

PRESTIGE

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GRACE CHNG

MODEL OF POISE

HAUTE COUTURE SS24 UNPACKED |
RISE OF MEDICAL SPAS |
STARS OF WATCHES & WONDERS

DETOX WITH A SIDE OF BOTOX?

Wellness hotels and resorts have always been more about stress relief and sensory indulgence than scans and stem cells, but a growing number are transforming into medical wellness destinations, with science-backed therapies accompanying typical spa offerings.

Words: AARON DE SILVA



Blood therapy is available at the Soneva resorts in the Maldives.

Picture this: You're ensconced in a luxurious resort in a dreamy locale. As you step out of your private villa and saunter towards the spa, you're greeted not only by spa therapists, but also a team of medical professionals. They're there to welcome you on a multi-day programme that will address your physical, mental, emotional and spiritual wellness.

These days, taking a spa-cation is no longer about indulging in an endless series of massages, facials and body wraps interspersed with dips in the pool; it's about embarking on a total wellness journey. As more people seek out preventive treatments, and technological innovations make them more effective and accessible, medicine and wellness are coming together as never before. Enter the medical spa, or medi spa – what the Global Wellness Institute (GWI) defines as spas that operate under the full-time, on-site supervision of a licensed healthcare professional. Such

facilities provide comprehensive medical and/or wellness care in an environment that integrates spa services with traditional, alternative or cosmetic medical therapies and treatments.

As Beth McGroarty, GWI's vice-president of research, points out: "Many diagnostics and procedures that used to take place only at hospitals and medical clinics (for example, blood analysis, genetic testing, gut microbiome assessments and lymphatic drainage) are increasingly showing up on spa menus. Many consumers – especially wealthy consumers who can pay out of pocket – are turning to spas and wellness clinics for diagnostics aimed at early detection, for managing chronic conditions, and for other types of health and nutrition coaching."

A report by hospitality management school EHL identified medi spas as one of six major wellness trends for 2024. The market is worth US\$6.6 billion (about S\$9 billion),

with around 7,000 medi-spas worldwide. And that figure is set to rise. "Accessibility and advancements in technology are making treatments more available and affordable, leading to increased customer awareness and demand," says Marcel Butchey, professor in the spa management major at EHL Campus Passugg in Switzerland. "The desire for new and innovative wellness treatments, combined with higher consumer spending capabilities, propels the market forward."

In Asia, medi spas are often found within hotel and resort properties, which makes checking in to one more akin to going on a retreat with medical care than to calling on a medical clinic – no doubt contributing to their rise in popularity. "People want a luxurious [rather than an] overly clinical experience," explains Marife Bien, wellness director at Soneva Jani, a resort in the Maldives with seven island villas and 51 over-water pool villas.



A floatation device at Chiva-Som Hua Hin. Below: The Mövenpick BDMS Wellness Resort in Bangkok caters largely to business travellers.

EXPANDED CUSTOMER BASE

The years have seen not just advances in science and technology that level up the medical therapies and treatments available at medi spas, but also discernible shifts when it comes to its patrons. For one, they are getting younger – which can be attributed in part to a change in mindset.

At RAKxa Integrative Wellness, a health resort in Bangkok, Thailand, Wsinee Sukjaroenkraisri, its executive vice-president of business strategy, has noticed customers in their 30s adopting the preventive approach to health and wellness.

"They tend to be successful entrepreneurs of start-ups, who lead very busy and stressful lives, but understand that they need to take care of their health," she says. "[They're] very different from previous generations, who would consult a doctor only when they fell ill. [For the entrepreneurs], it's about how they stay fit and healthy, how they keep up their performance, so that they can live up to their full potential and enjoy life."

It's a similar story at Anantara Riverside Bangkok Resort. "We observe ... a transition from the traditional disease paradigm – focused on treatment post-illness – to a more proactive wellness paradigm," says Devi



Irianti, the resort's director of spa and wellness. "In this new paradigm, the emphasis lies in preventing illness and maintaining optimal health for as long as possible."

And while spa getaways used to be a predominantly female-centric activity, more men are jumping on the bandwagon. "While facial aesthetics and well-being services are

more popular with our female guests, our male guests are more interested in trying targeted solutions such as cryotherapy, acupuncture and personal training," offers Bien. RAKxa Integrative Wellness has a roughly 50 to 50 female-male guest ratio; for Anantara Riverside Bangkok Resort, it's 60 to 40. McGroarty believes that this interest stems in part from the extensive media



The idyllic setting of RAKxa Integrative Wellness Retreat south of Bangkok.

coverage of the longevity and performance quests of tech billionaires such as Twitter co-founder Jack Dorsey, Amazon founder Jeff Bezos and Brintree founder Bryan Johnson – the last is known to spend US\$2 million a year on his longevity regime.

SCIENCE AT THE SPA

At Chiva-Som Hua Hin in Thailand – one of Asia's most well-established holistic wellness centres – the Niranalada Medi-Spa offers popular medical aesthetic treatments such as the high-intensity focused ultrasound therapy, which aids skin tightening; the PicoSure laser treatment, which promotes skin rejuvenation; and CoolSculpting, a non-surgical option for body contouring. These align with the growing preference for minimally invasive beauty treatments. It also recently welcomed a new hyperbaric oxygen chamber: a pressurised environment in which guests can receive oxygen.

Chiva-Som's wellness director Chanyapak Suwankantha explains: "This innovative technology is known [to help bring about] anti-ageing effects and health

benefits, including improved oxygen delivery to tissues, enhanced wound healing, reduced inflammation and support for various medical conditions."

Meanwhile, RAKxa Integrative Wellness, the partnership with VitalLife Scientific Wellness Clinic, which is operated by the internationally renowned Bumrungrad International Hospital, offers more than 200 treatments that range from detoxification and weight management courses to those that focus on gut health and de-stressing. Guests can choose from preordained programmes or have one personalised; either way, the journey always begins with a full consultation – referred to as an "integrative diagnostic" process – that includes meeting with a medical doctor, a wellness advisor and a physiotherapist.

Anantara Riverside Bangkok Resort has similarly joined hands with healthcare practitioners, collaborating with Bangkok Dusit Medical Services (BDMS), the largest private healthcare group in Thailand, to present a world-class medical facility with a full suite of scientifically based wellness

packages. Each journey at the BDMS Wellness Clinic Retreat, located within the luxurious hotel itself, begins with a check-up that analyses everything from hormone levels to immune function, gut balance and food intolerances. "These comprehensive assessments empower individuals to understand their bodies on a deeper level, facilitating a personalised approach to healthy living," says Irianti.

Over at Soneva Soul, the wellness arm launched in 2021 by luxury resort chain Soneva, one can benefit from both ancient healing practices, such as traditional Chinese medicine and Ayurveda, as well as modern science and medicine. In January 2024, the centre introduced cryotherapy, which Bien says "enhances performance and recovery, reduces pain in the joints and muscles, and aids in the treatment of mood disorders".

Also on the table is stem cell therapy, regulated by the country's Food and Drug Administration (FDA). "By importing stem cells with prescriptions, we've enhanced our suite of tailor-made health and wellness offerings," Bien explains. Treatments include

intradermal injections for skin rejuvenation and hair loss, as well as stem cell IV infusions, which reduce inflammation, promote tissue regeneration and help build a stronger immune system.

MORE PLAYERS, MORE CHOICES

Across the region, medi-spa facilities are proliferating. In January 2024, for instance, the US\$400 million BDMS Connect Center opened in the heart of Bangkok. Comprising the Mövenpick BDMS Wellness Resort, the BDMS Wellness Clinic and the MICE Center, the sprawling campus is just a stone's throw from malls such as Central Embassy and Central Chidlom.

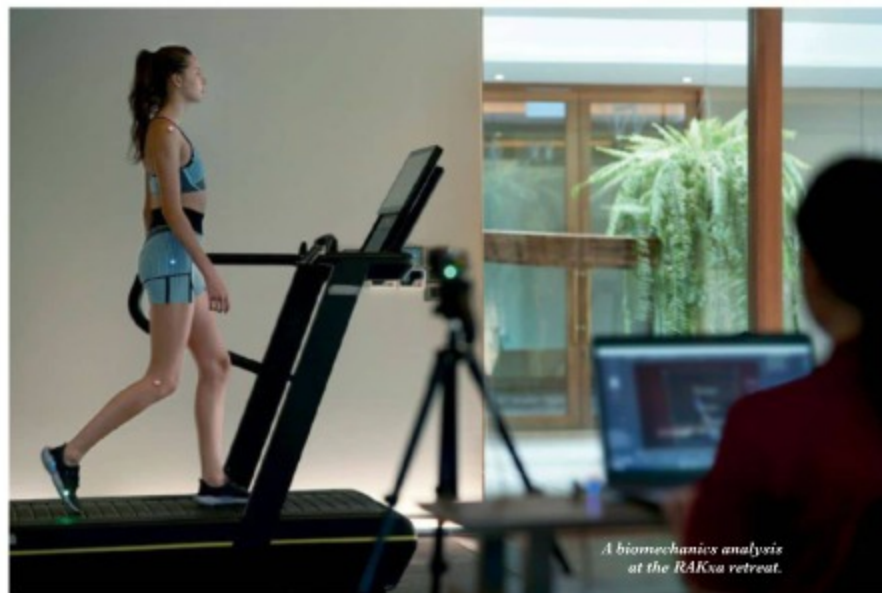
This February, Sunway City Kuala Lumpur launched Sunway MediSpa, a spa and medical centre that blends wellness practices such as massage, aromatherapy and breathwork with cutting-edge anti-ageing and cellular treatments. The facility's medi-aesthetic therapies are powered by INDIBA, a pioneer in alternating current electro transference technology, which is used by beauticians, dermatologists and plastic surgeons worldwide.

Looking ahead, Butchey believes that the medi-spa industry is poised for growth. "[The integration of medi spas] into hotels and resorts reflects a growing trend towards wellness-centric hospitality, which is prompting new players to invest in order to attract affluent guests," he says, citing the US-based Equinox Hotels – a company born out of Equinox (fitness) Clubs – as an example.

For the McGroarty, the medical-wellness offerings are likely to become "more medical, more serious, more sophisticated", with the current investment in longevity science and solutions delivering breakthroughs. With these advances, prices will trend downwards, a prospect that will only benefit consumers. ■

REGIONAL RETREATS

From renowned holistic wellness destinations to brand new medi-spa facilities, here are six establishments in Asia to consider for your next wellness escape.



A biomechanics analysis at the RAKxa retreat.

ANANTARA RIVERSIDE BANGKOK RESORT, THAILAND

Perched on the banks of the Chao Phraya River, this urban wellness retreat prides itself as a serene oasis amid the frenzy of the Thai capital. The property's BDMS Wellness Clinic Retreat offers science-backed, lifestyle-focused packages. For example, the Weight Management Retreat blends expert guidance and personalised coaching with spa treatments and curated meals to address the physical and emotional aspects of weight management.

anantara.com/en/riverside-bangkok

CHIVA-SOM HUA HIN, THAILAND

Routinely voted as one of the best spas and/or wellness retreats in the world – thanks in part to its enviable beachside location – Chiva-Som is a pioneer in the holistic wellness sphere. In the medi-aesthetic space, its Niranlada Medi-Spa employs technology approved by the US Food and Drug Administration for both non-invasive and minimally invasive procedures. These include high-intensity focused ultrasound, pico laser and CoolSculpting treatments. A recent addition is hyperbaric oxygen therapy.

chivasom.com

MÖVENPICK BDMS WELLNESS RESORT BANGKOK, THAILAND

Part of the new BDMS Connect Center in Bangkok, this resort caters largely to business travellers. Here, wellness elements are incorporated into meetings and conferences – think yoga sessions, mindfulness workshops and healthy catering options. It is also directly connected to BDMS Wellness Clinic, which is part of the BDMS Connect Center as well, and offers on-site health consultations and retreat programmes, supervised by experienced professionals from Bangkok Dusit Medical Service (BDMS), Thailand's largest private healthcare group.

movenpickbdmsbangkok.com

RAKXA INTEGRATIVE WELLNESS, THAILAND

This retreat in the south of Bangkok boasts the VitalLife Scientific Wellness Clinic, which is staffed by 40 professionals from Bumrungrad International Hospital and outfitted with high-tech facilities such as a hyperbaric oxygen chamber, an infrared sauna and a cryo-sauna. This is complemented by RAKxa GAYA, a medical gym with Olympic-grade machines designed to

assess one's stability, movements and posture, as well as RAKxa JAI, a holistic wellness centre that employs traditional Chinese medicine, Ayurveda and other traditional healing practices, and more modern methodologies such as floatation and singing bowl therapies. rakxawellness.com

SONEVA SOUL, THE MALDIVES

Wellness centre Soneva Soul is found exclusively on three Maldivian properties: Soneva Fushi, Soneva Jani and Soneva Secret, giving the retreat a stunning Indian Ocean backdrop. Among the signature therapies are the platelet-rich plasma (PRP) treatments – non-invasive procedures that use the patients' own platelets to stimulate healing and rejuvenation. Another cutting-edge therapy is Major Autohemotherapy, which involves drawing a small amount of blood, treating the blood with ozone, then injecting it back into the body to enhance the immune system and metabolism. soneva.com/soneva-soul

SUNWAY MEDISPA, KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA

The latest addition to Kuala Lumpur's Sunway



BDMS Wellness Clinic Retreat at Anantara Riverside Bangkok. Above: The beachside location of Chiva-Som Hua Hin adds to the appeal of the resort.



Resort Hotel, Sunway MediSpa is headed by Dr Lau Cher Rene, an expert in anti-ageing innovation and cellular rejuvenation. Facial treatments are designed for hydration, cell generation and lifting, and addressing pigmentation. Body therapies, meanwhile, include proionic treatments that can target and reduce the appearance of cellulite or remove

excess fat while also tightening and toning muscles. Expect, too, spa treatments that showcase the regional heritage, such as the Traditional Malay Massage, the detoxifying Macoca Borneo Body Wrap treatment and the revitalising Coffee Body Scrub. www.sunwayhotels.com/sunway-resort/facilities/spa-wellness-centre