

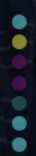
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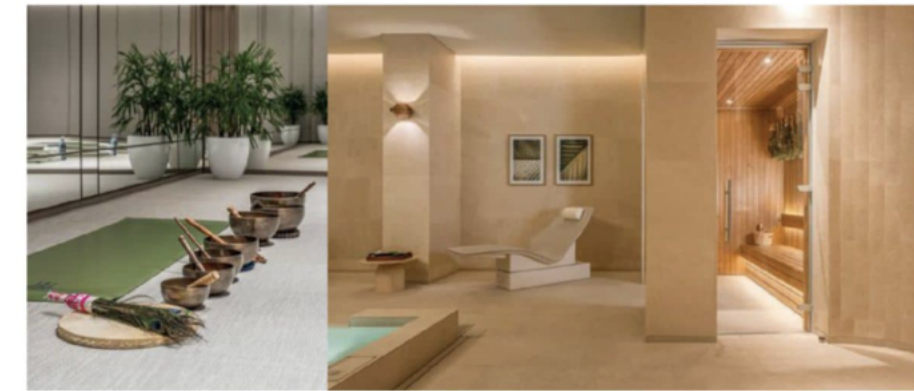
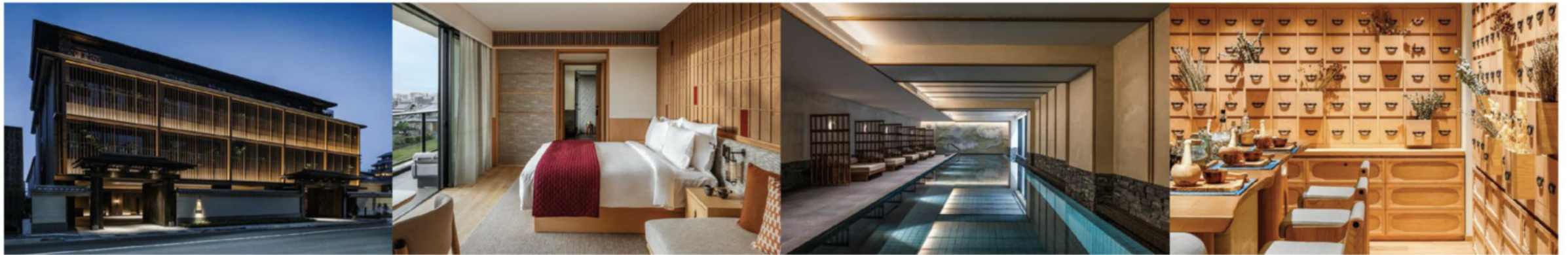
TWOSET VIOLIN

EDDY CHEN AND BRETT YANG RESET



TOP ROW
Six Senses Kyoto

BOTTOM ROW
(Left) Huvanfen Fushi
(Right) Banyan Tree
Spa Dubai



The Year Of Wellness Tourism

LOOKING AT THE SLATE OF HOTELS—AND HOTEL SPAS—OPENING THIS YEAR, 2025'S PRIMARY TRAVEL TREND MIGHT BE WELLNESS. BLINK DESIGN GROUP CO-FOUNDER CLINT NAGATA SHARES HIS PERSPECTIVE.

WORDS SUFFIAN HAKIM PHOTOS BLINK DESIGN GROUP

I HATE BEGINNING STORIES with statistics, but they're too staggering to ignore. According to the Global Wellness Institute, the wellness tourism market is expected to reach US\$1.3 trillion (\$\$1.76 trillion) in 2025 alone. The Singapore Tourism Board (STB) is aware of this, launching a huge concept and price revenue tender in July last year to develop and operate a wellness attraction on the Marina South Coastal site. Hotels across the world are ramping up their spa offerings, while upcoming new properties are curating experiences around their guests' wellness and well-being. We are entering the golden age of Wellness Tourism.

One man playing a significant role the Wellness Tourism experience in some of the world's best hotels is Clint Nagata, founder of BLINK Design Group. Founded 18 years ago in Bangkok and Singapore, the group has grown its portfolio from South-east Asia to Europe and the Middle East. The Hawaiian native, Bangkok-based Nagata, along with his team, are the architects and designers of famed properties such as the Regent Phu Quoc, Roku Kyoto, Six Senses Kyoto and the W Dubai. Presently, Nagata and his team are renovating the spa at Dubai's One&Only resort, and a wellness-centric Six Senses in France's Loire Valley among several projects.

Nagata is seeing the Wellness Tourism trend first hand. "There's a shift now to spas and branded residences. Even within these branded residences, more and more have treatment rooms," he observes. "Spas have changed from the old days. It has grown beyond the old days where they go, 'Do you want oil massage, sports massage or Thai massage?'"

Nagata continues, "But now, like in Six Senses Kyoto, there are all kinds of treatments now based on the six senses—there's sound treatment, there are treatments based on smells, that uses water, light therapy. The entire experience is considered. In the waiting area, there are zero-gravity chairs."

"What are those?" I asked him, picturing a nondescript classroom chair floating about in outer space.

"They're chairs that can be adjusted such that your feet and your heart are in the same horizontal line. That's the best position for your heart, because it doesn't have to work against gravity. That's when your body is in perfect balance," he replies. "I bought one for my house after I saw it when we did the spa."

It is only recently that the group has broadened its practice to include specialty spa design. They are usually called in for big picture

projects, where Nagata's vision shapes everything from the layout of a property to the materials, colours and forms of a property, all in line with the group's ethos of placemaking. With this, they create spaces and environments dedicated to well-being, while retaining the history and identity of the town, city or even locale that they're in.

Clint emphasises the importance of viewing projects through the eyes of a local—"as if we were born and raised there"—ensuring that designs resonate with both locals and visitors.

Adding spa design to its already impressive portfolio was something Nagata and his team took in their stride. "We don't typically do designs that are busy and over-the top. It's always refined and calming, so it's ideal for a spa. The other spa we're doing right now is in Baku, and it follows similar concepts (as Six Senses Kyoto) around nature and texture, with curved, fluid spaces. But we elevated that. In Baku, the textures of the walls in the hotel and spa are based on the old walls from the historical sites of Azerbaijan."

This gives new perspective to the burgeoning trend of wellness tourism—that discerning travelers do not want cookie-cutter spas, but something steeped in the place they're in.

Nagata explains, "Before, architects and designers will do what they

think feels right for a project, but now, it's about telling a story, and differentiating yourself from other spas. We're looking at another project in Niseko that embodies the concept of water as the source of life. The spa wants to follow water through the seasons, starting with snow in winter, and then it melts and goes into streams."

Which leads Nagata to his next observation about the trend—revitalising winter resorts that become ghost towns in the summer.

"We're working with Banyan Tree on one of its ski resorts. But they no longer want to be a ski resort—they want to be an all-season resort. So they're promoting summer sports and activities like biking and trail hiking, as well as their spa."

Going by the projects that the group is working on, it is a clear indicator of the trend playing out. Blink is also working on properties in Normandy, Panglao and Mauritius—all of them with a strong spa or wellness component.

As these properties get completed this year or next, they will bring with them legions of tourists looking to these places for a health boost, or to improve their physical and mental wellbeing.

After the health scares of the Covid years, we're glad that 2025 will offer the perfect counterpoint. **AM**