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THE TRAVEL ISSUE
In Praise of Slowing Down



One very tired writer explores the *next frontier* of luxury wellness: *sleep optimization*.

SNOOZE FEST

By FIORELLA VALDESOLO

I arrived at SHA Mexico, a longevity resort outside Cancun, with one primary goal: to improve my sleep. Something that over the past seven years—with the birth of my daughter, the slow slog through a global pandemic, personal health struggles, aging parents, increasing work and relationship stress, and the arrival of the hormonal tsunami that is perimenopause—had become a nightly struggle. Falling asleep I could handle; staying asleep, not so much. Most nights, I would wake with a start around 3 a.m., drenched in sweat and with my brain racing, and spend the next hour (or hours) in a battle with my body to lull it back to sleep. I have sleep tracked and ear plugged, I have sprayed mist on my cooling pillow, I have purified and temperature-controlled my air, I have blocked out blue light and meditated, and I have ingested all manner of magnesium from supplements to foot sprays to, I will admit, the viral sleepy girl mocktail (magnesium powder plus cherry juice and prebiotic soda), which, alas, didn't work on this girl.

I was foggy, irritable, and depleted, as if my internal battery was perpetually broken. Shannon Sullivan, MD, a sleep medicine specialist at Stanford, confirms that lack of sleep is associated with lower energy, debilitated focus and performance, and poorer quality of life, not to mention an increased likelihood of depression, anxiety, and hypertension, plus a weakened immune function. “Our creativity and our ability to problem-solve suffers, and it takes much longer to accomplish tasks,” says sleep scientist and assistant professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School Rebecca Robbins, PhD. “We’re also less able to do what we call perspective-taking: the taking in of the stressors or negative events we all experience every day with a grain of salt, so to speak. Those small events can loom large when we’re sleeping insufficiently.” It’s no surprise, then, that every breaking news alert feels like an emotional firehose. But the compounded



FROM LEFT—VEMI therapy beds at Carillon Miami Wellness Resort; Hydrotherapy circuit at SHA Mexico; Ayurvedic massage at Ananda in the Himalayas
PREVIOUS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT—Audrey Hepburn in Breakfast at Tiffany's; Suite at Carillon Miami Wellness Resort; SHA Mexico; Ananda in the Himalayas

WE *have* NO HOPE of living LONGER, NO MATTER *how many* NAD DRIPS or COLD PLUNGES WE TAKE, IF WE AREN'T SLEEPING WELL.

effects of insufficient sleep are far more dire. “Chronic [lack of sleep] is associated with increased risk of diabetes, obesity, cardiovascular disease, and accident risk,” adds Dr. Sullivan.

And nowadays, more of us may be at risk: According to a study commissioned by the CDC in 2016, about one-third of adults are not getting enough sleep. (What amounts to “enough” is widely understood to be seven to nine hours a night.) “Both quantity and quality have declined,” says Mariana Sofia Riveros, MD, an integrative medicine physician at SHA Mexico, adding that technology, which disrupts circadian rhythms and keeps the brain in a high-alert state, is a big culprit. This is mostly due to the fact that it’s unavoidable: We move from one screen to another, from morning until night, says Dr. Robbins, and much onscreen content is designed to grab our attention and keep us constantly engaged, even when it’s time to disconnect come bedtime. Chronic stress is another cause. “It keeps our fight-or-flight response activated, increasing cortisol levels, which makes it difficult for the brain to downshift into restorative sleep, which is foundational to a regulated nervous system,” says Andrea Matsumura, MD, an American Board of Internal Medicine–certified sleep medicine physician. Stress and poor sleep are also bidirectional, says Dr. Sullivan: Stress can increase frequent brief awakenings known as sleep fragmentation and negatively impact sleep quality, and, in turn, that poor sleep can make it harder to navigate stressors during waking hours. It’s a vicious cycle. The hormonal ebbs and flows of the menopause transition present another sleep roadblock for many women in midlife. “Progesterone naturally has calming and sleep-promoting properties, so its decline can make it harder

to fall asleep and stay asleep,” adds Dr. Matsumura. Sleep apnea, a common and often undiagnosed issue, is yet another cause of interrupted sleep, as it can block airways; snoring is similarly disruptive, for both the snorer and their bed partner.

I am not alone in the pursuit of a quest to sleep better. Far from it, in fact. There are currently over 125 million posts on TikTok tagged *sleepmaxxing*, the modern term for maximizing or improving upon your sleep. Much of that content is devoted to various viral hacks—eating kiwi, employing nostril expanders and jaw straps, and imbibing that aforementioned sleepy girl mocktail—that will reportedly help us *go the fuck to sleep*. Some of these tactics, doctors say, have limited value, while others (like mouth taping, which Dr. Matsumura says can worsen untreated sleep apnea) may have a negative effect. Online, *sleepmaxxing* often bisects with *looksmaxxing*—see all the *morning shed* routines whereby users take off the various contraptions they wear overnight, so they don’t wake up looking like an ogre—and the larger conversation around longevity (let’s call it *lifemaxxing*). The very modern quest to increase our life- and healthspans is tied to our bedtime habits: We have no hope of living longer, no matter how many NAD drips or cold plunges we take, if we aren’t sleeping well.

People are starting to think about their sleep habits and environment the same way they would their skincare or wellness routines, says Juan Quintero, owner of luxury bed retailer Hästens’s Miami store, where their popular 2000T mattress sells for more than \$50,000. It’s also why the concept of “sleep tourism”

is booming: The market is projected to exceed \$140 billion by 2030. Upscale wellness destinations like SHA, Carillon Miami Wellness Resort, and Ananda in the Himalayas all report significant increases in the number of guests who are coming to address a sleep issue. “People now recognize sleep as a pillar of longevity, so they are actively seeking help,” says Dr. Riveros. “Many guests arrive feeling overwhelmed by mental overstimulation and emotional strain, and look to our programs as a solution,” says Ananda’s Senior Ayurvedic Physician Sreelal Sankar. At Ananda, the sleep enhancement program employs modern diagnostic tools (like the Belun assessment ring, which was approved by the FDA in 2023) and then interprets them through an Ayurvedic lens. The protocol includes classic Ayurvedic treatments, such as *abhyanga* (a body massage with warm herb-infused oil), *shirodhara* (the continuous, gentle flow of warm oil on the forehead), and *netra tarpan* (an eye treatment utilizing lukewarm medicated ghee), plus emotional healing, sleep hypnosis, yoga, meditation, cupping, and moxibustion, a form of heat therapy. At Carillon, many guests arrive “wired but tired,” says Vice President of Spa and Wellness Tammy Pahal. The property boasts a sleep wellness circuit with a salt float bath, VEMI therapy (an electromagnetic bed), sound-wave treatments, and a meditation pod. Guest rooms feature customizable Bryte AI beds, which help with motion isolation to stop tossing and turning, as well as temperature regulation.

At SHA Mexico, I underwent a wide range of medical and psychological evaluations to help get to the root of my sleep issues: a consultation with Dr. Riveros to review my patterns and emotional triggers; an overnight sleep apnea test (thankfully, I passed); a nervous system analysis to evaluate my stress load; plus metabolic and hormone panels, and body composition and vascular health exams. My results showed a hyperactive sympathetic system, high physical stress, and an accumulation of mental fatigue, plus gut markers that suggested *dysbiosis*—which is crucial, says Dr. Riveros, as intestinal inflammation can disrupt deep sleep architecture. I am what I eat, even at night, it seems. And while my overactive brain has helped me remain nimble and productive in my career, it has not been helping me at bedtime. “An overactive brain keeps the sympathetic system switched on,

making it difficult to downshift into the parasympathetic mode needed for sleep,” says Dr. Riveros. “This leads to racing thoughts, difficulty falling asleep, and light, non-restorative sleep.”

My lack of deep sleep was something my Oura ring, which I’ve been wearing for about a year, had already alerted me to. Since it launched in 2015, Oura has sold more than 5.5 million rings and has added features like blood-oxygen and breathing-regularity sensing and, more recently, sleep-debt tracking (which shows how much shuteye your body is missing) and cumulative stress effects. Oura is just one among many sleep tracking tools, from smartwatches to apps to more newfangled tech innovations like Elemind, a soft, wearable headband powered by closed-loop neuromodulation that can help guide brainwaves into or back to sleep.

Technology—the culprit in much of our collective sleeplessness—is also becoming a potential solution, giving us unprecedented insights into our patterns. At its best, the tracking trend can increase awareness of sleep habits and encourage healthier behaviors, says Meredith Perry, cofounder and CEO of Elemind. At its worst, it can end up fostering a different kind of anxiety: “Stressing about getting a high sleep score every night can backfire, leading to more sleeplessness,” says Perry, adding that Elemind doesn’t have scoring for that reason. This thoroughly modern fixation on tracking and optimizing sleep has grown to be such a significant issue that researchers now even have a name for it: *orthosomnia*. “Over-focusing on numbers can increase anxiety, which paradoxically worsens sleep,” says Dr. Riveros. That’s right: Some of us are now losing sleep over losing sleep.

This begs the question: Can we optimize our sleep without going overboard? Doctors and sleep medicine experts agree that having a pre-bedtime ritual is a good thing. And if going to a sleep-focused destination helps instill and reinforce this notion, as it did for me, that’s great. But much like our skincare routines and our diet, as boring as it may sound, less is often more. “Honestly, the best things you can do for your sleep are straightforward and don’t garner the same attention as the latest hack,” says Dr. Sullivan. Such basic practices include getting regular exercise, eating a healthy diet, practicing some kind of mindfulness (in addition to meditation, activities like stretching, reading, writing, and drawing also qualify), maintaining a consistent bedtime, and keeping a dark, quiet, and electronics-free sleep environment. While having treatments like intermittent hypoxia and craniosacral therapy at SHA Mexico certainly felt restorative, it was consistently practicing those other simple habits for a week that actually gave me a real—and much-needed—system reset. When I got back to New York, I slept through the night.

Photos courtesy of Ananda in the Himalayas, Carillon Miami Wellness Resort, Getty Images, and SHA Mexico