

# spa business

## Diana Mestre

creates healing spas, retreats and suites across Mexico for Velas

## WELLNESS-SING

brings the benefits of singing to spas

How are spas dealing with

## SINGLE-USE PLASTICS?

## Mental wellness white paper

reveals the evidence behind spa modalities

## VR massage

at The Oddly Satisfying Spa

# MARC COHEN

launches Extreme Wellness retreats







# MARC COHEN

After 16 years in academia Dr Marc Cohen is now launching a series of wellness retreats, writing children's books and hoping to solve the world's water crisis. He tells Jane Kitchen about his plans



Cohen's new retreats offer 'extreme bathing' in pristine wilderness

## Why have you developed Extreme Wellness retreats and how do they work?

They're designed to help people counter the forces of entropy, clear their channels of elimination and explore the edge of their comfort zone - while also experiencing profound relaxation and extreme comfort. Attendees explore the limits of hot and cold, breathing and breath retention, and exertion and relaxation in a small group setting - we limit attendance to 12.

One of our first retreats was held at Maruia Hot Springs in New Zealand in November. The resort boasts geothermal pools, cold plunge pools, saunas and a bathhouse for water yoga, and participants spent the first day both experiencing and learning about hot and cold therapy - what happens physically and psychologically, and how to use breathing techniques to master the cold.

In the following days, they were taken for day-long outings in the natural surroundings - hikes through the nearby beech forest or to the top of a mountain - while a support crew went ahead to set up a portable steamroom, heated hammocks, hot lunch and fluffy bathrobes next to a pristine lake or waterfall. Participants then replicated the hot and cold experiences they learned at Maruia, going from cold water bathing to warming in the steamroom.

Part of the philosophy of Extreme Wellness is that until you know what your extremes are, you can't find the balance point. It's like yoga, where you push a stretch to your limits, stretch a bit further and then relax to achieve a point of bliss. Exploring those limits can help people cope with other stresses that are out of their control, or to revisit anxiety in a very controlled way.

While the activities are remote - part of the appeal is to experience bathing in pristine wilderness - we've been able to introduce a five-star luxury spa experience. We're bringing extreme comfort into an otherwise uncomfortable situation - the top of a mountain or a frozen lake - which gives it even more of a wow factor. We provide this wow factor by offering creature comforts - beautifully cooked meals, fluffy bathrobes, steamrooms and heated hammocks in remote locations, using nature as your venue. The memories you create, and the depth of experience is greater than anything you can do in any fancy built environment.

## What's your own experience with extreme bathing?

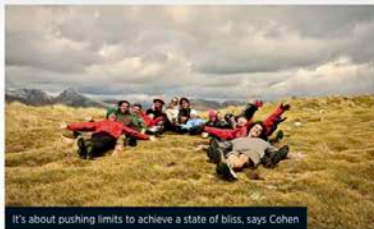
I'd already had multiple knee injuries and surgeries before my mid-20s, after a bus hit my motorbike and my leg snapped in half. I remember lying on the roadside with my left toes touching my knee and then being told I could lose my foot, and would find it hard to walk properly again.



► After nine months of plaster and rehab, I refused orthotics and simply adapted to a slightly shorter left leg. As a doctor and expert in natural remedies I tried every natural treatment, including herbal and nutritional remedies, osteopathy, chiropractic, acupuncture and yoga – they all helped marginally, and I continued to live an active outdoor life. Yet as the years went by, I found myself in more and more pain, and when I hit my 50s it began profoundly affecting my life. I started to limp and reduced my exercise and put on weight, and once my sleep was affected I really struggled to keep up with the demands of a busy life.

In 2017 I met up with Wim Hof and began his method of breathing and ice bath practices (see SB17/4 p22). My musculoskeletal pain diminished and my physical resilience and mental focus surged. I noticed some big changes. I no longer limped, I slept soundly (without physical pain), my appetite changed and I became happy to eat one or two small meals a day. I no longer felt the effects of decades old injuries.

As I worked with him on the science behind the Wim Hof Method, I found my 30 years of study culminated in a deep understanding of how consciously manipulating the basic elements of life – oxygen, carbon dioxide, water, temperature and glucose – could



It's about pushing limits to achieve a state of bliss, says Cohen

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I no longer  
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injuries

back into our evolutionary potential and transform our physiology. Extreme Wellness was born – and I knew I had to share this with as many people as possible.

#### Tell us about your professional background

I went into medicine interested in fulfilment, fun, and wellness. I soon discovered that in western medicine, I'd be learning about illness and I took four years off to study physiology, psychology, and do a PhD in Chinese medicine before finishing my medical degree. I did a further PhD in computer systems engineering and worked as a locum general practitioner and in emergency departments. I saw that while western medicine was good for acute conditions, it missed the mark with chronic disease.

Then in the mid-1990s, I became the director of the Centre for Complementary Medicine in Australia's Monash University Medical Faculty,



Cohen and a small group took part in one of the first retreats in New Zealand in November



Lakes and waterfalls provide the perfect setting for cold bathing



where I taught a wide range of wellness-focused courses. In the early 2000s I was offered a job as a professor at RMIT University, where I was to be the 'conventional doctor' in a complementary medicine faculty. Over the past 16 years as a professor of health sciences I've co-written seminal textbooks on herbs and natural supplements and the global spa industry, researched acupuncture, organic food, herbal medicine, yoga, meditation, the Butyko breathing technique, pranayama and dysfunctional breathing, along with saunas, hot springs, elite athletic performance, detoxification and the Wim Hof Method.

#### How do you see Extreme Wellness growing?

Some of the activities we offered in the retreat we'll now offer for day experiences at Maruia, but we've already also planned the next retreat for April. I think we'll run up to eight retreats at Maruia each year, and I'll travel to other places to host retreats if I'm invited.

Eventually I want to have a bank of people who can lead adventure bathing and/or Extreme Wellness retreats around the world, and I plan to offer training and a certification programme. Places like Nepal, the Andes or the Swiss Alps – anywhere where there are

mountains, hot springs or cold lakes – would be ideal to expand the concept. You have these otherwise cold, inhospitable environments around the world, and suddenly this opens them up as wellness experiences.

#### And now you've also written a children's book?

Yes – the book is called *The Beautiful Mare and the Boy Who Gave Thanks*, and it's based on a 2,500-year-old Chinese parable about an old man who lost his horse. It's a really positive, powerful story, and it's been used in a lot of different environments to talk about how you interpret the world. I've just added another dimension to it – the boy makes the best of each situation, because he's open to new experiences. It's being translated into 14 languages, and I've got two more children's books on the way. I've written more than 100 peer-reviewed articles and about a dozen textbooks, but none of those works have given me as much joy as these children's books.



Cohen's book for children is based on a Chinese parable about acceptance and finding gratitude



World Bathing Day on 22 June celebrates hot spring culture and raises awareness about accessing clean water



PENINSULA HOT SPRINGS, AUSTRALIA

► **Your mother, who died last year, had a profound influence on your life. What did you learn from her?**

In some ways, I'm the boy in the story. My mother gave me the idea that you can make the most out of any situation.

She always saw life as an adventure, but she also had an incredibly blessed life – she left Czechoslovakia when she was five, just before the Second World War started. Her father's company sent him to Australia and they arrived the day Hitler marched on Prague.

She took joy from everything – up until her last days. When she got her diagnosis of metastatic melanoma, she didn't want any treatment, she just wanted to live as well as she could. She reached 84 years old and lived and died on her own terms, and she lived and died really well. She was just the most optimistic, most loving, most amazing woman I've ever met.

**What is Bathe the World Foundation?**

It's a public benevolent foundation I helped form. Its aim is to provide access to a bucket of water for everybody, every day, which means a couple of litres to cook with, some to drink and some to wash. Having clean drinking water is important, but what we're looking at is beyond survival. There are 2.4 billion people – and that's about one in three people on earth – who don't have access to washing water.

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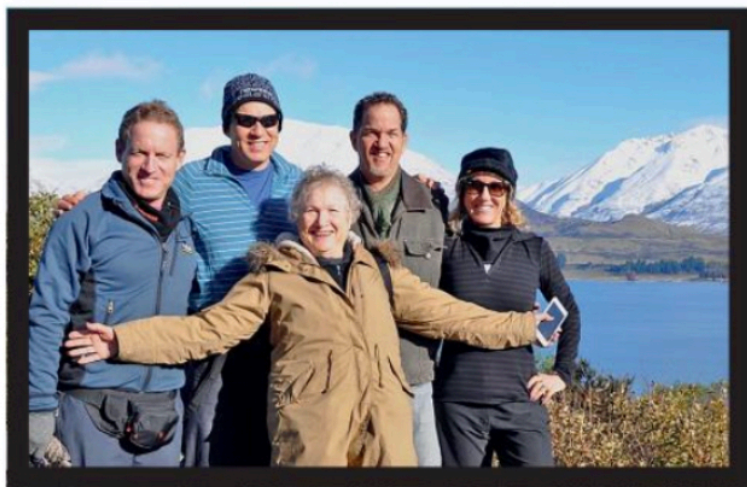
We want to bring it home to people that bathing can transform your life

We're planning to work with a company called F Cubed, which has developed a solar desalination, purification technology that can produce pure, clean drinking water from any water source, using solar energy. We will be working with them to fund projects where we can disperse these solar panels.

World Bathing Day is held every year on 22 June for awareness-raising and fundraising, where hot springs or thermal spa resorts around the world can host events to draw attention to this issue, or raise money to help fund it. We're also creating a festival at Dalhousie Hot Springs in Australia, to be held on World Bathing Day in 2022. We'll bring one person from every nation on earth to bathe together in the world's largest flowing hot springs, to figuratively bathe the world and also to draw attention to the issue.

We also want to do a crowdfunding campaign to raise AU\$240bn – that's roughly how much money it will take to create the infrastructure to give everybody a bucket of water every day. I'm hoping to rally people around the cause, including the hospitality industry. There are roughly 20 million hotel rooms around the world and I want to have a standard where guests give AU\$1 to this cause when they buy a room.

We want to bring it home to people that bathing can transform your life. That actually brings it back to Extreme Bathing too – going to the extremes of hot and cold and using your breath consciously, can transform your world, and if you do that and then contribute to other people, then it not only changes your life, but it will also literally change the world. Wellness is about the 'we', not the 'I'. If we take that attitude, I believe the world can be abundant. I'm investing the rest of my life into moving that direction. ●



Cohen with his siblings and late mother – “the most amazing woman”



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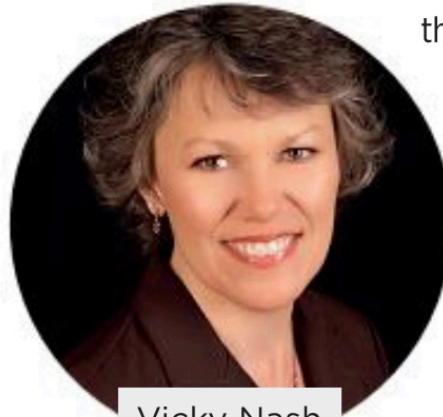
95 people from 14 states attended the conference

## First-ever US hot springs conference a success

The organisers behind the inaugural US Hot Springs Connection say the three-day conference unleashed a torrent of interest and enthusiasm, resulting in steps to form a national geothermal trade association and develop a website representing every hot springs entity in the US.

The event, which was held in Glenwood Springs in Colorado in November, welcomed 95 attendees.

“Geothermal springs offer a unique and highly sought-after visitor experience; they also have a sector-specific set of challenges



Vicky Nash

that need to be addressed.

Getting the nation’s geothermal stakeholders in the same room and talking with one another proved to be an invaluable experience for everyone involved,” says Vicky Nash, who coordinated the event. Nash will work closely

with an association management company to begin the process of establishing a board of directors and bylaws. Additionally, a marketing firm will begin creating a website and map to list every commercial hot spring in North America.

**More:** [http://lei.sr/J3k2Y\\_B](http://lei.sr/J3k2Y_B)



# MIND OVER MATTER



Gerry Bodeker

A new white paper reveals the scientific evidence behind numerous modalities and their impact on mental health. Editor Gerry Bodeker explains how spas can tap into this wealth of information

In October a 122-page white paper on mental wellness was unveiled to hundreds of spa and wellness professionals at the Global Wellness Summit in Italy (see SB18/4 p78). It was created in response to an upsurge of interest in mental wellness from both industry members and the general public. As Dr Ranieri Guerra from the World Health Organization notes in its introduction: "Mental, neurological and substance use disorders affect one in four people over their lifetime and one in 10 at any given time, and thus affect billions of lives globally."

The aim of *Mental Wellness: Pathways, Evidence and Horizons* is to identify the

many complementary interventions which are scientifically proven to help enhance people's mental wellbeing and happiness. There was a lot of existing research and it's taken the Mental Wellness Initiative – a Global Wellness Institute action group – a year and a half to pull everything together. But finally there's a body of evidence on a wide range of modalities – from massage, aroma, sound and light therapy to movement and exercise, mindfulness and nutrition, and the benefits that these offer for mental wellbeing.

Many of the therapies are already available in spas and the white paper now showcases evidence to support future innovation. Facilities have an opportunity to act as a safe entry point into these wellness modalities which support mental wellbeing and happiness that may be unknown, and perhaps untrusted, outside of the spa setting.

## Proven modalities

Massage is one of the common spa services highlighted in the white paper for its proven effectiveness on anything from pain and cancer to headaches and infant care. Information was taken from the US National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health and a 2010 meta-analysis of 17 clinical trials concluded that massage therapy may also help to reduce depression.

The US National Association for Holistic Aromatherapy references a range of studies showing, among other effects, the stress-reducing properties of sage oil, immune-modifying effect of eucalyptus oil, the role of peppermint oil in counteracting neuralgia, and the combination of peppermint and caraway oil in enhancing the quality of life of people suffering from dyspepsia.

Elsewhere, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* reports that since 1979, there have been 18,000 studies published conducted on various aspects of meditation and its benefits.

We also identified many beneficial mental wellness pathways that are not typically found in spas, but which have

potential for innovation and rejuvenation of the spa experience. These include laughter yoga – Google it! – art therapy, journaling and the influence of nature.

As it turns out, social laughter, seems to release endorphins associated with feelings of wellbeing and heightened mood. Oxford University researchers in the UK conducted a series of experiments and found that pain thresholds – an indicator for endorphin release – were significantly higher after laughter. They suggest that "laughter, through an endorphin-mediated opiate effect, may play a crucial role in social bonding".

Group support and social connectedness are also foundational in maintaining a state of mental wellness.

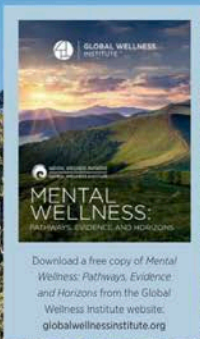
For spas in areas of rich cultural heritage, there's the opportunity to partner with local experts to build new, culturally important offerings. All cultures have clear dietary, exercise and other health practices encoded in their ways of living. Uncovering these traditional wellness practices can transform our understanding

of the way human physiology works and the energetic basis of wellbeing.

## Researching the spa experience

In the second section of the white paper, we drill down into the spa experience itself and find there's an emerging body of science backing up claims that it benefits mental wellness.

In 2016, doctors Elissa Epel, Deepak Chopra and colleagues found highly significant changes resulting from a ayurvedic detox/rejuvenation programme known as panchakarma. These include a reduction in many metabolites which are risk factors for metabolic disorders such as obesity, diabetes and heart disease. It also found that a break of just six days sets off genetic changes which can boost the immune system, decrease symptoms of depression and dementia and reduce stress (see SB16/4 p91).



The evidence highlighted in the white paper can be shared with customers, published in articles and used in educational sessions



Spas, such as Sunrise Springs, have an opportunity to act as a safe entry point into modalities which support mental wellbeing



## RESEARCH: MENTAL WELLNESS



A Deepak Chopra study suggests that a six-day retreat can help with stress and depression

► In Australia, RMIT professor Marc Cohen and his team's study on 4,265 mostly female respondents using thermal bathing spas found that "relaxation", "peace and tranquility", "indulgence" and "escape" were the most important motivators for bathing. Most respondents reported general health benefits (98 per cent) and better sleep (82 per cent) from bathing. Significant benefits were reported for back pain, arthritis, stress/anxiety, depression and insomnia (see SB17/2 p56).

The Kuopio Ischaemic Heart Disease project in Finland examined 2,315 men aged 42-60 over a five-year period. It found that increased frequency of sauna bathing – four to seven times a week for 30 minutes at a time – is associated with a reduced risk of heart-related disease, death and all-cause mortality. Sauna



Frequent sauna visits are associated with a reduced risk of heart disease and dementia

Attracting older adults: movement classes decrease the risk of falling, anxiety and depression

ULZA/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM



The white paper highlights the many different evidence-based pathways which spas can use to enliven their offering

sessions have also been linked to lower risks of dementia (see SB17/1 p108).

In other research, a French study found that levels of anxiety and depression in 250 women who had breast cancer treatment were reduced by a two-week, multi-modality spa programme. Stronger and longer lasting effects were especially noted in reductions in depression.

### What does this mean to spas?

So. How can spas harness this new flood of knowledge? I've often argued that spas have the potential to be the organisational face of wellness. Some destination spas, like Lapinha in Brazil, Brenners Park, in Germany and Kamalaya in Thailand, already are. They offer a wider range of wellness modalities under one roof that can't be found in any other setting. Others focus more on massage and bodywork – but there's much more than this available to enliven the spa world and its offering to clients, and the white paper highlights the many different evidence-based pathways which can be used.

Nowadays there are so many centres for yoga, meditation, tai chi, etc, that it's not necessary for spas to employ therapists directly. Bringing visiting practitioners in and building a marketing plan around them can breathe new life into the spa business.

The wealth of information, available freely at [globalwellnessinstitute.org](http://globalwellnessinstitute.org), can be drawn on to support the science behind spa modalities. This can be

shared with customers, published in magazine and online articles as well as in marketing materials, and shared via educational sessions.

There are opportunities to target new markets, such as parents-to-be. A section on The First 1,000 Days of Life offers evidence on how wellness approaches that future parents engage with are predictors of the mental and physical wellbeing of their children in adulthood.

Or partnerships could be formed with existing community groups and local enterprises, such as those focused on older adults. Dance, tai chi, meditation and yoga all are supported by scientific evidence as reducing many conditions associated with ageing such as risk of falling, anxiety and depression, early onset dementia.

The white paper also places an emphasis on spa staff being treated with the same consideration as guests and that a code of ethics for spas is called for.

Finally, there's the opportunity for spas and spa groups to begin partnering with local and international researchers to uncover new areas of evidence about the value of spa experiences. Here the focus is not only our physical health but especially on mental wellness and living a life in balance and happiness. ●



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