

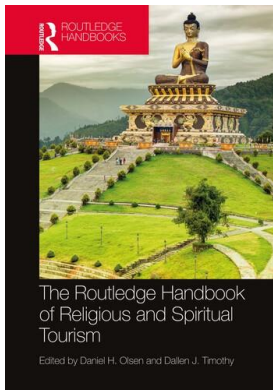
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Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

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## **The Routledge Handbook of Religious and Spiritual Tourism**

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### **Religion, spirituality, and wellness tourism**

Publication details

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780429201011-6>

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**Published online on: 30 Jul 2021**

**How to cite :-** Melanie Kay Smith. 30 Jul 2021, *Religion, spirituality, and wellness tourism from: The Routledge Handbook of Religious and Spiritual Tourism* Routledge

Accessed on: 20 Mar 2023

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780429201011-6>

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# 5

## RELIGION, SPIRITUALITY, AND WELLNESS TOURISM

*Melanie Kay Smith*

### Introduction

Spirituality and wellness are arguably inextricably connected. Wellness can be defined as the path to achieving well-being (Nahrstedt, 2008), a path that includes physical, mental, and spiritual health, self-responsibility, social harmony, environmental sensitivity, intellectual development, emotional well-being, and occupational satisfaction (Smith & Puczkó, 2013), whereas spirituality “includes experiencing oneness with nature and beauty and a sense of connectedness with self, others and a higher power or larger reality, concern for and commitment to something greater than self” (Hawks, 1994: 1). Moal-Ulvoas and Taylor (2014: 454) define spirituality as being “concerned with understanding reality in a broad sense and includes understanding one’s ‘self’, other human beings or alterity, and the sacred”. Some authors have argued that spirituality is at the core of wellness (Myers, Sweeney & Witmer, 2000; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006), and that travel, whether in the form of spiritual tourism or of wellness tourism based body-mind-spirit activities are closely connected.

However, questions remain regarding the separation of spirituality from organized or institutional religion and how far spiritual wellness is connected to secular wellness practices which focus more on self-development. While the seminal work by Timothy and Olsen (2006) explored the relationship between tourism, religion, and spirituality, paving the way for a robust scholarship on the subject, the meaning of spirituality in the context of wellness tourism has not been defined very clearly. Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to examine the relationship between religion and spirituality in the context of wellness tourism, including those activities that offer tourists greater meaning in their lives and better connections to the world around them. Often, this takes place in holistic meditation or yoga retreat centres, but the importance of landscape and nature in the development of spiritual well-being is also explored.

### **Spiritual tourism: a personal quest beyond religion?**

The quest for spirituality is in some ways based on the increasing secularization of society. This is partly a result of the rise of consumerism as a global ethos, which has led to the growth of consumer-based forms of spirituality outside of religion (Gauthier et al. 2013). However, the relationship between religion and spirituality is still being debated. Kujawa (2017), for

example, argues that the quest for spirituality represents dissatisfaction with or alienation from the dogmatism of institutionalized religion, which is why many people travel in search of or to regain or rediscover spiritual traditions in order to fill a spiritual vacuum that religion cannot fill. Kujawa further suggests that it is a person's internal experience, rather than the external expression of faith, which is the driving force for spiritual tourism. Kato and Prozano (2017) also suggest that religiousness and spirituality have not declined, but rather that the way in which religion is practised has changed in the modern world. As the influence of traditional religious institutions has declined, spirituality has been 'de-regulated' from religious institutions, with individuals having the freedom to create their own spiritual lives and choose which spiritual traditions to practice (Kujawa, 2017; Gauthier et al., 2013).

Stausberg (2014) suggests that any definition of spirituality belongs both within and beyond religion. Norman (2012) argues that while religion describes a shared system of beliefs and participation, spirituality is connected to a personal or individual focus. This focus, he suggests, leads spiritual tourists to engage in a "variety of practices or behaviours that are self-consciously seen as contributory to meaning and identity, and/or beneficial for the individual's health and wellbeing" (p. 21). Within these practices or behaviours, Norman lists five categories of experiences that spiritual tourists seek when travelling:

- **Healing:** which includes the search spiritual, emotional, and psychological healing;
- **Experiment:** where spiritual tourists experiment with different cultures and religious philosophies or immerse themselves in different religious traditions and practices;
- **Quest:** travel to search for meaning and personal discovery;
- **Retreat:** where people seek socio-geographical escape, meaning that people seek experiences away from their home and home culture and use secular attractions for spiritual purposes; and
- **Collective:** this category includes people who travel to "spiritual hubs" for spiritual holidays.

Wilson, McIntosh and Zahra (2013), in their phenomenological analysis of the meaning of spirituality, suggest that spirituality concerns a human being's individual search for meaning in life; that people engage in activities that result in experiencing transcendence, connection, and/or deep personal meaning which also promotes growth; and that people seek harmonious relationships or 'oneness' with the 'self', the 'other' (including other people, animals, the earth, and nature) and/or God/Higher Power. Although the individual and personal quest is given emphasis in their understanding of spirituality, connections with nature, people around them, and what lies beyond them are also clearly important for the spiritual tourist. Likewise, Kujawa (2017), in describing spiritual tourism as a transformative experience that often takes place in a collective setting with like-minded people, suggests that spiritual tourism involves experiences related to transcendence, connectivity, and transformation. However, Kujawa also refers to the "peculiarity of spiritual tourism that external travel is needed to achieve an internal experience of spiritual meaning" (p. 194).

However, some authors have defined spiritual tourism even more broadly. For example, Kato and Prozano (2017: 245) state that

Religious tourism is defined as travelling for spiritual purposes usually carried out according to the interpretation of sanctioned religious leaders and institutions and to institutionally sanctioned destinations, whereas spiritual tourism is characterized as a more subjective and individual travel for spiritual betterment and self-discovery and may include secular sites such as war memorials, natural landscapes or places related to celebrities.

## Spirituality and personal wellness journeys

Travel has been viewed as a way of enhancing and transforming individual self-development and even changing world views. For example, Reisinger (2015: 5) states that “Travel can offer physical, psychological, cognitive affective and spiritual experiences that can change one’s assumptions, expectations, world views and fundamental structures of the self”. There are strong connections to personal well-being. Indeed, Norman and Pokorny (2017: 203) refer to spiritual tourism as a practice of subjective well-being work, arguing that it is a “reflexive well-being intervention” that leads to spiritual betterment and can include both religious and non-religious activities. They argue that spiritual tourists are being proactive in addressing a problem in their lives.

Smith and Puczkó (2012) highlighted the importance of spirituality in the relationship between tourism and quality of life by adding a ‘spiritual well-being’ category to the domains of well-being that are affected by tourism. This means that a person might adhere to

A high level of faith, hope, and commitment in relation to a well-defined worldview or belief system that provides a sense of meaning and purpose to existence in general, and that offers an ethical path to personal fulfillment which includes connectedness with ‘self’, others, and a higher power or larger reality.

*(Hawks, 1994: 6)*

In their spectrum of well-being and types of tourism, Smith and Diekmann (2017) categorised ‘retreat tourism’ and ‘spiritual pilgrimage’ as types of tourism that contribute to long-term, eudaimonic well-being and enhance existential authenticity. Religious and spiritual retreats have become more commonplace in the tourism landscape in recent years (Sharpley & Sundaram, 2005; Heintzman, 2013; Chapter 14, this volume). Smith and Diekmann (2017) also stated that tourists are more likely to move towards a sense of self-transcendence through forms of spiritual tourism of extended duration, such as through engaging in long pilgrimages or ashram-stays. Voigt, Howat, and Brown (2011) also proposed that in the context of wellness tourism, those eudaimonic experiences are more likely to be gained from spiritual retreats, whereas more hedonic well-being experiences might take place in, for example, a beauty spa.

Bandyopadhyaya and Nairb (2019) suggest that spiritual tourism is prominent within the rapidly expanding wellness industry. For example, they describe how Western tourists embrace spirituality in India because it represents a panacea to hectic modern lifestyles and helps them to attain self-fulfilment, inner harmony, and bliss. Cheer, Belhassen, and Kujawa (2017) describe spiritual travel experiences as enabling people to renew connections with others, life in general, and most importantly with themselves. Smith (2003: 104) described spiritual tourists as those searching for “an authentic sense of self” in which “[t]he tourist’s own self thus becomes the object of the tourist gaze, rather than any external attractions or activities”. Smith also suggests that travel becomes transformative when it reveals a person’s true or authentic ‘self’. Although many spiritual tourists tend to be young backpackers who are attempting to ‘find themselves’ and explore the meaning of life through travel, some research has suggested that tourists tend to become more spiritual as they get older. For example, Moal-Ulvoas and Taylor (2014) have shown that spirituality can motivate older adults to travel and can result in knowing

the 'self' better, giving greater meaning to their lives, gaining a clearer understanding of others and connecting more closely to nature.

### **Spiritual and wellness destinations and experiences**

The role of the destinations or locations in the creation of spiritual and wellness experiences plays a somewhat ambivalent role in spiritual and wellness tourism, as the internal journey is often given greater emphasis than any external setting. However, Norman and Pokorny (2017) discuss how spiritual tourism activities tend to take place in spaces that are 'alternate' to the spaces of the tourists' everyday life, such as spaces that are quiet, slow, rural, or religious. Kato and Prozano (2017; see Howard, 2012) suggest that pilgrimage in the form of walking pilgrimages is a type of slow tourism that utilizes the healing qualities of the natural environment and affords moments of spiritual engagement.

Although many retreat visitors prefer to stay within retreats themselves rather than exploring the surrounding area (Kelly, 2010), it is nevertheless important that any retreat is located within a peaceful and natural landscape (Smith & Kelly, 2006). At the same time, many spiritual seekers tend to visit so-called sacred landscapes and destinations, which represent "relations between bodily existence, felt practice and faith in something immanent but not manifest" (Dewsbury & Cloke, 2009: 695). Tourists may be drawn to a country that offers different spiritual traditions from their own (e.g. Western tourists visiting Indian ashrams, Korean temples, or Thai meditation centres). Heelas and Woodhead (2005: 150) metaphorically refer to this as "tectonic shifts in the sacred landscape" to describe the shift away from "denominational religions" to the adoption of different forms of spirituality. Jiang, Ryan, and Zhang (2018) suggest that rising interest in meditation retreats represent such a shift which retreats promote ancillary components such as beautiful natural landscapes, physical and mental well-being, and temple foods in addition to the religious and spiritual practices. There are also increasing overlaps between more hedonic (e.g. spas and beauty) and more eudaimonic forms of wellness (e.g. self-development and spirituality). For example, Ashton (2018) describes that while the spiritual retreat is a relatively new concept in Thailand, several of the retreats combine experiences that are often offered at specific types of retreats, such as experiences catering to spa and beauty, self-awareness, inner peacefulness or meditation, mind and body wellness, and spiritual renewal.

### ***Holistic and spiritual retreats***

Several authors have argued that spiritual retreat tourism is part of wellness tourism (Voigt et al., 2010; Heintzman, 2013; Ashton, 2018). Voigt et al. (2010) separated wellness tourism into three types of retreats: spa and beauty, lifestyle resort, and spiritual. Spiritual retreat tourism can be religious or non-religious in nature (Ashton, 2018). It tends to offer accommodation for people seeking peace, quiet and spiritual nurture, and sometimes combines religion and wellness in some form (Heintzman, 2013). Bone (2013) describes spiritual retreat tourism as a form of contemporary pilgrimage and suggests that the spiritual experience of being in a retreat is pervasive, regardless of whether participants gain the most benefits from escapism, forming part of a community, or being in a therapeutic landscape. In this vein, Kelly and Smith (2017) produced a typology of retreats:

- *Religious retreats*: spaces owned by or run by religious communities, e.g. temples and monasteries;
- *Spiritual retreats*: spiritually informed spaces (e.g. ashrams and meditation centres);
- *Yoga retreats*: retreats focusing specifically or partially on yoga;
- *Health retreats*: offering lifestyle improvement workshops (e.g. nutrition and weight loss);
- *Fitness retreats*: offering scheduled fitness classes and courses (e.g. bootcamps and outdoor adventure sports);
- *Mind-based retreats*: focusing on relaxation, reflection, mindfulness, and meditation;
- *Body-Mind-Spirit*: aiming to balance the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual through a programme of carefully selected workshops (e.g. holistic retreat centres); and
- *Miscellaneous*: place-based retreats where special kinds of landscapes play a role (e.g. silent retreats in deserts and eco-retreats in jungles).

Spirituality is the key element in many of these retreats, but it is by no means central. As Kelly (2012) notes, the rest/relaxation factor is the main motivator why people visit these types of retreats, followed to a lesser extent by social and spiritual reasons.

Many tourists seeking spiritual retreat experiences might search online sites such as The Retreat Company (<https://www.theretreatcompany.com/>) which allows potential spiritual tourists to search retreats related to 'Spiritual Awareness'. Within this category, approximately 50 different options are available located in a wide range of countries around the world. The spectrum of activities is rather broad, ranging from meditation and mindfulness retreats in Bhutan to 'healing and adventure' retreats in Peru; 'dolphin therapy' in Hawaii; 'grey whale' experiences in California; and acoustic sound retreats in Finnish natural landscapes. This particular retreat company makes very little reference to religion or faith communities of any kind, preferring to use the word 'spiritual'. Another company, Retreat Finder (<https://www.retreatfinder.com/>), offers over 200 retreats, which are organized by religious grouping, including Christian, Catholic, Protestant, Quaker, Buddhist, Zen, Hindu, interfaith, and 'open to all'. Another popular website is Book Meditation (<https://www.bookmediation.com/home>), which lists more than 2,400 meditation retreats, of which 241 are labelled as 'spiritual retreats'. Most of these retreats are based on meditation and mindfulness. According to the Book Meditation website,

Spiritual retreats grasp their essence from ancient religions. Whether the core teachings are Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, or Tibetan, one thing is certain. A spiritual holiday will help you regain presence and peace in your life. You will be given the opportunity to deepen your spiritual focus and understand yourself and your loved ones better.

(*n.p.*)

### ***Yoga tourism and retreats***

Heelas and Woodward (2005) have noted the growing range of holistic and physical practices or activities like yoga to help facilitate the convergence of the personal and the spiritual path. Smith and Sziva (2017) describe yoga as being comprised of a series of physical, mental, and spiritual practices. While yoga initially focuses on the physical body through a series of movements or postures, mental and spiritual transformation can follow with regular practice. This transformation can be intensified if people decide to pursue their interest in yoga through retreat holidays. Ponder and Holladay (2013) therefore suggest that yoga tourism is a form of transformational tourism which can lead to self-actualization and spiritual

renewal. Reisinger (2013) concurred and included yoga in a list of practices that leads to transformational experience that helps people find their authentic selves and enhance their psychological, emotional and spiritual well-being. Smith and Sziva (2017) note that for those who participate in yoga retreats, having a spiritual experience is not as important as other motivations (e.g. stress relief, self-understanding, and health) but also note that those participants who equated yoga with spirituality are more likely to travel to yoga retreats. Garrett (2001) also suggests that some yoga practitioners might call themselves spiritual, whereas other practitioners say they are 'working on myself'. Park, Braun, and Siegel (2015) concur, arguing that yoga practitioners are reported to be more spiritual, but not necessarily more religious. Bowers and Cheer (2017) undertook a more extensive study which analysed the extent to which yoga tourism is connected to spirituality. They suggest that individuals may well gain wellness benefits or have spiritual experiences while practicing yoga, but that it very much depends on their personal and individual perspectives and experiences. They also view yoga tourism and spiritual travel as being innately connected in that they both focus on inquiry and self-discovery. However, the extent to which yoga tourism can be considered spiritual is still debatable, partly because of increasing commodification and the fact that self-improvement and career enhancement as motivations overshadow spiritual ones for many participants.

Many of the above-mentioned websites list yoga activities at some spiritual or meditation retreats. However, because of their popularity, specific yoga-based retreats are usually given their own category. For example, The Retreat Company lists yoga retreats separately from spiritual awareness retreats. One company, Book Yoga Retreats (<https://www.bookyogaretreats.com/>) describes itself as 'the world's largest yoga site' and includes a separate category for 'Spirituality & Chanting'. Presently there are 3,962 'Spiritual Yoga Retreats' in addition to almost 5,000 'Yoga Meditation Retreats'. Interestingly, there are only six retreats that are described as 'Christian Yoga Retreats', and most yoga-based retreats do not identify with a faith tradition.

### ***Temples and monasteries***

Yiannakis and Gibson (1992) suggest a special category of tourist—'seekers'—who are on a spiritual or personal quest to understand themselves and their lives better. These tourists travel to many places in this quest for meaning, including monasteries and temple stays where guests participate in monastic life, ceremonies, meditation, and cooperative activities. Ouellette et al.'s (2005) study of visitors in a monastery suggests that the expected outcomes such as deepening faith, devoting time to prayer and feeling closer to the God are strong motivators for staying in monasteries and temples. Jiang, Ryan, and Zhang (2018) estimate that there are over 100 Chinese temples that offer meditation programmes. They suggest that even though many of the tourists who visit these retreats are not motivated by religious or spiritual reasons, they often have some sort of 'sacred-spiritual' experience. The authors sub-divide experiences into 'Search for Meaning' (focusing on one's inner being) and 'Search for Escape' (creating connections and relationships with the world and others). The authors also argue that although aspects of these retreats, such as Zen meditation may lose some of their sacred or spiritual nature when presented and consumed as a mediated tourism product, they nevertheless form an integral part of the overall experience and the search for the real 'self' and self-realization. However, participants in temple stays and monasteries tend to have either a secular experience that is enhanced by the natural landscape and religious culture or a sacred experience through reaching a sense of the divine and having a clear view of the purpose of their lives.



### ***(Spiritual) landscapes and nature***

While spiritual seeking revolves around connecting to a higher being or power and searching for the meaning of 'self' and purpose of life, Moufakkir and Selmi (2018) also note that a connection to nature is another aspect of spirituality. Taylor (2010) suggested that in some ways the natural environment has become a spiritual substitute for the search for meaning in traditional religious and spiritual groups. de Botton (2003) argued that humans began to become attracted to sublime landscapes at a time when traditional belief in the God was declining, and that rural landscapes have acquired sacred meaning in contrast to the urban environments seemingly devoid of spiritual spaces. As such, there has been a rise in what Taylor (2010) describes as 'nature religion', which has been connected to paganism, animism, the New Age movement, the romanticization of the rural, deep ecology, and environmental sustainability (Timothy & Conover, 2006; Olsen, 2020; Chapter 12, this volume).

Vallés-Planells et al. (2014) suggest that natural landscape can contribute to people's experiences through enjoyment (e.g. recreation and aesthetics), personal fulfillment (e.g. education, inspiration, and spiritual benefits), health (e.g. escapism and calm) and social fulfillment (e.g. social relations, cultural heritage, and sense of place). Maller et al. (2009) similarly summarized the benefits of parks and protected areas for human health and well-being, which included the following benefits:

- *Physical*: settings for recreation, sport, and other leisure activities;
- *Mental*: restoration from fatigue, peace and solitude, artistic inspiration, and education;
- *Spiritual*: reflection and contemplation, feeling a sense of place, and connecting to something greater than oneself;
- *Social*: including couples, families, networks, and associations' recreational activities and events; and
- *Environmental*: preservations and conservation of ecosystems.

Vallés-Planells et al. (2014) argued that spirituality is perceived as an important part of personal fulfilment, whereas Maller et al. (2009) suggested that spirituality is connected to reflection, connection, and transcendence. Sharpley and Jepson (2011) concluded that spirituality was mainly connected to respondents' subjective experiences in terms of meaning, harmony, and connectedness, and that most transcendental experiences tend to take place in areas like mountains, lakes, and coastlines where there is solitude, quietness, and remoteness.

In their development of a Customer Well-being Index for visitor satisfaction at national parks, Lee et al. (2014) found that spiritual experiences were rated much higher than relaxation or socialising in terms of what constituted visitor satisfaction. Ram and Smith (2019) suggest that the benefits derived from tourist interactions with different types of natural landscapes can be divided into four distinct types: spiritual interaction, physical-emotional interaction, intellectual interaction, and aesthetic interaction. The authors found that spiritual and physical-emotional factors have the most impact in influencing tourists' revisit intentions. As such, the emotional and spiritual benefits of natural landscapes are more important for visitors than intellectual and aesthetic benefits. In their study, Ram and Smith found that seaside landscapes were rated superior in all four factors. However, the landscape that rated the highest in terms of spiritual interaction was the desert. This parallels research by Moufakkir and Selmi (2018), who found that visitors to deserts view the landscape as a space that affords them feelings of awe because of its immenseness, peace, silence, simplicity, and emptiness. Participants in their study made a metaphorical connection between



the physical emptiness of the desert and their inner/spiritual emptiness. Paradoxically, this empty landscape filled their spiritual emptiness, bringing them a sense of comfort and security and, in some cases, closeness to the God.

### **Concluding thoughts**

Quests for spiritual enlightenment or meaning in the context of wellness tend to be based on a search outside of institutionalized religion in a tourist's home country. This does not mean, however, that the tourist's quest is secular or devoid of religious meaning. On the contrary, spiritual tourists tend to engage with other religious traditions in different geographical contexts and expose themselves to a wider variety of beliefs. However, this quest is not necessarily focused on religious sites or sacred landscapes. In fact, the type of destination travelled to is not as important as the inner journey which is facilitated through travel away from home. At the same time, the importance of a quiet, peaceful, and simple setting has been recognized as an important part of this quest. As such, most retreats are located in rural or wilderness landscapes, whether in small villages, mountains, forests, or near water. Hectic and stressful day-to-day living in urban environments clearly requires an antidote in slower forms of tourism in calm, natural settings (Norman & Pokorny, 2017; Bandyopadhyaya & Nairb, 2019). This quest is also typically an individual or personal quest for meaning and the development of the 'self'. However, the quest often allows people to engage with others in communal settings with like-minded people in retreats, monasteries, temples, and yoga centres. The presence of inspiring spiritual individuals, such as well-known gurus or famous yoga teachers, can also facilitate this search for meaning.

Some authors have argued that spiritual tourism can be defined even more broadly to include adventure tourism which challenges the individual and leads to greater self-fulfilment (Cheer, Belhassen & Kujawa, 2017; Gezon, 2018). Indeed, the individual search for the 'self' includes transcendence and connections to a higher power (whether God or nature), as well as relationships with others. It also includes growth in the form of self-development or transformation, which is why many retreat centres focus on activities that enhance personal growth and change. Spirituality is also a way to solve problems in people's lives (Norman & Pokorny, 2017). However, spirituality should not be defined too broadly, especially in the context of the wellness tourism industry, as there are very few tourism experiences that do *not* improve wellness in some way. Rather, it should be argued that the search for spiritual experiences as a proactive component of travel is important—and this is where wellness and spirituality overlap.

The quest for spiritual experiences has become an integral part of tourism and well-being (Smith & Puczko, 2012). The types of tourism that include spiritual experiences, such as retreats or pilgrimages, are described as offering more eudaimonic benefits and the enhancement of existential authenticity than other forms of travel (Smith & Diekmann, 2017). This stands in contrast to the more hedonic and relaxation-based experiences offered by other aspects of the wellness tourism industry (Voigt, Howat & Brown, 2011). Wellness usually involves trying to balance one's body, mind, and spirit, yet spiritual health has often been a neglected component in Western culture. This, however, has not been the case in Eastern cultures. As many of the spiritual practices that are now practised by wellness tourists, such as yoga and meditation are derived from Asian health systems or lifestyles, spiritual tourists often go to Asia as a part of their spiritual quest (Smith & Puczko, 2013).

Although wellness tourists choose to get away from their everyday lives to seek or practice spirituality, not all wellness tourists visit sacred or religious destinations. While they may

choose to spend their time in a temple, monastery, or ashram, more commonly they visit holistic retreat centres that have no religious or spiritual affiliations. As well, certain landscapes influence feelings of spirituality more so than others. As noted above, deserts and seashores afford the most wellness benefits to visitors, many of which are spiritual. Many tourists who visit temples or monasteries clearly also want to benefit from the surrounding natural landscape as well (Jiang, Ryan & Zhang, 2018). The concept of the healing or therapeutic landscape is by no means a new one, but growing concerns about the planet and environment are influencing the rise of sustainable destinations, eco-friendly retreats, and a renewed emphasis on nature stewardship and preservation on the part of tourists. Among many communities of the world, the spiritual connections to nature are very strong, and the natural environment can even become a spiritual substitute for religion (Taylor, 2010).

Although many wellness practices may be undertaken more for rest, relaxation, or health than for spiritual reasons (Kelly, 2012), tourists may choose to engage in spiritual practices like yoga that can later take them on a more intense spiritual journey in the future. Yoga practitioners tend to see themselves as spiritual rather than religious, but true spiritual practitioners also tend to travel for wellness reasons rather than just doing yoga at home (Smith & Sziva, 2017). Meditation tourism is like yoga-based tourism in the sense that tourists may go to retreats with a non-religious motivation but still have sacred or spiritual experiences (Jiang, Ryan & Zhang, 2018). As such, seeking spirituality is not always a prior motivation for wellness tourists, but it nevertheless can become a significant outcome or benefit.

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