

EUROPE: BELGIUM & FRANCE

1. What is currently making news in your country when it comes to spa and wellness?

Although Belgium is a country the size of a small region of France, it is home to Brussels, the buoyant European capital characterized by a perpetual cross-fertilization of cultures.

After a severe economic downturn (2009-2011), which involved the bankruptcy of several landmark spas and left spa development at a standstill, several new holistic spas are preparing to open in the Brussels region by the end of 2014 and in early 2015.

Belgians and affluent French expatriates are ready to invest time and money in efficient wellness programs using international experts in yoga, Lomilomi, Shiatsu and nutrition.

Although times are grim in France, with very low confidence in President Hollande (nicknamed “the Lazy King” by the French press), Brussels is now the fast-moving place to be.

2. With the buzz about wellness technologies, how do you see spa and wellness establishments using wellness technologies in your country? In the future?

No Belgian spa (nor, to my knowledge, any French spa) has yet embarked on promoting wellness technologies in its spa shop (to boost retail) or in its wellness programs. This is too bad because the “quantified self revolution” is a powerful driver to sell packages and memberships.

Evaluating health-related metrics during the first session, keeping track daily or weekly with specific exercises and personal training, and then watching data improve quarterly offers a win-win scenario both for clients and for wellness spas which can literally bank on evidence-based wellness programs. This is one of the recommendations I delivered three months ago to the managers of a wellness hotel currently under construction in Amsterdam and opening early in 2016.

3. When it comes to wellness tourism, what is happening in your country?

Honestly, Belgium does not have such great weather; Bangkok and Singapore are far more attractive as health and wellness destinations. However, with Paris only 75 minutes away by high-speed train, a lot of French women come to Brussels for advanced aesthetic treatments (fillers, dermabrasion, laser-hair removal, IPL rejuvenation, thermage tonifying programs, etc.), which are between 20 and 30 percent less expensive in Belgium than in France.

While in France people mostly pay with credit cards or bank checks, and only pay for small expenses in cash, the opposite holds true in Belgium, where people can pay for their yearly membership in cash or with credit card (checks are almost non-existent).

One can easily understand why some French doctors now come to Belgium to cater to a French clientele.

4. Please provide one sentence that best describes the latest developments in your country for each of these categories:

Hotel spas: A focus on wellness programs and unique signature treatments, not only to entice more hotel guests from their bedrooms to the spa, but also to attract local clientele with exciting membership programs, thus pulling them away from local day spas only delivering treatments.

Destination spas: Ahhhhhhhh... I long so much for Miraval, Canyon Ranch, Rancho La Puer-ta, Spa Eastman, Chiva Som, Kamalaya or COMO Shamballah to open a sister property in the South of France. I know the perfect location near Saint-Tropez, on pristine land overlooking the iconic French Riviera.

Hot springs spas: The 103 French traditional thermal spas in operation still maintain a decent business model, billing 25 percent of the cost of nine million days of treatments to Belgium's social security administration, in order to cure chronic afflictions, addictions and ailments associated with aging (520,000 guests per annum with an average of 18 days). (In Belgium, the tradition of taking the baths is more fun and socially oriented — and, more often than not, in the nude — in heat and water facilities called Thermen.)

Wellness living communities: Brussels will soon welcome its first-ever wellness-living community in a bourgeois district only ten minutes from the Grand Place, with a Spa Cinq Mondes soon to follow, managed by Deep Nature, France's largest spa operator, with over 40 spas already in operation.

Corporate or employee wellness programs: French companies do not seem to invest seriously in wellness programs using precise physical evaluations at the outset (because no company wants to prove that it induces stress in its employees). However, a yearly event every October called "J'aime ma boîte" ("I love my company") offers the opportunity to sell Amma chair massages and express aesthetic treatments. Label Spas de France, one of the three spa associations in France (with nearly 200 spas) is organizing a spa week between September 15-18 ("Le Spa en Fête") with the aim of not only attracting individual guests, but also targeting corporations in the catchment area of each spa, the results of which can be commercially sustaining for the rest of the year.

5. Fast-forward five years and tell us what you think the spa and wellness industry in your country will look like.

Urban Destination Hotels developing in Paris, Brussels and major European capitals, partnering with strong health and wellness destination brand names and visiting experts and therapists.

Wellness companions (not "gadgets") will be monitored by therapists and personal trainers to make each session at the spa as efficient as possible, to move away from "anti-aging" into "optimal aging."

I also believe that the Global Wellness Day initiated by Ms. Belgin Aksoy in 2012 in Richmond Nua (Turkey) will become an international beacon, each second Saturday of June, encouraging stressed urbanites to switch to healthier and richer lifestyles (the next Global Wellness Day is Saturday 13 June, 2015).

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