



From salt to saunas: The global wellness economy is worth trillions

A friend in Singapore sent me a picture of some Kneipp bathing salt crystals that supposedly help to induce soothing sleep. 'Is this a German brand? Germany does such great wellness products. Can you bring me a couple of items on your next trip home?' I googled the company and learnt about the fascinating life of theologian Sebastian Kneipp, a pioneer in hydrotherapy and holistic healing and whose patients included a pope.

by Ming Wong

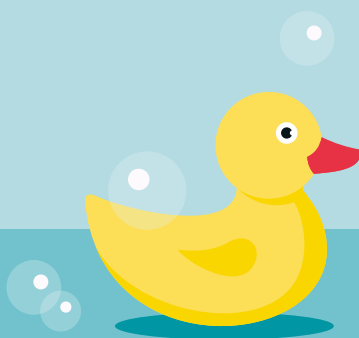
Wellness - what it entails

Indeed, homeopathic and wellness products such as creams or lotions, nutritional food and drink, sleepwear, pillows, socks and exercise gear are a big part of the German wellness industry. For many people, the word 'wellness' also conjures images of saunas, thermal baths, cosmetic salons and massages. Kur treatments in clinics set in idyllic towns used to be commonly prescribed by doctors for overstressed patients. These tend not to be covered by health insurance anymore, but Germans still love hot baths in beautiful settings. Relaxation and selfpampering is good for health. A more recent development is the idea of wellness as workplace health or employee wellness programmes.

Spa towns - prestige and problems

Internationally, the wellness spa market is established. Think of Turkish hammams, Japanese onsens, or Korea with its omnipresent jjimjilbang or saunas which sometimes feel like a second home, what with their amenities for sleeping, eating and lounging. Germany received an extra boost in 2021 when three of its spa towns – Baden-Baden, Bad Ems and Bad Kissingen – went on the UNESCO Great Spa Towns of Europe list. Baden-Baden's elegant Kurhaus is also 200 years old in 2024, so the city has a significant spa heritage to celebrate.

But many less-known spa towns struggle to keep going. Bathing regulars tend to be elderly clientele. Younger people prefer travelling abroad or more up-to-date facilities. German Textil-frei or Freikörperkultur used to be a traditional part of German culture. Many spa facilities now have bathing with swimming costumes to attract new clients. Besides the costs of running huge premises with a high demand for water and electricity, spas also have problems recruiting personnel - sauna and pool attendants, fitness trainers, masseuses, physiotherapists. etc.



Wellness associations - working for the industry

The Düsseldorf-based German Wellness Verband is the association that consults on jobs, training and certifications. It recognises excellence in spa management by giving out annual Best Spa Manager awards at FIBO in Cologne (an acronym for fitness and body-building), the largest health and fitness trade show in Germany. <https://www.wellnessverband.de/>

Internationally, the Global Wellness Institute (GWI) spearheads initiatives and advocates both public institutions and business in its mission to improve wellness worldwide. The GWI estimates that the world wellness economy is worth US\$4.5 trillion annually. While Covid dealt a heavy blow to public bathing, it also caused people to embrace wellness as a dominant lifestyle. The German Fitness Association (DSSV e.V) says that fitness centres and health facilities can now claim more than 11 million members. Consumer concerns have driven a lot of business and technology innovations, creating new sectors such as wellness travel, wellness supplements and wellness apps. In particular, the GWI has identified mental wellness as the new industry bubble worth an estimated US\$131 billion.

Vokabeltraining

selfpampering
Selbstverwöhnung

premises
Gelände

to spearhead smth
etwas anführen

supplements
hier: Nahrungsergänzungsmittel

