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COVER STORY

RESURGENT RETREATS

Wellness getaways have made a robust comeback since the early pandemic shutdown, as people look to connect with others – and disconnect from the daily stresses of the Covid era.

BY CHRISTINA JELSKI

A yoga space at Xinalani, an ecoresort and yoga retreat in Mexico's Puerto Vallarta.



TW ILLUSTRATION BY JENNI MARTINS

As the pandemic sent people into lockdown last March, wellness travel specialist Dawn Oliver was discouraged as she watched her retreat business swiftly come to a halt.

“Obviously, all the retreats I had planned were canceled, postponed or just came to a complete stop,” said Oliver, founder of the luxury travel company Well Xplored.

By summer, however, business began trickling back, with Well Xplored gaining about 100 new clients through the second half of the year. Wellness practitioners and retreat leaders also began reaching out, and by fall, Oliver had sold out three yoga retreats to St. Barts. In December, she had five more sold-out wellness retreats, including a 50-person retreat in the Dominican Republic, on the books.

“There are lots of people in the world right now, maybe living by themselves, who have been home for so long that they’re just starving for connection,” said Oliver. “Sure, they can jump on a Zoom call to try and feel connected, but that’s very limited. People are looking for an intimate retreat experience, where they can not only have connections with one another but also

that one-on-one connection with a teacher.”

According to Oliver, demand for small-group, invite-only wellness retreats has been robust, though the majority of her business is now being planned within a very tight booking window.

While the recent 50-person retreat in the D.R. was something of an outlier, most of Oliver’s trips have hovered in the eight-to-13-person range. Other retreat destinations that have proven popular among her clientele include the Caribbean, Mexico and Belize as well as closer-to-home domestic options like Florida and Austin, Texas.

Many of the retreat leaders she works with have also required pretravel Covid-19 testing, regardless of local or national testing mandates.

“For a recent retreat in Florida, the leader did require a negative Covid-19 test,” said Oliver. “It wasn’t some-

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1) An aerial shot of Puerto Vallarta, which is home to more than 150 spas and wellness venues. The tourism board there has launched a marketing campaign that highlights those offerings. 2) Xinalani in Puerto Vallarta provides amenities like a temazcal, or sweat lodge. 3) Xinalani also offers beach casita accommodations.

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thing that was required for travel into Florida, but everybody was happy to do it. It really allowed them to create their own sacred space and feel safe.”

With both physical and mental wellness top of mind for many throughout the Covid-19 crisis, hotels and resorts are also looking to tap into more health-conscious travel demand.

In mid-January, Rosewood Hotels & Resorts, for example, unveiled its Journey to Resilience program, billed as a “wellness retreat concept designed to enhance one’s ability to recover from, or adapt easily to, change.” Rolled out across 14 Rosewood properties globally, each multiday program features a unique lineup of fitness, nutrition and other well-being therapies, ranging from forest bathing at the Rosewood Castiglion del Bosco in Tuscany to a CBD therapy massage at the Rosewood Miramar Beach in California.

Likewise, Mexico’s Grand Velas Riviera Nayarit all-

inclusive resort partnered with Ana Paula Dominguez, director of the Mexican Institute of Yoga, to launch a “wellness getaway” promotion. Introduced on Jan. 1, the customizable, retreat-style offering is complimentary when seven or more suites are booked together and features programming focused on mindful eating, yoga, massage and more.

The Grand Velas Riviera Nayarit wellness experience is targeted toward families, small corporate groups or groups of friends who have formed a “quaranteam.”

Mexico, in fact, has emerged as something of a hot spot for wellness-seekers amid the pandemic, with Well Xplored’s Oliver citing solid demand for destinations like Tulum and Todos Santos.

“Tulum has always been popular for wellness and yoga, and I don’t think they’ve slowed down one bit these days,” said Oliver.

Meanwhile, Puerto Vallarta is similarly looking to draw pandemic-era wellness travelers. Its tourism board recently launched a campaign, under the tagline “Re-vive,” designed in part to highlight the area’s many well-

ness- and nature-centric offerings.

“We’ve been working hard to diversify our market and find new audiences,” said Luis Villasenor, director general for Puerto Vallarta Tourism. “We’re really focused on reducing the age of our [average guest] from those that are 60 and above by showcasing the wellness segment and developing more products that really give people a chance to disconnect and get into contact with nature.”

Puerto Vallarta is home to more than 150 spas and wellness venues, including El Grullo Naturista, a boutique hotel and naturopathic wellness center that bills itself as “the ultimate health and yoga retreat.”

The beachfront property recently unveiled a four-day “full detox” program for \$6,000 per person, which comes inclusive of a stay in a private luxury cabin, all food and drink and a variety of treatments. (El Grullo’s locally inspired treatment menu includes hot onion compresses, steam baths and stinging nettle therapy, the last of which involves applying the plant to skin to reduce inflammation.)

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1) The pool at the Ranch Malibu in California. The resort has seen a surge in demand since reopening last July. 2) A Well Xplored small-group retreat at the Kinkara ecoresort and wellness center in Costa Rica. 3) A group of retreat guests at the Ranch Malibu gather for a plant-based meal.

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“Since the onset of Covid-19, visitors are seeking more detox-focused programs and attempting to live a healthier lifestyle,” said Saskia Claudine Geul, an associate and detox specialist at El Grullo Naturista.

Another standout within Puerto Vallarta’s wellness sector is ecoresort and yoga retreat Xinalani, which offers amenities like beach casita accommodations and a sustainable restaurant as well as a spa and a temazcal (sweat lodge).

In response to the pandemic, Xinalani tweaked an existing “solo traveler package,” offering guests an all-inclusive, customizable program of daily yoga classes, meditation, healthy meals, massages and excursions starting at \$975 per person for five nights.

According to Jean-Baptiste Belledent, Xinalani co-founder and manager, interest in solo wellness retreats has been fueled in part by a rise in remote work and a “growing digital nomad trend.”

“There’s a growing frustration, especially with millennials, who feel stuck at home,” said Belledent. “We now cater to a younger crowd, [and we’ve also seen] a relative increase in the proportion of men, too, as our [prepandemic] business was mostly women. We’re on a slow recovery curve.”

Alongside the wellness boom unfolding in Mexico, stateside properties specializing in retreat programs are also doing relatively brisk business.

The Ranch Malibu, a luxury wellness retreat resort in California, has seen demand surge since resuming operations last July, with Alex Glasscock, the resort’s co-founder and CEO, reporting that the Ranch’s booking pace is “now a little above normal.”

“We were having people saying, ‘Gosh, we really want to come with a couple of people, but we’re just not ready to be around a larger group,’” said Glasscock. “So, we’ve tailored a program called the Ranch Private, where up to four people can come for a week and have their own hiking guide, their own fitness instructor, their own yoga instructor and their own dining area.”

The Ranch Private offering has proven popular, with the Ranch able to accommodate up to three Private groups simultaneously while still continuing to serve a number of general program guests.

Programs at the Ranch are designed to be intensive, with activities tailored to each individual’s fitness level. Meals are plant-based and promise to be nutritionally dense, while scheduled activities can range from mountain hiking and low-impact strength training to restorative yoga and massage.

General program rates at the Ranch start at \$8,200 per person for a weeklong retreat, with the Ranch Private starting at \$11,000 per person for a one-week stay.

“I think that with the pandemic, everybody’s daily routines have been disrupted,” said Glasscock. “Certainly, being sequestered in your home adds stress, and maybe your food habits have slipped or you’re not exercising as much. We get a lot of gratitude from our guests at the end of the program, because they’re just so thankful that they could clear their heads, get out and be active in a really safe environment.”