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The ceremony of spa

The sensual spas of Paris offer rituals that are more like a spiritual encounter than your average rubdown. By Judy Chapman

As a destination, Paris is associated with culture, high fashion and history but for some the French capital is also a spiritual destination. Its centuries-old architecture can leave a person feeling soulful and aware of the preciousness of the present moment.

In addition, the many spas of Paris, which boast thermal waters, oriental steam rooms and heated marble slabs upon which to receive Moroccan mud applications, can become a spiritual pilgrimage in themselves as you allow the beautifully uplifting bodywork to take effect not just on skin and muscles but on the spirit as well.

Spa life has long been the wellspring of France. According to recent reports, there are 130 thermal bathing stations around the country and the coastline is home to dozens

of thalassotherapy spas, which are medical health facilities based on seawater cures like hydrotherapy and algae-based wraps and applications. Historically, the French government subsidised its citizens to spend time at the thermal springs or thalasso waters for rehabilitation and rejuvenation.

In Paris, however, it's the hammam, also known as the communal Turkish bathhouse, that still takes centre stage. Taking its name from the Arabic word for "spreader of warmth", the hammam is the Middle East's answer to the Japanese onsen (hot spring bath) and the sauna of Finland.

La Mosquée, France's oldest place of Islamic worship, is located in the Latin Quarter and offers traditional Islamic bathing rituals as well as a sense of the divine. Entrance into the white-domed building touched me to my

very core. True beauty reigned. Inside, several chambers feature high ceilings and rose-coloured marble pillars. Light pours through old stained-glass windows and the paint peeling off the walls feels like it could tell a thousand stories. The main chamber features a water foundation surrounded by comfy day beds, which is where traditional massages are bestowed by large, radiant Moroccan women. It feels like a sacred space.

The hammam spa ritual is effortless. Simply strip down to your bathers, which is usually the required attire although some wear less. For modest folk, the atmosphere is half-lit and thick with steam, allowing one to enjoy the vigorous scrubs and soapy washes with a small degree of privacy. People of all shapes and sizes progress through the steam rooms, each one hotter than the other. Different languages





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fill the vaulted rooms like enchanting songs.

Spas are traditionally a social experience. During the Roman Empire days, folk reportedly spent hours at time in the bathing houses, eating, drinking, chatting and reading while receiving steam therapies or massage. Even today, in the hot spring spas of Japan, you'll find steaming thermal waters filled with women and men chatting noisily to each other.

Several steams and cold plunge pool dips later I booked the gommage (exfoliation) and lay meekly as a large Moroccan woman scrubbed my skin vigorously with traditional black olive soap (weeks later my skin still felt incredibly smooth). The finale was an incredibly deep, strong and therapeutic massage where years of tension seemed to fall away. This was no hushed spa experience, however. All of the massages are given in the main public chamber as therapists chat to each other, occasionally breaking into sudden chants that echo through the ancient walls.

Afterwards, I recline on a plush daybed piled high with coloured silky cushions, sip mint tea from an ornate glass and nibble on sweet Arabian pastries. Could life be any more sensual? It's times like this that one feels truly honoured. And why not? The beauty of spas is that they provide a nurturing and guilt-free atmosphere for self-worship.

While a visit to a European spa is historically

about the curative waters, a growing acceptance of Eastern medicine has propelled a burst of Asian treatments into the marketplace. At Thémaé, a luxury day facility not far from The Louvre, Ayurvedic and oriental massages are very popular, as is the Japanese Onsen Ritual, where a mind-soothing head and neck massage are bestowed as you soak in a traditional wooden tub filled with water and tea flowers.

Inspired by the Japanese tea ceremony, Thémaé is a blend of calming Zen ritual with the Moroccan warmth of rendered walls, candle-lit corridors and harmonious colours. Treatments are called ceremonies and there's a strong focus on tea-based rituals with a contemporary slant. Their 90-minute Hammam Ritual, for instance, begins with a session in the steam room followed by a lathering of black olive soap upon a heated marble slab. The steam room is colour customised to enhance different moods and emotions. We sat covered in the reddish brown Moroccan clay, high on life, allowing our skin to purify amid the coloured haze.

Typically French

The fact that Asian-inspired therapies are growing in popularity can be attributed to Europe's history of discouraging physical contact, often for cultural and religious reasons. Today, however, touch-based therapies such

as traditional Chinese medicine are growing in popularity as evidenced by a number of excellent TCM doctors and universities in Paris. The French are increasingly drawn to massage and reflexology as a way to relieve stress rather than relying on medication for cure.

Still, it always seems sensible to take indigenous experiences in the country you are visiting. At The Four Seasons George V, for instance, located a few steps away from the Champs-Élysées, a Louis XVI-style spa features decadent interiors of gilt mirrors, 18th-century prints and a sanctuary pool surrounded by whirlpools and trompe-l'oeil gardens. The menu of flawless facials, impeccable manicures and pedicures plus cocktail make-up sessions and aromatic scrubs made from cranberry, mint and ginger all delivered by warm and confident therapists seems impeccably Parisian. As well, guests have complimentary access to the water and hammam facilities pre- and post-treatments.

I chose the Marie Antoinette facial from their Beauty Secrets Menu and found myself cocooned in warmth as thick, orange blossom-scented creams, scrubs and mist sprays were applied with a generous facial massage then completed with a leave-in fragrant jasmine hair mask. Afterwards, I was served orange blossom tea and chocolate macarons — apparently the queen's favourite — in the private lounge bar, which was also stocked with strawberries, dried fruit and teas. Pleasure can be addictive.

Afterwards, as I waited for my friend to finish her treatment, my hair still soaked in the sweet jasmine oil, I observed the comings and goings of the historic hotel. Beautifully dressed men and women moved with grace through the marble foyer. Flowers spilled out of tall vases and crimson velvet couches beckoned. It occurred to me that spirituality does not exist only in temples and it is not only folk shrouded in saffron robes who convey kindness. There is beauty in every moment. The dashing waiter who topped up my water glass was completely present. The benefit of taking treatments is that they quieten the mind and slow one down so you notice and appreciate the smaller things in life.

Another quintessential French spa experience is Les Bains du Marais, which offers an authentic atmosphere where foreigners are few. Marais, which is traditionally a bourgeois district, is now known for its offbeat fashion, cafés, bars, historic museums and galleries. Les Bains du Marais has long held an esteemed reputation as an institution for patrons who prefer classic French pampering. While the spa menu offers traditional facials, beauty therapies and French pedicures, it also offers a hammam that consists of two eucalyptus-scented marble hot rooms.

In this hallowed place, bodies draped in towels lounge about in a lantern-lit Moroccan-inspired rooms. I choose a 20-minute gommage

scrub given in a white-tiled chamber, but for deeper cleansing there's a three-hour session of steam, gommage, massage and pedicure. While there are separate bathing days for men and women, Wednesday evenings and weekends are mixed gender "bring-your-bathers" occasions. Afterwards, curl up with a magazine or sojourn upstairs to the adjoining café for healthy, nourishing soups and juices. Even better, take away a touch of Paris with their range of olive, bitter orange and honey scrubs.

It didn't take long before French fashion houses and designers moved into the spa arena. Located on the ground floor of Anne Fontaine's signature store, Le Spa Anne Fontaine is Paris's first organic urban spa that "conveys my passion for balance, comfort and needs as a working woman", according to its owner. Fontaine calls her treatment rooms cabins and inside these wombs I can select from an expansive range of natural facials, wraps and massages that are reasonably priced for a five-star spa in Paris. Alluring offerings include the Goddess Bath, Amazonian Baptism and The Girl from Ipanema, many of which are based on Fontaine's childhood memories in Brazil.

Another haven located within walking distance from the Champs-Élysées is Espace Payot, a large modern space of grey stone and muted colours that offers a cool yet calming ambience. The heated floors, yummy robes and slippers and first-rate water and steam facilities are wonderful but come second to the sparkling 14-metre ultra-violet indoor pool that is fitted out with underwater music. Here, I sink into the waters and let the massage jets pummel my neck muscles, back and feet.

For a hammam therapy, the Private Dream comprises a jacuzzi with salt crystals followed by body exfoliation using a balm of semi-precious stones, a steam and body massage. Other choices include pedicures and facials given with diamond powder. Afterwards I was taken to the health bar for a customised vegetable juice, which I enjoyed while

overlooking the coaching room where regulars partake in slow movement exercises like yoga and Pilates.

Cinq Mondes spa is also worth a visit as founder Jean-Louis Poiroux apparently spent 10 years travelling the globe collecting ancient beauty and bathing recipes before he opened his flagship store in a historical building nearby the Place de l'Opera. The spa's design is a mix of influences from East and West including Japanese screens and cedarwood tubs and treatments that have been inspired by his travels. The décor celebrates Ayurvedic, North African, Japanese, Chinese and Balinese cultures. For hammam devotees, creams and scrubs made from sesame, olive oil and honey are available. The Savon Noir (black soap), scented with cinnamon, eucalyptus and cedar, is a take-home delight made from the purest ingredients and comes with a traditional Kassa glove perfect for a home spa ritual.

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Beyond Paris

Outside of Paris there are a multitude of wellness destinations that offer natural hot springs, thalassotherapy and affordable places to drink, bathe and experience health in a joyful manner. In these places it is possible to slip into a honeycomb robe and wait by the burning fire for an attendant to take you on your journey. La Ferme Thermale d'Eugénie, set inside a restored farmhouse in the 19th-century spa town Eugénie-les-Bains, is located near Bordeaux and the Atlantic coast and is one of France's long-held secrets.

It was named in 1862 after Napoleon's third wife, Empress Eugénie. The story is that she spent three months a year bathing in the remedial water to escape the summer heat of Paris. Inside, a sumptuous world recalls Greco-

Roman bathing traditions. The heated marble slabs perfumed with spices, chestnut wooden cabins with white marble baths, hydro-massaging thermal showers and a Turkish hammam are all created with healing in mind. Eugénie's waters are known for treating arthritis, painful joints, bad backs and muscle tension with anti-inflammatory virtues that improve suppleness and circulation.

A four-hour train ride from Paris is Évian, a small town located on the shores of Lake Geneva revered for its healthy mineral waters flowing down from the French Alps. There are plenty of places to bathe here including Évian-les-Bains, which boasts 18th-century spa buildings and waters beneficial for gout and arthritis.

A newcomer to the scene is the eclectic Buddha Spa, which celebrates all continents with particular inspiration drawn from the Himalayan region. The philosophy behind the Buddha Spa is to make the experience fun and frivolous. In the words of creator Helen Coulon, "We wanted to make a new twist to the town, yet there is still a harmony and grace here and the call of the water, mountains and fresh air make it all very spiritual. People depart feeling touched by the Buddha."

Another of France's blessed offerings — wine — makes an appearance at several spas that offer merlot-inspired treatments and experiences. The Caudalie Vinotherapie Spa, located in a vineyard in the Bordeaux region, is one of the most beautiful. Here, you can spend the night in a chateau and spa by day with a host of treatments made from the rich mineral waters and local wines. Imagine bathing in a red wine bath or being wrapped up in crushed cabernet scrubs both of which are said to help combat free-radical damage. Afterwards, it makes sense to drink some of the wine — for internal health, of course.

Interestingly, the region is renowned for having some of the longest-lived people in France. Good wine and conversation, it seems, are the secret to longevity.