

## Health, wellness, and entrepreneurship in post-COVID tourism: Adaptation, innovation and sustainability

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### Abstract

Wellness tourism is today one of the fastest-growing and most strategic sectors of the global tourism industry, as it directly connects health, mental balance, and improved quality of life with the tourism experience. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted new social and individual needs, accelerating travelers' shift toward safer, more sustainable, and meaningful forms of tourism. In this context, wellness tourism is being redefined as a holistic model of experiences that integrates nature, self-awareness, mental health, and culture. This article analyzes the key post-COVID adaptations of the sector, emphasizing innovation, digital transformation, and the personalization of services. Furthermore, it examines the role of sustainability and cultural entrepreneurship as levers to enhance the authenticity of the experience and foster local development. Particular attention is given to Greece, which possesses significant comparative advantages for the development of wellness tourism. Finally, the need for comprehensive strategies combining economic efficiency with social, cultural, and environmental value is highlighted.

**Keywords:** Wellness Tourism; Post-COVID Tourism; Health; Mental Wellness; Sustainable Development; Holistic Experience; Cultural Entrepreneurship

### 1. Introduction

The concept of health and wellness in tourism has been radically redefined in recent years, especially in the post-pandemic era. Wellness tourism is no longer limited to passive forms of relaxation or spa services but has evolved into a holistic and multidimensional model of experiences that focuses on the traveler's physical, mental, and emotional balance. It encompasses practices related to mental health, mindful nutrition, physical activity, contact with nature, and personal development, reflecting a broader shift toward a more sustainable and human-centered approach to travel (Johnston et al., 2020; Benson & Henderson, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst for this shift, revealing the vulnerability of modern societies and the growing human need for safety, health, and meaningful experiences. Travelers, affected by prolonged periods of isolation, anxiety, and uncertainty, increasingly seek meaningful journeys that actively contribute to improving their quality of life. In this context, wellness tourism emerges not as a luxury choice but as a key tool for prevention, rehabilitation, and overall well-being enhancement (Lemke & Popp, 2022; Hjalager, 2021).

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At the same time, post-pandemic tourism development requires innovation and sustainability. Destinations and enterprises are called to adopt new practices that integrate health protocols, digital solutions, personalized services, and environmentally responsible strategies. Linking wellness with sustainable development strengthens not only the resilience of the tourism sector but also the long-term prosperity of local communities and ecosystems.

Consequently, studying health and wellness in post-pandemic tourism is of particular importance, as it illuminates the adaptations, innovative approaches, and sustainable practices shaping the future of tourism. Understanding these developments is a critical step in designing strategies that respond to contemporary traveler needs and the challenges of an ever-changing global environment.

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## 2. Impacts of COVID-19 on Wellness Tourism

The COVID-19 pandemic caused profound and multi-level impacts on the tourism sector, with wellness tourism experiencing significant restructuring in both demand and services offered. Travel restrictions, health protocols, and widespread feelings of insecurity led to a radical re-evaluation of how people travel and take care of their health during vacations.

One of the most evident impacts was the shift toward smaller, decentralized, and less crowded tourism facilities. Travelers avoided mass tourism and preferred destinations offering privacy, low visitor density, and a heightened sense of safety. Rural areas, natural landscapes, and secluded wellness accommodations saw increased demand, promoting a gentler and more sustainable tourism model (UNWTO, 2020; 2022). This trend helped reduce pressure on over-saturated destinations and opened new opportunities for local communities.

At the same time, the pandemic highlighted the importance of mental health. Anxiety, isolation, and uncertainty experienced worldwide increased demand for experiences promoting emotional balance and inner well-being. Mindfulness programs, meditation, yoga, and relaxation techniques were dynamically integrated into wellness tourism packages, shifting the focus from physical care to overall psycho-physical restoration (Lemke & Popp, 2022). Wellness tourism thus began to function also as a mechanism for mental empowerment and prevention.

The role of digital innovation was also particularly decisive. During the pandemic, many wellness enterprises turned to digital solutions to maintain engagement with their audiences. Virtual retreats, online wellness sessions, health monitoring apps, and personalized digital services were adopted on an unprecedented scale (GWI, 2023). Technology did not replace the travel experience but complemented it, extending the duration and scope of wellness experiences before, during, and after travel.

As a result of these changes, modern travelers now seek experiences with deeper meaning that combine self-awareness, contact with nature, and authentic local character. Emphasis is shifting from superficial luxury to the essence of the experience, simplicity, and connection with oneself and the destination (Charalambidis, 2022). COVID-19, despite its negative consequences, ultimately acted as a catalyst for a more conscious, sustainable, and human-centered model of wellness tourism.

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## 3. Adaptation, Innovation, and Entrepreneurship in Wellness Tourism

In the post-pandemic period, wellness tourism is being reshaped through targeted adaptations and innovative business practices that respond to travelers' new needs and sustainability requirements. Its development now rests on three interrelated pillars: holistic wellness experiences, infrastructure adaptation, and the use of digital solutions, creating a new dynamic field of tourism entrepreneurship.

First, providing holistic wellness experiences plays a central role, treating the individual as an integrated whole of body, mind, and emotion. Tourism enterprises incorporate nature-based activities, personalized wellness programs, balanced nutrition, and mental empowerment practices, enhancing the experiential dimension of travel (Smith & Puczkó, 2014). This approach aligns with the contemporary trend of travelers seeking meaningful experiences of self-improvement and inner balance, beyond mere recreation.

Second, adapting tourism infrastructure is a key pillar of innovation and competitiveness. Post-pandemic trends show a shift toward smaller accommodation units, low visitor density, eco-friendly lodgings, and the integration of local products and resources into the tourism experience (Batat, 2022; GWI, 2024). These practices enhance both the sense

of safety and sustainability while creating new opportunities for local entrepreneurship and the development of authentic place-based wellness products.

Third, digital solutions play a decisive role in shaping a flexible and personalized wellness tourism model. Wellness tracking applications, virtual coaching, online retreats, and hybrid experience programs allow the delivery of high-quality services without mass gatherings (Yeoman, 2021). Digital innovation complements on-site experiences, extending the traveler's engagement with the destination before and after the trip.

Furthermore, cultural entrepreneurship emerges as an important lever for differentiating wellness tourism. The creation of thematic experiences based on local culture, gastronomy, literature, cinema, and cultural heritage enhances the authenticity and psychosocial benefits of the experience (Papadimitriou, 2023). Studies indicate that cultural retreats, gastronomic programs, and cultural parks can serve as innovative business models linking wellness with sustainable local development (Maniou et al., 2025a; 2025b; 2025c; 2025f).

Moreover, the integration of culture, health, and entrepreneurship is emerging as a contemporary trend, with examples connecting medical history, literature, and cultural heritage to mental wellness and cultural development (Pagkalos et al., 2025e; Maniou et al., 2025g; 2025h; 2025). These approaches enhance the experiential dimension of wellness tourism and create resilient business ecosystems with long-term social and economic value.

Overall, adaptations and innovation in post-pandemic wellness tourism go beyond technical changes, constituting a new business paradigm that combines health, culture, and sustainability. This model meets contemporary travelers' expectations and lays the foundations for a more resilient, human-centered, and culturally integrated tourism development.

Lastly, we emphasize the significance of digital technologies in the field of education as well as for training and teaching entrepreneurship. ICTs facilitate education for all, provide new ways to educate instructors effectively, enhance knowledge retention, promote teamwork, increase transparency, develop learner-centered approaches, develop innovative teaching strategies, and speed up knowledge acquisition. Additionally, use virtualization, mobilization, artificial intelligence, and new learning settings and worlds to support educational activities and techniques and offer new instruments for representing knowledge. Particularly in training for entrepreneurs ICTs are highly effective and productive, facilitating and improving evaluation, intervention, and educational procedures through a variety of ICT applications that are the main supporters of education [35-40] as well as through mobile devices that bring educational activities everywhere [31-34]. While games change education into a multimodal, amiable, and pleasurable interaction [42-43], the use of AI, STEM, and robotics raises educational procedures to new levels of adaptation, invention, and performance [41]. Furthermore, the adoption, development, and integration of ICTs with theories and models of metacognition, mindfulness, meditation, and emotional intelligence cultivation [44-49] puts mental skills at the center of educational procedures and policies and speeds up and improves educational practices and outcomes even further, particularly in business and health entrepreneur training.

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#### **4. Sustainability and Cultural Entrepreneurship in Post-COVID Wellness Tourism**

Sustainability has become a fundamental and non-negotiable axis for the development of wellness tourism in the post-COVID era. Wellness experiences are assessed not only based on the quality of services provided but also according to their environmental, social, and cultural impact. In this context, adopting sustainable practices, such as using renewable energy, reducing plastic use, recycling, and managing natural resources responsibly, is organically integrated into wellness tourism business models, creating long-term added value (Batat, 2022; GWI, 2024).

At the same time, sustainability in wellness tourism extends beyond the environmental dimension to encompass social and cultural spheres. Cultural entrepreneurship emerges as a critical mechanism for empowering local communities, utilizing cultural heritage, local narratives, and intangible cultural assets as key elements of the tourism experience. Incorporating cultural elements enhances authenticity, differentiates the destination, and creates new forms of experiential tourism focused on wellness and self-awareness.

The connection between local culture and sustainable development is supported by studies highlighting the role of cultural experiences as tools for regional development. For example, the "Sacred Triangle" of Ancient Greece demonstrates how experiential education and cultural architecture can serve as models of sustainable regional development and cultural entrepreneurship, enhancing both cultural identity and economic activity in these areas (Papaioannou et al., 2023).

The application of cultural entrepreneurship is particularly significant in island and peripheral areas, where wellness tourism can act as a lever for economic revitalization. Research shows that utilizing cultural heritage on islands such as Imbros and Tenedos contributes to creating sustainable tourism models, strengthening local economies and social cohesion (Maniou, 2023). Similarly, cultural entrepreneurship in the Mediterranean promotes forms of gentle and sustainable tourism, aligned with wellness principles and environmental protection (Maniou, 2023b).

Moreover, the cultural dimension of the travel experience enhances visitors' psycho-emotional wellness, as the journey acquires a symbolic and experiential character. Analyzing the concept of "travel" in contemporary Greek music highlights the role of cultural storytelling in shaping emotional bonds with destinations and creating experiences with deeper meaning—an element particularly relevant for wellness tourism (Maniou et al., 2024).

In summary, post-COVID wellness tourism constitutes a multidimensional model of sustainable development, where environmental responsibility, cultural entrepreneurship, and local development function complementarily. Integrating sustainable practices and cultural elements not only enhances destination competitiveness but also contributes to building resilient local ecosystems capable of responding to the challenges of contemporary tourism.

## 5. Economic and Social Dimension of Wellness Tourism

Wellness tourism has emerged as one of the most dynamic and resilient sectors of the global tourism industry, with significant economic and social importance in the post-pandemic era. According to estimates, the global wellness tourism market is expected to approach USD 1 trillion by 2030, highlighting its strategic importance for national economies (GWI, 2019). This trend is driven by travelers' increasing preference for experiences that promote physical and mental health, prevention, and overall quality of life.

In the Greek context, wellness tourism presents particular development prospects, as the country possesses rich natural and cultural assets. Thermal springs, thalassotherapy opportunities, agritourism, and the Mediterranean dietary pattern constitute comparative advantages that can substantially enhance Greece's international competitiveness in the wellness sector. When strategically leveraged, these forms of tourism can contribute significantly to product differentiation and the reduction of seasonality (Oikonomou, 2021).

At a social level, wellness tourism acts as a lever for creating high-quality jobs, often requiring specialized skills and advanced professional training. At the same time, it promotes regional development, as it primarily expands in rural, island, and less-developed areas, offering employment and entrepreneurial opportunities to local communities. The social dimension of wellness is thus integrated into tourism activity, fostering social cohesion, improving residents' quality of life, and supporting sustainable local development.

To fully exploit the economic and social potential of wellness tourism, a comprehensive development strategy is required. Education and continuous professional training of wellness practitioners play a pivotal role in ensuring service quality and alignment with international standards. Simultaneously, the digital transformation of the sector, through personalized experience applications and smart technologies, can enhance the added value of services provided and improve the visitor experience.

Equally important is the establishment of a strong national brand, such as the "Greek Wellness Experience," which links wellness to Greek nature, culture, and lifestyle. Such a brand can serve as a tool for international promotion and strategic positioning of Greece on the global wellness tourism map. Finally, the protection of natural resources and respect for cultural heritage are prerequisites for the long-term sustainability of the sector, ensuring that economic growth aligns with social and environmental responsibility.

In conclusion, wellness tourism constitutes a strategic pillar of economic and social development, with particular significance for Greece. Its rational utilization can contribute to creating a sustainable, high-quality, and socially responsible tourism model, adapted to the needs of the post-pandemic era.

## 6. Conclusions

Post-COVID wellness tourism is not merely a specialized form of tourism activity but represents a broader lifestyle philosophy that redefines the meaning of travel. It combines the need for health and mental balance with self-awareness, experiential engagement, and sustainable development, reflecting the profound social and cultural changes triggered

by the pandemic. Travelers no longer seek only rest or luxury but experiences with meaningful content that contribute to their overall quality of life.

Within this new framework, Greece possesses strong comparative advantages that can transform it into a leading international wellness tourism destination. Its mild Mediterranean climate, rich cultural heritage, natural environment, thermal springs, as well as local products and the Mediterranean diet, create a unique foundation for developing authentic and holistic wellness experiences. Moreover, linking wellness with culture and lifestyle enhances the differentiation of the Greek tourism product and reduces dependence on mass tourism.

However, the success and sustainability of the sector cannot emerge in a fragmented manner. A comprehensive and long-term strategic plan is required, combining innovation, digital transformation, and sustainable management of natural and cultural resources. Integrating local culture, strengthening cultural entrepreneurship, and ensuring active participation of local communities are critical factors for creating resilient and authentic wellness destinations.

Finally, the human-centered nature of wellness tourism emerges as a key prerequisite for success. A development model that places people—both visitors and local communities—at its core can provide not only economic benefits but also meaningful social, cultural, and environmental value. In this way, post-COVID wellness tourism can serve as a model of sustainable development and a lever for positive change in the future of Greek tourism.

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## Compliance with ethical standards

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### *Disclosure of conflict of interest*

The Authors proclaim no conflict of interest.

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