



Healing

Wellness is the new luxury as rich baby boomers spare no expense to get their health back on track. Judy Chapman reports.

ALPHA, NEW ZEALAND

Hooked *on*

CHRONIC fatigue. Inflammation. Digital overload. Sugar addiction. Stress. Just some of the things that don't actually kill you on their own, but can add up to make you feel pretty lousy before finally morphing into a life-threatening condition.

How we prevent that is a near-obsession with a rapidly aging — and richer — demographic that has taken the adage 'prevention is better than cure' to an unprecedented level. Never before have urbanites spent so much time and money on fitness, nutrition, and preventive healthcare. Where once people went to spas for a relaxing massage, the demand now is for targeted treatment regimes — with a pool villa worked into it.

So even as other parts of the global economy hobble along, wellness has become one of the healthiest industries in the world.

The statistics bear this out. According to the Global Wellness Institute (GWI) the worldwide wellness economy is now worth US\$3.7 trillion. From 2013 to 2015, the wellness industry grew by 10 per cent while the rest of the world's economy shrank by 3.6 per cent, says the Miami-based research organisation.

Wellness tourism is also on the rise, adds the GWI. From 2013 to 2015, wellness tourism revenues grew 14 per cent, more than twice as fast as overall tourism expenditures of 6.9 per cent.

In Singapore, spas report a healthy growth and a demand for more specialised treatments.

"We have seen a steady increase of 10 per cent in annual revenue in our full and half-day detox and wellness programs," notes Alsu Abdulina, Regional Spa Director for Auriga Spa at the Capella Singapore.

In fact, guests show particular interest in preventive methods to avoid burn out. "We've seen more guests wanting organic products, supplements and treatments. They're also studying the ingredients list when purchasing skincare."

At Resorts World Sentosa, which houses ESPA, Singapore's largest destination spa, a spokesperson echoes this, reporting a recent change in customers' priorities.

"We now have a yoga teacher, nutritionist, chiropractor and other wellness professionals on board." Bookings for ESPA's day retreats which comprise spa, fitness, detox and nutritional cuisine elements, grew dramatically from 2015 to 2016.

Sally Forest, Managing Director of SoulCenter, a center for meditation and stress-relief says they started seeing this growth in 2013.

"We had a huge rise in 2015 and then double digit growth in 2016," says Ms Forest. "The biggest jump we've seen is at the MD and CEO level. The business scene is getting tougher and senior executives need to become more aware of, and manage, their stress levels."

But for anyone thinking of jumping on the wellness bandwagon, it's a highly competitive business.

There are roughly 400 spas in Singapore with 14 new spas opening in the past two years but just as many closing, says Julie Garrow, Managing Director of Singapore-based Intelligent Spas, an industry research consultancy. Almost half of the 400 are salon type spas, and she adds that destination spas with a wellness focus are doing better than those without.

"Luxury spending is shifting from stuff to experiences," notes Ingo Schweder, CEO of GOCO Hospitality, a company which designs wellness retreats and spas around the region. Baby boomers, whom he claims have 73 percent of all the economic power in the world, are behind this.

"Baby boomers have the disposable income and are increasingly driven by preventive medicine," he says. "There is a major shift in how people think about wellness and these changes are also reflected in the business world. Extremely successful businessmen — and women — are shifting to wellness."

While wellness may be the new luxury, it's not only for the rich.

Even international hotels are offering healthy options. The Intercontinental group recently rolled out the wellness-centric Even Hotel brand while Starwood's Elements hotels feature in-room fitness and nutritional menus. Westin and Swiss hotels have introduced superfood menus and there's even an on-site vegetable sommelier at the JW Marriott Dongdaemun Square in Seoul.

"People's most precious assets are time and money, and they want to spend it on the things they value the most," concludes Mr Schweder. "They seek experiences rooted in meaning, authenticity and nature". He says an emerging middle class is also giving rise to more affordable options, changing the perception that retreats are only for the well-to-do.

So what's next on the wellness front? Meditation studios are all the rage now (book your cushion) and the app Head Space has been downloaded several million times. Wellness communities are replacing retirement homes while wellness social clubs are the next big thing. Alcohol-free bars are also on the rise. A good night out these days is meeting up with friends for a meditation class or a vegan meal. As the saying goes, health is truly wealth.