

Tourists seek out wellness experiences

Chinese globetrotters increasingly are exploring travel options that include health and well-being

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As the serene northern Thai city of Chiang Mai stirs from its slumber and the first wisp of sunlight emblazons the famous Buddhist temple Wat Phra Singh, Lin Yi is ready to begin his early morning jog.

"The feeling you can get when you run through the temple at dawn is far beyond what you might experience at peak hours when all the tourist groups have arrived," said Lin, head of overseas business at Beijing-based Chinese travel information website Qyer. For quite a few years now, he has made running a part of his travel routine.

"As you run, you can see the daily lives of monks as they sweep the floor, make breakfast and prepare to chant. This is something you can only see at early morning," said Lin. "And you also feel refreshed from running, so a 30-minute jog will let me see a lot of interesting things."

Lin's inclination for a taste of wellness during travel is becoming increasingly common among Chinese globetrotters. Since 2013, China has continued to move up in the ranking for wellness tourism expenditures, and is now in the top three, after the United States and Germany.

It is also the growth leader by adding over 21 million inbound and domestic wellness trips from 2015 to 2017, according to the latest report published by the Global Wellness Institute (GWI) in October.

Seeking a sense of wellness is an inevitable stage as the way of traveling changes, said Lin. He said the focus of Chinese tourists has been changed from a "tick the box" approach of taking photos at must-see attractions, to experiencing local lifestyles, as it is now much easier for the up-and-coming middle class to travel abroad.

To cope with the rising demand, Qyer now offers a series of themed tourism packages, featuring hiking, cycling, skiing and yoga in popular destinations including Japan, Thailand, Canada, New Zealand and countries across Europe. And since the launch of such programs three years ago, clients' inquiries for well-

ness tourism have been growing 40 percent annually.

But Lin said the wellness tourism market in China is still in its infancy compared with more mature markets like Europe and the United States.

Globally, wellness tourism is now recognized as a significant and fast-growing tourism segment, according to GWI, reaching a market size of \$639.4 billion in 2017. With an annual growth rate of 6.5 percent, the sector is growing more than twice as fast as tourism generally.

The market has drawn attention from players both inside and outside the wider tourism sector.

The Hotel Jen Beijing, launched by Shangri-La Hotels and Resorts in May last year, is equipped with a 3,500-square-meter health club that offers group classes, cardio machine area, mixed martial arts area, and more.

Meanwhile, in 2019, luxury fitness club Equinox will launch its first hotel, in New York, with intentions of expanding. The aim is to integrate "the science of fitness" into travel.

Global trend

"As a segment of the tourism industry, wellness tourism benefits from a global trend of rising consumer awareness of, and interest in, health and wellness," said Ophelia Yeung, senior research fellow at GWI. "More people are also looking for experiential travel, and wellness is all about the experience."

While Europe and North America lead the number of wellness trips and expenditure, respectively, the GWI report shows that in both it is Asia that has made the most gains in the past five years.

Yeung attributes the rapid growth to the fast rise in sophistication of Asian travelers and their ability to pay for higher quality travel, as well as rising awareness toward improving health during holidays.

"Worsening environmental pollution and congestion in Asia make people look for sanctuaries, fresh air and nature during their holidays," Yeung said.

"For consumers from Western countries, Asia is the place for holistic treatments," said Brian King, associate dean and professor of the



Chinese tourists track through Avachinsky, a stratovolcano in Russia. An increasing number of Chinese tourists are including fitness programs in their tour itinerary. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY ASIA WEEKLY

School of Hotel and Tourism Management at Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU).

"Asia has a long established history of holistic therapies, some associated with religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Taoism, notably Ayurvedic treatments, yoga and Chinese medicine ... hence it may be considered a competitive advantage that Asian destinations can offer guests such experiences," said King. Ayurveda is a traditional system of medicine that derives from the Indian subcontinent.

In addition, Yeung said Asia has the advantage of a large and growing intra-regional market, and will benefit from increasing short-haul vacation trips within the region, especially when more consumers regard travel not as a luxury but an essential component of their life.

Yeung said it is important to promote wellness tourism because wellness travelers tend to spend more than the average tourist. And the economic benefits they bring can potentially mitigate the impacts of 'overtourism' suffered by many destinations, also smoothing out visitor seasonality.

"Wellness tourism brings visitors who are interested in experiencing authentic culture — more than visiting popular destinations for photo ops and shopping — and tends to increase human interaction, for example, with therapists, teachers, healers, guides and so on, which can create more opportunities for small businesses and employment," said Yeung.

The business value of wellness tourism products is also higher, as better services and a deeper understanding of a destination are required.

"The price of such products can be twice that of a regular travel package, because it is highly customized ... but (we can see that) our users are willing to pay more for these products and their special features," said Lin from Qyer.

GWI's Yeung said there is "some-

times a tendency to conflate wellness tourism with medical tourism, especially when destinations or governments use the term 'health tourism' to cover both sectors."

Unlike the latter, which primarily involves people who are seeking medical treatments and procedures, wellness tourism involves travelers who are primarily interested in wellness, "the pursuit of maintaining or enhancing one's personal well-being", on their trip.

Noting that there is a long history of connection between health and tourism, King from PolyU said the next phase of development will involve multiple collaborations between the two sectors, which can bring opportunities, but at the same time demand new skills and approaches.

"It is not just about avoiding surgery or medications. There is also a strong desire for an enhanced quality of life, personal fulfillment and happiness," said Karina Stewart, cofounder of Kamalaya, a resort on the tropical island of Koh Samui in southern Thailand. Kamalaya was opened in 2005, so Stewart is attuned to the rapid development of the wellness tourism industry over the last decade.

Holistic approach

In May, Kamalaya brought its multi-award-winning wellness treatments to European clients through its collaboration with the UK hotel Lime Wood in the English countryside of Hampshire.

"Mini retreats" include holistic therapies and treatment from both East and West alongside healthy cuisine, personal mentoring, a cooking class, early morning yoga, and meditative walks in the forest. Stewart said she already has plans to continue this collaboration next year and is open to extending it to elsewhere in the world.

As a resort owner, Stewart said the wellness experience should not just be about quick fixes, but how to make it sustainable — something

the guest can bring back home after their vacation. To do this, Kamalaya aims to give guests the knowledge and tools necessary to make life-enhancing choices that are viable for the long term.

For example, it encourages visitors to write down their experiences and think about whether any of the resort's activities can be incorporated into their daily routines.

"Our philosophy is that by supporting people to make small but permanent changes, they will feel inspired to continue making positive progress after they return home," said Stewart.

King at PolyU believes tourism "has a valuable role to play in 'positive psychology'."

"Travel experiences can take people from their daily concerns and provide optimism, challenge and refreshment. In Asia, holistic philosophies emanating from Confucianism, Buddhism and other traditions are a welcome balancing force to materialism," said King.

China aims to build a group of international wellness tourism destinations by 2020, as reported by Xinhua. Yonhap News reported in May that South Korea plans to promote its southern region as a cluster for wellness travel, with an investment of \$742,000 into developing tourism programs.

Cities and regional governments have important roles to play in promoting wellness tourism, said Yeung from GWI, noting that regulatory authorities are important for ensuring that wellness amenities and services meet international standards.

Destinations should also reflect "wellness" in a broader sense, not only within a resort property but in the public places and the overall environment.

Meanwhile, Lin from Qyer hopes to convey the idea of wellness tourism to more users on the company's platform, making them aware that integrating wellness elements into vacations can unlock a completely different travel experience.