

Business Traveller

MIDDLE EAST

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FIT FOR TRAVEL

*Hotels embrace
'health is wealth'
movement*



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SR12 KUWAIT KD1



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FIT

WORDS GEMMA GREENWOOD



The global 'health is wealth' movement accelerated by the pandemic is giving hotels the extra push they need to offer travellers what they really want – flexible fitness and wellbeing choices for their body, mind and spirit

FOR TRAVEL

There's no doubt about it; 2020 has been a game changer for the health, fitness and wellness sector. Pre-COVID-19, the global 'health is wealth' movement had gained strong traction, but nine months into the pandemic, body and mind wellbeing has become a priority for all.

Never before have so many people on this planet turned their focus to moving more, eating better and perhaps most poignantly, practising methods to improve their mental health to reduce anxiety and promote sleep during what has undoubtedly been 'the' most unsettling period in modern history.

Some 59 per cent of people are more conscious about their overall health as a result of COVID-19, and 73 per cent plan to eat and drink healthier, according to the latest research by FMCG Gurus.

The pandemic's impact on our every-day routine has also led to a fast evolution of fitness and wellness trends. With more of us working from home (WFH) than ever before and gyms forced to close for extended periods, we've been fast to adapt.

Video-on-demand fitness classes, available anytime anywhere, have become a saviour for many, breaking up the monotony of yet another day of WFH and enabling us to try new training methods at a time that suits us. Demand for already popular sleep and meditation apps and videos have rocketed too.

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In what Google CEO Sundar Pichai calls “a sign of the times”, daily views of guided meditation videos on YouTube (the streaming site owned by Google) have surged 40 per cent since mid-March, while San Francisco-based relaxation, meditation and sleep app, Calm, was downloaded 3.4 million times in April alone, according to figures from Sensor Tower.

With so much choice and flexibility now available to a new generation of wellness-savvy global citizens, most of whom will soon resume their travel plans, the hospitality sector needs to adapt to meet their post-COVID expectations. Travellers will demand new fitness and wellbeing experiences, from in-room or outdoor workouts to meditation apps and concierge advice on local running routes that maximise sightseeing opportunities.

Goodbye to tick-the-box gyms

Hotels are generally behind the curve when it comes to their wellbeing offering versus guest expectations, according to

Tea Ros, founder and managing director of Strategic Hotel Consulting, who advises hotel owners and operators how to create value for guests.

“Hotel health and fitness solutions are sometimes poorly conceived, resulting in low guest satisfaction,” she says. “Hotel gyms are often a tick-the-box exercise with limited and impractical design, traditionally led by fitness equipment manufacturers.”

We’ve all stepped into a hotel gym and observed random equipment, sometimes packed into a small, poorly ventilated room with no natural daylight and thought, ‘no thanks’.

Ros refers to these gyms as a “non-sensical after thought”.

“Traditionally hotels have been slow to adapt to fitness trends – the movement towards functional training and in-room and outdoor training are just some examples – and in a post-COVID world, where guests have a heightened interest in health, they face the risk of being left behind if they don’t adapt,” she says.

“Traditionally hotels have been slow to adapt to fitness trends”

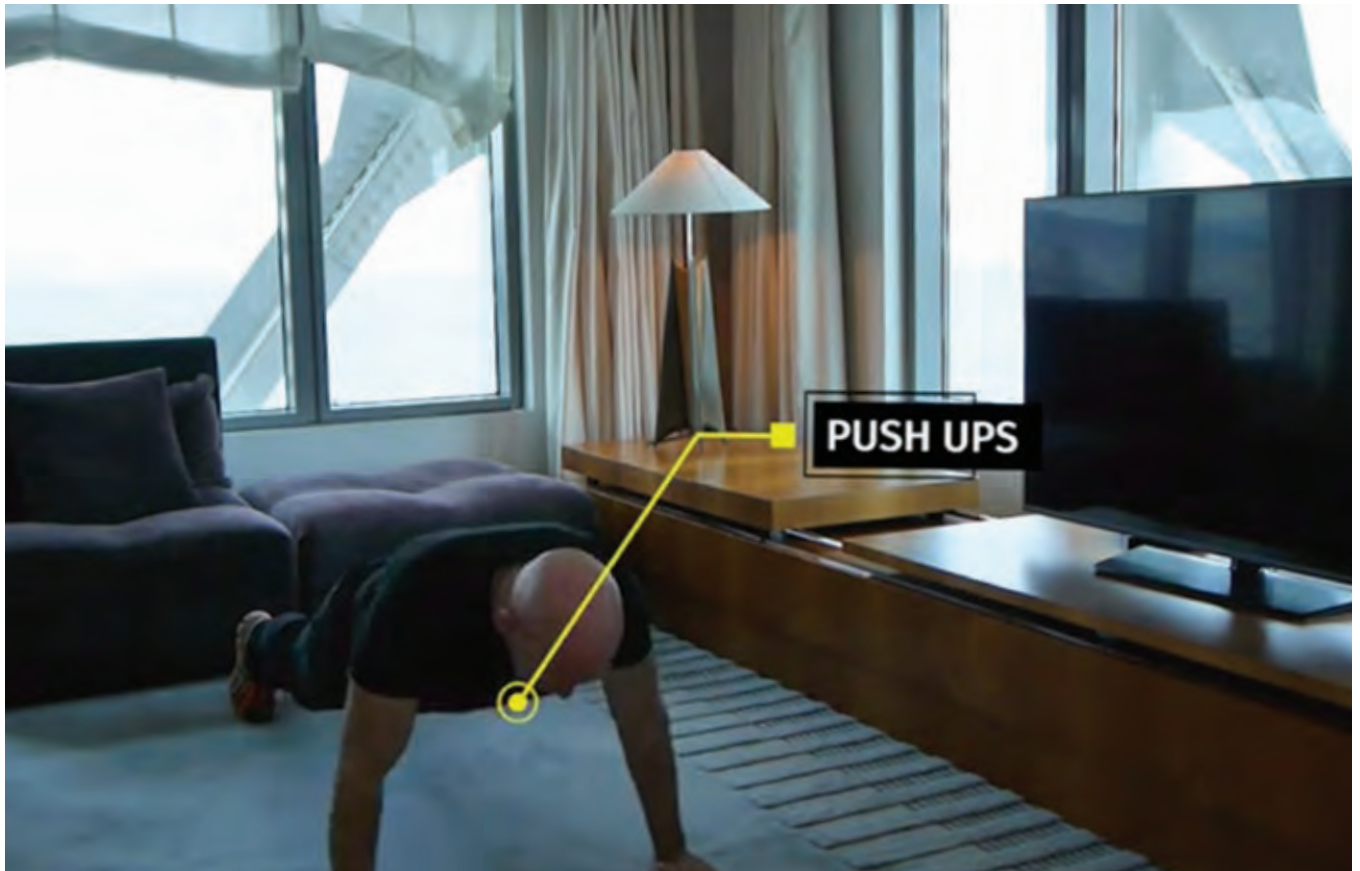
“The immediate paradox is that guests want to exercise during their stay, but many don’t want to go to the gym, so there’s a real opportunity for hotels to differentiate.”

Ros notes that 75 per cent of people are concerned about hotel gym safety as a result of the pandemic, citing the Gensler Hospitality Pulse Survey 2020, while in-room workouts are the favoured option for 27 per cent of business travellers, according to Carlson Wagonlit Travel (CWT).

An even more compelling argument, more than 83 per cent of business travellers now consider the gym and wellbeing activities on offer at a hotel before booking their stay (CWT).

ABOVE: Business travellers are now making fitness a priority (photo credit: Privilee)

PREVIOUS PAGES: Yoga on the Burj Al Arab beach (photo credit: Dubai Tourism)



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Peak performance

With consumer demand for fitness and wellness opportunities at an all-time high, Ros has an action plan to get the hotel industry up to speed. She's teamed up with her partner, Mark Arnall – a Formula

ABOVE: F1 performance coach and physio Mark Arnall

One performance coach and physiotherapist with 23 years of experience keeping F1 drivers in tip-top shape while travelling the world – to create a holistic health and fitness solution that meets the needs of today's guests.

For the last 18 years, Arnall has worked with Finnish F1 champion Kimi Räikkönen and previously with drivers Mika Häkkinen and David Coulthard and during this time, has spent more than 240 nights in hotels every year.

Of course, he's become adept at maintaining his own health and wellbeing and that of his drivers while on the road, developing successful in-hotel programmes and best practices that Ros says translate particularly well to on-the-go business travellers.

Their plan is to partner with “like-minded hotels” to create “first-class health and fitness solutions that motivate guests to lead a healthy lifestyle”.

“With Mark as their fitness ambassador, hotels can take a 360-degree approach to guest training, recovery, jet-lag reduction, nutrition and more,” explains Ros. “He can give their guests access to the tools F1 champions have been using for years, with great results.”

His holistic strategy spans in-room video training and travel/jet-lag recovery programmes, destination exercise planning, mental training tips for best performance, immune system support, advice on how to reduce travel aches and pains and crucially, nutrition and hydration – again, for performance and recovery. Health camps for corporate groups as an alternative executive retreat are also part of the offering.

Ros believes reliance on hotel gyms will soon wane as guests opt for more in-room and outdoor fitness options. Hotels that retain gym spaces will need to “step it up” and “do it properly”, she adds.



Luxury leaders

The tide is already turning in the luxury hotel sector, with aspirational brands including Kempinski, Four Seasons and Fairmont, to name a few, taking the lead in developing wellbeing strategies that tap into current trends.

Kempinski Hotels recently partnered with fitness company Peloton to offer in-room exercise bikes at its hotels in Germany. Guests can stream live cycling and fitness classes from the Peloton Studios in New York and London or watch them on demand.

Kempinski's Chief Quality Officer, Benedikt Jaschke, acknowledges that "today, more than ever, guests want to maintain and improve their fitness when travelling" and look for an "opportunity to continue their regular 'home' training in their hotel room".

Peloton bikes are already proving popular with guests at numerous hotels across the US, Canada and the UK, with all participating properties listed on the Peloton Hotel Finder (hotelfinder.onepeloton.com).

Four Seasons Hotels & Resorts has taken the celebrity trainer route, signing up Harley Pasternak to launch 'Fit With Four Seasons'. The full-body fitness 'guru' is enhancing hotel fitness facilities and creating exclusive fitness programming at Four Seasons properties worldwide. Guests can access challenges and routines in their room or at the Pasternak-designed hotel gym, with special programmes available to combat jetlag or 'desk' fatigue.

The new gym at Four Seasons Hotel Bahrain Bay represents Pasternak's first collaboration in the Middle East with his signature design including intuitive flow from station to station, the latest equipment from HOIST Fitness and a private area dedicated to personal training. It also showcases Pasternak's favourite machine, the MotionCage circuit trainer, ideal for small groups, with multiple stations offering everything from a squat rack and jump station to battle ropes and a punching bag.

Guests on the go can also access his workout videos on the Four Seasons app.



ABOVE: The Pasternak-designed gym at Four Seasons Hotel Bahrain Bay

TOP: Kempinski has partnered with Peloton

"Today, more than ever, guests want to maintain and improve their fitness when travelling"

Fairmont Fit takes matters a little further, offering "a host of paths to fulfil your quest for personal wellbeing – from heart-racing workout routines to heartfelt moments of peace".

This programme hinges around six pillars, including a gear-lending programme with kit delivered to your room; green spaces where you can tap into the healing power of nature; culinary journeys connecting you to the local landscape; immersive spa experiences; cultural exploration and destination discovery for wellbeing; and a new plastic-free sustainable water policy.

Let's get digital

Fairmont's parent company, Accor, has also partnered with wellness technology company Three Sages to launch restorative in-room video programmes at select properties in North and Central America. The tie-up offers Fairmont, Sofitel and Swissôtel guests complimentary yoga, stretching, breath work, mindfulness and sleep practices via the in-room entertainment systems.

For Swissôtel it's another service bolstering its already strong wellness offering, with many properties,



including Swissôtel Al Ghurair in Dubai now featuring re-designed rooms that enhance guest wellbeing through the use of circadian lighting, non-allergenic materials, improved air quality and more.

Pullman is another brand packing a punch in the wellness arena. Having recently rolled out a highly

successful neighbourhood gym concept (Pullman Power Fitness) at several properties, the brand then announced a partnership with New Zealand-based fitness-class giant Les Mills, initially offering guests the brand's globally popular video-on-demand workouts at 50 hotels around the world.

ABOVE: Accor offers on-demand digital wellness experiences with Three Sages

RIGHT: Fairmont Fit offers destination running experiences

The 'Pullman Power Fitness Fuelled by Les Mills' experience includes a complimentary 30-day membership to Les Mills on Demand (LMOD) and Les Mills TV in China – the brand's online fitness library of more than 1,000 workouts. Guests will also have access to virtual group and individual classes from 2021, while live classes and events are on the cards too.

The programme, led by a team of worldwide fitness instructors and entrepreneurs known as the Pullman Fitness Squad, has already launched at Pullman Doha in the Middle East, as well as properties in China and New Zealand.

"With health and fitness now a top-tier priority for people of all ages, there is huge potential for forward-thinking brands like Pullman to meet growing consumer demand for high-quality wellness offerings as part of their travel experience," confirms Keith Burnet, CEO of Les Mills Global Markets.

"We're looking forward to combining the scalability of digital fitness with the thrill of live workouts to offer Pullman guests a world-beating fitness experience that will leave them happier and healthier by the end of their stay."





All the feels

At the very top end of the hotel market the stakes have been raised even higher as post-pandemic, High Net Worth Individuals (HNWIs) demand even more sophisticated wellbeing solutions that improve health and peace of mind.

Raffles Hotels & Resorts has therefore gone all out and crafted its entire guest offering around the wellness movement, acknowledging the integral role it now plays in the traveller experience, moving from a “megatrend” to a key expectation.

Its recently launched ‘Emotional Wellbeing by Raffles’ initiative is a global blueprint for wellness, based around design, nutrition and “rituals for serenity”. This encompasses the exclusively Raffles ‘Second Nature’ hotel design philosophy of creating harmonious and natural environments through Feng Shui and

“The pandemic has led to a super acceleration of peoples’ demand for health and wellbeing”



Biophilia; nutrition to support sleep, travel recovery and the relationship between the mind and digestive system; as well as rituals that promote serenity, peace and revitalisation.

These are delivered by Raffles Butlers who are now trained to curate and guide the entire guest wellness journey.

“As the expectation for wellness luxury travel continues to grow, we must look beyond material luxuries to experiences that balance the mind, body and spirit,” explains Emlyn Brown, Global Vice President, Well-Being, Luxury & Premium Brands, Accor. “At Raffles we believe that true luxury is not about what you do, but how you feel. Once the pandemic is under control and our luxury guests return to their normal routines, there will be an even greater demand for wellness activities that embrace the key health modalities of nutrition, mindfulness and sleep.”



The democratisation of fitness

Brown acknowledges that until recently, comprehensive guest wellbeing offerings have focused almost exclusively on luxury travellers and although his remit is to create wellness strategies for Accor's premium and luxury brands, he stresses the post-COVID need for a "democratisation of fitness", making it accessible "to the largest number of guests possible".

"The pandemic has led to a super acceleration of peoples' demand for health and wellbeing and our message is clear – we want fitness to be central to the hotel experience across every single brand, making it available to all generations and demographics, enabling them to exercise the way they want to and nudging them towards healthier practices," he says.

Brown notes that even pre-COVID-19, 75 to 80 per cent of guests across all of Accor's 35-plus brands were making a conscious effort to look after their wellbeing, so this mindset has "become the norm".

With the pandemic accelerating this wellness movement, the hotel industry must catch up and respond with solutions that tackle fitness, nutrition and mindfulness, he says.

"Guests want to move, so it has become an important part, if not 'the' most important part of the hotel wellbeing offering," he adds.

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Emotional Wellbeing by Raffles; The wellbeing experience at Raffles Dubai; Swissôtel Al Ghurair has a strong fitness focus; Pullman Power Fitness Fuelled by Les Mills

Community fitness calls

When it comes to hotel gyms, Brown says that generally speaking, most are "not what they should be". The "big banks of treadmills" that were a differentiator for hotels 25 years ago, no longer cut it, he adds.

Accor is therefore looking to draw on key elements of its "game-changing" Pullman Power Fitness concept to create modern experiences for today's gym-savvy travellers across its portfolio of brands.



Launched in October, Pullman Power Fitness replaces the "one-size-fits-all" hotel gym environment. Pitched as the "world's first boutique fitness hotel brand", it also introduces a new social dimension to the guest stay.

"Hotels have been focused on bringing in people for community experiences in their lobbies, bars and restaurants, but the one space that is probably the most dynamic, with the most potential for animated community activity, is our gyms, and this is what started the approach for Pullman," explains Brown.

"We wanted to create our own fitness brand, drawing on all the modern elements of exercise so that new and sophisticated users could come in and do all the things they can do back home, if not more. From HIIT and recovery zones and equipment similar to what you might find in a CrossFit space, to video-on-demand exercise areas, it's very attractive, fun, dynamic and community based in a highly-stylised environment."

With the pandemic amplifying demand for health and wellbeing solutions, hotels are in a "great position" to offer them says Brown. The industry should not only "match and mirror" this trend, but "exceed expectations" through guest education and exceptional experiences, he stresses.

The hotel concierge will take on a new role in this respect, he adds, offering a much more wellness-focused check in.

In the near future we can expect our concierge's knowledge to go beyond practical advice on places to eat, taxi prices and shop opening times. They will be expected to provide information on the top Pilates class or boot camp in town, where the locals go for their post-workout protein shake and the best running route for sightseeing and cultural hotspots. Insider intelligence on wellness will be considered as essential as who and what to tip and how best to travel to the airport during rush hour. **BT**



DESTINATION FITNESS

From desert cycle tracks and city-wide fitness drives, to dedicated sports districts and high-altitude treks, the UAE offers travellers the chance to explore and stay in shape at the same time

The UAE has become a health and fitness destination in its own right, appealing to visitors who want to stay active while discovering the country's diverse natural and manmade beauty. For many, it's also a chance to become immersed in every day UAE life. Here are our top five picks of fitness experiences worth a try.

Al Qudra Cycling Track

A popular destination with adventure seekers and fitness enthusiasts alike, this 86km cycle track promises amazing views of the desert and the chance to catch a glimpse of local wildlife – including the Arabian oryx. Whether you're a professional or novice rider, it's an experience not to be missed, particularly at sunrise and sunset. There are rest stations and restrooms along the way if you need to take a break and the Trek UAE bike shop, located at the end of Al Qudra Road, is a great place to rent your bike. visitdubai.com

ABOVE: Hodayriyat Island is Abu Dhabi's new active lifestyle destination

RIGHT: Privilege gives members access to fitness activities galore

#DUBAI30X30

Dubai Fitness Challenge (#DUBAI30X30) is an annual celebration of fitness and wellness and you're invited to join. Launched in 2017, the challenge is simple: complete 30 minutes of activity each day for 30 days, with a month-long calendar of free workouts, fitness events and wellness-centric entertainment available on tap to inspire you and keep you moving. You can run in the desert dunes, challenge yourself to a boot camp, swim in open water, cycle through the city streets or take part in a free mega outdoor exercise class. Dubai has also teamed up with top fitness trainers to provide 30 high-tech workout stations at locations emirate wide, so there is no excuse not to exercise when you visit. You've just missed the 2020 DUBAI30X30, which ran from October 30 to November 28, but there's plenty of time to dust off your training shoes or roll out your yoga mat for the 2021 edition. dubaifitnesschallenge.com



The Privilee app

If you're a regular UAE visitor, consider splashing out on Privilee, an app-based lifestyle membership offering exclusive access to the country's top leisure and fitness venues. Members get unlimited access to the best beach resorts, pools, gyms, fitness classes, tennis and squash courts, kids' clubs, plus spa deals and discounts at hundreds of bars and restaurants, so it's worth the investment. Privilee memberships can be purchased annually, or for one- or four-month time periods, from as little as AED 529 (US\$141) per month.

privilee.ae

Hudayriyat Island

Abu Dhabi has launched a new district dedicated to sports, leisure and entertainment on Hudayriyat Island. This active lifestyle destination spoils you for choice with sports fields and courts, jogging tracks, cycle tracks, footpaths, a bike park and indoor fitness facilities, as well as Abu Dhabi's newest outdoor adventure hub, Circuit X, featuring a BMX Track, Splash Park, High Rope Park and a Skate Park. Hudayriyat is also home to the UAE's biggest permanent obstacle course site at OCR Park, merging obstacle course racing and endurance fitness with the latest in technology to create an innovative new fitness challenge. For leisure, there's glamping and stargazing experiences at Bab Al Nojoum, the Hudayriyat Heritage Trail located along the waterfront, plus a promenade lined with cafés and restaurants, a skate park and a children's splash park and play area. If you fancy a swim, access to Hudayriyat Beach is free and features a dedicated swim zone.

hudayriyatisland.ae

Jebel Jais Hiking

Grab your hiking boots and head for the hills, or rather the Hajar mountain range formed more than 70 million years ago in the eastern part of Ras Al Khaimah. More specifically, Jebel Jais, the UAE's highest peak at 1,934 metres above sea level, is home to six unique hiking trails of various difficulty levels. Spanning some 16km in total, the trails take you through the diverse mountain ecosystem and if you're lucky, you might bump into a mountain goat or donkey. The hikes are split between the upper and lower segment of Jebel Jais. You can opt for a self-guided tour or hire a guide through a local tour operator.

visitjebeljais.com **BT**

