

CITY TOUR

Bangkok's Bundles

Massages using hot herb-filled poultices are showing up on spa menus around the world. The origins of this centuries-old treatment are mysterious, but some scholars say compress healing is indigenous to Thailand. One thing's for sure: The Thais have elevated it to an art form. These Bangkok spas offer interpretations from classic to avant-garde. —JUDY CHAPMAN



Wat Pho Temple

Famous for Thai massage but also home to the country's oldest Thai-medicine school, where traditional poultice massage has been practiced for centuries. In a large communal massage pavilion, graduate healers press steamed bundles of crushed lemongrass and camphor along your spine for a song (about US\$16 for an hour). 2 Sanamchai Rd., +66-(0)2221-2974, www.watpho.com



Ruen Nuad

A 650-square-foot spa in a converted Thai house with dark wood floors and whitewashed walls. Book the Herbal Compress massage two days in advance and therapists will customize a treatment using fresh Thai herbs such as tamarind leaf and camphor. 42 Thanon Convent, +66-(0)2632-2662, ruen_nuad@yahoo.com



Spa Botanica

The city's newest luxury spa, opened last November at the Sukhothai hotel. Clean-lined decor, bamboo sculptures, and outdoor bathtubs, all surrounded by more than 75,300 square feet of tropical gardens. The 60-minute Oriental Touch Therapy combines a classic ginger compress with a dry acupressure massage to boost circulation. 13/3 South Sathorn Rd., +66-(0)2344-8900, www.sukhothai.com



Suk Spa

A boutique spa in a rambling hundred-year-old four-story home crammed full of teak furnishings and dimly lit with Sukhothai-style lanterns. Try the Thai Herbal Heat Massage with Pikhul, an earth-mother type who nimbly wields two pouches of Kaffir lime and lemongrass steamed in lemongrass-and-mint water, a neat twist on the usual recipe. 1/30 Sukhumvit 11 Rd., +66-(0)2651-2672, www.sukspa.com



Divana Nurture Spa

Occupies a charming house in a quaint garden. Poultices here contain creative mixtures of medicinal herbs, sea salt, and wildflowers. Whereas traditional poultice ingredients are energizing, the Moonlight Anti-Stress version (pepper berries and wild jasmine) delivers on its promise to fight fatigue, calm back tension, and induce a good night's sleep. 8 Sukhumvit 35, +66-(0)2261-4818-9, www.divana-dvn.com

CREATURE COMFORT Herbal compresses were traditionally used on the sore legs of Thai elephant calvary men—and of the elephants themselves.