

The Wellness World's New Take on Luxury

From culturally authentic programs to intimate group retreats in spectacular locations—discerning wellness seekers crave more immersive, transformative travel. A look at some of the options.

By: Abbie Kozolchik



In the summer of 2021, the nation sat rapt as a boatful of VIPs arrived at an idyllic tropical retreat, among them, an over-the-top heiress whose first real utterance to the staff—beyond the correct pronunciation of her name—was, “Listen, I’m in desperate need of a massage.” And so began our ongoing journey through the world of *The White Lotus*, where we’ve learned, if nothing else: Don’t be a Tanya. (For the two or three of you who haven’t watched yet: She’s the Uber-Karen of the five-star resort and spa circuit.)

Of course, spa Karens are merely symptomatic of larger forces. With season one shot at the peak of the pandemic and suffused with what creator Mike White has called “contemporary zeitgeisty anxiety,” his art imitates life by questioning the entire ecosystem of luxury travel. “The pandemic sped up something that was going to happen anyway,” notes Erica Gragg, founder of Escape Artists Luxury Travel Advisors

and the small-group wellness travel company Escape to Shape. As questions about how we’re leading our lives feel increasingly urgent—and the pursuit of deeper, more meaningful experiences has gained currency—“the definition of luxury has changed,” says Gragg.

Out: Cloistering oneself behind the gilded gates of a resort for the sole purpose of R&R. In: almost anything else. Read on for four of the most interesting options.

Taking ever deeper cultural dives

In the world according to Armond, fabled manager of the Hawaiian White Lotus, luxury guests enjoy “an overall impression of vagueness” from local staff. “You don’t want to be too specific...as an identity,” he declares blithely. Whether or not you concede that there’s some historic truth to his words, “now, even travelers who’ve gravitated toward traditional luxury are looking for more authenticity,” says Gragg. And some of the most beloved

retreats are responding with ever deeper dives into the surrounding cultures and communities—not least, the property that doubles as the season one *White Lotus*: the Four Seasons Resort Maui at Wailea.

A Wayfinder’s Journey, which is the newest entry on the hotel’s Unforgettable Experiences lineup, introduces you to a celebrated modern practitioner of ancient Polynesian navigation: Kala Baybayan Tanaka. As the daughter of the late Chad Kalepa Bayban—himself a legendary canoe captain, master navigator and advocate for the endangered art of wayfinding—Tanaka has celestial navigation in her blood. And as an accomplished wayfinder in her own right, she brings her toolkit to life—the stars, the swells, the winds—when you head out together at sunset on a private catamaran for an evening of storytelling, stargazing and feasting. That last part comes courtesy of Chef Samuel Taganeca, whose onboard tasting menu is inspired by venerable “canoe plants”—the staples that sustained the Polynesian

Above: Sunset on a private catamaran
Opposite page: An onboard tasting menu inspired by “canoe plants”





Wadi Al Masdara hike, Anantara Al Jabal Al Akhdar Resort

navigators of yore on epic journeys across the ocean. Think *kalo* (taro), *'ulu* (breadfruit) and *'uala* (sweet potato), for starters.

Back on land—about 8,500 miles to the east—a different kind of wellness offering roots you in the ancient civilization that surrounds Anantara Al Jabal Al Akhdar Resort in Oman. On the Three Village Culture Walk, you and a resident Hajar Mountain expert hike through Al Aqr, Al Ayn and Ash Shirayjah, where the cliff-hanging farm terraces, medicinal distilling techniques and historic aqueducts give you an experience that climate-controlled cardio never could (though of course, there's a well-equipped gym back at the resort should you want one). And if you visit in the springtime, when the path doubles as a blooming damask rose trail, you'll get a heady preview of one of the spa's signature experiences: the Rose Rescue Ritual, in which the most famous local flower—cultivated on these slopes for centuries—stars in a foot ritual, massage and facial.

In fact, for the authenticity-minded luxury traveler, few pairings work better than hyperlocal pampering and culturally rich walking. And as that model proliferates,

certain brands are really nailing it, according to Gragg. Take Aman, for example—and Amanjiwo in particular, where days spent on the temple- and rice paddy-flanked Cultural Trails in Java are arguably best capped off with the Mandi Lulur (an elaborate sloughing, kneading and soaking rite formerly reserved for Javanese royalty). Or consider Como

Hotels and Resorts, whose Uma Paro and Uma Punakha outposts are reintroducing travelers to all that is transcendent about Bhutan—from the brisk Himalayan hiking trails to the hot river stone bathing rituals—after the tiny Buddhist kingdom's long Covid closure. Of course, even in non-pandemic times, Bhutan has taken measures against overtourism (most notoriously, by charging visitors a daily sustainability fee), as if anticipating one of the travel industry's current favorite mantras: Authenticity is the new luxury.

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Picnic in the Rice Fields, Amanjiwo, Indonesia

Embracing plant power in all its forms

Even the casual observer of the wellness world has heard about—if not engaged in—shinrin-yoku (forest bathing) since the concept started spreading west from Japan more than a decade ago. And while the appeal of a mindful walk in the woods is clear, we seem to want more of a good thing: The plant kingdom is now driving all manner of luxury travel experience.

“There’s tremendous interest in plant-based medicine in the luxury market,” notes Scott Bull, a wellness travel consultant at Hidden Doorways Global Luxury Travel and Consulting. At Sedona’s newly expanded and reopened Mii amo destination spa, for example, “CBD now features on the treatment menu to help meet this demand,” he says.

Not that healing plants need be confined to the spa, of course. One of the best new cases in point is hidden among the mangroves, marshes and tropical forests of the Sian Ka’an Biosphere Reserve on Mexico’s Riviera Maya: Casa Chablé, where historically medicinal and ceremonial crops figure into

every experience from the Goodness of Agave tasting to classes on the ancestral preparation of corn and cacao.

For floraphiles who want to go even deeper, one good option is Uxua Casa Hotel & Spa in hippie-chic Trancoso, Brazil. The on-site Vida Lab is a medicinal kitchen, research center and spa treatment formulation center—a Wonka factory for the wellness world under the supervision of Medical Director Jullian Hamamoto, MD. You can drop in, check out the living roof and request custom blends of anything from juice to essential oils. To go home with DIY skills, sign up for the elixir-mixing and cooking classes here, too.

A more literal take on going deeper? A new Wellness in the Wild experience from Anantara the Marker Dublin Hotel, where the resident Wild Swimming Guru, Jessica

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Lamb, immerses you in Ireland’s famously abundant kelp forests, among other habitats. Note that a different algal superstar—a blue-green variety that acts as a natural retinoid alternative—powers a popular add-on to any treatment back at the spa: the Longevity Eye Lift, which also includes smoothing plant peptides.

Then there are the travelers who simply want to hole up in the middle of nowhere and take cover under a leafy canopy. “I’ve found that more and more people are defining luxury as ‘away from it all, immersed in lush nature,’” says Gragg. “We got a taste of that during Covid, and it stuck.” While the natural beauty doesn’t hurt, something else is at play, too: “People are looking for an excuse to disconnect,” says Gragg, “and in a lot of locations, the nature almost forces a digital detox—at least for a portion of your day.” At Dawn Ranch, for example, you’ll be drawn to the maximally lush stretch of the Russian River that surrounds this new California retreat. There amidst the Redwoods, Douglas Firs and Tanoaks, cell reception is infamously spotty—and you’ll be endlessly grateful it is. Back at the ranch, keep the dreamy arboreal vibes going at the spa with a sweet birch magnesium bath in a wooden tub or—perhaps most on point—a forest bathing body scrub.

Seeking reconnection

Not everyone has the urge to get away from everything and disconnect. Many luxury travelers have had the opposite reaction post-pandemic, says Gragg, and now want nothing more than to reconnect with their friends and family in a stunning setting with every possible amenity. Thus, the peak villa moment we find ourselves in.

With rosters of experts on hand in some of the world’s most beautiful places—from St. Barts to South Africa—the most sought-after luxury villa rental experts find themselves catering to every conceivable wellness need (on top of the usual must-haves). “When you’re traveling, not having to search for these services is its own kind of luxury,” notes Gragg, who has herself assembled villa-attending wellness squads from fitness trainers, hiking guides, yoga instructors, massage therapists and health-minded private chefs.

An alternative means of reconnecting: small group travel. Escape to Shape, for one, has seen ballooning demand, with wellness-focused itineraries on the 2024 books in Bhutan, Rwanda, the Dolomites, Southern India and Egypt. Similarly, Jacada Travel has seen its Luxury Groups and Reunion Tours gain serious ground, particularly among extended families who want to make up for lost time with shared memories that range from soaking in Japan’s hot springs to hiking the Inca Trail.

Not that you have to be part of a small group to reconnect with other humans in a small-group setting.

Some of the most intimately scaled wellness retreats are ideal for those purposes if you’re a solo traveler. The venerable and recently overhauled Golden Door—with its single-occupancy rooms and 40-guest max—is a great choice where you’ll find communal activities that foster camaraderie and conversation (hikes, fitness classes, guest speaker presentations) but still plenty of one-on-one time with the pros.

Meanwhile, The Ranch Groupies and wellness watchers in general eagerly await the brand’s March 2024 expansion into a renovated Hudson Valley manor with ties to both Alexander Hamilton and J. Pierpont Morgan. True to all the Ranches so far, this one will accommodate only 25 people per hiking- and treatment-intensive session.

Pressing the reset button

There’s another stream of luxury wellness travel that’s emerging, but unlike those above, this one really is all about you: the hard reset. “Increasingly, people want a serious, long-term transformation—and if you can achieve that with the best of the best over a relatively short period of time, even better,” says Gragg.

The goals may vary—sleep overhaul, nutritional makeover, workout supercharge, full-body glow-up—but the thinking on how to achieve them remains the same: Enlist the kinds of ultra-specialized pros who normally work with elite athletes and/or prestigious research centers, then spare no expense or resource in developing programming.

Think: the Optimal Wellbeing Program at the year-old Sensei Porcupine Creek in the California desert, where the state-of-the-art devices will establish your biomarkers so a team of exercise physiologists, nutritionists, mindfulness coaches and others can craft a bespoke, data-driven five-day plan to help you reach your own goals. (Here’s where we remind you that Sensei was created by tech pioneer Larry Ellison, cofounder of Oracle, and Dr. David Agus, a professor of Medicine and Biomedical Engineering at USC’s Keck School of Medicine and a contributor at *CBS News*.)

Then there’s the just-opened Como Metropolitan Singapore, where the Como Shambhala wellness facility is a sprawling centerpiece that offers curated, multiday journeys—complete with gut health and body composition diagnostics. And not to be outdone, the White Lotus, aka the Four Seasons Maui at Wailea, has introduced White Glove Wellness in partnership with Next Health, a longevity center known for everything from customized IV treatments to biomarker testing. The newest offerings include the Longevity Protocol, a blend of Ozone, Stem Cell and Exosome therapies, among others, that aim to do nothing short of prolong your life—and as Armond and Tanya would tell you, that’s no small thing. O

beauty

INSIDE THIS SECTION:

Holistic and Healthy

Farm to Face

Clean Means Confident

OUR RITUALS AND ROUTINES
BRING US CONFIDENCE AND
HEALTH—INSIDE AND OUT.
HERE, ICONS IN THE INDUSTRY
DESCRIBE HOW THEY VIEW THE
ART OF WELLBEING.

Honoring the light within each
day and each person you meet.

—*Boldjarre Koronczay, Founder
of Eminence Organic Skin Care*

I define wellbeing as a state of
body and mind that allows me
to let my energy flow. Nothing
blocking it. When that happens,
anything is possible, and kindness
seems to flow out of me.

—*Jane Iredale, Founder of Iredale
Mineral Cosmetics*

To me, the art of wellbeing is
bringing together all aspects
to live a happy, healthy life
for planet, people, and self—
physically, mentally, emotionally,
intellectually, and spiritually.

—*Sue Harmsworth, Founder of ESPA*

To me, the art of wellbeing is
feeling both beautiful and fulfilled
inside and out through emotional
balance and feeling confident in
your skin.

—*Dr. Philippe Allouche, Head of
Creation Innovation and Research
at Biologique Recherche*



giving back

Reef Revelations

Anantara wanted to study, celebrate, and support the biodiversity of its world-renowned house reef in the Maldives. So it hired ocean researchers and did it right.

By Liz Vaccariello

The team at Anantara Kihavah Maldives Villas knew the coral and marine life around their island was special. It had received accolades (“best house reef in the Maldives”), and they’d all had extra time to explore and enjoy this fragile environment of vibrant tropical fish, Hawksbill sea turtles, Blacktip reef sharks, and all manner of crustaceans, mollusks and rays during the pandemic lockdown. But it wasn’t until August of 2021 that the idea to scientifically document and share its splendor was hatched.

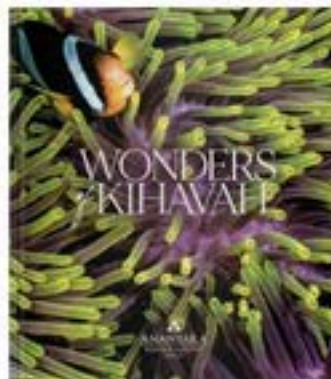
That morning, executives Ibrahim Mausooof and Paul Counihan were snorkeling several meters offshore. They’d just watched a nonchalant octopus hang outside its hole for a full 60 minutes and were grateful, euphoric even, for the marine life they encountered daily. “I’ve never seen a reef so beautiful,” Mau, who’d been photographing atolls in the Indian Ocean since he was six years old, remarked to Paul. “I’ve seen six atolls and this is the most lively, the most beautiful, the most dramatic.”

Two years later, the writers, editors, photographers and marine biologists gathered to celebrate the publication of

Wonders of Kihavah, a science-based coffee-table-book-meets-research-study chronicling the rich biodiversity found at this island positioned in the heart of the Baa Atoll archipelago, a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve.

During COVID, the 180-person team stuck on the island was able to spend time inspecting and appreciating the life underwater. That led to the moment between Paul and Mau, which led to Anantara—helped by its philanthropic Dollars for Deeds program—hiring Australian Marine Conservation Society Director Dr. Selina Ward to study the exact scale of its biodiversity. Ward and her colleagues, fish and coral experts Dr. Storm Martin and Dr. Hannah Markham, had all conducted extensive research work on Australia’s Great Barrier Reef, and they say they were heartened to see how healthy, lively and diverse the Anantara Kihavah reef turned out to be.

An astounding 300 fish species (and 132 species of corals) were recorded, with Ward emphasizing that this delicate equilibrium



only underscores the urgent need for marine conservation efforts, especially in the age of global warming.

Renowned ocean scientist, conservationist and author Dr. Gregory Stone, who served as a guiding ambassador and book editor, described the ecosystem at the

celebration. “It’s the kind of place where there’s a little something for everybody,” he said. “You can find these very colorful, beautiful nudibranchs, which are these tiny snails without shells. Then you turn and you’ve got a four-foot nurse shark swimming by you, or a manta ray above you, or a school of fusiliers behind you. You go a little bit deeper, you get into the soft corals and you see the waving fronds of gorgonians. Then up on the reef flat you see a lot of very good hard corals. I like seeing that. It’s a good system.”

And the team at Anantara works mightily to keep it that way.

The book is available digitally at anantara.com/en/kihavah-maldives/the-reef 