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Destination: Wellness



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Clockwise from top left: Pacific views at the Esalen Institute, reflexology path at La Costa Resort and Spa, yoga and pool at Rancho La Puerta. [More Photos »](#)

By JESSE MCKINLEY

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SO I'm sitting in a hotel in upstate New York with my feet in a bucket of warm water charged with electricity when it suddenly hits me that maybe "getting well" wasn't going to be as much fun as I thought it was going to be.

The procedure I was receiving was an "ionic detox foot bath," one of dozens of allegedly medicinal services offered during a Health and Wellness Weekend held in November at [the Edge Hotel](#), a woodsy establishment in Lyons Falls, N.Y. In this case, the bath involved placing my feet in a small bucket of salt water charged with a small current for half an hour — a process that was meant to draw out the "yucky stuff" in my body by osmosis according to its practitioner, a frizzy-haired former chain smoker named Brenda, who assured me the bath was perfectly safe.

"But," she added with a laugh, "I don't know anything about ampage."

Oh boy. At first glance, this mission had seemed like a breeze: a search for "wellness" — that seemingly unimpeachable state that has become as common a come-on in travel circles as "eco-friendly." There are wellness retreats, wellness diets, wellness beauty treatments, wellness classes, wellness resorts, wellness hotels, wellness weekends and, of course, wellness experts.

“Wellness is this feeling of confidence, this feeling of vitality, this feeling of “You got this,” said Dr. Jim Nicolai, the medical director of the Andrew Weil integrative wellness program at Miraval Resort and Spa, in Tucson, Ariz. “Wellness is a verb just as much as an adjective.”

And, often, a very lucrative verb, dressing up everything from alternative medicines to anti-aging products. A week at Miraval, for example, can set you back \$475 a night. And it’s not just for scenic spots either: the MGM Grand in Las Vegas has added special wellness rooms and suites; Canyon Ranch’s SpaClub in Vegas also employs “wellness professionals.” In October, the InterContinental Hotels Group, which owns Holiday Inn, announced plans for its Even Hotels — with an “intrinsic focus on wellness in terms of food, work, exercise and rest” — at dozens of locations

across the country. So-called wellness tourism is estimated to be a \$106 billion chunk of the trillion-dollar worldwide “wellness cluster,” a market that includes travel as well as things like medical tourism, nutrition and fitness, according to a 2010 study prepared for the [Global Spa and Wellness Summit](#) by SRI International, an independent, nonprofit research firm.

But what exactly is wellness? I thought I’d find out. And so, saddled with a sore Achilles’ tendon, an ever-present threat of heartburn and all manner of life stressors, I embarked on a cross-country search. I was left, on various occasions, body-weary, sleep-deprived and incredibly waterlogged. Along the way I meditated and hyperventilated, and was plyometric-ed, watsu-ed and ceremonially “crowned.” I hiked and ran, floated and swam. I had my chakras read — my aura looks like a giant pistachio — and ate more quinoa than I can remember. And at the Esalen Institute, perched on the California coast and seemingly on the edge of the world, I got naked with a bunch of strangers and watched the sunset.

ACCORDING to SRI, the wellness movement is “a proactive and holistic approach” meant to address “the root causes of our personal and societal ills.” The term wellness, though, has old roots and myriad modern meanings. Dr. Halbert Dunn, author of the 1961 book “High-Level Wellness,” described it as something that included self-knowledge, creative expression and good health. Since then, that definition has evolved to the broader one we have today, which includes sleek, strictly regimented operations like [the Ranch at Live Oak](#), a \$5,600-a-week “endurance, wellness and nutrition program” in Malibu, Calif.

But there are still places where you can go to experience something more along the lines of what Dr. Dunn was talking about. Though [Esalen](#) does not drape itself in wellness terminology, the 50-year-old institute is still advertising its goal of “pioneering deep change in self and society,” and thus seemed like a pretty good place to explore the roots of what wellness might be. For me, Esalen long had a reputation as a mystical hideaway on the California coast, but unexpected guests have not traditionally simply dropped in. Most are there to attend one of the institute’s hundreds of workshops, which can range from tantric sex to Gestalt theory. (Not at the same time, of course.)

Over the years, Esalen started allowing for so-called “personal retreats,” which you can book after donating at least \$50 to the Institute. I did exactly that, and booked a \$650-a-night “point house” in mid-November.

Mind you, just getting to Esalen had involved flying across the country and then driving three hours south from San Francisco, a long day that had left me with an empty belly and soft brain.

But when I finally arrived, my first impression was simple: wow.

Situated on a nugget of land thrust into the Pacific, Esalen has commanding views of the California coastline, with its cliffs tapering into the ocean, and a campus that is both rustic and seemingly in harmony with Mother Nature. Vines creep along cobwebbed and rust-flecked fences that line the edge of a central glade where groups do HoopYogini, which combines yoga with a hula hoop. Monarch butterflies and green hummingbirds flit about the institute’s central garden — organic, naturally — while a stream burbles down a canyon to the surf below. At one point I looked down during a walk and saw the words “Thank you” and “Love” in small stone and twigs arranged on the ground.

Well, I thought, that was easy. I feel better already.

But as Esalen's acolytes might say, the road to inner peace doesn't take place in one night, which was all I had. Nor is it always luxurious. While the point house was a treat, with a small cliffside deck, complete with an old bathtub, much of the lodging here is more rudimentary, with a variety of shared rooms for visiting seminar attendees and so-called "work-scholars," an often scruffy and idealistic crew who help staff the institute's kitchens and other parts of the institute between their studies. Meals are buffet-style in a communal dining room hung with guitars (and, surprisingly, often populated by quite a few people surfing the Web). There were healthy-looking people of all ages everywhere having animated conversations, playing chess and even sharing a smoke outside, something that seemed both charmingly and shockingly old-school.

That said, there are only a few enlightenment options for those who aren't attending a workshop. I went to a relaxing early-morning guided meditation but avoided the Open Seat session, an Esalen tradition where a facilitator listens to whatever issues you want to discuss. The night I was there, attendees included two anxious-looking women and a patient-looking man. But I was not that man.

Speaking of manhood, though, I was a touch nervous about the details of the next Esalen tradition: the bath.

While the baths are not formally nude-only, I saw not a stitch of clothing on my dozen or so fellow bathers. Not that I was looking. Instead, I was enjoying other vistas; the baths, which are fed by sulfur-scented hot springs, sit just 100 feet or so above the Pacific, with an uninterrupted view beyond. And with massage tables both inside and out, you can get your back rubbed and taste the surf at the same time.

With the sun sliding beneath the horizon, questions of modesty or embarrassment quickly vanished. A couple of guys in the bath next to me chatted about sports, but most of my fellow bathers were just quiet. As was, surprisingly, my mind. I could hang out here — and let it all hang out here — for a while.

It was with just such a sense of serenity that I next traveled to [La Costa Resort and Spa](#) in Carlsbad, Calif., a sprawling hub for the well-to-do spiritual seeker. Touting itself as the No. 1 wellness spa in the nation, it boasts more than 600 rooms, 17 tennis courts, 6 swimming pools (including a booze-friendly one just for adults) and 2 golf courses.

It's also, notably, home to the [Chopra Center](#), a polished, commercial outlet that sells everything from mala beads (starting at \$5.50) to weeklong teacher training courses that can run more than \$12,000. The event and product catalog is more than 70 pages, and includes a range of products specifically geared for your "dosha," which it defines as your "mind-body type." (There is a quiz, no kidding, to help you figure it out and shop accordingly.)

The center is also where Deepak Chopra — a well-regarded mind-body expert and author — has recently initiated his concept for "workplace well-being," a group wellness program aimed at corporate customers that purports to decrease absenteeism, increase productivity and promote greater vitality and mental health. Prices start at \$3,995 for a 90-minute lecture by one of the center's speakers — but not Mr. Chopra — for up to 40 people. A full-day session for such a group starts at \$20,000 for stress management tips and group meditation (including ayurvedic lunch).

"The path to wellness begins here," the center's press material says.

For its part, La Costa — which recently underwent a \$50 million renovation — calls itself "California's original destination for mind, body and sport," a definition that can result in some odd juxtapositions. The night I arrived, there was a yoga teacher training class going on at the same time as a poolside party for the Del Mar Cigar Club.

Outside, in a Mediterranean-style courtyard, a Ferrari was parked with a small sign on the windshield: "This vehicle is for sale."

La Costa is handsome, dotted with exotic flowers, fountains and a spacious spa offering all manner of treatments and other indulgences. But trying to be all things to all people comes with a certain risk, namely the impression that certain "wellness"-related flourishes are little more than window-dressing. For dinner, for example, at the resort's Blue Fire Grill I chose something called From the Fields, which was described as an "ayurvedic inspired vegan dish of the best local produce and grains." What it turned out to be, however, was an over-roasted acorn squash, stuffed with a bland fist of quinoa and

carrots. It made me long for the simple grub at Esalen.

The squash was still weighing me down the next morning when I decided to try a plyometric power class. Fitness is a big deal for many at La Costa — you can't toss a mala bead without hitting a jogger — and when I arrived at the fully stocked gym, 10 minutes late, the three other older men in the class were already sweating. One guy dropped out after 20 minutes, and I was soon huffing so badly that I was unable to finish a section of bear crawls. The sequence involving sprints, squats and thrusts, meanwhile, made me consider calling 911. I do seem to remember music — Billy Idol, maybe, though I also vividly recall Cher — and finally, thankfully, some stretching. On the floor. The sweet, kind floor.

When I stumbled out, I still didn't exactly know why they called that plyometrics. But let's be clear: I did not feel well.

MY final stop was [Rancho La Puerta](#), a venerable wellness resort just south of the border, in Tecate, Mexico. Founded in the 1940s by Edmond Szekely, a Romanian philosopher who ardently believed in the power of fitness and who, according to reports at the time, apparently chose the area because it was on the same latitude as Galilee. (“Romanian Professor Finds Cult,” read a headline in a 1949 edition of *The San Diego Union*.)

Nowadays, guests are still strongly encouraged to take morning hikes — often leaving before dawn. There is also a hefty roster of bodywork options for your tired calves and backs, one of which was something called watsu, which is basically aquatic shiatsu, a process that its practitioners say replicates the feeling we all have in womb.

“For most people, we came into the world perfect, loved, no disease, no pain,” said Dave Towe, my watsu instructor, a former executive with a physique like a giant G.I. Joe doll. “And, at the end of a watsu treatment, clients immediately will say, ‘Oh my god, I haven't felt that way in years.’”

Considering that I could barely walk after my run-in with plyometrics, I was willing to try anything. Still, as I gently eased my way into the pool — heated to a skin-friendly 96 degrees — I felt just a touch silly at the prospect of being swooshed around by a man who looked as if he could bench-press a house. And yet that quickly dissipated as Mr. Towe massaged my muscles in what approximates a weightless environment. Despite what Mr. Towe said, I felt more like a fish than an embryo, something that felt weirder when I later ate unadorned tuna for lunch. (The food here was relentlessly healthy, though alcohol is available only on special nights.)

Most visitors to the Rancho come for a week to take in an array of almost nonstop classes and activities, as well as its lovely small cottages, landscaped gardens and ample statuary of the female form. I, again, had only about 24 hours to peruse the offerings, and was almost instantly — perversely — stressed out: Would I go to a life coaching class, a “ranch Spanish” course or something called sound healing, which involves lying on the ground and listening to the ghostly echoes caused by rubbing crystal bowls?

Still moving slowly, though, I managed to miss them all the afternoon I arrived. I was wandering toward the Rancho's labyrinth — an inlaid stone maze under a bower of trees — when I was approached by Briggitte McReynolds, who asked me — unprovoked — whether I wanted to “get crowned.”

Was it a euphemism for a mind-altering substance? No. Instead, Ms. McReynolds had been running a workshop, for three days, on making ceremonial crowns out of paper decorated with all manner of feathers, baubles, fake flowers and butterflies. Would I, she asked, “energize” one of the crowns in a ceremony?

Well, sure. Soon enough I was standing in a circle, holding a crown and surrounded by other members of a workshop I had not attended. They were an eclectic bunch that included a stressed-out mother of a Cornell student; a grandmother from Houston who had made crowns for all her grandchildren; and a gay male couple from San Diego.

Ms. McReynolds, holding a bunch of sage and a rattle, explained the process: each person would talk about why they made the crown, walk the labyrinth, and then place it on their heads, to “put the batteries in,” and take their place as a “leader in their life, not a lingerer,”

with a connection to the “divine male, and divine female.”

I rolled my eyes. But then, Ms. McReynolds — sporting red henna hair and purple toenails — said something that knocked me off my high horse.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “We’re just making this up.”

And then, when people began to talk about why they made their crowns and what they symbolized — finding their voice, finding wisdom, for their grandchildren — it was hard not to be touched. And after I walked the labyrinth (O.K., limped the labyrinth) and was crowned, I walked back to my room feeling surprisingly good.

Maybe that was it. Maybe wellness — like a crowning ceremony — was just what you made it: a catchall of anything and everything aimed at making you happy, or healthy, watsu-ed or whatever. And just like walking a labyrinth with a paper crown, it might not lead anywhere in the end. But it feels good while you’re doing it.

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