



ALL NATURAL Herbal pouches at Mactan Island's Chi Spa Village are filled with such ingredients as lotus flowers, camphor, and aloe vera.

SPA GOER

BY JUDY CHAPMAN

Getting Warmer

The herbal poultice is heating up spa menus around the region

HEALING THROUGH HEAT IS ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST TIME-HONORED therapeutic traditions—think Native American sweat lodges, Turkish hamams, hot-stone treatments, moxibustion, even the humble hot-water bottle. The warmth of a masseuse's hands alone can induce immense calm. But it's the herbal poultice, also known as the hot compress or herbal pouch, that is fast becoming a staple on today's spa menus. Passed down through generations of pilgrims and early traders, the poultice has traveled from its Ayurvedic origins in India to Thailand, Malaysia, the Maldives, and beyond. • Shaped like oversized dumplings, these little bundles are overflowing with wellness benefits. They comprise a handful of fresh herbs and plants wrapped in natural cloth, and are boiled in a steamer for 10 to 15 minutes before being applied to various parts of the body as a stand-alone treatment or as part of a massage. Depending on the condition of the

60



NICE TOUCH Readyng an “Herbal Harmony” treatment at Chi Spa Village, left. Below: Hmong-inspired poultices at La Résidence Phou Vao in Luang Prabang. Opposite: A Thai-style treatment at Six Senses Spa.



new **Quan Spa** (91-22/6693-3000; www.marriott.com), where the “Spice Bundle Massage” involves two therapists pressing pouches filled with medicated oils, wild spices, and handpicked forest herbs on the body. It’s synchronized bliss. Further south in Goa, the **Sereno Spa** (91-832/272-1234; www.goa.park.hyatt.com) at the Park Hyatt customizes its herbal poultices for each client, drawing on such ingredients as powdered horsegram, dried ginger, and castor leaves blended with *njavara* rice.

BALI On the menu at **Maya Ubud Resort & Spa** (62-361/977-888; www.mayaubud.com) is a hot herbal compress made from the bounty of Bali’s own natural medicine chest: turmeric, betel, and ginger. According to the resort’s Ayu Martiasih, all areas of the body can benefit from this treatment, and it’s highly recommended for the relief of symptoms associated with rheumatism and arthritis. Having it applied in an open-air pavilion overlooking the Petanu River is a great bonus.

PHILIPPINES “Herbal Harmony” is an ideal name for the pouch treatment awaiting you at **Chi Spa Village** (63-32/231-0288; www.shangri-la.com), the sprawling spa complex at Shangri-La Mactan Island Resort. Filled with ingredients like lotus flowers, camphor, and aloe vera, the bundles soothe muscles,

client, the technique ranges from a gentle compress to vigorous pounding.

According to Dr. Thampi of the Sereno Spa at the Park Hyatt Goa in India, the herbal poultice is classified as a *swedana* (sweat treatment) in the ancient Vedic texts. In today’s parlance, it’s considered a detoxifying therapy as it encourages sweat, thus helping to eliminate toxins from the body. Dr. Pakpilai Thavisin from the S Medical Spa (www.smedspa.com) in Bangkok adds that when herbs are heated, their healing properties penetrate the skin more easily. She prescribes poultices for chronic pain as well as for osteoarthritis and fibromyalgia. But if your ailment is nothing more dramatic than tense muscles

or lower-back pain, poultice treatments are just as effective. Better still, they can be downright enjoyable. What follows is a roundup of some of the best in the region.

CHINA In ancient China, hot rocks were wrapped in bark and pressed upon the body to relieve stress and muscle pain. For a modern spin on this venerable curative, try the herbal compress at the **Banyan Tree Lijiang** (86-888/533-1111; www.banyantree.com) in Yunnan province. Part of a three-hour signature massage treatment, the pouches are filled with honeysuckle and red tea and dipped in warm sesame oil before being applied. It sounds good enough to eat, and the benefits—smoother skin, improved skin tone and blood circulation—are equally as delectable.

INDIA In Mumbai, prepare yourself for deep relaxation at the JW Marriott’s sleek



increase blood circulation, and heighten oxygen flow through the body.

LAOS In Luang Prabang, “Mohom Indigo Healing Art” at **La Résidence Phou Vao** (856-71/212-194; www.pansea.com) takes its cues from the ancient therapies of Hmong shamans, who wrapped herbs and plants in blue fabric (a color symbolizing spirituality) and then boiled them in a clay pot filled with water and indigo leaves. Revamping this practice, the months-old spa at La Résidence packs its poultices

with such locally grown herbs as *yaanang*, lemongrass, cinnamon, Borneo camphor, and ginger.

MALDIVES Given that the Maldives comprises thousands of coral atolls, it makes perfect sense that the sand and the sea have found their way into the islands’ traditional medicines. In the underwater treatment rooms at Huvafen Fushi’s **Aquum Spa** (960/664-4222; www.huvafenfushi.com), the “Maldivian Monsoon Ritual” uses poultices that are filled with mineral-rich Maldivian sand and then steamed in seawater.

MALAYSIA Malaysia’s healing culture is a mix of Indian, Arabic, Chinese, and Malay practices. Little wonder, then, that Pangkor Laut Resort’s **Spa Village** (60-5/699-1100; www.pangkorlautresort.com) has named its poultice treatment the “Campur Campur,” meaning “a blend of varieties.” According to spa manager Chik Lai Ping, the original Malay herbal poultice dates

back as far as the 13th century. Here they have improved on tradition by creating mini pouches for the eyes and face.

THAILAND Possibly the most popular herbal poultice is the Thai version, or *lukprakob*, originally used to treat wounded soldiers during the kingdom’s Ayutthaya period. One of its best modern-day applications can be found in the seaside town of Hua Hin, at the Evason Hideaway’s **Six Senses Spa** (66-032/618-200; www.sixsensespas.com). A component of the “Oriental Massage,” the steamed pouches here are pressed along the body’s *sen* or energy lines. In Bangkok, one can also take lessons in this fabulous treatment at **Wat Pho** (62-2/212-974; www.watpho.com). The temple has trained Buddhist monks in traditional healing arts for generations, and its massage school is open to anyone wishing to take a bit of Thailand’s therapeutic wisdom home with them. ©

Judy Chapman is the author of Ultimate Spa, a guide to spas and spa treatments throughout Asia.

PREVIOUS AND TOP LEFT: COURTESY OF SHANGRI-LA MACTAN ISLAND RESORT & SPA. TOP RIGHT: COURTESY OF YTSARA.