

Sundry Spas Shore Sense of Well-Being

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It could be argued that spa treatments are nothing more than an indulgence, a small luxury for the spoiled and the elite. True, the money spent on a eucalyptus steam bath, sea-salt scrub, or lavender body wrap could go toward practical goods such as organic vegetables or a sturdy pair of runners. But another school of thought holds that such therapies can do wonders for a person's health, enhancing physical and emotional well-being.

The concept of spa treatments as just one element of a multifaceted approach to wellness is the central tenet of Spa Ethos (2200 West 4th Avenue). Lydia Masri, the spa's director of guest care, says staff emphasize "home care" and ask clients about their lifestyle and habits -- how much activity they get, what their diet is like, and how they cope with stress -- to get an understanding of their life outside the spa.

To derive the maximum benefit of a "stone thermotherapy massage" or a "citrus reverie body envelopment", for instance, people have to be taking care of themselves all the time, not just the occasional day they take a break from the real world.

"If someone comes in expecting some miracle thing, and they don't drink enough water or get any exercise, it's really not going to help," she says, interviewed at the spa. "We don't tell people what to do, but we want to be partners with guests in wellness. Otherwise we're not really doing them a service."

Therapist Pascale Couton, originally from France and a 21-year veteran of her trade agrees.

"It is a whole mindset," she says. "If you want to maintain health, even if you don't have a lot of time, just go for a walk every day, even for half an hour. You have to take care outside of here."

To show one of the spa's most popular treatments, the "detoxifying therapy" -- an intensive algae treatment that's said to help reduce toxins and stimulate the lymphatic system -- Masri heads for the steam room while Couton prepares a "wet room". The space, one of the former bank's two vaults, is now designed simply with cinnamon-and ginger-coloured granite tile, a massage table, and a shower.

During the one-hour session (\$145), Couton uses a dry brush to give Masri a body exfoliation, then coats her with a substance made of seaweed and mint that looks like sludgy green paint. Then Masri is wrapped in plastic -- "like sushi", Couton says -- while she gets her scalp and feet rubbed. After about 20 minutes, Couton unwraps Masri, washes off the mudlike cream, then, in some spots, applies a gel that she says acts against cellulite and rubs in a moisturizer everywhere else. Masri says she feels relaxed, but at the same time her body "feels quite alive".

When clients are finished a treatment, they're encouraged to drink water and relax for a while. Couton follows up with them a couple of days later.

" We ask how they're feeling, If they have any questions," Couton says. "We make it clear from the start that home care is very important. Health has to be ongoing."

Taking care of oneself is also part of the philosophy at Vida Wellness Spa (1088 Burrard Street, in the Wall Centre Hotel), unique for being based on Ayurveda, a form of holistic healing that originated in India about 5,000 years ago. Literally translated as "the science of life", Ayurveda holds that three *doshas*, or elements (*vata*, *pitta*, and *kapha*), maintain the body's functioning, and when they're in balance, health and beauty -- inner and outer -- result.

Practitioners tailor each treatment to a person's individual dosha composition, deciding which types of Ayurvedic herbs, such as wild cherry, lemongrass, and comfrey, to incorporate.

Besides Ayurvedic, Thai, and shiatsu massage, among the spa's therapies are a "warm ginger sugar exfoliation", an orange-and green-tea body wrap, and an "exotic kona coffee vichy". Then there is its Swedana steam treatment.

It starts with an Ayurvedic massage, which is said to promote blood and lymph circulation. You're then escorted to a quiet room that consists of the Swedana, a handcrafted cedar steam cabinet. The rectangular casing opens up for you to climb into and lie down on your back, then closes to encase your body from the neck down. Your head stays cool while the rest of your body warms up from steam infused with a herbal mixture -- like chamomile, lemongrass, lavender, and sandalwood -- customized for your dosha composition.

Afterward, you're back on the massage table for an exfoliating "dry flour brushing", a superfine mix of barley flour and lemongrass that feels delicate and soothing. You get to walk away with the wooden brush just used on your now-tingling, invigorated body, as well as information about the doshas and Ayurvedic herbs, recipes for "balancing" teas, and detailed instructions of various body stretches. (The treatment costs \$180 for 90 minutes; \$225 for 120.) Chances are good you'll also leave with an "Ahhhh."

Another out-of-the-ordinary experience can be had at Miraj Hammam Spa, an authentic Middle Eastern steam bath. In 600 AD, the prophet Muhammad endorsed the *hammam* as a method of cleansing without bathing, and the tradition has endured as a means of healing body and soul. Literally translated as "spreader of warmth", hammams, which in the Middle East are usually attached to mosques, were known in centuries past as the "silent doctor".

Opened by Surinder Bains in 2000, Miraj also follows the practice of women and men having separate chambers. The spa (1495 West 6th Avenue) has specific women's and men's hours so each can fully relax and take in the steam in the raw.

Here, you start off with a shower, then slip into a sarong and make your way to the hammam chambers. The stunning steam rooms are designed with spectacular archways, intricate tile patterns, and Jerusalem gold marble slabs (which stay cool) to lie on. The inner sanctum is much hotter than the outer, the two separated by glass doors and a trickling fountain.

After time in both steam areas, you experience a *gommage*, a full-body exfoliation with black Moroccan soap. Then you're rinsed off with welcome cool water, and can opt for a papaya and clay "body masque", an aromatherapy facial, or a gentle massage right down to your baby toes. (Prices vary; a hammam, gommage, and 15-minute relaxation massage is \$99.)

To bring the treatment to a close, you relax in the Sultana lounge, which is decorated in hues of cranberry and gold and consists of exquisite velvet pillows, strewn on day beds. You can dip into Middle Eastern tea and sweet cake.

Then you float back into the real world. And with a little attention and effort, those feelings of peace and well-being will stay with you long after you leave.