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Redefining Wellness Hospitality with Ingo Schweder: *From Experience to Healthspan*



01 Ingo, you've been shaping the luxury wellness and spa space for four decades, from Mandarin Oriental and Oberoi to founding GOCO Hospitality and owning Glen Ivy Hot Springs. How do you personally define "innovation" in high-end wellness hospitality

today, and how has that definition evolved over your career?

For me, innovation in wellness hospitality has never simply meant introducing the newest treatment, technology or piece of equipment. It is about understanding how people's relationship with health is changing and then creating destinations that respond to that evolution in a meaningful way.

Historically, many predecessors of today's wellness destinations were European health resorts, thermal establishments and sanatoriums, where people stayed for extended periods to recuperate and improve their health. As modern medicine advanced and travel and hospitality evolved through the second half of the twentieth century, hotels introduced spas, initially centred largely around beauty, relaxation, massage and hydrotherapy. At the same time, the modern wellness movement was emerging, bringing a much broader understanding of physical, mental and emotional wellbeing.

Over the course of my career, I have watched those worlds gradually come together. The hotel spa became more sophisticated, guests became more knowledgeable, and the expectation shifted from simply being pampered to wanting to return home genuinely feeling better. We began integrating nutrition, fitness, traditional healing, mindfulness, sleep, stress management and more advanced therapeutic programmes into the hospitality experience.

COVID accelerated another significant shift. Health suddenly became much more personal and urgent, and the conversation moved decisively toward prevention, resilience and understanding our own bodies. Today we are entering the era of longevity, where diagnostics, biomarkers, regenerative medicine, biohacking, AI and highly personalised programmes sit alongside traditional therapies, human touch and centuries-old healing practices. This convergence of hospitality, wellness and preventive health is, in my view, one of the most exciting developments our industry has ever experienced. The growing overlap between wellness and medicine, particularly in diagnostics, early detection and personalised health support, is already clearly visible across the sector.

So my definition of innovation today is much broader than technology. Innovation is our ability to combine the best of science with the best of hospitality and human care, and to translate sophisticated knowledge into an experience that people can actually understand, enjoy and integrate into their lives.

Ultimately, I believe the next frontier of wellness hospitality is about extending healthspan, not simply lifespan. If we can create environments that help people remain healthier, stronger, more mobile, mentally engaged and able to enjoy life for longer, then we are moving beyond providing a

great wellness experience. We are contributing, in our own way, to improving the healthspan of humankind.

02 GOCO has worked on over 400 projects worldwide, from SHA Wellness Clinic to large-scale bathing complexes in China. Can you walk us through a concrete example where you pushed the boundaries of the traditional hotel spa model—what exactly was innovative about it in terms of concept, business model, and guest experience?

Fivelements Samui is perhaps the best example because it allows us to take everything we have learned through nearly two decades of GOCO projects around the world and apply it to our own flagship property.

The starting point was very different from the traditional hotel model of designing the resort first and then allocating a space for the spa. At Fivelements Samui, wellbeing informs the entire destination from the outset. We are bringing together hospitality, advanced wellness and longevity, movement, nutrition, recovery, social connection and regenerative living as one integrated ecosystem.

From a guest perspective, this means moving beyond booking individual treatments towards a much more personalised journey. Advanced diagnostics and technology can help us understand what someone actually needs, while experienced practitioners, traditional healing modalities and human connection remain equally important. The intention is that guests leave with greater knowledge of their own health and practical tools they can carry into everyday life.

The business model also goes beyond the traditional relationship between rooms and spa revenue. We see wellness as the primary reason to visit and as something that can create deeper engagement, longer stays and an ongoing relationship with the guest.

For me, that is where we are pushing the boundary: Fivelements are not resorts with wellness in them. The destinations themselves are designed around helping people live better and healthier for longer.

03 You operate at the intersection of serious health outcomes and luxury leisure. When you design next-generation wellness destinations—biohacking, longevity, integrative medicine, etc.—how do you balance clinical credibility, measurable results, and the emotional, sensorial dimension that luxury guests still expect from a spa?

I don't believe clinical credibility and luxury should ever be competing forces. The most successful next-generation wellness destinations need both.

A guest may come to us for advanced diagnostics, longevity medicine or measurable health outcomes, but during that same stay they also need to rest, eat beautifully, move, connect with nature, receive a wonderful treatment and simply do something that feels good for the body and soul.

That is why we take a 360-degree approach. Science and data can help us understand the individual and personalise the journey, but the environment, design, human touch, nutrition, sleep, emotional wellbeing and quality of service are all part of the outcome.

For me, the future of luxury wellness is not about turning resorts into clinics. It is about taking the credibility and precision of the best medicine and integrating it seamlessly into an experience that remains warm, sensorial and deeply human. When those elements work together, you create something much more powerful than either a traditional spa or a clinic could achieve alone.

04 With Glen Ivy Hot Springs you're stewarding a historic, much-loved hot spring while modernizing it. What have been the toughest innovation decisions there—whether around technology, programming, or pricing—and how did you avoid alienating an

existing clientele while attracting a new generation of wellness travellers?

The greatest challenge at Glen Ivy was recognising that something can be extremely successful and still need to evolve.

When we acquired Glen Ivy in 2016, it already had more than 150 years of history and generations of loyal guests. It would have been easy to stay in that comfort zone and keep doing what had always worked. Instead, we looked at every aspect of the business and asked how we could improve it without losing the character and accessibility people loved.

That started behind the scenes with restructuring the management team and upgrading our operational systems, technology, booking platforms, CRM and marketing. We refreshed the brand and digital experience, improved our infrastructure and MEP systems for greater efficiency, elevated our treatment offering and introduced more advanced equipment. We also completely reconsidered food and beverage, with a much stronger emphasis on healthy, locally sourced and farm-to-table cuisine.

Just as importantly, we expanded what a day at Glen Ivy could mean. Wellness became more participatory, with yoga, meditation, sound healing, AquaFit and other activities and workshops complementing the traditional experience of bathing and treatments. Many of these experiences became part of the wellness day rather than another service to purchase.

The key was never to innovate for innovation's sake. We listened to the existing clientele, preserved the experiences and traditions they valued, and built around them. That allowed us to elevate Glen Ivy for a new generation of wellness travellers while ensuring that our long-standing guests could still recognise the place they had loved for years.

05 You've collaborated with brands like Four Seasons, Bulgari, Waldorf Astoria, and Ritz-Carlton, each with very distinct identities. What are the key mistakes you see luxury hotel owners or operators make when they try to "bolt on" a wellness or spa concept, and what principles do you insist on to

ensure the wellness offering is truly integrated, profitable, and brand-authentic?

One of the most common mistakes is treating wellness as a checklist: treatment rooms, sauna, steam, fitness, perhaps a healthy menu, and assuming that this automatically creates a compelling wellness proposition.

For us, the process starts much earlier with a clear understanding of the market, the competitive landscape and the guest. We look carefully at what already exists and, equally importantly, what is missing. There is little value in duplicating the same modalities and experiences offered by every competing hotel.

The wellness concept then has to grow naturally from the brand and the destination. That means creating a distinct point of view through programming, treatment modalities, design and service, while always finding an authentic connection to local culture, healing traditions, ingredients or environment. A Four Seasons wellness experience should not feel interchangeable with a Bvlgari or Ritz-Carlton experience, and neither should feel as though it could simply be transplanted from one country to another.

Commercially, integration is equally important. Wellness needs to be considered from the beginning in terms of guest flow, space allocation, programming, staffing and revenue generation. When the concept is differentiated, operationally sound and genuinely relevant to the destination, it becomes much more than an amenity. It strengthens the hotel's overall positioning, drives engagement, and can meaningfully contribute to profitability.

06 Looking ahead 5–10 years, where do you see the most transformative innovation coming from in luxury wellness hospitality—AI and data-driven personalization, longevity and preventive medicine, social and community-led wellness, new ownership models, or something else entirely—and how is GOCO positioning itself to ride (or lead) that wave?

I believe the greatest transformation will come from the convergence of many of these trends rather than one technology or concept alone. AI, diagnostics and preventive medicine will make

wellness increasingly personalised and measurable, but the bigger opportunity is to make meaningful wellness available to many more people.

That is very much how we see the future of GOCO. We are developing two complementary models. Fivelements represents a highly personalised, luxury wellness experience, where guests can go deeper into their individual health and wellbeing journey. Glen Ivy, meanwhile, represents the democratisation of wellness: an accessible day-wellness model where thousands of people can experience bathing, treatments, movement, healthy food and community without committing to an expensive residential programme.

Our long-term vision is to expand both brands globally and, where the opportunity allows, potentially locate them within the same destination or market. A guest could choose an accessible wellness day at Glen Ivy or a more immersive, bespoke journey at Fivelements, depending on their needs, time and budget.

For me, that is an exciting future: not one definition of wellness, but a spectrum of experiences that allows more people to participate. GOCO's role is to keep developing the concepts, business models and destinations that make that possible.

07 For hotel owners, spa directors, or young designers who want to innovate in luxury wellness but feel constrained by budgets, legacy buildings, or conservative stakeholders, what is the single most impactful shift they can start with tomorrow, and what personal mindset do they need to cultivate to succeed in this space?

The most impactful shift is to stop thinking that innovation necessarily means spending more money. You can have the latest technology, the most expensive equipment and the most spectacular design, but none of it matters if the experience does not feel authentic.

My advice is always to understand what you do exceptionally well and then do it with heart. Do not introduce something simply because it is fashionable or because a competitor has it. Avoid gimmicks. Be clear about your purpose, communicate it truthfully and make sure every part of the guest journey supports that promise.

I often say that everything in the world today is about experience, not about chandeliers and marble. For me, luxury is defined by how you make someone feel, what they remember and whether the experience has genuinely added something to their life.

That also requires courage. Particularly when budgets are tight or stakeholders are conservative, you need the confidence to simplify, focus and stand behind a strong idea. Authenticity does not necessarily cost more, but it does require conviction. And in wellness, guests recognise very quickly whether something has been created with genuine purpose or simply added because it is trending.

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