

Talking to...

Anne Dimon



JOANNA STERKOWICZ speaks to Anne Dimon, president and CEO of the Colorado-based Wellness Tourism Association (WTA), about the growth of wellness travel globally and how it impacts the spa sector.

How does the WTA define the term 'wellness'?

Because the term 'wellness' is so personal and means different things to different people, the WTA board of directors made a conscious decision to limit our definitions to purely industry terms, such as 'wellness tourism', 'wellness travel', 'wellness retreats' and others. In terms of defining the term 'wellness tourism', the WTA Glossary of Industry Definitions – the first glossary for the wellness tourism industry – looks at wellness tourism as: 'A specific division of the global tourism industry that is defined by the common goal of marketing natural assets and activities primarily focused on serving the wellness-minded consumer and those who want to be.'

Is there a danger that consumers could confuse wellness tourism with medical tourism?

Yes. And many – consumers as well as others – do confuse the two. The WTA looks at wellness tourism as being more 'proactive' with one's own health and wellbeing and medical tourism being more 'reactive'; as in treating a medical

“*Wellness tourism is a specific division of the global tourism industry that is defined by the common goal of marketing natural assets and activities primarily focused on serving the wellness-minded consumer and those who want to be.*”

condition or providing procedures that are more 'invasive', such as surgery. We also believe that there is a growing area where the two overlap, and that overlap occurs when and where the medical industry offers scientifically-supported proactive testing that can help identify medical issues prior to symptoms being present, plus advise the client on how to possibly reverse the condition before it worsens. The WTA has recently included a Medical Wellness category of membership to welcome

companies that meet the following criteria: A company with the primary business of medical (the care of patients, and services that respond to specific medical conditions or issues) will be considered for membership if they also offer multi-day retreats/ programmes and/ or packages that are deemed to be more preventative than reactive. For instance, retreats/ programmes for sleep, stress management, medical testing for the early detection and prevention or certain medical conditions, and others.

When did the current wellness travel trend actually start?

That is really difficult to pinpoint, but I do know that when I launched TravelToWellness.com in 2004 as the first editorially-driven online magazine and resource for the wellness-minded traveler, the term 'wellness travel' was rarely, if ever, used. I had just finished reading *The Wellness Revolution* by Paul Zane Pilzer (published in 2002) and 'wellness travel' was not mentioned. When I launched

TravelToWellness.com, a columnist in one of Canada's leading daily newspapers actually chided me for using the word 'wellness' in the name.

I believe wellness travel as we know it today began in the spa. I have articles dating back to 2004 to show spas moving into the realm of wellness when the buzz words were 'detox' and 'stress management'.

At that time, as a

journalist

I had been covering the spa industry for a number of publications (including the

Toronto Star where I was writing a column in the Travel Section called the Wellness File) since the late 1900s, and was seeing signs of the spa industry moving more into the 'wellness' space. On an international level, and also in 2004, I visited and wrote about Chiva Som in Thailand and discovered one of the first true wellness retreats, although it wasn't called that back in 2004.

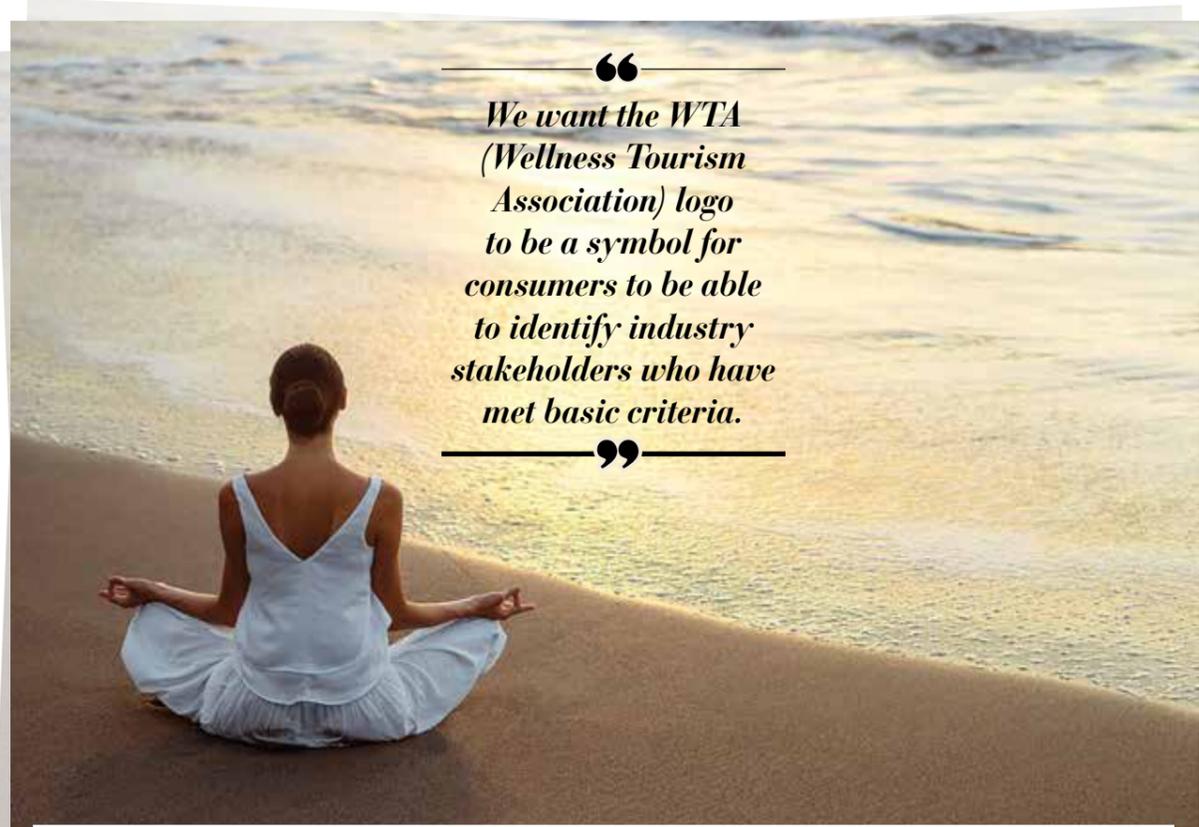
In 2005 'wellness and entitlement' were behind the changing face of spas, and I used the term 'wellness destination' for the first time in an article about Arizona which ran in the Vancouver Sun. That same year I wrote about the Optimum Health Weekend Program at Grail Springs, Ontario for a Journeys for Body, Mind & Soul column in another Canadian newspaper, The Chronicle Herald. While spas and the concept of wellness began to fully emerge around 2004 and 2005, the Global Wellness Institute (GWI) agrees with me that the terms and concepts around 'wellness tourism' really started taking off in 2008. Then in 2010, GWI research benchmarked wellness tourism as a \$106 billion global industry. They predict that by 2022, global wellness tourism will near the \$1 trillion mark.

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How did the WTA come about?

The WTA was officially launched in January of 2018 and in less than two years has grown to close to 90 members and partners in 15 countries. As a 20-plus year travel writer/ industry journalist plus founder/ editor of Travel To Wellness, I began to accumulate notes for an industry association back in 2013. In those days I was calling it the IWTA (International Wellness Travel Association), but I got diverted and put it on the backburner. It wasn't until early 2017, following an interview for a trade magazine with Andrew Gibson (then VP of Wellbeing for Accor Hotel), that I brought the WTA concept forward. Andrew agreed with me that it was a good idea, and brought Accor in as a co-founder. He then reached out to Tom Klein, president of >





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Canyon Ranch, and the wellness resort brand become a co-founder. The three of us moved forward and then the real work of launching an association began, making it my very full-time job. The Art of Living Retreat Center in North Carolina and the Monaco Government Tourist Office both came in as Founding Members. Madeleine Marentette of Grail Springs in Ontario, Canada, joined as a Board Member, Unicomm become a Founding Partner and we were well on our way.

What is the WTA's mission?

To shape and support the sustainable future of wellness tourism for the global good.

Do you think the term 'wellness' runs the risk of being overexposed, given that it seems to be popping up in all sorts of marketing?

Yes. 'Wellness washing' is a term being used to identify the utilisation of the term 'wellness' strictly for marketing purposes

with no substance to back it up. That is one of the reasons we have set criteria for industry stakeholders to become members of the WTA. We want the WTA logo to be a symbol for consumers to be able to identify industry stakeholders who have met basic criteria.

GWJ maintains that every destination has something unique to offer wellness travelers, linked with its local culture, natural assets, foods, etc. Do you agree?

Only to a point. While every destination may have something to offer wellness travelers, this does not make them 'wellness destinations'. For instance, just because Las Vegas has the highest concentration of luxury spas on the planet, and offers numerous restaurants serving healthy cuisine, it would not qualify to market itself – according to WTA's newly-introduced guidelines – as a wellness destination. Nor would any other major city, due to

the noise, the congestion and, in many case, the lack of easy access to natural assets (i.e. mountains, rivers, hot springs etc.). Nature is a very important aspect of wellness tourism. An exception is Monaco, which is building its wellness reputation on thermal baths that date back to the early 1800s. They also have green practices and protocols in places, a range of restaurants offering healthy options, and a wide variety of health and fitness practitioners.

How can spas tap into the wellness tourism trend?

As they moved from 'pampering' to 'prevention', spas led the charge into wellness travel and ultimately wellness tourism. Spas, spa treatments and the total spa experience will continue to be regarded under the umbrella of wellness. But spas themselves are not mandatory for a complete wellness travel experience. To tap into the trend, I'd suggest that hotel spas, resort spas and game safari spas first sit down with their hotel/ resort

management team and take a look at what other aspects of their property can be easily and inexpensively rolled in under the wellness umbrella. Can the food & beverage department work to introduce healthier options on menus? Do they cater to wide and various food preferences that clients demand today (e.g. vegan, vegetarian, gluten free etc.)? Are they willing to introduce special healthy-focused menus in one or more of their outlets? Does the property have onsite fitness instructors, or yoga practitioners that might lead classes as part of a multi-day package? If not in-house then perhaps in partnership with local companies? Collaborating with local tour operators might give guests access to walking, hiking and cycling tours.

The WTA polled its members to find out the top wellness travel trends and narrowed it down to five growth areas. Please elaborate.

We polled members in early 2018, which revealed these five top growth areas:

Going Solo: The Going Solo trend supports the results of the WTA's recent Wellness Vacation survey in which close to 50% of respondents reported a preference for solo travel, or solo travel to be with the like-minded.

Rise in Newcomers: Over the year 2018, many of our members reported that 50% and more of their guests were first-timers and, in some cases, had never even been to a wellness resort or wellness retreat.

Greater Flexibility with Length of Stays:

Members are seeing demand for a wider range of durations for retreats and programmes.

Mental Health Matters: Consumers are looking to take a break from their busy, stressful lives and give their minds a 'time out' (i.e. a break to reconnect with self). It is the programing around 'mindfulness' that often ends up being the most popular part of a retreat.

Demand for Specific Solutions: Consumers are becoming more aware of the value associated with a true Wellness Vacation that is planned with a specific goal. They seek solutions to such issues as stress and stress-related symptoms, sleep problems, achieving a healthy weight, and developing a more balanced life.

In conclusion, I would emphasise that wellness tourism is not a trend, nor is it an industry 'niche'. Rather, it is a rapidly growing sector of the tourism industry that encompasses all demographics of travelers. It is fueled by many things, mostly our ever-stressful daily lives, and the inherently human desire to seek health, happiness and longevity. **PB**



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