to the idea of the community and what it offers in terms of connecting with other travelers."

Still, as community is often forged over time, how can wellness travel providers attempt to create a sense of connection between guests and locals over a period of days or weeks?

One option is by providing opportunities for voluntourism. "It's come to the point where travelers now take 'giving back' as a given," according to Reuters Intelligence Luxury Conversation report.

"Voluntourism ... defined as the 'conscious, seamlessly integrated combination of voluntary service with the traditional elements of travel and tourism,' is one of the fastest-growing tourism niche markets in the world." By offering travelers the opportunity to build homes, help out on community projects, or provide food for hurricane-ravaged citizens, visitors can feel like they're a part of something larger than themselves, which is a key part of the transformative experience.

"More affluent millennials now take a keen interest in returning to their roots, prompting a growing demand for traditional arts, cultural practices, and philosophies in a bid to relieve stress and achieve emotional wellness," according to ILTM and CatchOn's report on Asia travel. For example, temple getaways provide a way to connect while letting guests "practice the ancient art of calligraphy (a form of meditation in Buddhist culture) and engaging in philosophical exchanges with monks."

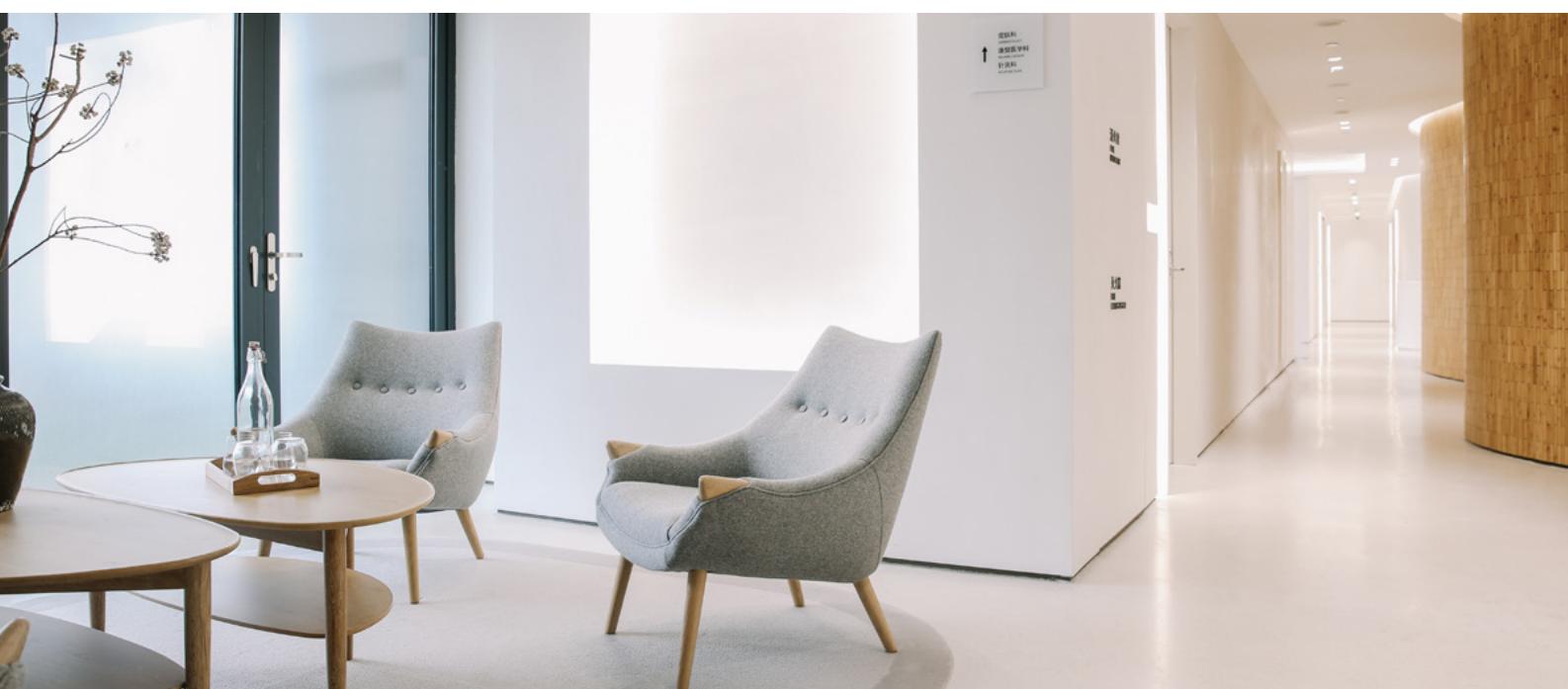
Retreats can also connect guests to local wellness activities. In China, wellness seekers can be encouraged to participate in public morning tai chi sessions. In Scandinavia, they can be directed to communal saunas. Around the world, many communities schedule regular hikes for locals and guests alike.

On site, wellness retreats should encourage meaningful interactions between staff and guests. Unlike traditional forms of travel, wellness travel often

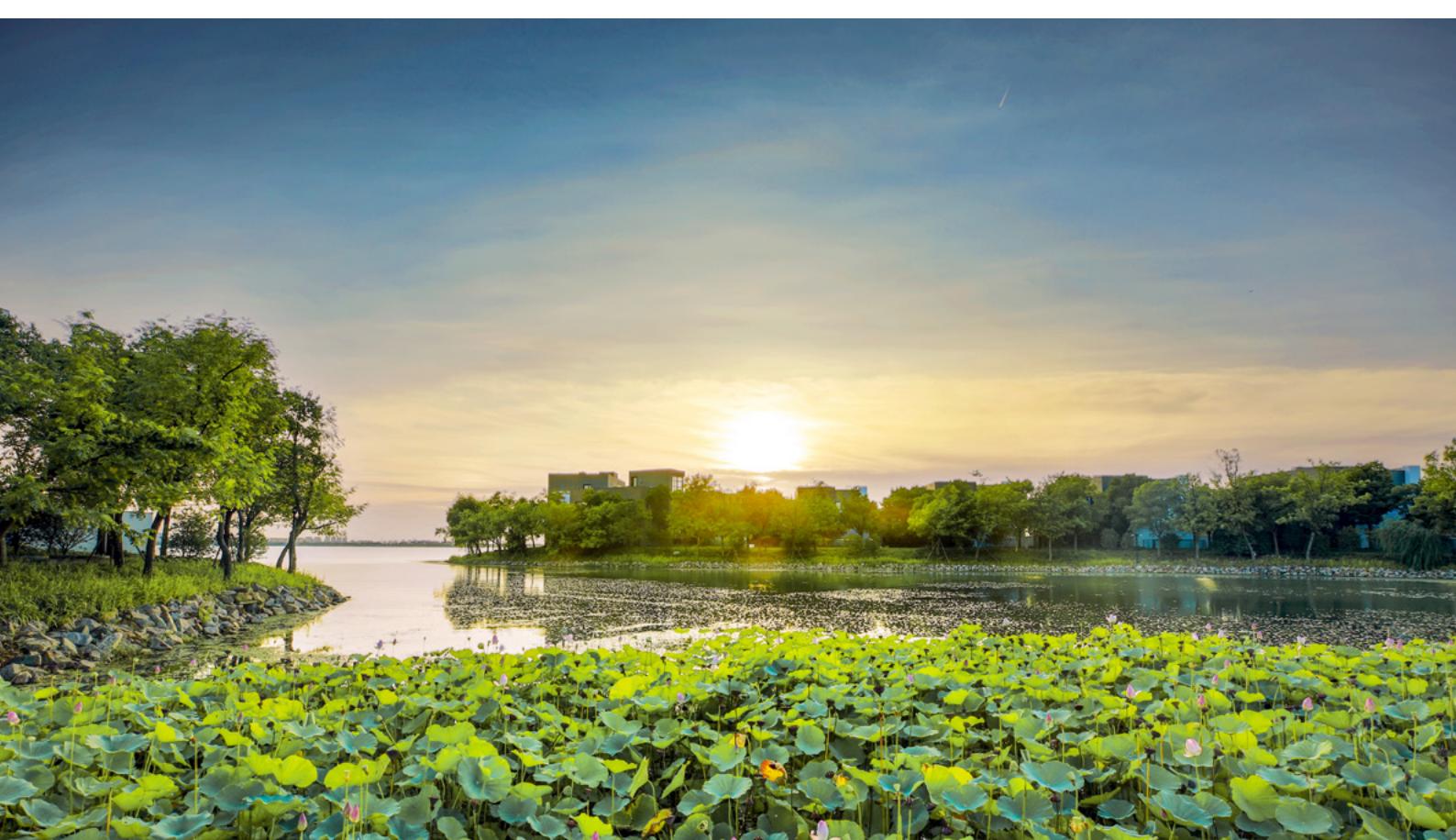
involves in-depth interaction between guests and staff. An Exploratory Examination of the Wellness Tourist Experience Using Netography, published by the University of Massachusetts Amherst, found that wellness travelers are drawn to connecting with retreat employees and that the relationships built with staff often have a profound impact on their experience. "Travelers truly value the community aspect provided at many wellness resorts," according to the report.

Wellness travel providers should also develop ways to stay connected with their guests once trips are over. According to Droga, one upcoming trend in wellness tourism is maintaining relationships with guests via online support or dedicated apps. Such tools allow guests to stay connected to the community they were part of during their wellness journey while maintaining a link to lessons learned. Fred Tsao, the founder of SANGHA Retreat, said that by offering apps, online courses and post-stay coaching, the community is maintained. "You want to continue to encourage guests to continue the narrative and allow them to come back for a refill," Tsao said.

Staying connected to the traveler after the fact is certainly good business practice. "It's the holy grail for wellness destinations — how do we get travelers to hang onto that knowledge gained and then have that echo extend out to family, friends, community, and planet?" said Haupert, of the Transformational Travel Council.



GOING BACK TO NATURE THROUGH WELLNESS TRAVEL

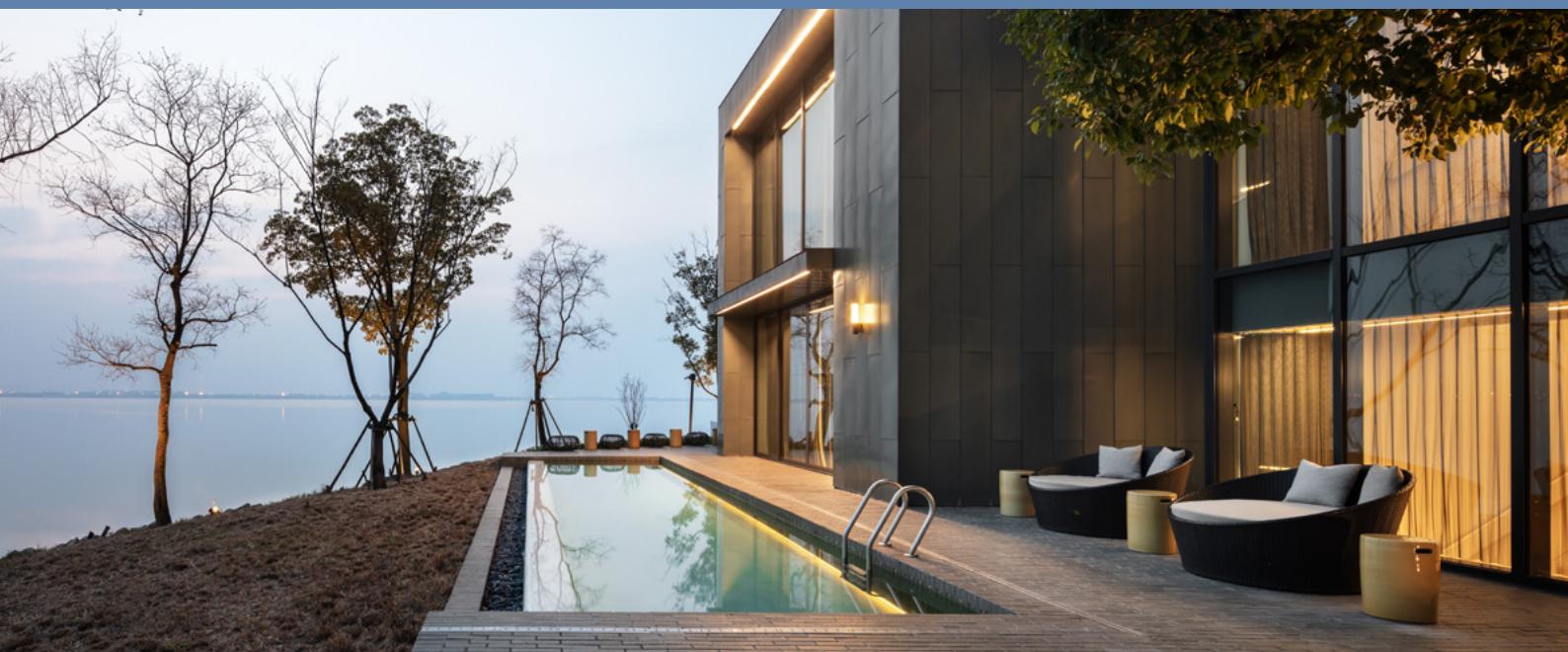


More people are living in urban areas than ever before, and many of them have little or no access to unspoiled nature. In 1950, around 30 percent of the world's population lived in urban areas, according to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. That figure has risen to 55 percent today — and it's expected to increase to 68 percent by 2050.

In China alone, there are about 160 cities with more than one million people, according to World Population Review. "Chinese cities are ultra-competitive environments with relentless construction, traffic and transport hubbub, and little greenspace," according to a [Reuters Intelligence report](#). "This has driven a huge drive for consumers to look back to nature, craving countryside escapes, beach retreats, and fresh air."

As SANGHA Retreat's Tsao said, "The concrete jungle energetically sets people apart from nature. But we are built to be part of the [natural] environment."

As greater numbers of people become disconnected from nature in everyday environments, the need for eco-therapy is on the rise. Even doctors are now prescribing time outside to relieve anxiety or depression. For example, in the United States, the Park Rx America movement is encouraging medical professionals to prescribe nature instead of pills. In Scotland, the National Health Service Shetland recently unveiled Healthy Shetland, a program of nature prescriptions to help treat everything from anxiety and depression to high blood pressure.



The Natural Opportunity

Access to nature is becoming one of the key attributes wellness travelers are looking for when selecting a destination or travel experience, according to the aforementioned 2019 study by Germany's Wellness-Hotels & Resorts.

"Wellness programs cannot separate nature out," said SANGHA Retreat's Waring. "It's a core anchor of the mission. Guests must be taken to nature to synchronize with the sights and sounds."

Fraenkel, founder of the Mind Body Spirit Network, agreed. "More hotels and resorts are incorporating nature into their programming, given the value guests put on it." She mentioned the Mandarin Oriental in Boston, where the general manager takes a daily run with guests. She also noted that more and more hotels are offering free bikes for guests to use during their stays.

But one of the trendiest ways to enhance guest access to nature has been the recent global embrace of the Japanese idea of forest bathing, or shinrin-yoku. In Japanese, shinrin means forest, and yoku means bath; shinrin-yoku, then, is the idea of immersing oneself in the forest's atmosphere.

The concept gained popular acclaim thanks in part

to the book *Forest Bathing: How Trees Can Help You Find Health and Happiness*, by Dr. Qing Li, a physician at Tokyo's Nippon Medical School and a founding member and chairman of the Japanese Society for Forest Medicine.

"Indoors, we tend to use only two senses, our eyes and our ears," wrote Li. "Outside is where we can smell the flowers, taste the fresh air, look at the changing colors of the trees, hear the birds singing, and feel the breeze on our skin. And when we open up our senses, we begin to connect to the natural world. When you are intimately connected to the forest through all five of your senses, you feel restored and refreshed. The forest can bring you back to health and life."

Li said there's now a wealth of data proving that a walk in the woods can reduce blood pressure, improve cardiovascular and metabolic health, lower blood-sugar levels, improve concentration and memory, increase anticancer protein production, and aid in weight loss. Science has also shown that connecting with nature can increase energy, improve one's ability to concentrate and learn, reduce anxiety, and ease depression.

Japan has embraced the concept. Since 2006, the country has recognized more than 60 areas as certified Forest Therapy Bases. According to the Japanese National Tourism Organization, The Dragon Route, winding past the Chubu region's hot springs and diverse landscapes, has become

increasingly popular among travelers looking for forest bathing and other natural healing options. The village of Misugi, located in Japan's Mie Prefecture, is making forest bathing a part of its new wellness travel initiative, which is capitalizing on existing natural assets such as dark skies, hot springs, and lush forests.

Forest bathing is rapidly taking off outside Japan, as well. Blackberry Farm, one of the top spa resorts in the United States, recently added forest bathing to its programming. So too have Armathwaite Hall in England's Lake District and the Falkensteiner Hotel Grand Medspa Marienbad in the Czech Republic. Forest bathing is even catching on in cities. Tokyo has several sites for the practice, and Urban Edge Forest Therapy in New York City is just one of the walking-tour companies that's taking guests on guided strolls through green spaces.

All of this suggests that incorporating nature into wellness programs need not require a massive investment or a complicated strategy review: Rural areas can take advantage of their trees, their quiet spaces and their dark skies, while urban destinations can take a more mindful approach to utilizing what assets they have at hand.

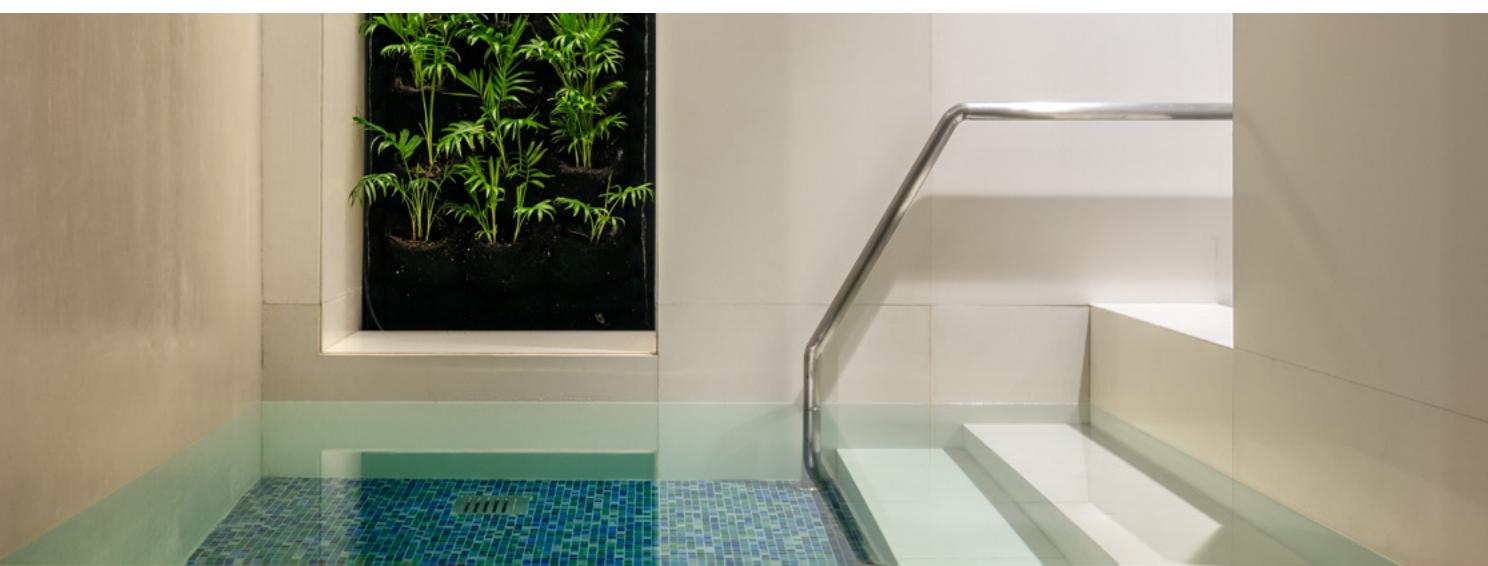
Building in Nature for Wellness

Nature isn't just a matter of being outdoors. It can also mean bringing the outdoors inside.

Biophilic design is a growing movement in the wellness tourism space that focuses on strategies to incorporate natural materials, light, and forms into built environments, said Stephen R. Kellert, professor emeritus at the School of Forestry and Environmental Studies at Yale University, in an article for Metropolis Magazine. "Biophilic design brings nature [into] our spaces [in] three ways: real nature in our spaces (i.e., natural lighting, views, fresh air), the nature in the space (i.e., natural materials, plants, animal life), and symbols of nature (i.e., artwork, ornamentation, fractal patterns)," Kellert wrote. "It can result in enhanced health and productivity."

True biophilic environments are about more than just a few office plants or a lobby water feature. Yes, the presence of such elements can be therapeutic, but the building's structure itself must be healing by incorporating natural materials and forms, experts said. Consider the emotional appeal of Arab-Islamic architecture, which relies on geometric patterns found in nature, or the curvature used in the Belle Époque design of 19th-century German spas.

Today's hotel and spa designers — who tend to be familiar with the principles of nature's effects on wellness — are adding biophilic elements with intention. Almost every new wellness property built over the past decade or so, from Lefay Resort & Spa in the Italian Dolomites to Lelewatu Resort on Indonesia's Sumba Island, incorporates natural elements, including wood, waterfalls, and floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking green spaces, in order to enhance the wellness experience.



CONCLUSION



Are we, as a culture, destined to continue living in a state of permanxiety? Certainly, things are not slowing down as the pace of technological advancement speeds up. Furthermore, the normality of a 24/7 digital existence has spread like wildfire around the planet.

But SANGHA Retreat founder Fred Tsao is among those who believe a backlash is coming. The world is undergoing a paradigm shift, in which there's a new understanding that we're connected to each other in ways far deeper than technology might suggest, Tsao said. There's a renewed understanding that the world is interconnected by energy, among people, and with nature. This change is having a transformative effect on the world, shifting consciousness and awakening a new wisdom that

everything and everyone is connected. "In order for us to be well," Tsao said, "the environment in which we live must be well."

No longer satisfied merely with a massage and a yoga class, today's wellness travelers are looking to become part of the greater wave of transformation. Some travelers may be transformed by time communing with nature. Others may find themselves transformed through the process of voluntourism. Some may find meditation to be the key to inner change. Destinations and travel providers looking to provide well-being, rest, and relief to travelers must be aware of this evolving intent and continue to provide them with a range of tools and products that allow the transformation process to begin in a holistic way.

ABOUT SKIFT

Skift is the largest intelligence platform in travel, providing media, insights, marketing to key sectors of the industry. Through daily news, research, podcasts, and Skift Global Forum conferences, Skift deciphers and defines the trends that matter to the marketers, strategists, and technologists shaping the industry.

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ABOUT OCTAVE INSTITUTE

OCTAVE Institute is a platform to help people find clarity, harmony, and a new level of consciousness and freedom. It is comprised of SANGHA Retreat, an innovative, fully-immersive health and wellness retreat in Suzhou, China that combines Eastern philosophies with Western science; AITIA, which powers the communal programs at OCTAVE Institute; THE VILLAGE, a live-work-learn community for personal and communal learning, executive retreats, conferences, summits, and festivals including the annual AT ONE International Festival; and THE LIVING ROOM, an urban support center in Shanghai.



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