



unplug and play

Our hard-wired lives are leading to a boom in wellness tourism.
Danielle Norton highlights some of the best itineraries on land and sea.

Throughout history, the search for rest, relaxation and healing has always been a driver for travel. In Japan, devout Buddhist and Shinto pilgrims have traversed the forest trails of the Kumano Kodo seeking salvation. The Romans gravitated to hot springs for thermal bathing, and in India, Ayurvedic retreats were commonly pursued. These practices laid the foundation for modern wellness tourism, which centres on spiritual, emotional and physical transformation.

Wellness retreats have become a mainstream holiday choice since they emerged in the 1970s. Meditation, yoga, forest-bathing, fitness boot camps and digital detoxes have become so common that the non-profit Global Wellness Institute predicts the annual wellness tourism market will turn over more than \$US1.4 trillion by 2027.

Retreats promise more than a typical holiday experience, inviting travellers to find wellness their own way and catering to a desire for alternatives to

the busy, high-dopamine world of smartphones, constant productivity and the information superhighway.

Whether participants seek to practise yoga, undertake a digital detox, read a book or two, reboot their exercise regime or recover from grief, trauma or surgery, a wellness retreat creates a reserved pocket of time and space for them to deal with physical and emotional issues.

Escape Haven, an award-winning Balinese women's wellness retreat, is a

prime example of this "outcome-based" travel trend. At this Instagram-friendly property in Canggu, where palm trees frame a central pool and pretty purple bougainvillea tumble from the rooftops, there's a recognition that women's lives are demanding. Modern life is fast and constantly connected, with ever-shifting goalposts and very little time for intentional rest.

Retreat leader Ailise Sweeney-Lowe believes this lifestyle comes at huge cost. "Often, women get here and don't

realise how much they've been carrying. They know they're burnt out, they know they're tired, but they don't really understand why. Sometimes it's not easy to actually stop and slow down. Sometimes you need to get yourself out of your normal environment."

This is why a retreat is so appealing. At Escape Haven, women are nurtured, celebrated and encouraged to reflect deeply on their lives and their contributions to the world, supporting this reflection with sound baths, spiritual yoga sessions, meditation, counselling and bucket-list tourism activities. The promise of personal and spiritual growth combined with the excitement of a new destination is a combination many find hard to resist.

Retreat guests are looking to transform themselves and return home with strategies that will help them improve their daily lives. "Travellers are looking for more than a yoga retreat these days," says Janine Cottle, owner of Escape Haven. "They want wellness 'takeaways' from their holidays."

When Cottle started her first wellness retreat, 18 years and more than 15,000 guests ago, she offered a program of yoga and surfing. "Everything was much more activity-based," she says. "Now, what women are after is outcome-based. Guests don't just want to feel better for a week, they want tools they can take home and use in real life."

"Wellness tourism has gone from 'woo-woo' to mainstream, and instead of being an add-on, wellness is an expectation of their experience."

With growing awareness of burnout in modern workplaces, a wellness retreat becomes a place to safely experiment with tools and rituals, says Cottle. "It's driven by wearable health technology like Oura rings and Apple watches. People can now track their heart rate, steps and sleep, and they're starting to understand wellness at a different level. They're tracking what's happening to their wellness and having agency over it."

Over in Koh Samui, Thailand, Kamalaya Wellness Sanctuary is built on nine hectares of land that stretches



Clockwise from top left: Kamalaya on Koh Samui; healthy food at Gwinganna; a pre-surf warm-up at Escape Haven; hiking at Aro Hā. Previous page: a scenic hot tub at Aro Hā.

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from the beach into a natural jungle setting via lush gardens bursting with birdlife and butterflies. Its general manager, Gopal Kumar, believes that "wellness is your daily journey, your pathway to longevity. If you're seeking to rediscover your true self and heal from anxiety, burnout, trauma or whatever it is you're going through, Kamalaya will be a place of personal transformation for you."

"Wellness and luxury are very different," he adds. "You can marry them, but wellness is not all about shiny finishes and luxe buildings. We do offer that, but true luxury is having your individual needs addressed."

Personalisation is of the utmost importance at Kamalaya and the team intentionally creates an environment that provides the foundation for transformation involving yoga, reiki, Ayurvedic healing (including shirodhara therapy), traditional Chinese medicine, herbal supplements and modern techniques like neuromodulation therapy, hyperbaric oxygen therapy and intravenous therapy.

Kamalaya helps guests focus on behaviour adjustment, from dietary adjustment and detoxing to emotional balancing and brain enhancement. "One visit here can help change your habits forever," says Kumar.

Melanie James, general manager of Gwinganna in the Gold Coast hinterland, believes the popularity of wellness retreats can be attributed to multiple factors.

"People are living in a constant state of stress with the pressures of everyday life," she says. "They're seeking more health-conscious lifestyles and have a desire to escape to a more natural, low-tech environment where they can regulate their nervous systems."

A weekend retreat at Gwinganna, which has been operating for more than 20 years, offers guests the chance to put away their phones and indulge in spa treatments, Pilates, yoga, forest walks, organic meals and a raft of yin-and-yang wellness activities that remind and encourage them to move their bodies.

The weekend starts with a seminar about the things a body needs for optimal health (sleep, fluids, nutrition, positive thought, exercise and strength), then gives participants time and space to explore these ideas before a final speech on circadian rhythms, stress management and ways to maintain the wellness journey at home.

Immersion in nature is also the essence of Aro Hā in Glenorchy, north-west of Queenstown on the South Island of New Zealand, where picturesque views of Lake Wakatipu and mountain ranges provide guests with a soothing natural setting from which to look inward.

"Revive & Thrive" – seven caffeine-free days of yoga, hiking in alpine

wilderness, breath work, contrast hydrotherapy, vegan dining, indulgent massage and mindful living – is Aro Hā’s signature offering. For those with time restraints, the five-day “Essential” program offers a condensed version, including days spent in mindful silence, while guided fasting gives guests a new perspective on their relationship with food.

“The science is finally catching up to the hippies,” says founder Damian Chaparro. “Turns out they were onto something – walk barefoot, breathe deep, sit still, and connect with something larger than yourself.”

At Aro Hā, a maximum of 20 guests ensures quality connections while the all-inclusive program takes the pressure off. There are no decisions to be made, no scheduling to be done. Everything is engineered so people can immerse themselves in the alpine environment. As a result, guests often report improved sleep and enhanced psychological wellbeing by the end of their retreat.

Cruise lines, too, are embracing wellness and offering voyages designed to focus on restoration, movement and improving the health and lifestyle of their passengers. Scenic Eclipse, for instance, has created a new category of cruising by blending six-star luxury with a retreat experience at sea and

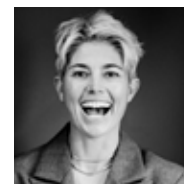
will launch Scenic Ikon, an ultra-luxurious vessel for 270 guests with a 1700-square-metre spa, in April 2028.

Scenic Eclipse voyage has three dedicated wellness-retreat voyages in the upcoming season: Panama City to Valparaíso, Barbados to Rio de Janeiro, and Tenerife to Antigua. Activities like stretch classes, circuit training, Zumba, calisthenics, fitball, meditation and sound healing are all on offer.

Passengers can linger in a salt therapy lounge, take afternoon tea with a wellness coach to chat about pain management and nutrition, visit multisensory hammams, partake in Finnish saunas and try hot-and-cold contrast therapy in a holistic wellness program that balances traditional treatments with health-focused workshops and expert-led classes.

As modern life becomes busier and more demanding, wellness retreats addressing our dysfunctional behaviour patterns and helping us feel calm, rested and emotionally restored, are likely to become even more popular. As Ailise Sweeney-Lowe says, “It’s OK to have times of intensity in life. We’re hard-wired for that, we can manage it. The payoff is that we have to offset them with times of stillness.”

The writer was a guest of Escape Haven and Gwinganna.



MY DAY ON A PLATE

Michelle Heyman, soccer player, 38

7am A flat white. Two eggs with smashed avocado on toast.

7.30am Creatine in orange juice and an electrolyte drink.

9.30am Post-gym, a high-protein Chobani yoghurt.

12pm Chicken Kyiv with sweet potato, carrot and broccoli.

2pm I have a banana with peanut butter before a run.

6pm A big bowl of delicious laksa. It’s full of protein, vegetables and ingredients that are great for your gut.

7pm Papaya with more high-protein yoghurt and granola.

Dr Joanna McMillan says:

Top marks for ... A well-timed spread of protein – eggs, yoghurt, chicken and laksa – across the day. This will support muscle repair and recovery after exercise. The yoghurt also gives your calcium intake a boost, important for bone health and resilience in a high-impact sport.

If you keep eating like this you’ll ... Stay well fuelled for general health, but on heavier training days you could fall short on carbohydrate, the best fuel for repeated sprints, endurance and topping up muscle glycogen. And watch your iron, as female athletes are at higher risk of low stores, which can sap energy and impair recovery and immune function.

Why don’t you try ... Adding extra carbohydrates in the form of oats, wholegrain toast, rice, noodles, pasta or potato around harder sessions and matched to the day’s training load. Include iron-rich foods like lean red meat, mussels, eggs, legumes and tofu, and combine the plant sources of iron with foods rich in vitamin C to help absorption.

Michelle Heyman is an ambassador for the partnership between the Australian Institute of Sport and Chobani.

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