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TRAVEL IDEAS

How Wellness Resorts Are Adjusting Their Protocols During the Pandemic



Claire Stern · October 20, 2020



Photos: Miraval; Graphic: W+G Creative

Remember the days when common travel concerns were limited to relatively benign headaches like time-zone changes, flight delays, and lost luggage? Barely, I assume, since for the better part of the year, the pandemic has grounded many jet-setters and introduced a flurry of additional travel-safety precautions to follow for both personal and public health. New must-ask questions before getting away now abound, and when the trip in question is to a wellness resort, a big what-if is whether the vacation would even be restorative at all, given pandemic-era realities.

The very goal of the curated experiences on offer at luxurious wellness resorts is to prioritize health and well-being, and those concerns are indeed of paramount importance, given recent reports of declined mental health during the pandemic. From workshops that provide emotional and spiritual healing to meditation sessions and movement classes, wellness retreats are tailor-made to help you relax during the most uncertain of times. And after looking into how a number of them have shifted specific offerings and added precautions to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission, that intention still rings true. The impact, though, is up for interpretation.

While these facilities are working to *reduce* risk, it does bear mentioning that no number of precautions will *remove* risk of COVID-19 transmission associated with traveling to a wellness resort during the pandemic. Depending on the level of risk you feel comfortable taking on, though, you can still in good conscience travel by complying with self-quarantine guidelines before arriving and after leaving, and by practicing social distancing while there. And if you do decide to take a restorative trip, here's what to expect from a number of highly rated wellness resorts.

Safety protocols at wellness resorts during the pandemic

Destination spas and retreats follow all health and safety guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), including enforcing social distancing, wearing cloth masks, and washing hands, but many go further in their efforts to fight the virus.

Below, check out how arrival policies, cleaning methods, and property programming may look different at wellness resorts during the time of COVID-19.

Arrival policy

Once upon a time, you could check into a hotel, drop your bags in your room, and be on your merry way—not so much in 2020. In addition to enforcing pre-arrival quarantines, temperature checks, and masking policies (many of which are mandated by law), a number of wellness resorts are operating at a reduced capacity of 25 percent. “Our priority is the safety and comfort of our guests,” says Simon Dewar, general manager of The Lake House on Canandaigua (starting at \$195 per night through winter), which opened this past August in the Finger Lakes of New York. “We have learned to smile with our eyes and over-communicate. Our [luggage attendants] and front-desk team have gloves and masks available as well as strategically positioned sanitizers. There are state-by-state guidelines that we all have to observe, but there is no charge for canceling through our booking system if you are restricted from travel.”

In terms of complying with these guidelines, different resorts have different protocols. Michael Bruno, founder of The Valley Rock Inn and Mountain Club (from \$795 per night per guest house), located an hour from New York City in Sloatsburg, says he asks guests, prior to their booking, if they’ve traveled recently. High-end luxury resort Miraval Berkshires Resort & Spa (starting at \$549 per night) recommends that guests traveling from non-exempt states fill out a travel form on Mass.gov and be able to offer proof of a negative COVID-19 test result taken no longer than 72 hours before arrival.

Cleaning and disinfecting

As part of Hyatt's Global Care & Cleanliness Commitment to create a safe environment for guests, Miraval Berkshires, along with every other Hyatt property, has hired a dedicated Hygiene & Wellbeing Leader to oversee new cleaning and disinfection procedures, including contactless solutions for housekeeping and check-in and frequent sanitization with hospital-grade disinfectants and electrostatic sprayers. (All guests and employees on the premises are also required to wear facial coverings.) Similarly, at the Lake House on Canandaigua, each room is cleaned and sanitized with an electrostatic sprayer, then sealed prior to guests' entry.

At Canyon Ranch Lenox, in Massachusetts, access to medical assistance is available in addition to improved cleaning guidelines: Physicians and health experts, including former U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Richard Carmona, MD, are available remotely 24/7, should any medical issue arise. In compliance with Massachusetts law, the resort now also requires a 14-day quarantine for guests arriving from out of state, unless a negative COVID-19 is administered prior to entering the state.

Programming

Just as the sanitary protocols at wellness resorts have evolved, so too has the programming. Located on the beachfront in Montauk, New York, Marram (starting at \$600 per night) offers morning meditation groups, self-guided nature walks, and, to help curb the spread of the virus, virtual yoga classes via Instagram Live that are also available to non-guests. Beyond programming, general manager Teach Mayer says Marram's layout and architecture is naturally conducive to adhering to COVID-19 safety. "All guest rooms have direct access to fresh air, our HVAC units do not share air between rooms, and common-area furniture has been rearranged to facilitate social distancing," he says, pointing out that the property's nightly fire pits are now also set up for socially distanced hangouts.

Other examples? [Santa Monica Proper Hotel](#) (starting at \$450 per night), positioned steps from the beach in Los Angeles, partnered with luxury spa [Ricari Studios](#) on an exclusive three-day, all-inclusive staycation retreat, the [Ricari Reset](#), where guests can enjoy one-on-one Pilates, yoga, and body-conditioning classes, hair-styling services, brow shaping, and spa treatments with a masked industry expert. The Lake House on Canandaigua updated its standard yoga classes to allow six feet of distance between participants, and still offers custom-designed bikes to ride around the grounds, and socially distanced hikes with scenic views of gorges and waterfalls. The spa at [Carillon Miami Wellness Resort](#) (starting at \$299) created an entire menu of [touchless wellness services](#) to cater to the new normal.

How the pandemic has affected bookings at wellness resorts

As travel restrictions began to loosen in certain regions of the northeast over the summer, certain facilities saw an increase in demand compared to the travel drought of the spring. “We are now happily experiencing an unanticipated extended season,” says Amy Cherry-Abitbol, CEO and founder of [Shou Sugi Ban House](#) (starting at \$975 per night), a spa retreat in Water Mill, New York. Cherry-Abitbol says peak season generally ends after Labor Day, when the weather cools and schools reopen, but “many locals and seasonal renters have decided to extend their stay in the Hamptons since they are able to continue to work or [attend school virtually](#).” Likewise, Dewar says the Lake House on Canandaigua’s 50 rooms currently being booked (out of 125 total rooms) have been operating at 98 percent occupancy, and guest houses at The Valley Rock Inn and Mountain Club have been fully booked every weekend since June.

While booking is up now, in the months ahead, hopeful travelers and wellness resorts alike would be wise to anticipate changes to safety guidelines in light of the pandemic. And if a second wave of the virus ultimately deems travel of any sort untenable, virtual wellness offerings might be the next best thing.

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