

Dip into a bath at the spa to the stars

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What's better than a glass of champagne and chocolate-coated strawberries? A bath, I say.

The rose and frankincense oil jacuzzi bath I was immersed in at Absolute Spa spirited me to a place where such things matter not and they were left untouched.

It's much more delicious, it seems to me, to have a bath drawn for you at just the right temperature, the lights turned down, candles lit and to drift into a womb-like place in your universe. It's hard to do at home when "things that must get done" lurk outside the door.

The rose oil, I am told, is good for capillary circulation, and frankincense expands the mind and uplifts the spirits. There are many aromatherapy bottles lined up by the bath, offering a menu of moods and feelings.

It's no wonder Uma and Hilary and Charlize and Elle come here when they're in town. And I quite understand why Tori Spelling and her new husband Charlie Shianian booked in for seven hours recently. Even Ben Affleck, who doesn't fit the spa image, has been in for undisclosed ablutions.

The list of Hollywood celebs who revive themselves at this spa goes on and on. It's a heavenly, therapeutic getaway, where every prickly thing in your life is momentarily bumped off your radar.

Absolute Spa is one of the places that takes therapeutic bathing to a new level with a menu of bathing options.

About a year ago, they introduced ayurveda massage and bathing, an Indian "science of life." It involves oiling the body, a deep massage, applying a traditional paste which nourishes, exfoliates and absorbs the oil, and then a triphala herbal bath.

The massage, called *ahbrynaj*, is done by two practitioners to calm nerves. In the *Shirodhara* treatment, two litres of oil are poured over the forehead and the scalp is massaged.

"Our epidermal layer is composed of 70 percent oil. All our vital functions are governed or controlled by the oils in our body," says Wendy Cocchia, owner of Absolute Spas. Oil on the forehead stimulates the pineal gland and the pituitary gland, refreshing the hormonal system, recharging it.

The Pizzichil treatment takes it a step further with four litres of oil rubbed all over the body, concentrating on joints and big muscles. "It penetrates deep into tissue layers, repairing damaged tissue and rejuvenating nerve cells," she says.

In another room, Absolute's hydrotherapy pool allows practitioners to massage clients with water wands, and the jacuzzi, of course, is a common North American phenomenon. The mud bath is hugely popular, says Coccia. "We import Austrian mud that contains up to 30,000 natural herbs and botanicals naturally. It's from the only place in the world where weeping willow trees grow straight up because it's so healing."

Coccia recently got distribution rights to Aromatherapy Associates products, a British aromatherapy bath line used by the royal family and stars like Gwyneth Paltrow.

At Miraj Hammam on South Granville, owner Surinder Bains Kassour is busy acquainting Vancouverites with the Middle Eastern hammam, steam baths that were originally attached to mosques for purification and socializing.

When she opened this palatial marble bathhouse five years ago, she tacked "spa" on to the name. "People are now using the term hammam and soon enough, I can drop the 'spa' altogether. We're more than a spa. We have a very rich spiritual history."

Bains Kassour experienced her first hammam in Paris. "It was shocking for me at first. There were 80 to 100 nude women, washing each other. There were mothers and daughters and friends."

Here, bylaws preclude such mass togetherness, but people (a lot of celebrities as well as locals) are becoming very comfortable with the process, she says.

At Miraj, you first go through a high-intensity steam bath, then move to a low-mist chamber to slowly cool down. After that, you wash in cool water, then move on to a massage treatment--anything from a gentle aromatherapy massage to deep tissue therapy.

"It's really wonderful to have the whole body cleansed," she says, "from the neck all the way down, with black Moroccan soap and a Middle Eastern loofah mitt."

"Hammams are back in fashion because people miss the contact of someone touching you...and cleaning you. Women say they've been nurturing and caring for their children all these years and no one has washed them since they were babies themselves. It brings back what their mothers did for them," she says.