



How beating stage 4 lung cancer inspired a hotel manager to become a wellness tourism pioneer

- Given weeks to live after a late-stage diagnosis, Ingo Schweder combined treatment with other measures including a macrobiotic diet, vitamin infusions and yoga
- His experience made him realise that luxury hotels were lacking in their wellness offerings, so bridging the gap between the two became his vocation



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Goco founder and CEO Ingo Schweder overcame a stage-four lung cancer diagnosis in the late 1990s, which set him on a new path to bridging the gap between wellness and luxury hospitality. Photo: Facebook

A personal victory over cancer inspired Ingo Schweder to pioneer the combination of wellness and luxury hotels.

“When I was 32 I was diagnosed with stage-four cancer and I was given six to eight weeks to live,” says Schweder, CEO and founder of Thailand-based consultancy Goco Hospitality.

He had a 13cm (5in) tumour in his lungs that was growing aggressively. Although he didn’t smoke, Schweder admits that his lifestyle, running luxury hotels, was “work hard, party hard”.

To find a solution, he visited several major international cancer centres, including the renowned Cleveland Clinic in the United States.

“They were all very nice, gave me morphine and said, ‘Ingo, sorry there is not much chance for you any more, better go home,’” he says, speaking on a call from his home in Thailand.

“At any age it’s heartbreaking to hear, but when you are barely more than a kid, with dreams and aspirations, I found it very hard to accept.”



Schweder performs a headstand at a yoga class. Photo: Ingo Schweder

He began to prepare for his last few weeks, but then he heard of a trial taking place at University Hospital Heidelberg in southern Germany. With nothing to lose, he signed up.

But Schweder didn’t just rely on the conventional Western methods of cancer treatment in the trial, which included chemotherapy. Over the next two years he practised regular [yoga](#), [meditation](#) and [breathwork](#).

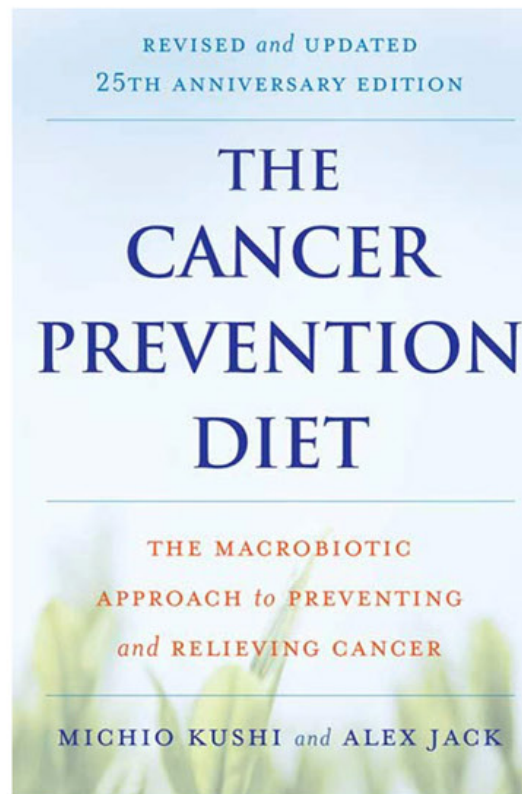
He also had weekly [vitamin infusions](#), some of which would last for 12 hours at a time.

He used cannabidiol (CBD), which helped to keep his digestion regular after chemotherapy, which has unpleasant side effects including a suppressed appetite and [constipation](#). “When you take toxicity in, you need to immediately flush it out,” he says.

He stumbled upon a book by the late Japanese scholar Michio Kushi on macrobiotic cuisine which claimed to cure cancer, advocating a diet of wholegrains, fermented foods, pulses, nuts and seaweed, among other things.

“Even in the top hospitals, [the food they provided was not nurturing](#). So after I read that book, I hired my own chef and ate nothing else.” There is still no proof that the diet actually helps cure cancer, but Schweder went into remission and, two years after his diagnosis, the tumour had disappeared completely.

“It was a gift. But [when you are faced with death, you learn a lot](#),” the now 62-year-old says. “In between chemo procedures I went looking for luxury wellness resorts with integrative medicine. At that time, in the early ’90s, they did not exist. Luxury hotels might have had a couple of treatment rooms, a sauna and a pool, but that was it.”



The Cancer Prevention Diet, by Michio Kushi and Alex Jack, taught Schweder about macrobiotic cuisine.

Medical wellness resorts were too clinical, not luxurious, he felt. So he thought, “I’m a good hotelier, why don’t I combine them?”

Bridging the gap between wellness and hospitality became his vocation. One of the first projects he worked on in the mid-’90s was Ananda, a spa resort in the foothills of the Himalayas, which within its second year was awarded an accolade by Conde Nast Traveller as a place to “renew body and soul”.

He joined the Mandarin Oriental Hotel Group in 2000 and integrated dedicated wellness offerings into 15 of its hotels before leaving in 2006. Coming from a family of entrepreneurs, he had an itch that needed scratching: he needed to set up on his own.

“I sold my three sexy cars and my two houses and moved into a small apartment in Bangkok and bought a tiny car. I raised capital to hire an amazing team and establish a proper company. But I didn’t pay myself for a while.”

His company, Goco, consults with luxury hotels to launch spa and wellness facilities, with clients now including five-star hotels such as the Waldorf Astoria, Capella, Four Seasons, Bulgari and The Ritz-Carlton.

He explains that the name combines “Go”, representing advancement, and “co”, from community, in a word that’s easy to pronounce and that represents a community-centric healthy lifestyle. The company also now owns and manages its own spa hotels, including in Bodo, in Norway; Temescal Valley, California; and Daios Cove, Greece.

The hotels Schweder works with offer wellness options that go well beyond just a signature massage (although they have those too). At Sangha Retreat in Suzhou, China, you can check in for a two-day deep health journey focused on customised preventive health that includes a [genetic test](#), vascular inflammation profile, glucose metabolism function test, hormone profiling and a tumour risk analysis.



A yoga class at a wellness centre run by Schweder's company, Goco, at Daios Cove Luxury Resort & Villas, in Greece. Photo: Goco Hospitality

Goco launched in the aftermath of the global financial crisis. "Although it took a bit longer ... I was never afraid," Schweder says. "If you have a good idea and you know what you're doing, you will survive. It was very clear that wellness would go gangbusters. It was so obvious the world would need more healing places."

Goco has so far worked on over 400 projects worth more than US\$4.3 billion in 42 countries, from individual hotel spas to wellness resorts and mixed-use developments, from initial idea to realisation and ongoing management.

Nowadays, Schweder continues to be careful about what he eats and exercises nearly every day.

"I eat 80 per cent vegetarian, not strictly macrobiotic but lets call it macrobiotic-influenced ... 100 per cent organic only and centred on fish, miso, pickles, grains and vegetables. I practise yoga, meditation and breath work near daily and also have a personal trainer for my weight and cardio work."

Schweder is also a partner in China-based Space Concepts, which runs Space Yoga and [Space Cycle](#), together with his best friend Matthew Allison, former president of EMI Music in Asia (the two were best men at each other's weddings).

The Space brand was born in Taipei, in Taiwan, and launched in China in 2016, enjoying three years of growth before the coronavirus pandemic struck.

The original plan was to roll out 27 studios, but as lockdowns forced people to stay home, they stopped at 12 and invested more online, buying a [virtual "fitness mirror" company](#) for online classes, and selling "Space Bikes" for home use, [similar in concept to Pelotons](#).



Now the company has around 3 million subscribers and celebrity trainers who add star power, such as JJ Dancer, who has performed with Beyoncé and Kanye West, and worked with Jessica Alba for the film *Sin City 2*; and Brett Hoebe, who gets Victoria's Secret models ready for the runway.

Partnerships with brands such as sports apparel retailer Lululemon and carmaker Mercedes-Benz also helped Space's profile. In 2018, China e-commerce giant Alibaba invested in the company. (Alibaba owns the *South China Morning Post*).

"In China, if you buy a Mercedes-Benz, you get a celebrity trainer driving your new car to you – with some complimentary vouchers for Space Cycle," Schweder says.

At a recent Space event, [Apple CEO Tim Cook](#) turned up without warning, perhaps to see what the fuss was about.



Apple CEO Tim Cook (right) talks with Space Concepts co-founder Matthew Allison at a Space Cycle event in Beijing, China. Photo: Space Cycle

Schweder believes the best model for Space Yoga and Space Cycle is to remain online-focused, while Goco has plans to expand across Europe and Thailand. With aspirations for wellness both on and offline, it seems he has things well covered.



Tara Loader Wilkinson

Tara Loader Wilkinson is a journalist and editor of 15 years, having written for the Wall Street Journal, the BBC, Tatler, Monocle, the Financial Times and many more. She spent 9 years living in Hong Kong before recently returning to her homeland of the UK. She loves long walks in nature, spending time with friends and family and drinking Champagne.