

Wellness Resorts Eye Long Covid Treatments as New Moneymaker

From colonic cleanses to brain modulation to nutrient-rich IV drips, spas are coming up with all sorts of (costly) ways to treat symptoms of long Covid.

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Source: *SHA Wellness Clinic*

To beat long Covid, the version of the virus where symptoms persist for more than 12 weeks, you can employ the same tried-and-true tactics that help overcome the flu: Stay well-rested, guzzle clear fluids, and hope for the best. Or you can channel your inner Gwyneth Paltrow and pay \$3,500 to have a therapist cake a paste of turmeric, galangal, and kaffir lime on your chest, cover it with an alcohol-doused towel, and set it all on fire.

The latter technique—a traditional Ya-Pao detoxification therapy used for centuries in Thailand—is believed to balance the wind, water, and fire elements in the body. According to the practitioners who prescribe it, it's also a great way to alleviate long Covid symptoms such as inflammations and coughs.



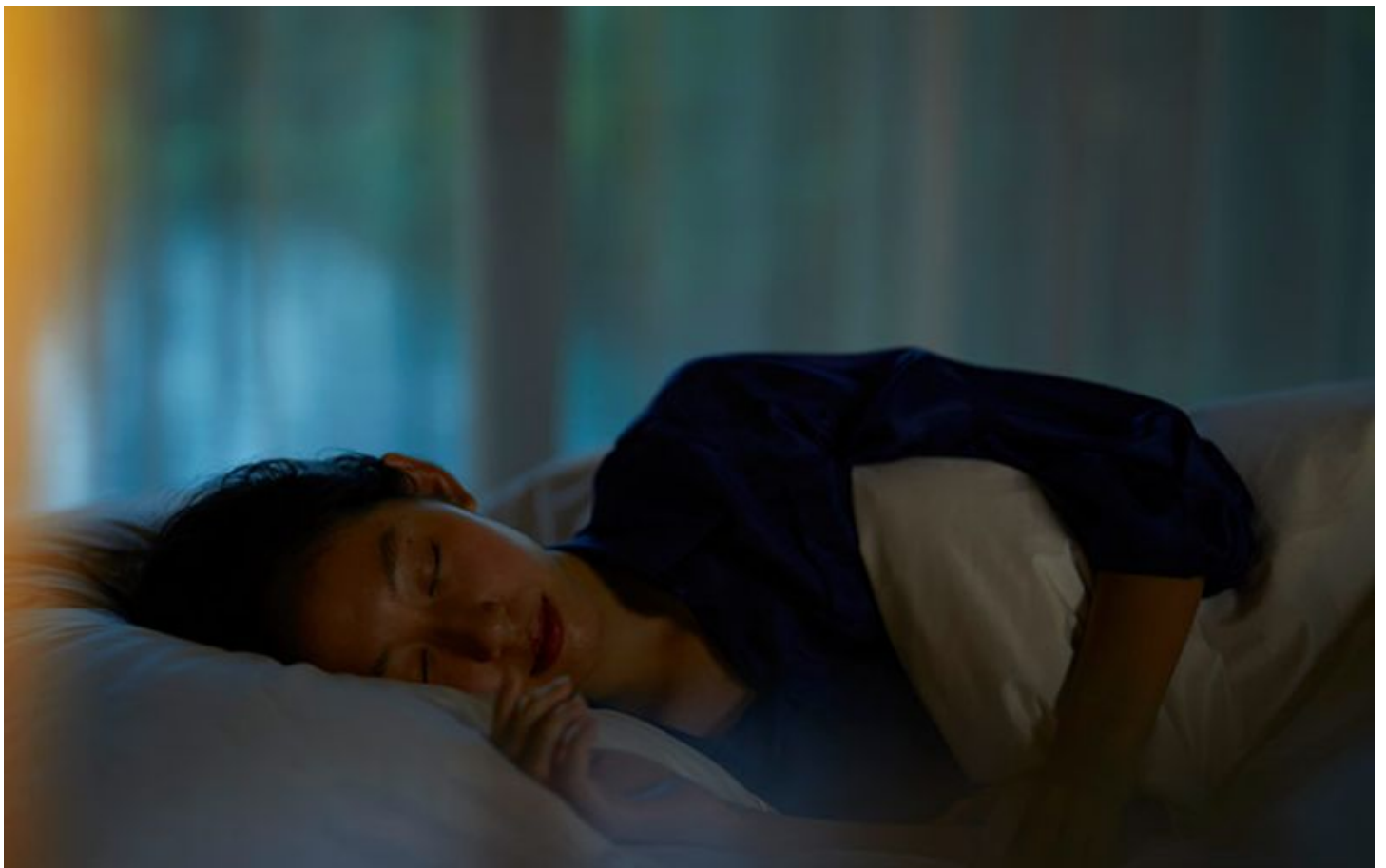


A garden villa at Thai wellness resort RAKxa. *Source: RAKxa*

Ya-Pao is just one of the treatments offered as part of the new Covid-19 Health Rejuvenating program at RAKxa, a medical spa resort just outside Bangkok with jungle-shrouded pool villas on an island in the Chao Phraya River. And RAKxa is just one of at least a half-dozen acclaimed wellness resorts around the world aiming to capitalize on the medical aftermath of Covid.

Their addressable market is surprisingly large. While in-depth research on the prevalence of long Covid is still in its early stages, a recent study by the U.K.'s Office of National Statistics found that 13.7% of its 20,000 respondents, all of whom had tested positive for Covid-19, still felt symptoms after three months. If this percentage is an indicator of the numbers elsewhere, more than 23 million people could be experiencing long Covid worldwide.

A Clinical Conundrum



“We’re learning more about long Covid every day,” says Dr. Kristin Englund, an infectious disease specialist leading the long Covid recovery center at the Cleveland Clinic in Ohio. As the virus can affect almost every organ in the human body, she says, long Covid can present in many different ways. Almost all of Englund’s patients experience fatigue, but other common symptoms include shortness of breath with exertion, dizziness, concentration difficulties, constipation, and intolerance to heat and cold. More serious issues such as diabetes and kidney damage may, in some cases, prove deadly even months after the initial infection.

With long Covid manifesting itself in such a variety of forms, treating it is still a clinical conundrum. “If there is one consensus, it’s that there is no ‘magic pill’ for these patients,” Englund says. “There is no supplement or antibiotic or treatment that will cure all symptoms. The best treatments are still to be determined.”

But the very absence of clear guidance from physicians has opened the opportunity for medical spas and wellness resorts to offer their own options, often with locally inspired or high-tech modalities that are either unproven in clinical settings or otherwise overlooked by Western medicine. The question is less whether it’s worth trying these approaches and more whether people will shell out for it—many require weeklong commitments and hopping a flight halfway around the globe.

A Holistic Approach



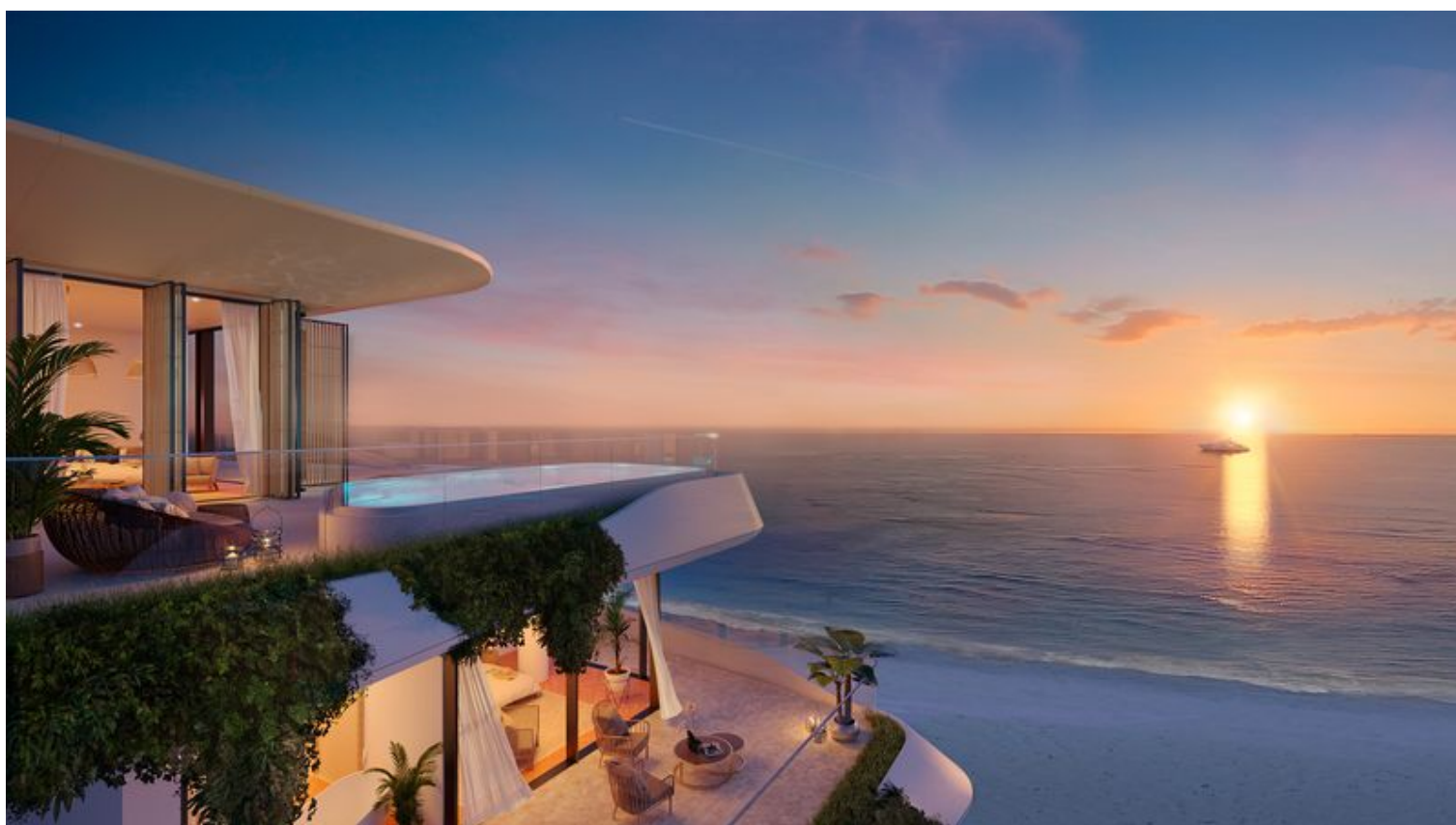
A patient uses a hyperbaric chamber at RAKxa, outside Bangkok. Source: RAKxa

At RAKxa, Medical Director Narinthorn Surasinthon—a regenerative medicine physician at Bangkok’s Bumrungrad Hospital—focuses on the respiratory system. Over the three-day program, he and his team have patients inhale concentrated oxygen in a hyperbaric chamber, take intravenous blood ozone infusions, and practice chest muscle-strengthening exercises in an Olympic-grade medical gym. The goal is to restore lung capacity.

“Respiratory issues are some of the most common manifestations of long Covid,” Surasinthon explains, adding that “many people end up with scarring in their lungs.” Following the clinic’s holistic approach, he also includes Pranayama breathing exercises, acupuncture, and Thai traditional medicine—such as the fiery Ya-Pao therapy—to aid blood circulation and relieve discomfort.

The resort can tailor its therapies if patients have symptoms of a totally different nature and can draw on medical expertise from a partner hospital. “Pulmonologists, cardiologists, nephrologists, and rehabilitation doctors, we can all work together as a team,” Surasinthon says.

But other resorts are taking completely different approaches.



Overlooking the Balearic Sea from SHA Wellness Clinic, on the Spanish coast. *Source: SHA Wellness Clinic*

Perched on a hill on the Spanish coast between Málaga and Valencia, the SHA Wellness Clinic unveiled a seven-day Post-Covid program in May. After an initial assessment that includes a stress test, carotid ultrasound, and bloodwork, guests receive a program tailored to their ailments. Those with musculoskeletal issues can get a combination of Watsu therapy (think underwater shiatsu massage) and reflexology. Those with psychological effects may receive a “brain photobiomodulation” session that claims to stimulate and regenerate brain cells with low-level lasers and coaching in Pranayama breathing.

And those with respiratory problems may try nebulization sessions (which are similar to asthma treatments) and traditional Chinese medicine. All of it is done within the plush confines of a sleek, white-on-white resort where the infinity pool faces a row of towering cliffs and the suites overlook the Balearic Sea.

Rates start at around \$3,000, with required add-on treatment packages ranging from \$650 to \$1,300; accommodations are roughly an additional \$400 a night. “We’ve already seen a great deal of interest, both in definitive bookings and enquiries for more information,” says Juan Antonio García, SHA’s clinical director. Like the other resorts in this story, it didn’t offer numbers on how many people have booked.



The pool at Lanserhof Tegernsee. *Source: Lanserhof Tegernsee*

Lanserhof Tegernsee, in the rolling Bavarian Alps just south of Munich, is a go-to spot for oligarchs and top models looking to detox, destress, or shed some pounds. Now its team of doctors and dieticians look at the gut for a possible long Covid cure. Guests of its seven-day \$10,000 Covid-19 Program will

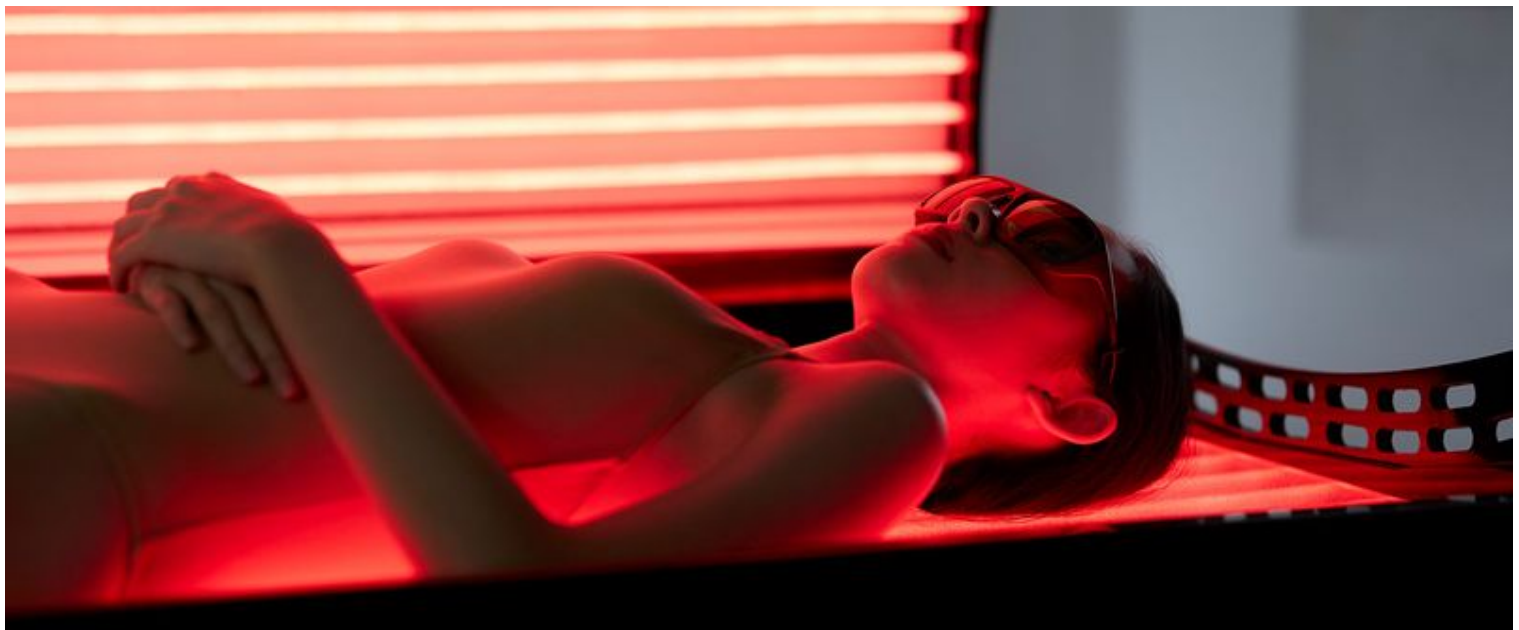
receive individual treatment schedules based on their symptoms (these could include bowel cleansing, energy therapy, lymphatic drainage treatments, and cryotherapy).

Every program is based on the strict diet plan of the late Austrian physician Dr. Franz Xaver Mayr, who's famous for drawing attention to the importance of gut health. Using a combination of intermittent fasting, colonics, Epsom salts, and small portions of alkaline-rich food, the program aims to rid the gut of old debris to revitalize the immune system.

“Long Covid is a silent inflammation reaction,” says Dr. Benedetto-Reisch Lanserhof's medical director. “Fasting has a regulating effect on those processes.”

Similar is the Post Covid program (seven days, from \$7,000) at VIVAMayr, a small village of wooden chalets on the shore of Austria's Lake Altaussee. It uses blood tests and applied kinesiology (muscle testing) to diagnose imbalances around the body and inform a personalized diet and treatment program. But there the menu gets complemented by nutrient-rich IV drips, electrolysis foot baths, and breathing exercises to promote cell regeneration and increase the number of energy-producing mitochondria in patients' cells.

A Proven Market



Whole-body light therapy at RAKxa. Source: RAKxa

Although long Covid is a novel phenomenon, the isolated symptoms are not. Treatments for brain fog and respiratory problems have been a mainstay in wellness brochures for decades; they run the gamut from Ayurvedic methodologies to science-backed technical approaches. This allowed wellness resorts to launch their Covid recovery programs relatively swiftly, without the need for new specialists or equipment. Lanserhof's Covid recovery program made its debut in May 2020—even before “long Covid” was added to the dictionary.

That also means the resorts aren't losing much by offering the programs, even if bookings are slim. But the demand exists, says Frances Geoghegan, founder and managing director of the London-based wellness travel agency [Healing Holidays](#). Since February, she says, she's received as many as 50 weekly enquiries from people trying to address issues that have arisen as a result of Covid. “They can't get the help they need from their GP. [In the U.K.] it's near impossible to get an appointment during the pandemic, and there are huge waitlists in place for treatments.” As a result, she explains, “Many have decided to take charge of their health and look for programs abroad.”

The combination of alternative and conventional medicine at wellness resorts is especially attractive to these consumers, Geoghegan says. “It's a mixed bag of problems, and our clients are choosing to treat it in different ways.”

“It's not just the medical treatments people are after,” says RAKxa's Surasinthon, echoing Geoghegan's sentiment. “They're looking for a combination of everything. Healthy food, personal care, and exercise programs to aid rehabilitation—you won't find that in a regular hospital.”

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