



World Retreat Initiative Briefing Paper 2017

What is the aim of your initiative?

The WORLD (Wellness Outcomes from Residential Lifestyle Destination) Retreat Initiative aims to document the health impact of retreat experiences through scientifically credible research that includes a global survey on the characteristics, motivations, and experiences of retreat guests as well as research into the clinical, psychological, physiological and metabolic impact of retreat experiences.

What or who are the current “news makers” or trends in the initiative’s industry/sector?

The past year has seen the publication of a number of scientific studies demonstrating the health benefits of retreat experiences and the ‘vacation effect.’ These studies include research by Deepak Chopra and Elissa Epel’s group that have shown changes in gene expression and metabolomics profiles with improved regulation of stress responses and immune function, along with Dean Ornish’s group who have shown improved telomerase activity, telomere length and gene expression. Marc Cohen’s group has also documented multiple clinical, physiological, psychological and cognitive function benefits after a one-week retreat experience with most improvements being maintained after six weeks.

Name some (high level) challenges facing your industry/sector?

The retreat sector remains a boutique industry with retreats differing in their offerings and philosophy, tied to specific locations and operators. Few retreats have reproduced their business models across multiple locations, and the industry is challenged with providing continuity of care despite the recent introduction of online coaching support.

Another challenge is documenting guests’ health and economic outcomes using validated measures, and interacting effectively with the wider medical and corporate community so that retreats can attract medical referrals, tax incentives and health insurance rebates, as well as be included in corporate wellness programs.

Are there any “heroes” (either companies or individuals) who stand out in your industry/sector?

Unhealthy lifestyles are recognized as a major factor in the development and exacerbation of many chronic diseases, and the retreat sector has an opportunity to promote healthy lifestyles through immersive residential experiences that deliver enhanced health and reverse chronic disease. Thus by demonstrating the medical conditions and clinical populations that are likely to receive the greatest benefit from retreat experiences, the retreat industry can make itself relevant to the medical community and health insurers and expand its offerings. The industry also has an opportunity to demonstrate an ROI for businesses and thereby engage with corporate wellness programs.

Is there noteworthy investment happening in your industry/sector?

This GWI Initiative has fostered a global consortium of retreat operators to make a three-year commitment to invest in university-based research into retreat experiences. These retreats (including Lapinha (Brazil), Sheenjoy (China), Danubius Hotel Group (Europe), The Golden Door (Australia) and SunSwept Reports (St Lucia)) are supporting the Global Retreat Survey, which will be conducted in nine languages (English, Japanese, Mandarin, Russian, German, Hungarian, Slovakian, Czech and Portuguese), along with the WORLD Retreat Study, which will explore the effects of retreat experiences on stress, anxiety, sleep, quality of life, health symptoms, cognitive function and metabolism in different clinical populations.

Name any key accomplishments (milestones) made by your initiative?

This initiative has secured a full-time research student at RMIT University to undertake retreat-based research that includes implementing the Global Retreat Survey, which went live in July 2017. We have also published the results of previous research and have completed a systematic review of 23 studies of retreat experiences that’s been written up and submitted for publication in a peer-reviewed medical journal. We have also developed an online assessment tool that will enable retreat guests to participate in future research and record measures of depression, anxiety, stress, mood, sleep, health symptoms, quality of life and cognitive function.

Chair: Dr. Marc Cohen - profmarccohen@gmail.com

Vice Chair: Samantha Foster

Initiative Members

Roberto Arjona
Hakan Balcan
Andrew Barnard
Nils Behrens

Dr. Daniel S F Boarim
Alex Glasscock
Melissa Ingram

Vickum Nawagamuwage
Marion Schneider
Mike Wallace