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The Link Between Wellness and Sustainability

February 2016

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Wellness and sustainability have very different definitions, but are often tied together in hospitality industry literature. In a foundational survey on wellness and its definition, conducted by Canyon Ranch, respondents most frequently associated the words hope, joy, and energy with wellness. These are words that are often used to describe travel and vacation experiences, especially vacations taken at resort properties. The full range of body, mind and spirit-enhancing activities constitute various dimensions of wellness. For example, one of the most popular wellness activities noted in a 2011 Values Study of Baby Boomers was simply “laughing with friends”.

Sustainability, however, has quite different roots from wellness. It most often refers to the attributes of an activity or process or business which are either renewable, or are relatively low consumers of resources (land, labor, materials, capital). The academic subject of sustainability is typically described in relation to three legs of a stool, which represent the impact of the activity in question on the economic, environmental and cultural systems in which it operates. On the surface, there does not seem to be a strong link between these two ideas: joy, hope and energy on one side and consuming fewer resources on the other.

However, the fundamental connection between wellness and sustainability is quite strong and was articulated to me by Kevin Kelly, CEO of Two Bunch Palms, an award-winning desert mineral springs resort located near Palm Springs, California. He explained that one can't be concerned about their own wellness without being concerned about planetary wellness. That is, we consider wellness to be an attribute much like vitality that many of us strive for, as individuals. The category of wellness travel, therefore, would consist of travel activities focused on gaining, (or regaining) vitality in the travelers' lives, whether those activities surround rest, intimacy, service work, fitness or cultural stimulation.

Alternately, we consider sustainability to consist of vitality in a group, community, or even global setting. If our surroundings or community lack vitality, it will become more of a struggle to maintain vitality as individuals within those surroundings. How healthy can an individual be if they live in a city where the air quality index is often rated as “unhealthy”, or “unhealthy for susceptible populations.”

Organizational Recognition

As consumer interest in “wellness” has been growing rapidly, for a variety of reasons that have been described elsewhere, many traditional spa and fitness providers have adopted the word into their offerings. For instance Spafinder, a strong player in the day spa and destination spa world, recently added “Wellness 360” to its name. Some hotels and condominium residences have simply changed the signage outside the gym from “Fitness Center” to “Wellness Center.” At the recent International Luxury Hotel Association's (ILHA) Luxury and Wellness Expo, several spa and fitness experts appeared to “stake a claim” to wellness in addition to their home area of expertise: the spa. I would suggest that wellness is a much wider field.

If resort hotels had a Director of Wellness position, it would include responsibility for not just the spa and fitness center, but for recreation, concierge, local and regional excursions with guided as well as self-guided tours, educational and cultural programming including exchange opportunities, such as sampling local cuisine with a local chef, etc. The concierge staff would be trained to appropriately suggest activities or on-site locations where individuals can find a quiet space, couples can have private time together, and larger parties or multi-generational groups can find activities that engage everyone and are prone to result in memories that can be shared for years to come.

Ferry to Modern Art Museum, Hobart Australia



Stitching Together the Trends

At the same Luxury Hotel industry conference, in addition to the shift from spa and fitness to wellness, a parallel transition was presented by owners and operators of luxury properties. They communicated the continuation of the shift that we have seen in both branded resort properties and independent luxury lifestyle hotels. This shift is toward lower density buildings that have smaller footprints on their sites, constructed of an increasing amount of natural and/or recycled materials of local origin, combined with furnishings and finishes that are generally lighter in mass and more soothing to the eye.

To satisfy guests' increasing desires for experiences that contribute to their vitality, innovative programming has been implemented in almost every aspect of the resort's operations. Instead of offering a yoga class in a fitness room, participants kayak to a mid-lake yoga platform. Instead of posting information about the hotel's involvement with the local community, some hotels add a voluntary surcharge to the guest invoice, assuming the guests want to participate in the effort. Some resorts even go further to offer a volun-tourism excursion in which guests can donate their time and energy to local causes as well. Instead of just asking guests to conserve water by re-using linens, incentives of free cocktails or loyalty program points have been added to further incent guests to forgo traditional housekeeping functions. Many hotels have also publicized their choice of non-toxic cleaning solvents to make guests feel more comfortable in the guestroom environment.

In summary, the themes of sustainability, wellness and experiential travel have become closely intertwined as they are complementary aspects to increasingly demanded guest preferences. It appears that from the perspective of the hotel guest, what the leisure resort offers has moved well along the spectrum from an "escape for indulgence" to an "escape for vitality". Hotel and resort management, consequently, must also transition their mission from one of spoiling guests with extravagance to one of providing a soothing and perhaps exotic canvas for guests via the physical environment, along with all of the necessary tools and programs with which guests can create their own desired experiences.

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Andrew Cohan manages the Miami-based operations for leading global hospitality consulting and advisory firm Horwath HTL. Andrew is a seasoned hospitality professional with extensive real estate, marketing and account management skills in North America and Latin America. He is a designated Member of the Appraisal Institute (MAI), and holds a Florida Certified General Appraisal license. He is also a Florida licensed Real Estate Broker Associate. Andrew has particularly strong experience with health and wellness resort properties, an expertise that is high in demand; He has performed numerous feasibility studies for planned resorts in the Caribbean and Central America and has consulted for leading management companies such as Canyon Ranch, Six Senses, Montage, Solage and Bulgari.

His background includes appraisals of iconic Miami Beach hotels, some valued at more than US \$1 billion. Andrew's mastery in both English and Spanish is important and beneficial as a Miami-based consultant.

Prior to joining Horwath, he served for nine years with hospitality consultancy HVS where he began his hospitality advisory career. Previously, Cohan rose through the ranks at AT&T, serving in roles as Marketing Manager in South America and Managing Director in the Caribbean. His last assignment at AT&T was Wholesale Director – Americas, managing a team of ten sales professionals located in four countries and a \$30 million revenue quota, providing services to major telecom carriers, such as Telmex and Telefonica.



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