

# FINDING MY WAY *Vietnam* and beyond

*Photojournalist Daniel Scheffler shares his life-changing journey to a destination spa and wellness resort*

Vietnam might not be your first choice when you think about wellness; in all fairness, it might not even be your second. But there is a group of visionaries who have found a sacred place where wellness comes off the land like a gentle mist, and then swells with the inclusion of the right people and energy. Amanresorts, known for imparting privileged access

to some of the world's most beautiful apertures, recently opened Amanoi on the east coast of Vietnam, south of the little town of Nha Trang. Here I found not only a glimpse of wellness in its purest form, but stillness and a vision of the way this health trend could be for everyone.

Wellness is the “it” word right now, isn't it? If it's not the corporates, hunting down physical and mental health for their employees through elaborate schemes in remote locations, it's the destination traveller unsatisfied with the status quo, on a quest for something more. But it hasn't stopped there: the city yogis and country pilates buffs are aiming

on Amazon. And let's not forget the ordinary folk, watching extreme workouts and healthy cooking shows on their smartphones while taking the train into and away from their lives.

So it's only natural that wellbeing has replaced Facebook in terms of everyday importance. Everyone is re-evaluating what wellness or wellbeing means, and they want to know how they can access its very soul. I admit, I am no different.

The definition of wellness is a “healthy balance of the mind, body and spirit, that results in an overall feeling of wellbeing”. It has been used for half a century in the context of alternative medicine, since

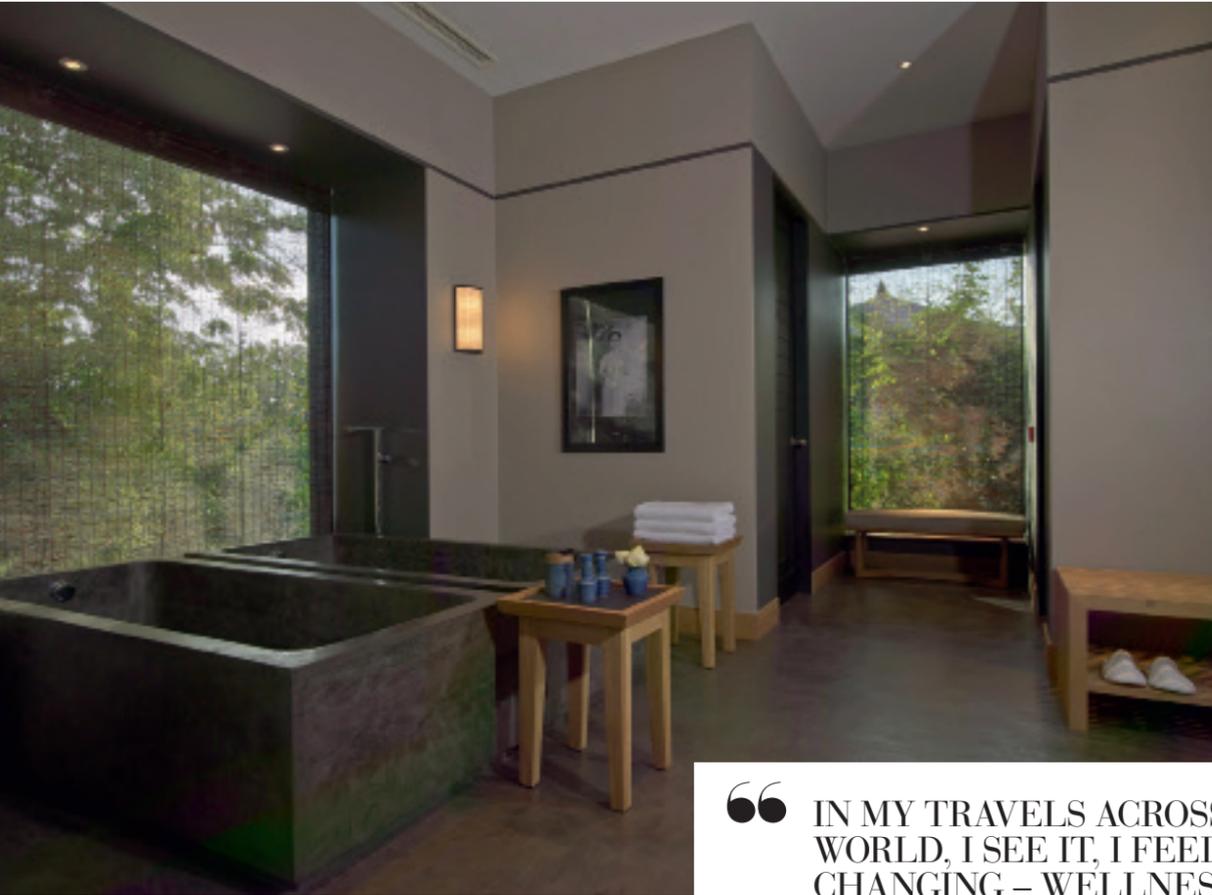
to take their practice into the next realm, and self-realisation and self-help books remain bestsellers

Dr Halbert L Dunn used the phrase “high-level wellness” in the '50s. But what we have come to define as wellness in contemporary usage became popular in the '70s. Since then, the word has taken over our lexicon – around the globe – as people started to pursue wellness as a form of self-improvement and expression.

According to Wellness.com, the term includes “mental, physical, spiritual, social, occupational and environmental health conditions”, and means that wellness is the quest for a “more optimal, holistic and balanced state of being”. It sounds ever-so inclusive and a perfect goal for me – the 21<sup>st</sup>-century human.

Walking the parks in high-rise central Hong Kong or on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, I watch the blissful early-risers doing tai chi as the sun starts to bat its eyelids. From San Francisco to Rio, and even our own backyard of Cape Town, I see the promenades packed with runners, signalling the end of the day – out there, feet pounding, come rain, mist or shine.





The gyms I frequent are full, and still opening on every block in every city I visit, showcasing this month's craze of specialised workouts, whether on a chair or a bike. The First Lady of America, Michelle Obama, is encouraging kids to move, with her national campaign, while India's and Bali's ashrams and their holistic programmes are becoming more popular as meditation replaces cellphone use. This trend is everywhere – Russians could even get a free metro ticket for a few squats or pushups at the station while the Sochi Olympics were on.

But it's not just action that is driving this craze. There are the juice shops, health stores, organic promises on labels and billboards, endless talk on television and radio about healthy-eating options. Talk shows have left politics and embraced food and drink as the new wave of interesting debate, with experts coming from every possible culture, country and city. Even chef Jamie Oliver is paying closer attention to what he's dishing up.

I keep myself in check with an app on my smartphone: tracking my exercise, my eating, my water consumption and even my electronic downtime, so it doesn't come as a surprise that the rest of the world is doing the same.

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One of the key drivers of this shakedown is better knowledge; people are finally becoming more health-literate. Labels are being read; questions are asked. The baby-boomers have also reached a certain age, and status, that means that disposable income can now be spent on wellness.

In my travels across the world, I see it, I feel it changing – wellness, and health as a component of it, is on a surge. Just look at the hospitality industry, as luxury hotels and resorts offer their guests “revitalisation”, “escape” or even an ambitious “rejuvenation”. Mostly, though, all it comprised was pampering.

As Susie Ellis, CEO of Global Spa & Wellness Summit, says in her annual report: “If the gym and spa have traditionally been positioned as mere ‘amenities’, now those walls are being conceptually (and literally) broken down.”

The West has finally realised that it needs to look to the East for stillness lessons, and the East has discovered that it needs to look to the West to survive in a contemporary world.

And it is somewhere in the middle of these two



worlds that Amanoi fits – the merging of old-world healing with new-world pragmatism. Along with the spa, yoga pavilion and the brand-new pilates studio, the resort presents an array of healers: from massage therapists to an energy healer. The resort itself gently sits between pinkish rocks and the roughest sea, a structure as beautiful and as mystifying as any Eastern holy temple.

Amanoi is a contemporary beachside resort, alongside the full-service Aman Spa. It gets its name from the Sanskrit-derived word for “peace” and noi meaning “place”, and is considered a tranquil retreat.

After a scenic drive through the Nui Chua National Park, you ascend a broad bank of stairs to the central pavilion; from here you see the panoramic views of the sea and coastline – simply breathtaking. The resort offers the usual amenities and services expected of a destination of this calibre – fitness and leisure activities. Along with the pilates studio, gym and a lakeside yoga pavilion, there are also two outdoor tennis courts and a number of scenic walking, running and trekking routes on the property.

But the spa provides a serene setting for relaxation and rejuvenation, set beside a lotus-filled lake, surrounded by rolling hills. The extensive spa menu offers a number of treatment options: in the alternative realm, traditional spa treatments, and the more modern options of hair, manicures and pedicures. The all-natural, chemical-free spa product range is complemented by traditional Vietnamese ingredients, including aromatic herbs, rice and coffee.

“Amanoi is the face of the future of the Amanresorts – taking on wellness with not only state-of-the-art facilities, but real wellness with less fluff and more facts,” says Steve Jeanes, an intuitive healer who has worked with the brand for years. “People are tired of simply being pampered and



having their egos stroked – they want love, sincerity and someone to fight for them to become the best version of themselves.”

Jeanes' process with the “brothers or sisters”, as he refers to those who come to him, or happen to find him by chance, is simple: “I stand beside a soul that is asking for my help and I'll stay there for as long as they need me. I don't ask questions; I simply do as I am guided.”

My journey at Amanoi took me to visit a nearby village temple, through some simple meditations and a yoga class next to a small body of water in the middle of the resort. It was during this time that I ventured into a session with Jeanes, also known as Grey Wolf. The session was everything, and nothing. But it was here that I found for myself what true wellness means – that this balance of my soul, this healing of my mind, lies in stillness.

The Amanoi doesn't profess to offer up enlightenment; it doesn't profess to return you to the real world a changed or made-over person. However, what it does do is give you a small light that you can either take or forsake.

The luxury world has evolved – holistic is in, and plain old spa pampering is out. This special place, the people and the opportunities, provide the healing your body and soul require. And that is the first step towards true wellness – no matter how you decide to define it. ■

**MORE INFORMATION:**

Amanresorts has established venues in Bhutan, Cambodia, China, France, Greece, India, Indonesia, Italy, Laos, Montenegro, Morocco, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Turkey, the Turks and Caicos Islands, the USA and Vietnam.

For more information on Amanoi, visit [www.amanresorts.com/amanoi/home.aspx](http://www.amanresorts.com/amanoi/home.aspx).