



Trends in dining and wellness



By JÜRGEN SCHARKOSI

Dreams are one of the main products tourism offers. The impact civilisation has on our life adds specific needs to those dreams. The ability to recognise trends ahead of time divides the leaders from the rest, regardless if we work in mainstream or niche markets, leisure or business, hotel, resort or cruise industry.

This article focuses on trends in dining and wellness, two elements of tourism which are very much influenced by the lifestyle in different consumer markets. It gives an overview how various hotel, resort and cruise ship companies are willing and able to meet the demands and expectations of their 'guests', or end users of the products they sell.

Following the ban of smoking in the US and some parts of Europe, we now deal with the concerns of food and stress, two major issues of our society. Low cost fast food and reduced body movements are mainly accountable for a vast growing number of obese people. The constant increase of stress in all aspects of our life creates a demand for wellness centres, spas and therapy centres to treat body and mind.

Dining Trends

Casual Dining

Casual dining is about feeling well before, during and after having a meal. Especially guests who earn their living by appearing in formal attire on their working place, appreciate the opportunity to dine in an up-market restaurant with relaxed atmosphere.

The days of big portions, six course menus and waiters with formal black & white attires are gone. Guests do no longer want to feel 'stuffed' after a dinner, hardly being able to move. Light and easily digestible meals with names one can understand are now found on the menu of successful restaurants. The number of different dishes is not as important as the offer to order more than one size of the same dish. Fast, friendly and efficient service has become more significant, as the time thought to be available for dining decreases parallel with the number of other activities offered.

Sushi dining onboard
MSC MUSICA.



Mike Lonaglie

Healthy Food

Healthy, but not diet foods are in demand. Fresh-est, naturally grown food is much preferred to artificially engineered or farmed products. The word 'Low' plays a role for the growing number of waist-conscious consumer and is found on menus with low-carb, low-cholesterol or low-fat dishes. Writing the number of calories or joules on a menu has faded out, as it adds to the stress of selecting the choice of taste and combine with the numbers allowed to take in. These days, customers expect from a good restaurant that the food served is fresh and healthy, without harmful additives and substances.

Dining Experience

Adding that 'extra experience' has not only become a trend in shopping, but also in dining.

Full service restaurants of any size offer customers to participate in the creation of their dishes. The same is offered in the choice of seating. The assignment of tables by a member of staff with a chance to end up with someone who is keen on discussing topics of little or no interest to the other party is not really what people are looking for these days. Neither is having to appear for dinner at the same time every day of your holiday. Customers expect to take part in decisions and want to have more freedom of choice.

Market style restaurants have gradually replaced traditional buffets. Queuing for food is definitely not acceptable to the majority of customers of resorts and cruise lines. Market style means being able to look at the raw or semi prepared food dishes and have a say in the way they are seasoned, prepared or garnished.

The concept does not necessarily impose self-service. Table service can be implemented just as well as a regular restaurant would offer, with the exception

that guests are able to choose their preferred dishes by looking at the products rather than a menu and participate actively in the decision of size, flavour and variety.

Entertainment plays much more of a role in dining areas as ever before. This should not mean the return of singing waiters or musicians fiddling away at the dinner table until paid a tip. It refers to tasteful theme restaurants, interactive guest participation, contemporary table side food preparation and mostly charming waiting staff with charisma, good overall education and feeling for discretion.

Ambience

Very popular are restaurant layouts which are partly furnished with soft settees, arm chairs and low tables, not of Victorian but opulent, contemporary style. Appropriate lighting and background music are as important as the meal itself. Clean appearance, lot of attention on detail and the presence of appropriate art pieces round up the atmosphere where guests prefer to enjoy their meals.

Small, separate gathering areas where finger food snacks and trendy cocktails can be consumed are breaking down the huge dining arenas and give the living room / dining room character where people like to relax and take their meals.

Brands

Nothing goes without the presence of branded items. Regardless of purchased or self-created, the constant exposure of brands in everyday life has indoctrinated consumers to a degree, that the absence of branded products might be taken somehow as a missing part of their holiday. Especially popular in the coffee and tea service, branding has become a tool of promoting and selling products over and above the traditional way and is part of the lifestyle of our society.



Corona, probably the best branded beer in the world.

Wellness

Spa

An entity devoted to enhancing overall well-being through a variety of professional services that encourage the renewal of mind, body and spirit.

The term SPA is most likely derived from the Belgian town Spa in the province of Liège.

Since medieval times, illnesses caused by deficiency of iron were treated by drinking the iron bearing spring water found in Spa and other places in Europe. It is often suggested that the word Spa is an acronym of various Latin phrases, such as 'Sanitas per Aqua', meaning 'health through water' or 'Solus per Aqua',



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meaning 'water in itself'.

Big portions are out, healthy food is in.

For us, Spa, or Wellness Centre, means an additional service to our guests which enjoys increasing popularity. Wellness centres are a good fit with hotels, holiday resorts and cruise ships, where guests are out to treat themselves and want to return home feeling and looking better. Combined with related therapies such as anti-ageing and rejuvenating beauty treatments, or even cosmetic surgery, the wellness of people has become a respectable source of income and branded by-products sometimes generate more income than the treatment itself. A spa-cuisine menu is often added, offering appropriately designed healthy and light dishes to complement the well priced treatment at the Spa.

Add-ons like yoga are popular and endow with peace of mind.

Environment

A certain amount of space is to be provided in order to reach a stage where one can switch off and relax. Lighting and background music play an important role and so does tastefully scented air. Professional operators also make sure that their spa is constructed in a way to keep out disturbing noises from other areas.

Spa Concepts

The number of first class quality spas, spa concepts and therapies which evolved during the past two decades is simply countless. Amongst the best rated in Europe are the Thalassa therapy in Cyprus, various types of Fango therapies in Northern Italy



Relax and forget that you are travelling!

and the unique Geothermal seawater treatment in Iceland at the the Blue Lagoon. Long standing US favourites Golden Door and Canyon Ranch continue to be developed further, in Asia the Banyan Tree Spa concept is amongst the most popular ones.

Regardless of Day-Spa, Destination Spa or Add-On Spa, the visit to the place which is making body and mind feeling better is becoming more popular as stress on the job and in everyday life increases. The well meant reduction of physical work for the population of western countries results in jobs where body movement is usually restricted to lifting a pencil. The body, not being able to adapt at the same rate of speed as civilisation progresses, is therefore in need of artificially invoked movement, which spas and fitness centres provide.

Stress is not only imposed on us through work, but by the ever increasing number of consumer goods and the consequent battle of retailers for market shares. By hammering our heads with advertisements, special offers, new developments and “must have” messages, it managed to turn the once quite and peaceful Christmas time into a night mare for many.

So, it is very clear that the demand for treatment at Spas and Wellness Centres will grow as long as the way of life we are living right now continues.

Trends of Dining and Spa onboard Cruise Ships

Cruise lines are of course very much in line with the awareness of demands and the implementation of such on their cruise ships.

Building a number of new dimension mega ships every year is an ideal platform to integrate the newest trends and present them with state of the art technology. The idea that your spa and restaurant travels with you while you visit places which you might not



Treatment on the St Nazaire-built CRYSTAL SERENITY.

choose to visit if you had to stay there on land remains the strongest reason to choose a holiday onboard a cruise ship.

Keeping up or exceed consumer expectations with developments in the hotel-resort business is theoretically possible, but there are a few differences which of course count when it comes to the actual experience.

A fact is also, that cruise ship passengers compare lifestyle, services and value for money with that of their every day life, with the exposure to trends and developments they experience themselves where they live, through business travel or through talking to rel-

atives and friends. So, it is not only hotels that cruise ships are to consider when offering such products, but High Street food concepts and Day Spas as well.

Space

No doubt that the new mega class cruisers provide more space than their 900 passenger predecessors, but they are built that way to improve the scale of economy and not for providing more square meters for services which are usually included. Hotels & resorts will therefore maintain the advantage of providing more pro-rata space per guest.

Included Services

The traditional way of including food, entertainment and the use of facilities such as a wellness centre and spa proves to be challenging when it comes to return of investment and financing high class operations. If charged through the passage ticket it does not compare favourably with other holiday offers. Cruise lines have gone as far as charging for therapy treatments and signature dishes in a la carte restaurants, but charging extra for the use of a facility has not proved practical.

Hard Selling

While guests with US origin are used to the way of paying staff through a gratuity system, Europeans remain to be of the opinion that staff should be paid by the employer and not through themselves. Whatever the way, the bottom line remains pretty much the same, as good staff wants to earn a decent salary, regardless who pays them.

The payment through commissions and tips however, needs to be carefully monitored, as overambitious staff will try their best to improve earnings through hard selling. Despite company regulations and staff guide lines, there are still a lot more staff who apply hard selling methods than those with ability to sell through selling skills and charm.

This, of course is not going down well with most customers and leaves a foul taste after a dinner or spa treatment which is not cheap anyway.

Branded Facilities

Contracting brand spas and dining facilities onboard cruise ships has been done, but never really took off as a large scale business. In the food business it ranges from McDonald's in the early 90's to Joe's Stone Crabs or the signature dishes at Todd English's onboard QM2. Spa brands have a history with Golden Door onboard the QE2 and the big plans of a Canyon Ranch dedicated Spa ship remained on the drawing board.

Also day spa concepts such as UK based Holme's place tried to establish themselves onboard cruise ships, but were not able to find a solution for adapting their operating concept to the rules of the high seas.

Pricing

When choosing a vacation onboard a cruise ship, passengers still have the illusion of paying less for items and services because ships operate in a tax and duty free environments. Although this applies to a small number of products in the shop, it is not reflected in the consumer prices of bar, a la carte restaurant or spa items. This should not say that the value for money is negative, but it is then, when products and services are

From the research folder

Just returned from a spa vacation, where I accomplished the usual goals: pampering via treatments ranging from massages to facials; lots of exercise, from a few dips in the swim-against-the-current pool to hiking and bicycling; and even a bit of weight loss, from sticking as closely as possible to healthy menu entrees.

But there's one difference. This spa vacation wasn't experienced at one of America's traditional health-oriented fiefdoms, such as Golden Door or Canyon Ranch. Nor was it a resort-with-spa vacation, at a place like West Virginia's Greenbrier or Colorado's Broadmoor. Instead, my week-long spa adventure took place onboard Princess Cruises' CARIBBEAN PRINCESS.

And I'm not the only one. Passengers are increasingly drawn to onboard spas and, as a result, cruise lines are tweaking facilities on existing ships – and creating bigger-than-ever spas on new ones. Our trend-spotters report:

Sea days always book up fast and at full price – as do days in which a formal night is on the agenda.

Some onboard spas have abandoned occasional (and unpredictable) sale prices and moved to a two-tiered pricing level – higher for sea days, lower for port days.


In at least one case – we've seen it on Royal Caribbean – spas on newer ships charge significantly higher prices for treatments than on older vessels. For instance, on a recent trip onboard VOYAGER OF THE SEAS, its spa charged \$110 for a 50-minute massage; on a cruise the week before on the older (albeit recently refurbished) EMPRESS OF THE SEAS we paid \$99 for the same treatment.

Be forewarned: On ships where Steiner operates spas, its beauty technicians are strongly encouraged to sell their premium-priced products prior to the end of the treatment. The term "hard sell" comes to mind. I had one experience where a Steiner massage therapist actually cut my session short by five minutes to squeeze in the product pitch. Now I just say "no thanks" before the treatment begins.

Ultimately, cruise ship spas, which are a key component of cruising's ability to offer a health-oriented experience at sea, add a magnificent touch to any cruise. And some – and we offer our editor's picks of best spas at sea – can absolutely elevate the experience to an even higher level.



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compared to small and exclusive high street and boutique outlets. And this is when a large scale operation faces certain challenges. It simply becomes a matter of taste and comparison of a number of other things which have to be right, including the weather. 

All smile on another French-built cruiser, the WIND SURF.



Jürgen Scharkosi

Renowned for a track record of delivering innovative products which changed traditions in the hotel and cruise industry, Jürgen Scharkosi keeps up to date by writing editorials. The hobby author conducts his research to a great extent by visiting new venues and experiencing first hand what they have to offer, but also through an international network of insiders.

Born in Austria, Jürgen has lived and worked abroad for most of his life and is familiar with many of the cultures and traditions around the globe.

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