

## **Perceptions and Preferences of Wellness Travel Destinations of American Travelers**

**Carolyn Lusby<sup>1</sup>**

### **Introduction**

It could be argued that wellness tourism is as old as tourism itself, with early travelers voyaging to sites in ancient Greece and Rome for purposes of physical, emotional and spiritual wellness. With the increase in international tourism since World War Two to over one billion international tourists in 2013, wellness tourism too has gained momentum. While there is not one agreed upon definition of wellness in general, let alone wellness tourism, research has shown several key characteristics. In particular that wellness tourism is about seeking and creating, it is hence active and not passive (Smith & Kelly, 2006). While all tourism by definition involves travel outside of one's usual place of residence, wellness tourism is mainly defined by domestic travel to enhance or maintain health, while medical tourism involves increasingly international travel for purposes of seeking treatment for a medical condition (Voigt et al , 2010).

As with a general tourism definition, wellness tourism too is generally seen as a minimum of one night stay. Research has further suggested that the location of a wellness tourism destination matters, as tourists seek places that are invoking transcendence, nature and healing (DeBotton, 2002; Frost, 2004; Hoyez, 2007). Hence, natural and indigenous wellness resources could give a destination the competitive advantage needed (Sheldon & Park, 2009). Further studies have shown that more women than men partake in wellness tourism and that most wellness tourists also engage in wellness oriented holistic lifestyles at home (Voigt et al., 2010).

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<sup>1</sup> Ph.D, Assistant Professor, The Business of Hospitality, Florida International University, Biscayne Bay Campus, HM 333, 3000 Northeast 151 Street, North Miami, FL. USA. 33181

Starting with the Declaration of Independence guaranteeing rights to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, “Americans have personally and as a society long aimed to find wellbeing. By balancing individual and societal rights and responsibilities, the United States has sought to achieve quality of life like no other country. Epidemic levels of stress, obesity, sleep problems and lack of balance between home and work all further fuel an increasing interest in wellness, affecting the way tourism operators such as hotels, airlines and destinations operate. And while wellness in general has received increased international attention, there has been inadequate discussion regarding what wellness travel means to U.S. consumers and the travel industry. As such, this study seeks to understand perceptions and preferences of American wellness tourists.

## **Methodology**

This online study employed a survey sampling method to gather data from key interest groups including current travelers, travel professionals and people in the travel planning process. In order to reach travelers interested in wellness travel, a wide variety of databases were used, including list serves of academics in tourism studies, an e mail distribution list that includes consumers interested in work/life balance, a membership list of yoga studio, and university students. Participants were enticed to complete the survey by a chance to win one of the prizes given out through a drawing. A total of 515 respondents completed the survey, of which 70% were current travelers, 16% were college students and 14% were travel professionals.

## **Results**

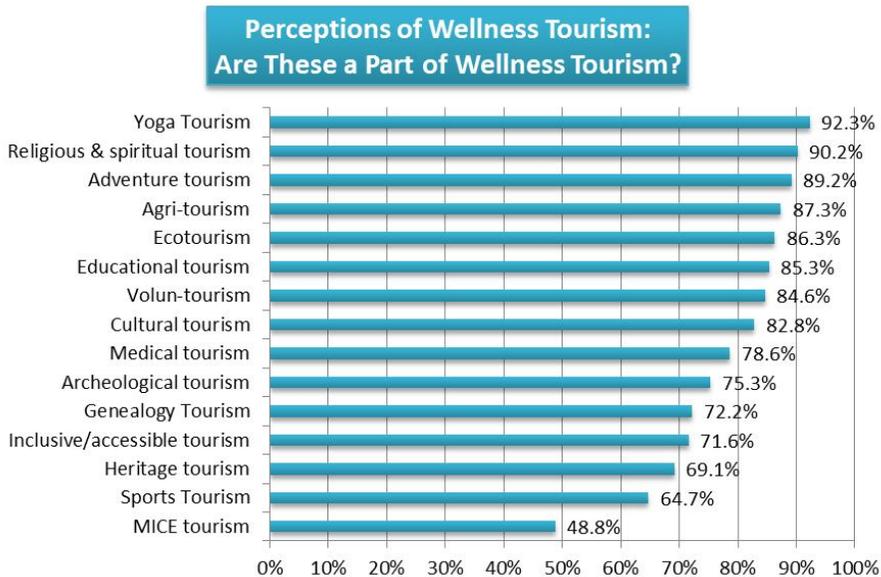
Twenty-eight percent of the respondents were male, while 71% being female. The average age was 47 and over 32% of the participants earned a Master’s degree and 17% earned a professional degree or Doctorate. Over 80% of respondents attained a Bachelor’s degree or higher, making this group slightly more educated than the US average. The total household income was 75,000 or higher for 45 % of the respondents, with another 17% choosing not to answer this question. Half of the participants are currently married and a full 94% owned a passport. Ages ranged from 18 to over 65 and were fairly evenly distributed throughout this range. The sample was ethnically homogenous with 80 % identifying as white or Caucasian.

## **Motivations and Perceptions of Travel**

The top motives for these travelers were “to spend time with family and friends,” and “to take a break from work.” Furthermore, 73% of the participants stated that it helped recharge their batteries, and another 53% stated that it reawakens their senses. Results further showed meaningful gender differences, with men being far more likely to travel for solitude. Looking at differences in age, spending time with friends was most important for the youngest group, while spending time with loved ones was more important for the older travelers. When asked why respondents would travel to distant destinations, the top motives were fun, adventure or something new, exotic location and better quality. Medical procedures and travel for services not available were the least important motivators for distant travel, which further seems to validate the distinctly different nature of wellness tourism. An overwhelming 84% stated that vacations made them more productive by feeling more rested and having a new perspective. Similarly, 88% of the respondents felt vacations made them healthier. As has been observed by previous studies, money (56%) and lack of time (30%) were the two biggest constraints to travel. When asked about the length and frequency of their vacation, only 12% stated they took a ten day vacation twice a year, with another 29% taking a ten day vacation once a year. Over half of the respondents (54%) stated they took a four day vacation more than three times a year. These statistics closely mirror trends in American travel, where more short vacations or extended weekends have replaced the traditional three week vacation. These results could also explain why most vacationers stay closer to home. In terms of trip planning, 64% used online tools for research. Most respondents spent surprisingly little time planning their trips, with 30% spending a week or less and another 26% spending less than a month.

## **Perceptions of Wellness Tourism**

Respondents provided new insights and credence to the multi-dimensional aspects of wellness in travel experiences. Consumer responses indicated the U.S. traveling public perceives many types of specialty tourism products as a contributor to well-being and as a part of well-being travel. This finding opens the door to cross marketing, product development and new branding and promotional strategies.



The characteristic shared between yoga, adventure, eco, and religious/spiritual tourism and wellness tourism is the noble purpose of meaningful, transformative engagement with people, cultures and resources. Wellness tourism is hence an active experience in which a traveler seeks to find or restore balance and seek self-actualization. It seems that elements of nature, being active, finding meaning through giving back, connecting with fellow travelers as well as locals and hence creating community, and seeking spiritual fulfillment are all parts of wellness travel. Indeed, finding oneself and a community that shares a common interest are vital ingredients of a wellness tourism experience. The need for community has been discussed in previous studies (Kelly & Smith, 2006; Lusby & Anderson, 2008) and is a direct result of an increasingly individualized and separated society. Here again travel is used to not only escape but also create and find something that is lacking in everyday life. A further emphasis on organic local food and products yields a cross over to sustainable tourism. Indeed, living a lifestyle of health and wellness, these travelers might be the perfect sustainable tourists choosing products and services that are holistic and green. When asked about visiting a Spa while on vacation, it is interesting to note that 75% of the respondents reported they do not typically visit a spa while on vacation, confirming that Spas are a part of wellness travel but not the primary reason for travel. This validates arguments that modern wellness tourism is less hedonic and more active to engage in self-analysis and creating.

Nearly 70% of respondents stated that their top three reasons for a wellness vacation were 1) stress reduction 2) reconnecting with themselves and 3) improving their health. It is interesting to note here, that improving psychological health was more important to this sample than improving general health. Indeed this finding replicates earlier studies (Chen, Prebensen & Huan, 2008), validating again that wellness tourism is more about maintaining balance and creating wellbeing curing medical conditions. Wellbeing seems to be tied to psychological well-being, where feeling well is equated to being well.

### Main Reason for a Wellness-Oriented Vacation by Age Segmentation

Main Reason for a Wellness-Oriented Vacation	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Stress reduction/pampering	35.4	47.1	48.1	29.8	29.5	31.4
To reconnect with myself/needed time to myself	22.9	21.4	22.2	19.0	19.0	2.9
To reconnect with my family or friends	18.8	7.1	12.3	15.5	15.2	14.3
To improve some aspect of my general health	12.5	12.9	12.3	22.6	21.9	25.7
To enhance my spiritual connection	7.3	7.1	3.7	6.0	9.5	11.4
To give back to the earth/community	3.1	4.3	1.2	7.1	4.8	14.3

As can be seen in the table above, giving back and enhancing my spiritual connection are more important for older travelers. Also interesting to note is that reconnecting/time to myself was the second most important motivator for most age groups, but was virtually unimportant for travelers ages 65 and over, who agreed that improving their health was more important. Differences in age were also found when asked whether participants had traveled specifically for wellness or included wellness in their previous trips. While 83% of travelers ages 18- 44 had incorporated wellness or traveled specifically for it, only 63% of travelers ages 65 and over had. This suggests that younger generations understand and incorporate wellness into their daily lives to a greater extent than older generations. When respondents were asked if they had ever traveled to improve their own sense of well-being (meaning physical, mental, spiritual, intellectual, social, and emotional health,) nearly 80% said they had gone on a wellness trip and or had taken a trip that included a wellness element. A significant number of respondents (22%) said they've done both, suggesting that these individuals place a high value on incorporating wellness as part of their vacation experience and most likely do so often as part of their lifestyle choices. In conclusion, it seems that wellness tourism is important to the American consumer in general, but women between the ages of 18-44 in particular.

Destinations should highlight rich natural and cultural resources and provide opportunities to engage with local people and create community. In terms of marketing and product development, segmentation by age seems suitable since notable differences in motivations and expectations were found. Tourism providers targeting American wellness travelers should create products and services that suit short term travel, meaning four days or less. Opportunities for men to find solitude and women to find community will enhance the experience for both genders. International destinations focusing on marketing aspects of fun, adventure or something new, promoting an exotic location and better quality should successfully attract American wellness travelers, as these were shown to be top motives for long distance travel.

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