

# WELLNESS SABBATICALS – THE NEW DETOX RETREAT

Stressed-out high flyers blending work and wellness is the latest travel trend

📷 JUDY CHAPMAN

ELON MUSK SAYS vacations can kill you. He’s obviously in the minority, since it’s well-proven that taking time away from work to de-stress and recalibrate helps you to cope with the pressures of a high-flying career.

We’re all familiar with the detox or wellness retreat – where you spend a weekend or even a week or two in lush, tranquil surroundings, tended to by health and lifestyle practitioners who help you to lose weight, treat ailments and adopt healthier habits. Crucial to the success of such retreats is to completely switch off from work to fully concentrate on your wellbeing.

But at this year’s Global Wellness Summit (GWS) held in Singapore, its CEO Susie Ellis outlined the emergence of several wellness trends – chief of which is The Wellness Sabbatical®, where one can embark on a longer-term wellness programme while still staying connected to one’s job.

The GWS even saw fit to trademark the term, “to establish its importance as an emerging concept within the wellness tourism space,” says Ms Ellis. And also, to highlight that doing a sabbatical isn’t new, but doing it in a wellness setting can positively change your lifestyle for the long term.

## THE BENEFITS OF A SABBATICAL

San Francisco based Dennis (DJ) DiDonna was a typical startup entrepreneur in the US, when career burnout led him to take a five month sabbatical in 2017, during which he walked the Camino De Santiago in



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Spain and did a six-week pilgrimage through Japan.

“It transformed my life,” says Mr DiDonna, who has since tied up with a university professor to launch The Sabbatical Project, to research the effects of sabbaticals and how they should be incorporated into the work culture in general.

“I want people to take regular sabbaticals, perhaps every seven years or so,” he says.

A growing number of retreats in the region are already structuring long-stay programs for the rising number of guests who want to access to wellness, yet still be able to work remotely. Unlike a traditional sabbatical where one typically unplugs and completely disconnects, the wellness



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sabbatical embraces work and wellness.

“Think three weeks or longer, focusing on your health and wellness, enough time to make lasting lifestyle changes and with one very important differentiation,” says Ms Ellis. “You will want to take along your iPhone or laptop to stay connected with your work – in fact, you’re welcome to.” That’s because for workaholics, not being able to access wifi is often more stressful than being connected.

## DIFFERENT FROM A QUICK RETREAT

How a wellness sabbatical differs from a detox weekend is that it’s not an extended retreat but is structured to support people during their transition.

For example, this month, Kamalaya retreat in Thailand launches its ‘Wellbeing Sabbatical’ that requires a minimum stay of 21 days. Besides a wellness programme, there are mentoring workshops as well as additional weekly follow-up consultations to monitor and help guests with their progress.

“Over the last two years, we have seen a remarkable increase of guests staying a month or even longer, who need a place where they can combine wellness and personal growth while still being connected to their work,” says Kamalaya’s co-founder, Karina Stewart.

Last month, Jurgen Pflugfelder, CEO



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of a real estate corporation in Germany, checked into Kamalaya Thailand for a long-stay. He had recently made his son an associate and decided to finally take “the first long vacation in my life,” he says. “While I am actively involved in the business, I needed a break to get my energy back.”

He jumped right into all of the holistic activities, while continuing to work in the evenings. “I discovered QiGong, which I had never done before, and am an absolute fan. I found pranayama breathing and yoga incredible and will definitely continue all of these disciplines when I return home. I must say that I can get very used to the idea of taking longer breaks like this.”

## THE DANGERS OF OVERWORK

With great WiFi connection and the ease of working remotely, the digital nomad trend is accelerating. Yet for many, the thought of taking off a month or longer off work seems unrealistic and financially impossible. That said, the health risks associated with working long hours can no longer be ignored.

Singaporeans are listed as some of the hardest working people in the world. In both Asia and the US, people are not even taking their annual leave. (The US just hit a record, leaving 768 million days on the table last year).

Yet taking time off has been shown to increase productivity and creativity, as well as lowering the risk of heart disease. According to the Framingham Heart Study, people who take time off live longer, and are happier personally as well as with their work.

“The age-old model of working like mad and taking a week or two of vacation a year just isn’t working for a lot of people anymore,” says Ms Ellis.



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(1) A hydrotherapy session at SHA Wellness Clinic. (2) Tranquility at Kamalaya. (3) Spa therapy at SHA Wellness Clinic. (4) Sunset yoga at Absolute Sanctuary. (5) Susie Ellis, CEO of Global Wellness Summit.



RISING DEMAND

Claire Bostock from ‘Healing Holidays’, a new Singapore-based wellness retreat travel company, confirms they are noticing more people asking for longer stays in wellness destinations, most of whom are affluent, and going through a transition in their personal and work life.

She says these guests are seeking not just a yoga or detox retreat, but a complete life overhaul. “Whether one is going through a career change, divorce or recovering from a crisis, it’s not about scheduled activities or following a set regime, but more about giving one the space and support to reflect and help them through their transition,” she says.

One of the resorts she works with is Absolute Sanctuary in Thailand, which offers a 30 to 60 day ‘Long-stay program’. Founder Benjaporn Karoonkornsakul says they launched this after noticing an increasing number of people that wanted to get away for longer periods of time to really transform their health and lifestyle for the longer term.

He explains, “It takes 21 days to form a new habit, and we felt a 30 or 60-day structured program would better ensure that guests will not only be able to transform their health but also to learn new habits that will become second nature by the time they depart.”



(1) Amatara Resort ocean pool villa. (2) Dennis ‘DJ’ DiDonna (3) A yoga session at VANA.

Says Ms Bostock, “The guests who check in for these are typically high-flyers, stressed-out senior executives who have come to a crossroads in their lives where they know they can no longer continue with their way of life and the state of their health.”

HOW IT WORKS

Hong Kong-based fashion designer Tiffany Jane Bisley took her first sabbatical at Absolute Sanctuary in Thailand, after years of not taking a break, or even a full weekend. “I had been to Absolute Sanctuary three times before for their burn- out and detox programs, so this was an easy choice for me. I took 30 days to detox, de-stress and take a proper break from work and everyday life.”

GWS’s Ms Ellis herself experienced her first sabbatical earlier this year at Vana, a luxury ashram-style retreat in India.

“It was actually the first time I was able to stay away for an extended period of time. Yet if I wasn’t able to take my work with me, I wouldn’t have been able to do the retreat.”



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She says that this is exactly what is beginning to change in this arena. “Bringing work is what makes a sabbatical realistically possible.’ Even so, she says she only worked for around two hours a day.

“I believe we need to be away from work to make lasting changes. I am off the coffee and now turn off the computer earlier in the evenings and no longer turn it on the first thing in the morning. I sleep so much better now. I’ve gone from working 12 hours a day to eight and being just as productive.”

THE WAY FORWARD

Mr DiDonna points out research suggesting that one needs to disconnect regularly from one’s old work and work identity to reap the benefits of perspective and personal change.

“Our experience has shown that 80 per cent of people who were offered a sabbatical policy by their employer returned to the same employer after taking the leave,” he says. “These employees return feeling more loyal to their employer for offering such a transformative benefit.”

Ms Bisley adds that while she brought all her work with her on her sabbatical, she didn’t touch any of it other than a few urgent tasks. “I used to think that the more hours you put into your own business, the more money you would make. However, I have adopted a much healthier approach to life and work.” She now pencils in more me-time for gym, yoga and meditation “All of this has definitely benefited my health, my mindset and even my business.”

For now, Ms Ellis believes The Wellness Sabbatical trend speaks to what future-forecasters LSN Global sees as a new breed of high-net-worth individuals: a tribe they call ‘Untethered Luxurians’ with a radically new mindset centered on freedom, discovery, flexibility, footloose living and self-fulfillment.

More affordable options will likely rise in the not too distant future (think retreats designed for the co-working crowd), but the big question is whether companies will start to send their top executives (who are making them the big bucks) on a wellness sabbatical where they can still work remotely while eating healthy food, losing weight and learning skills they can bring back home.

Maybe the likes of Elon Musk might want to give it some thought.

SABBATICAL RETREATS



ABSOLUTE SANCTUARY

*Koh Samui, Thailand*

Check in for a 30 to 60 day ‘Lifestyle Change Program’ that includes accommodation, healthy meals, treatments, and counselling. The three-phase programme starts with a ‘cleanse’ of body toxins, followed by a ‘transformation’ to make you stronger through mind and body sessions such as yoga, stress management and lifestyle coaching. The last phase is all about celebrating the new you and features more pampering with symbolic releasing therapies and a monk blessing session.



AMATARA

*Phuket*

Regarded for their unique ‘Sleep Retreats’, ‘Stress and Burnout Recovery’ and ‘Family Wellness Program,’ what’s new at this luxury island, all-inclusive wellness resort is the ‘30-day Bespoke Wellness’ program. Tailored to people who need a 360-degree overhaul in their personal and professional life, it’s a holistic naturopathic-based retreat consisting of personally prescribed nutrition, supportive naturopathic remedies, treatments, yoga and activities. Programmes are customised to even handle complex and specific health issues. Another advantage is that it’s family-friendly so you can bring the kids.



SHA WELLNESS CLINIC

*Spain*

The 28-day ‘Life Reset’ at this high-end holistic medical retreat is not about relaxation but specifically designed for those seeking a lifestyle change. While you do follow an agenda: nutritional meals, yoga and fitness, treatments and therapies, you are encouraged to create new lifestyle habits that will last forever. The additional benefit is that Sha’s cutting edge medical support, will work for those who suffer more chronic health and medical issues.



ONEWORLD AYURVEDA

*Bali*

Before he founded Oneworld, Claude Chouinard was a burnt out professional who was advised by his staff to do a 14-day Ayurvedic Panchakarma. After two weeks he was so energised and inspired that he wanted “to bring this to the world” and Oneworld was created a few years later in 2017, offering 21 or 28 day programmes. Some have stayed for as long as 50 nights. When it comes to working during your Panchakarma, the doctors recommend minimal device time especially during the deep detox phase. Most people emerge from a Panchakarma completely transformed.



KAMALAYA

*Thailand*

This newly launched ‘21-day Wellbeing Sabbatical’ includes healthy meals, yoga, fitness and treatments. However, unlike other programs at Kamalaya that include at least two treatments a day, this will be a much less regimented retreat so guests have much more downtime for self-reflection, work and personal growth.



VANA

*India*

Considered one of the most transformational retreat destinations in the world right now, Vana offers a highly-regarded 21-night ‘Lifestyle Retreat’ for deep wellbeing and personal transformation. It’s a 360-degree holistic lifestyle program with attention paid to sleep, stress and any personal concerns. Guests have access to a full spectrum of supportive treatments and healing sessions. But this is no spa holiday. With limited wifi and a ban on all social media, Vana is a recommended destination for those serious about personal transformation.