

expensive does not always mean better

To achieve an aim in wellness, both parties, the seekers and providers must come together with a common objective. *As Alison Snelling and Dieter Buchner find out, many wellness locations have yet to embrace the all-important first step.*



After months of suffering, both physically and mentally, I had reached the end of my rope. A recent gallbladder surgery and a subsequent course of conventional medicine did not deliver the desired results either.

Then after reading of the need for time and patience for the body to heal itself and how we all have an innate ability to heal ourselves (if only we can find the right direction), I knew I had to take a totally different approach. There was one thing left that has not been tried yet – a wellness retreat.

I knew I could not manage such an undertaking on my own given all the daily distractions and responsibilities I faced, so I enlisted the help of my good friend, Dieter.

Together, the decision was made. We would simply find a great wellness programme which would help us both achieve our wellness objectives, one that is educational, inspiring and produce lasting results long after the programme had ended. This would be easy, I thought. Just write to some of the top wellness locations in the world, asking specific questions about how a stay would benefit us and we would be on our way.

THE RESEARCH

Where to then? Australia, America, Asia or Europe? The choices were endless and all appeared incredibly attractive.

We compiled an e-mail detailing symptoms and a brief medical history; questions were framed to elicit specific information about how their programme would benefit us; what experience they have of this type of condition and how they could create a bespoke

programme to meet our needs. We selected 12 great locations to approach.

The list was impressive and many could have easily been front-runners for inclusion into the list of the Top 10 Wellness Locations of the world, but what happened next was both frustrating and enlightening. If a wellness programme was going to help the healing process, the journey to get there was certainly not, at least for us.

SO WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED?

- Half of the locations had to be contacted more than once just to get a response. In some cases, we waited almost five weeks to get a response, and by which time we were no longer interested.
- One of the locations communicated by e-mail on eight occasions, three of these were to apologize!
- Four of the locations blamed technical problems with their servers for not responding sooner!
- Only two out of the 12 locations made serious effort to respond to our questions, and even suggested that they could adapt their standard offering to suit our needs.
- Eight out of 12 of the locations just sent information for a standard programme, or how their programme would benefit us despite our asking what they could do to offer a tailor-made programme.

Many of the responses were unhelpful and added nothing to our existing knowledge to help us decide where to go. Quotes included are verbatim; they have not been rewritten or embellished:

- “Thank you for your interest, many therapies will be able to assist you on your road to recovery!”

- “We will pass your message to another doctor since we have not received any answer from the previous one!”
- Thank you for your information. The 7 days program may help your situation but anyway you should take care of your body!”
- “Please call our health and healing department” (one of the most expensive locations and it would appear that they expected us to do all the work)

The two locations that did make an effort to provide a response to our questions really created a great impression. They clearly suggested how they could help, how we would benefit from their programme and how they would adapt their programme to meet our needs.

- “With all post-surgery conditions we take an adaptive response and this would be no different for you. We are confident we can provide you with a nurturing and healing experience but I do want to be certain that the benefit you can gain here will be worth travelling so far!”
- Our program is for people who want to take control of their lives, who have had medical conditions where they have had to depend on drugs and decide that enough is enough, who are eager to eat properly, change their attitudes toward themselves and their world, who want to take responsibility for their health.

The responses we received had a significant impact on how we perceived the locations. After all, at that point it was our only experience with them, and in most cases the impression was rather negative.

At last, after two months of research, we decided to participate in the educational and fasting programme with Dharma Healing International, on the island of Samui in Thailand. We were delighted to discover that the programme was run by Hillary Hitt, who was not only an experienced clinical nutritionist, but had been offering this fasting retreat for the last 12 years. After a phone conversation with her, our questions were answered and our fears about fasting were allayed. We knew we had found a special place.

The programme content and the responses we received from Hillary which we regard as caring and thorough, made our decision easy. We started the 7-day programme in February 2007.

THE EXPERIENCE

We could relate well with the programme because it emphasized self-healing, self-empowerment, holistic weight loss and promised to teach us how to “reclaim ownership of our own bodies”, focus our minds and take responsibility for our own health. We would achieve this through an Elimination Fast and a variety of classes which include:

- Overview of the Digestive System
- Digestion and Nutrition of all Food Categories
- Food Combining – The Art Of Eating – A Daily Cleansing Diet
- Breaking the Fast
- Enzyme Therapy
- Setting Up a Health Food Kitchen and Recipes
- In The Kitchen Raw Foods Preparation

In addition to these, an Iridology diagnosis and two Thai Massages were offered, and acupuncture, Shiatsu and hypnotherapy were also made available to us during our stay.

The core of the programme, the ‘Elimination Fast’ includes taking specially formulated Chinese herbs, a diet of fresh coconut water, herbal teas and a vegetable flavoured broth.

Day 1 started with a very thorough orientation where we met eight fellow fasters who had come from all over the world. Hillary explained how the fast worked, the way to self administer the twice daily colonic irrigation and how to use a machete to open coconuts.

The individual Iridology reading with a personal explanation of what Iridology is and how to read a chart was remarkable. We were both amazed with how accurately the picture reflects the state of our general health.

The unappetising, but highly effective Chinese herbal formula with its psyllium content really worked well to stave off any hunger pangs. It really helped that no food is served on the premises; and smoking and alcohol are forbidden!

A special liver flush drink was introduced on Day 3. The liver flush gives a kick to detoxifying the liver and gall bladder. Extra-virgin olive oil opens up and relaxes the bile ducts allowing old stagnant bile and sometimes gall and liver stones to be eliminated.

Day 4 was the highlight of the week – a half-day raw food cooking class. Preparing food without cooking including “bread” and veggie burgers was wonderful. And the freshly prepared vegetable and fruit juices were delicious and most welcome!

This is also the day that I was able to tell Dieter that for the first time in over nine months I was going to bed without any pain whatsoever. That was a fantastic outcome after only four days. The fast, together with one acupuncture and shiatsu session had really made a difference.

During our week at Dharma, we also experienced 30 hours of inspiring classes,



“A virtually pain-free body despite living with it daily for nine months before the programme”

attended a sound therapy session with Tibetan bowls, had a hypnotherapy session, two Thai massages, Yoga, meditation and many other interesting and beneficial activities.

It was a truly empowering experience because we were actively involved and really had to take responsibility for our healing, from cracking coconuts to making the daily herb drinks to creating our own juices to managing our own colonics.

We left Samui, extremely motivated and ready to change forever our dietary habits and preferences!

THE LEARNING

Taking time out for this fasting retreat was one of the best decisions of our lives. It was a sacred time – time spent learning about food, its impact on our body and learning new ways to take control of our own healing. We made a great choice in going to Dharma, not only did it meet all our objectives whilst there, it has had a long lasting impact that has made a significant difference to our health. Nearly three months after leaving the programme the facts speak for themselves:

- a combined loss of 21 kilos in weight!
- a new attitude towards food, a craving for fruit and vegetables and a diet that embraces many of the principles learnt – especially the integration of raw foods;
- a virtually pain-free body despite living with it daily for nine months before the programme;
- greater awareness of knowing how to listen to your body and when to stop eating;
- increased energy and general fitness

We highly recommend a supervised educational fasting programme as a profound

self-healing tool to anyone who wants to empower themselves to take personal responsibility for their well-being. For individuals who are considering a wellness programme or fasting retreat, it is critical that you research your options first to ensure that you are able to maximize the opportunity for healing. (See Sidebar story)

We also recommend that those locations interested in attracting guests like ourselves, to think about the messages they are communicating and how they could be perceived by potential guests. (See Sidebar story)

The location may be an amazing experience, but if the guest's experience when making a decision on where to go does not match with the positive experience they are likely to receive at the location, then a potentially rewarding experience for both could be lost. **sa**

Alison Shelling manages a successful learning and development business providing bespoke services to the hotel, spa, and leisure community internationally. She has extensive experience of developing spa recruitment tools, service and sales programmes and management development initiatives with 5-star luxury hotel and spa brands. She is passionate about our industry, both as a regular spa visitor and in her commitment to delivering outstanding spa development programmes that make a difference in delivering operational consistency and a memorable guest experience.

Dieter Buchner combines his extensive experience in hotel management, training and massage therapy, to inspire key players in the spa and wellness community with his passion for people development. Through his latest venture, Urban Healing Ltd., he educates and empowers spa professionals to bring more authenticity to the spa experience and to become role models of wellness that in turn inspires clients to embrace truly holistic lifestyles.

TOP TIPS WHEN RESEARCHING A WELLNESS PROGRAMME

1. Ask the right questions.
2. Create a checklist of questions e.g.
 - How will your wellness programme benefit my personal condition?
 - What experience do you have of helping people to heal who have this type of challenge?
 - What success stories can you share?
3. Be specific with what you want to know.
4. Evaluate your options against criteria that is important to your own personal situation.
5. Avoid being enticed by glossy wrappings which when unwrapped reveals a very basic and standardised package.

TOP TIPS FOR PROVIDERS OF WELLNESS PROGRAMMES OR RETREATS

1. Well-being extends outside of the boundaries of the wellness centre, retreat or spa – especially when you want to attract international visitors. Make potential guests feel good before they even visit you.

2. Consider the importance of electronic communication in creating that first connection with your guest – failed servers, poor e-mail responses and making the guest do all the work, all create negative impressions.
3. A caring and a genuine approach must start at the first point of contact with a potential guest – make sure your first impression is as amazing as your actual centre.
4. Be personal – when a guest asks very specific questions about the programme or retreat, don't send out a standardized reply that implies you offer no bespoke services.
5. Offer an active experience so guests leave with lasting knowledge that they can apply when they get back home. A programme without education is a lost opportunity.
6. When guests are ready to experience your programme or retreat, they want to be led. Ensure your staff are well-trained and genuinely know how to guide and lead guests through their experience.