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## **The Multidimensionality of Wellness Tourism in Thailand and Costa Rica: Mind, Body, and Soul**

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AHSS Research Grant

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## **The Multidimensionality of Wellness Tourism in Thailand and Costa Rica:**

### **Mind, Body, and Soul**

#### **Introduction**

The wellness tourism industry consists of a wide range of visitors, products, and destinations around the globe, it is multifaceted and diverse. Tourism academics have begun to analyze and study the wellness trends that have emerged and continue to gain momentum in the modern world. I too am interested in understanding these trends. The global wellness industry has experienced rapid growth with wellness tourism expanding as a destination attraction and productive market. Chiang Mai, Thailand has established itself as a wellness destination which I found to be abundant and worthy of exploration. Costa Rica is also a desired destination for wellness tourism. In this paper I will explore my wellness experiences in Thailand and Costa Rica, offering insight and analysis into what my participant observation and informal interviews captured.

In Thailand, I focused on secondary wellness tourism and tourists, whereas in Costa Rica I was concerned with primary wellness tourism and tourists. Wellness tourists can be categorized into two types of tourists: primary and secondary wellness tourists. Primary wellness tourists are those who travel with the main intention of participating in wellness activities, thus choosing their destination based on access to wellness activities. Secondary wellness tourists participate in wellness activities while they travel and use travel as an opportunity to get a massage, eat healthily, or practice yoga (Hudson, et al., 2017) but are not primarily motivated by wellness tourism opportunities. I

made this distinction based on my projected experiences in these countries. In Thailand I could be classified as a secondary wellness tourist, integrating wellness opportunities into my travel experience but not choosing the destination based on the wellness market. Whereas I visited Costa Rica with the central motivation of attending a holistic wellness retreat. Therefore wellness was my primary reason for visiting Costa Rica. The tourists I engaged with in Thailand generally reflected the secondary tourist category and similarly in Costa Rica with regards to primary wellness tourists.

In preliminary wellness research, I identified the theme of wellness tourism as a pursuit of self-discovery and connection to mind, body, and soul. Based on the wellness literature I concluded that wellness experiences can be transformative to an individual's existential perspective of themselves and their meaning of life. I became very excited about the potential of wellness tourism to provide global tourists and travelers with avenues for attaining a more holistic approach to life, an approach that is more fulfilling, healthy, and contributes to mental, physical and spiritual wellbeing. The literature on wellness emphasized that the pressures and stresses of contemporary urban lifestyles are leading to a disillusioned, unhealthy, unhappy, and overworked global population (Lehto et al., 2006). Hence, the increasing popularity of wellness, and expansion of the global wellness market.

What the literature did not emphasize but I have found to be incredibly pertinent and relevant to wellness is that to be 'well' or 'healthy' looks and means different things to each individual, whether they are participating in the wellness industry or not. With this in mind, I have gained a more nuanced understanding of human wellbeing, which the wellness industry has capitalized on, but can be accessed through many other modalities beyond the market.

With the extension of my wellness tourism research beyond the library into cultural immersion, I was better able to explore the question: Is wellness a market trend or a human desire?

Elements of wellness such as spas, yoga, and retreats provide pathways to a state of health that harmonize the body, mind, and spirit. The trends that surround wellness tourism are intertwined with western desires to take better care of their bodies and be more in tune with their emotional and spiritual lives (Smith and Puczkó, 2014). The literature on wellness tourism incorporates elements of both hedonism and eudemonism, with hedonism pertaining to moments of pure joy, intense pleasure, and appreciation of the moment. Hedonism is said to be a short-term impact of tourism experiences whereas eudemonic experiences consist of feelings of deep gratitude and impact overall life satisfaction (Dillette et al., 2018). Wellness tourism research supports both hedonic and eudemonic impacts as the results of wellness experiences, therefore supporting the notion that wellness tourism can provide long term transformative experiences. The difference between short term and long term wellness has surfaced a central consideration for each wellness experience that I participated in. Overall, what this ethnographic paper offers is an insight into the wellness experiences I participated in, the wellness practitioners I interacted with, reflections, and synthesis.

## **Literature Review**

To contextualize the word ‘wellness,’ which is at times used interchangeably with ‘health,’ has been ambiguous and multifaceted. There is a variety of definitions used to define wellness tourism in tourism-related literature. First, it is essential to note that wellness tourism and health or medical tourism are different genres of tourism. While wellness tourism has in part been born from the foundations of health tourism it has developed into its own unique and specialized industry. Health or medical tourism is largely concerning patients who travel abroad to undergo medical treatments or interventions that are more affordable and often alternative to modern western medicine (Liang and Wieler, 2008). Medical tourism has also experienced growth in the industry as

western health costs increase, skepticism of orthodox Western medicine spreads, and consumer-centered health care rises (Voigt, Brown and Howat, 2011). As a result, there is a growing desire to live healthier lives and experiment with more holistic and alternative modes of health and healing. A central element to the pursuit of wellness is a cultural shift from a reactive health and wellness paradigm to a proactive personalized approach (Dillette, et al. 2018). A proactive approach requires personalized reflection and self-study to identify ways to develop a balanced and healthy lifestyle that ensures long term wellbeing, rather than short term bandages (Dillette, et al. 2018). The concept of wellness entails that people are living healthy lifestyles to mitigate future illness. In conjunction with the desire to maintain a healthy body, the literature supports the notion that people are also in pursuit of maintaining a healthy mind and spirit. Definitions of wellness also promote the idea that wellness is a multifaceted concept that includes the wellbeing of mind, body, and spirit.

“A holistic mode of travel that integrates a quest for physical health, beauty or longevity, and/or a heightened consciousness or spiritual awareness, and a connection with community, nature or the divine mystery. It encompasses a range of tourism experiences in destinations with wellness products, appropriate infrastructures, facilities, and natural and wellness resources” (Sheldon and Bushell, 2009, p 16)

“A state of health featuring the harmony of body, mind, and spirit, with self-responsibility, physical fitness/beauty care, healthy nutrition/diet, relaxation/need for de-stressing/meditation, mental activity/education and environmental sensitivity/social contracts as fundamental elements” (Laing and Weiler, 2008, p. 380)

“A way of life oriented toward optimal health and well-being in which the body, mind, and spirit are integrated by the individual to live more fully within the human and natural community” (Smith and Puczkó, 2014, p. 5)

Table 1: Wellness tourism definitions.

Smith and Puczkó (2014) also identify five dimensions of wellness which are malleable and personal; (1) wellness is multi-dimensional, (2) holistic, (3) changes over time and along a continuum, (4) is individual but also influenced by the environment, and (5) is self-responsibility. These dimensions incorporate elements from all of the definitions listed above. Overall, the definitions of wellness encompass a broad and inclusive spectrum of wellness tourism that ranges from physical wellbeing through rest and relaxation to spiritual wellness that is transformative.

### **Why Wellness?**

Understanding the trends of wellness tourism, and the motivations of wellness tourists require insight into the catalysts. The literature on wellness references the flaws of the current western lifestyle as a driving force for tourist motivations and a growing wellness industry. Voigt, Brown, and Howat (2011) state that rapid growth of the wellness industry is a result of an increasingly hectic pace of life, high-stress work conditions, and the loss of community which has contributed to the growing desire for a simplified and meaningful life. Lehto et al. (2006) reference how urban living has resulted in damage to physical, moral, and spiritual wellbeing and as a result wellness tourism has experienced a surge of popularity. With a growing emphasis in industrial and highly automated urban societies to maintain good mental health, leisure and tourism have become elements of embodying mental and physical wellbeing, as well as good health (Lehto, et. al. 2006). Literature supports the notion that there are many dimensions of wellness which can be most simply categorized as mind, body, and spirit. Each of these dimensions is compromised by the working life

crisis (Ashton, 2018), social alienation (Smith and Puczko, 2014), and living in a “meaningless and absurd world” (Kontogeorgopoulos, 2017, 7). The realities of the modern western world have compromised the well-being of mind, body, and spirit. There is now a growing movement to return to wellness which has been consumed by the capitalistic market as an opportunity to profit. As wellness has become incorporated into the market it has led to a surge in “healthy, holistic vacations” and the “travel to feel well trend” (Lehto, et. al. 2006, 25). So, while some individuals may be engaging with wellness tourism to enhance their life experience, others may simply be influenced by its trendiness. Although, despite motivations, wellness tourists may experience similar results of improved wellbeing. However, the literature supports that consumers of wellness tourism seek experiences that lead to meaningful transformation (Kirillova, et al. 2017), rather than just assimilation to cultural trends.

Growth in the wellness industry is linked to a shift towards consumer experiences rather than consuming products (Laing and Weiler, 2008). As people come to realize that greater consumption does not imply greater happiness, individuals seek experiences that do contribute to their happiness. Such experiences are “pleasurable, personally significant and conducive to self-actualization beyond the consumptive encounter” (Kirillova, et al. 2017, 638). The wellness market has merged with the experience economy. The experience economy supports a place where experiences can be co-created by a supplier and a consumer for a memorable and pleasurable experience (Kirillova, et al. 2017), rather than an experience that is simply orchestrated by the supplier. Wellness tourists engage in experiences such as spa treatments, yoga and meditation practices, and spiritual retreats.

Wellness tourists may also be motivated by existential anxiety, crisis, or a lack of purpose in their modern life. The existential predicament is that human beings are ultimately “thrown into a world of meaninglessness, unconditional freedom, ultimate death, and universal alienation”

(Kirillova, et al. 2017, 638). Existential anxiety is a result of the existential predicament and the uncertainty of the meaning of life and death (Kirillova, et al. 2017). When a person is living in a state of existential authenticity, they are embodying a state of being which is true to their own values. Tourism can serve as a catalyst for existential authenticity because it involves “traveling to a new place, observing foreign cultures, and participating in nonroutine activities” (Kirillova, et al. 2017, 639). In Kontogeorgopoulos’ (2017) discussion of existential authenticity and volunteer tourism four themes are presented as to how tourists undergo interpersonal existentialism. Volunteer tourism provides tourists with an opportunity to (1) gain greater awareness, knowledge, and understanding of self, (2) introspect and reflect on one's life because tourists are removed from their commonplace and familiar relationships, (3) experience ‘trials of self’ that demonstrate that the challenges of being away from the familiar, everyday environment provides an opportunity for self-exploration and learning, (4) undergo personal transformation. Literature about tourism and existential authenticity does question whether authenticity is sustained after a person's travel experience. While tourism does offer a temporary life that is simple, free, spontaneous, and authentic (Brown, 2013) and therefore could be concluded to offer short term hedonic results, research also shows that tourism can be transformative and have eudemonic results. Transformation is recognized as a growth-enhancing and irreversible change that results from new knowledge and a fundamental break of lifestyle routines (Kirillova, et al. 2017). Tourism “enables exploration and realization of the self because, like tourism generally, it represents a liminal activity in which the familiar constraints, norms, obligation, roles and expectations associated with everyday life are altered, suspended, or reversed” (Kontogeorgopoulos, 2017, 5). Wellness tourism offers similar conditions and has significant potential to contribute to existential authenticity as it does to self-transformation and spiritual exploration.

## Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs was a recurring reference in existential literature concluding that tourism experiences have the potential to meet individual needs as identified on Maslow's hierarchy of needs, such as love, self-esteem, and self-actualization (Kontogeorgopoulos, 2017).



## Maslow's hierarchy of needs

Maslow studied  
transformative  
experiences and explored

the phenomenon of 'peak experiences' which has been declared as a "rare, emotionally charged moment of extreme happiness and fulfillment that extends beyond one's personal identity and is accompanied by a sense of harmony with the universe" (Kirillova, et al. 2017, 639). A peak experience is essentially a hedonic experience with eudemonic results. Tourism has the potential to create triggering episodes or 'peak experiences' because "when people are in the state characterized by the sense of spontaneity, freedom, and naturalness, they are particularly receptive and mindful of their surroundings as well as their own emotive, sensory and cognitive responses" (Kirillova, et al. 2017, 645). Travel can provide critical conditions for self-actualization. When an individual seeks meaning or purpose in life it is regarded as being concerned with the higher levels of Maslow's Hierarchy of needs. Self-actualization and seeking meaning or purpose in life are closely interrelated.

As an individual moves up Maslow's Hierarchy their concerns shift from matter to body to mind to soul to spirit (Laing and Weiler, 2008).

## **Methods**

I utilized participant observation, informal interviews, and semi-formal interviews as my research methods.

Participant observation was a significant portion of my research. Through participant observation, I was able to connect with other wellness tourists in Chiang Mai and Costa Rica. Through being a participant I was given validity and rapport amongst the other participants. We shared a common experience and this allowed for conversations to be fluid, natural, and insightful into my research topic.

Informal and semi-formal interviews were often a result of participating in wellness activities and connecting with other participants. I would converse with participants about their experiences often asking similar questions such as: "What called you to this (wellness) experience? Is (wellness) something that you integrate into your life while at home and abroad? How do you imagine this experience informing your home life? What did you gain from this experience? Have you noticed any personal transformations?" My questions and conversations varied, often flowing organically. I found that my interactions with participants were often incredibly genuine and felt more like friendly conversations in which my research topics were naturally integrated. Overall, my conversations provided me with valuable insight into the experience of other wellness tourists and deep meaningful connections.

## **Limitations**

A significant limitation for this research project was engaging with wellness tourists after they returned home from their respective wellness experiences. I am very interested in how wellness tourism experiences impact tourists long term wellbeing and lifestyle choices. It was significantly more accessible to measure and observe short term impacts of wellness tourism as opposed to long term impacts. Time was also a limiting factor for this project. The 10-week summer session offered a reasonable period for exploration, however, in order to attain results of more depth, a longer research period would be essential. As well as multiple interviews with individuals before, during and after wellness experiences.

### **Wellness Tourism in Thailand**

Chiang Mai, Thailand offered a diverse range of wellness tourism experiences, including but not limited to, Thai massage, spa tourism, yoga, and meditation tourism, health food tourism, traditional medicine tourism, ceremony tourism, and retreat tourism. I participated in each of these identified wellness tourism categories over six weeks in Chiang Mai city. For the purpose of this research paper, I will be narrowing the focus to ceremony tourism and retreat tourism, which I found to offer the most transformative experience to participants. Through this research opportunity, I became deeply interested in existentialism and the ways in which tourism aids existential authenticity.

#### *Heart Space*

Nestled in an alleyway on the outside of Chiang Mai city sits a small and intimate space catered for connection by a beautiful Ukrainian woman, Gabriella. I became aware of Heart Space through conversation with other tourists while staying at a hostel in Chiang Mai. Word of mouth

was an important tool for learning about wellness experiences that were less commercialized, advertised, and touristic. Through social media, I was able to further inquire and get in contact with the woman who organizes the space. Online Heart Space is briefly described as:

“A cozy community space for us to come together, open, and heal through meditation, song, ceremony, and whatever else our hearts desire! We can connect to ourselves, each other, and all of existence through the Heart Space.”

Connection is a central element of Heart Space and what is offered. Heart Space is a small studio space on the property of Gabriella’s home. It is intimate. The events that Heart Space hosts are rooted in “coming together”, “connecting to ourselves, each other, and all of existence”, as well as opening, and healing. It is a powerful space for connection mentally, physically, and spiritually, to the self, to others, and to the whole of existence.

Through facebook Heart Space advertises a range of events including “Healing Reiki and Sound Healing”, “Kundalini Yoga”, “Cacao Ceremony and Chakra Dance Journey”, and “Super New Moon Ceremony”, to name a few. Events are primarily hosted by Gabriella. She brings a deep sense of intentionality, mindfulness, and guidance to the space. Creating space for guests to safely and comfortably open their heart space and connect. Small groups promote a sense of connection amongst participants. Events are often limited to small group sizes between 8 and 16, for the space is small and small groups offer greater depth.

I attended two events at Heart Space while I was in Chiang Mai, a women's circle and a cacao ceremony. Online women's circle was advertised as:

Woman Wisdom Circle

A heart-opening space - to connect and share.

Free-form Movement Meditation - dance with vibration of gratitude, earth, and sky.

Sacred Mystical Dance - dance of Shakti.

Divine Healing Ceremony- dance of the divine embodiment.

All women are welcome to share this gentle yet powerful journey of reconnecting with our sacred feminine essence. No matter where you come from and where you are in your path, in this safe space, where you'll be deeply loved and supported, we invite you to get to know a higher version of yourself and to walk in beauty, grace, and gratitude.

Feel free to wear flowing, comfortable outfit to honor your feminine self.

The women's circle consisted of 8 women in total, all of whom were foreigners to Thailand, some passing through as travelers, like myself, and others residing in Thailand for longer periods of time, or retired to Thailand. Each woman entered the space with vulnerability, strength, to embrace connection. Through the curation of Gabriella's vision, women of many different walks of life were unified in space and time. The curation of the event was deeply intentional and created a profound environment to learn and share in. Based on my perception, it seemed that all of the women who were present had previous roots in exploring their personal wellness, mentally, physically, and spiritually, and were on a path to deepening their connection with themselves, others, and the planet. I felt empowered to be surrounded by women who practice awareness of their health and wellbeing. The event quickly became very personal with mindful listening, open communication, eye gazing, and static dance. In my experience, the women's circle at heart space was a spiritual experience of letting go of the exterior egoic identity. After the initial group sharing, the event went on without much speaking. However, there was profound communication and sharing through dance and song. This experience offered me tremendous depth into myself, vulnerability with other women, and heartfelt gratitude for life.



Photo 1: Women of the Heart Space Women's Circle

The sense of connection that was formed with these women through sharing a wholehearted space was powerful and contributed to my personal wellbeing. In my personal reflection, I was deeply impacted by my experience at the women's circle. I felt a strong sense of love and belonging which greatly enhanced sense of comfortability with myself and my femininity. As a new visitor to Chaing Mai, this space felt grounding and safe. I left the women's circle with a beautiful community,

strength, empowerment, and clarity. I felt (and continue to feel) inspired to create similar events that hold space for expression, recognition, and connection. The desire for depth in connection with ourselves, with others, and with the planet is a desire that I have observed in people at home and abroad. I believe that connection is often lacking and compromises people's sense of a fulfilling life. The holistic nature of the Women's Circle at Heart Space allowed many facets of overall wellness to merge, magnify, and be met.

I found the women's circle to be an incredibly profound experience and was called to go back the next evening, this time for a cacao ceremony. Two women, from Belgium and Italy, who I met at the hostel expressed interest in entering an environment that encouraged and supported opening up through physical movement, emotional expression, and human connection. The three of us ventured to Heart Space with excitement for expansion. On this night we attended a Connective Cacao and Sound Journey, which was advertised on facebook with the following information:

#### Connective Cacao and Sound Journey

Cacao has a nurturing, mothering energy that is wonderful for inner work and insight.

"It will show you the door, but walking through it is up to you."

Besides all the amazing health benefits that cacao has, its heart-opening effect helps you to deeply connect with yourself, those around you and our beloved mother earth with kindness and authenticity. It enables you to flow freely, while melting into the smoothing vibration of sacred sounds.

The Tibetan singing bowls, Thai gong, ocean drum, bells, and chimes take you on a journey of enchanting sounds into a world of deep relaxation and inner wisdom, where you can just BE effortlessly.

Our journey includes gentle movement, attunement, and chanting.

The attendants of the Cacao and Sound Journey were male and female foreigners interested in connection. Gabriella opened the space with grace and gratitude. Sitting in a circle each participant had the opportunity to introduce themselves and express their gratitude. After blessing the sacred cacao drink, we passed around cups to taste the rich and bitter cacao. Cacao is said to have incredible heart-opening properties that enhance connection to ourselves, others, and the planet, as the description mentioned above. In order to explore the properties of cacao and connection, Gabriella offered the group an assortment of activities from eye gazing, to hand-holding, to dancing. These activities did bring an element of closeness to the space, which promoted meaningful

connection.



Photo 2: Connective Cacao and Sound Journey Participants

The second part of the event was a sound journey that involved everyone laying down and Gabriella playing a collection of Tibetan singing bowls and other musical instruments. The effects of the singing bowls can be deeply meditative and even trance-like, offering deep relaxation and insight. I

found the singing bowl experience to greatly enhance my sense of relaxation, softening my mind and body. I felt deep contentment and trust for the alignment of my life.

Overall, the events that I attended at Heart Space were profoundly impactful. Many of my personal needs, which Maslow identifies, were abundantly met. I felt a strong sense of love and belonging through friendship and connection, I felt respect, recognition, and strength, as well as a greater understanding of my personal potential. The wellness experiences that are offered at Heart Space are attentive to meeting our human needs which are often neglected in contemporary lifestyles.

### *Earth Home*

After spending some time in Chiang Mai City, I felt called to explore beyond the urban area and ventured three hours North to a “guesthouse designed with sustainability and environmental awareness at its heart,” by the name of Earth Home.

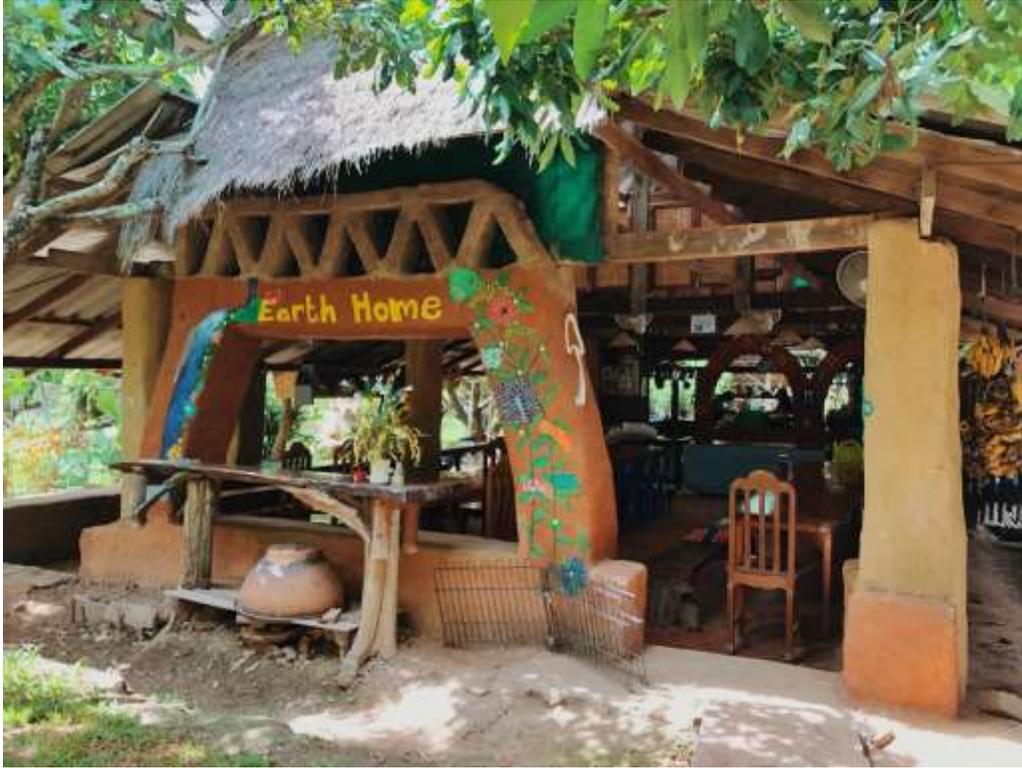


Photo 3: The

communal eating area and kitchen made from earth materials at Earth Home.

My visit to Earth Home was brief but relevant to my wellness experience because of its focus on environmental harmony and community. The mission of Earth Home is as follows:

- \* Promoting the construction of simple, effective and complete homes with natural building materials.
- \* Teaching the principles of healthy and sustainable living through permaculture, organic farming, and other workshops.
- \* Providing a homestay for guests to come experience and learn about sustainable living.
- \* Teaching children basic and important life skills by living with and taking care of nature

In a holistic approach to wellness that includes environmental wellness as a component of communal and personal wellness, Earth Home offers tourists insight into the creation of sustainable

homes, permaculture food production, and the potential of meeting physiological and safety needs with the wellbeing of the natural world in mind. Earth home also offers high quality local food to their guests, some of which is grown on the property.



Photo 4: Garden beds in the Earth Home garden.

My experience at Earth Home was relaxing and fulfilling. I was inspired by the vision of the project and commitment to environmental wellness. As well, the food that was provided promoted physical wellness and health. While I was visiting Earth Home there were other visitors, including two Singaporean families, a highschool group, and an assortment of travelers participating in a natural building workshop. The Singaporean families expressed that they were attracted to visiting Earth Home to provide their children with an opportunity to be closer to nature and experience a sustainable alternative lifestyle as opposed to urban Singapore. The high schoolers were visiting Earth Home for educational purposes, which is one of Earth Homes missions, to share knowledge of caring for the planet with young people. Lastly, the participants of the natural building workshop were enhancing their skillset and knowledge of harmonious living. These experiences have the potential to offer participants love and belonging, esteem, and self-exploration. I felt a sense of belonging through sharing meals and conversations with the other visitors. Earth Home cultivates a sense of community amongst its guests. I felt a sense of esteem by being seen and heard by other visitors and hosts. As well, other guests alluded to gaining respect and esteem through participation in workshops and activities offered at Earth Home. In my assessment, Earth Home also offers a space for self-actualizing needs to be met because visitors are focused on expanding their awareness of sustainability, and exploring their harmonious potential.

### *Suan Sati*

Retreat tourism is a significant component of wellness tourism that I wanted to incorporate into my research while in Chiang Mai. The retreat center that I visited, Suan Sati, was a beautiful

addition to my research and travel experience. The tourist that I interacted with were almost entirely individuals who have been nomadically traveling throughout Southeast Asia and landed at Suan Sati for a generally short stay of four days, with some individuals staying up to two weeks. Based on my interactions it seemed that Suan Sati visitors were looking for a place to relax, reflect, and learn.



Photo 5: A Suan Sati guest, Alex, journaling, and reading during free time.



Photo 6:

A Suan Sati guest, Tash, sunbathing and reading during free time.

Suan Sati's vision is “transformation, awareness, and empowerment.” The center operates on a daily schedule that allows visitors to be added to the mix at any time. The schedule is as follows:

5:30 am – Wake up

6:00-8:15 – Meditation and Yoga

8:30 – Breakfast

1:00 pm – Lunch

4:00-5:45 – Meditation and Yoga

6:00 – Dinner

\*During the standard daily schedule, we hold workshops at least once daily, either after breakfast or after dinner. They vary every day, but can be on meditation, yoga, art, music, creative writing, dance, discussion, gardening, and much more!

The schedule is focused on transformation, awareness, and empowerment, with yoga and meditation as the guiding platform. Suan Sati is a very intentional place that offers a wellness framework for visitors to immerse in and embrace their removal from common places and routines. The Suan Sati schedule offers a significant amount of free time, which I observed most guests using to read, rest, journal, shower or participate in workshops. The workshops that were offered while I was visiting included topics such as Ayurvedic medicine, ecstatic dance, mandala creation, slacklining, and meditation tips. I gained tremendous knowledge from the workshops that were offered and found that I was in an incredibly receptive state to process and absorb new information. Other guests also appeared to be thoroughly engaged in the workshop topics and processing ways to apply their new-found knowledge to their lifestyle beyond Suan Sati. It was a reoccurring theme amongst the Suan Sati Staff that they are attempting to offer guests modalities for healing and wellness that are transferable to everyday life. With transformation, awareness, and empowerment as their guiding principles, Suan Sati is offering their guests tools for everyday wellness and self-actualization.

With regard to Maslow's needs, I found my experience at Suan Sati to be all-encompassing. My physical and safety needs were abundantly met with delicious vegan homemade food at each meal, comfortable accommodation, and a safe space to express, relax, and expand in. The environment at Suan Sati offered a calm and supportive space to connect with the other guests. I made really meaningful connections while staying at Suan Sati that was fulfilling and genuine. My esteem needs were sufficiently met through a culture of respect, a sense of recognition, an embodiment of my personal strength, and an emphasis on freedom. The self-actualizing component of Suan Sati is what I found to be the most transformational and empowering. At Suan Sati there a

prominence of learning to get better at life that is encouraged and supported. Through practices like yoga, meditation, and silence, space is held to check-in and assess personal fulfillment with life.

“We don’t do yoga and meditation to get better at them, we do these practices to get better at life and got to know ourselves.” Claire (Suan Sati staff)

Self-actualization is incredibly individualized, however, I believe a space like Suan Sati can offer reflection and insight no matter one's perceived purpose in life. It is the act of holding space for ourselves to check-in and assess if we are living up to our potential.



Photo 7: The lushness of Suan Sati's gardens.

I felt a very strong sense of community at Suan Sati amongst the other visitors and the staff which facilitated wonderful discussion about existentialism and authenticity. The retreat setting encourages self-exploration through the changing of routines and the intentional schedule. I experienced an emphasis on going inward and confronting myself, rather than an obsession with the distracting external world. I gained tremendous insight and knowledge into how I would like to exist, how to channel my authenticity, and how to live out a life of fulfillment. A central takeaway, that I experienced, and was echoed by other guests, is the value of connection. Connection to ourselves, to each other, and to the planet is essential for the health and wellness of humanity. Overall, I felt that Suan Sati succeeded in their mission of providing transformation, awareness, and empowerment to their guests. I have been integrating the teachings of Suan Sati into my life daily.

### **Wellness Tourism In Costa Rica**

I extended my wellness research to Costa Rica by wonderful synchronicity. A classmate and friend, who I studied abroad in Australia with, was offering a weeklong retreat which sees coined as an “Eco Warrior” retreat. The term eco-warrior can be defined as “a person actively involved in preventing damage to the environment.” On the homepage of the retreat website the following description is provided:

What does it mean to live authentically? During this 7 day retreat, we will explore living in community and regenerative living. Connecting back to our humanity, within ourselves and with each other and how to live in a way that regenerates this beautiful home that we have abused for so long. Healing ourselves and the planet. An inspiring magical week of learning, connecting, healing, and demonstrating sustainable living through our actions. You will leave feeling empowered with the tools to effectively change the world, unforgettable memories, and lifelong friends. We can't wait to see you there! Pura Vida.



Photo 8: Group sharing circle where everyone had an opportunity to be seen and heard.

The Eco-warrior retreat was cultivated on a foundation of community building. Through activities of sharing, listening, and creating, communal connections were enhanced. With a community of support, people expressed that they felt safer to express, heal, and connect. Love and belonging are a pivial need that all humans desire and at this retreat it was emphasized. Without love and belonging individuals are disillusioned, insecure, and lonely, common themes in the contemporary world. The individuals who attended this retreat were calling in community, love, and belonging due to a lack of it in their daily life. This was a common theme amongst the participants and it was the power to be present for an experience that demonstrated to people, including myself, the potential for support and empowerment through community.



Photo 9: Cacao ceremony of connection with the Eco Warrior community

Activities such as Cacao ceremonies encouraged opening up and being vulnerable. There were significant emotional releases that people experienced during sharing. Participants expressed the powerful healing component of the retreat, coupled with tools for empowerment. In reflection, healing was possible in this space because there was a shared experience of love and belonging. Esteem was emphasized through empowerment and providing participants with profound knowledge and tools for connection, authenticity, and reflection, such as creative outlets, sharing circles, journaling, movement, and time in nature.

The following photos display elements of wellness that were incorporated into the retreat experience.



Photo 10:

Smoothie bowl breakfast loaded with fresh and local tropical fruit, as well as bulk food toppings.



Photo 11: Lunch at a local permaculture project, local, organic, plant-based food.



Photo

12: Morning yoga practice



Photo 13: Hands-on permaculture workshop planting trees and annual crops.

Food was a major element of the Eco-warrior retreat - planting, harvesting, and eating. Food is incredibly important to our health and wellness and it is often something that contemporary lifestyles are disconnected from. I observed incredible transformation for participants who had never eaten a banana from its original banana bunch, or planted a tree. Connection to the planet can be enhanced through connection to our food and improve personal wellness. Planting and harvesting food was also community based and created an incredible collaborative workforce. Then to sit down for a meal together was deeply fulfilling and gracious.

Practicing yoga as a group also aligned us commonality, as well as individuality. Movement of our bodies



Photo #: The Eco-warrior family.

In conclusion, participating and observing the Eco-warrior retreat was a magnificent learning experience about meeting the needs of humanity. It was beautiful to be part of a supportive community that was encouraging of everyone's personal wellness. It was inspiring to be surrounded by individuals who are deeply concerned about the wellbeing of the planet. It was transformative to be in a new context and explore ourselves together. I see incredible value in wellness retreat tourism that attends to the basic human needs of love and belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization.

### **Takeaways and Findings**

The wellness experiences that I participate in in Thailand and Costa Rica were profoundly transformational and empowering. In reflection, there are beautiful themes that have emerged.

1. Wellness tourism offers tourists an opportunity to gain personal awareness, insight, and knowledge of themselves through spaces that are catered towards and supportive of existential authenticity.
2. Connection to and harmony with nature is an integral component of holistic wellness.
3. Community is an important factor of wellness and a beautiful result of intentional wellness tourism, especially retreat tourism.
4. Wellness tourists are often seeking for self-exploration and learning.
5. Personal transformation is a result of wellness tourism.

While the term wellness has developed as western buzz word, it is my central takeaway that to be well is an innate human desire based on our human needs. The wellness industry has expanded as a commercial experience in our capitalistic era because human wellbeing is compromised by the demanding capitalistic and individualistic lifestyle. At the root of the wellness trend, I see a strong demand for connection. People are craving connection to themselves, connection to others, and connection to the planet. In my experience, wellness tourism has the potential to offer participants connection, both in the short term and the long term. However, I believe that wellness market speaks to the demand for a restructuring of society to meet the needs of humanity, including love and belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization.

## **Conclusion**

I have come to understand wellness as multifaceted, complex and extensive movement that has gained momentum in the urban-modern-contemporary lifestyle as a consequence of systemic

ignorance towards the wellbeing and health of the world. This includes the wellbeing of humans, physically, mentally, and spiritually, the wellbeing of all other living beings on planet Earth, and planet Earth itself.

Wellness is an incredibly interesting market because at the root of much of the sickness that the world is experiencing is the capitalistic system. The wellness industry is attempting to offer capitalistic consumers a relaxed, fulfilling and holistic experience which allows consumers to escape from their hectic, stressful, overstimulated working lifestyle. The capitalistic system which is disseminating the globe, spreading from the west like the flu, is resulting in sickness around the globe, physically, mentally, and spiritually. And as people become ill, they look to the system for help. Western medicine is focused on illness, not wellness, it is reactive, not proactive, and rather than addressing the source of illness, medicine in the west attempts to mask the symptoms of illness. Western modern medicine has its place but does not promote preventative and long term wellness, wellbeing, or health. The global wellness industry while a response to physical, mental and spiritual illness inflicted by capitalism, and its operation within the capitalistic boundaries, is not a capitalistic concept. In fact, wellness, wellbeing, and health is an innate desire for life.

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