

Healing Hands

With the wellness industry tipped soon to be a trillion-dollar market, we asked former *Spa Asia* Editor-in-Chief **Judy Chapman** to be our expert columnist on all things spa. In her inaugural piece, we are reminded that a spa is only as good as its therapists - so if they're happy, we're happy.

I'm sitting here with two feet submerged in a pretty bowl filled with water and frangipani petals. Beside me is a pot of herbal tea, and I'm anticipating the spa experienced promised to me: that my mind, body and soul will be transported to an otherworldly place.

I've always wondered about the dramatic difference in the cost of treatments at luxury spas and a therapist's wages. After all, no matter how appealing the treatment menu and its exotic offerings, it is ultimately the therapist's curative hands that stand the test of time.

It was not long ago that a therapist's life in Asia was very different. In cultures like Indonesia and Malaysia, for example, to be a masseuse was to be born into a lineage of healers, with the gift for healing passed down through generations.

Thankfully, there are a number of inspired individuals and organisations who are keeping the energy of this tradition alive.

In Thailand, there is increasing focus on caring for a spa therapist's wellbeing. Andrew Jacka, Vice President of the Thai Spa Association and Director of Horwath Spa Consulting, agrees that therapists are the backbone of the industry.

"Therapists know that they are in high demand and work hard to improve their own skills to better their lives, as does anyone in any type of employment," he says. "Any employer that does not provide therapists with a high level of salary and benefits will not be their employer for long."

Jacka says that the Thai Spa Association has just introduced a new category of membership for Spa Therapists that formally recognises the importance of the therapist's role in the industry.

David Haughton, Interior Architect from DJH & Associates Interior Architecture, which specialises in resort and



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...like the Bali Spa Association (BSA) are helping to set industry standards and enable wage standards to be established according to staff ability and experience.


"When there is an improvement in industry standards for the staff then the benefits are a two-way street," he says.

Susan Stein, Founder of Jari Menari International, a boutique massage centre in Bali, is a true believer that massage is a necessity, not a luxury, and wants both locals and tourists to experience massage on a regular basis and not just as an annual indulgence for a special occasion.

At Jari Menari, a 75-minute massage costs USD 18. Profits are recycled into employees' career growth, which includes Japanese language classes, advanced massage training with international teachers as well as sessions at other local spas. Stein also assists employees by paying school tuition for their children and supporting them at times of financial need.

"Every business owner must decide what they personally desire in profits and returns from their investment," says Stein.

Likewise, Six Senses Spas around the region are highly regarded for staff management strategies. A therapist at their Koh Samui property revealed to me that it is Six Senses' company policy to make sure employees are always happy first - even before the customer.

Indeed, the original purpose of Ayurveda - a major influence of Thai, Indonesian and Malay cultural heritage - was to empower the masses. With the Asian spa scene still very much in the early stages, and many of its leaders circulating goodness throughout the industry... the future of the spa looks as beautiful as the hundreds of blossoms I'm bathing in! 

Spa-trek throughout Thailand, and you'll find that the price of massages and treatments varies from USD 20 to USD 40, sometimes as high as USD 160.