

Perfect pampering

Whether you want to kickstart your fitness, detox or de-stress, here's how to find the ideal health spa break for you WORDS: Joanna Ebsworth

Loved by everyone from A-list celebs to brides-to-be and detox queens, health spas have never been more popular. But the spa tradition spans back thousands of years. Originally, spas were built on thermal springs renowned for their power to cleanse, cure and invigorate. Think of the Roman baths in Bath or the Victorian-built baths in Harrogate, which first developed as a spa town in 1571 after the discovery of its medicinal waters. And people didn't only bathe in the water, they drank it too.

These days, water-based treatments, such as hydrotherapy and thalassotherapy, are enjoying a renaissance, but spa treatments go much further than facials and massage. The latest spa trends include fitness makeovers, stress-reduction and sleep clinics, and renewed interest in energy medicine – so reiki, chakra balancing, sound therapy

and qi gong sessions are often available alongside more conventional treatments. There's also a new breed of 'eco' spas, with green initiatives including wind-powered electricity, and buildings made from recycled materials. At the Six Senses spa in Thailand, the surrounding gardens have even been designed to be edible!

With more than 500 spas and treatment rooms in the UK alone, finding the right spa can be confusing. But whether you're a spa virgin or seasoned regular, the secret to a successful spa experience is to make sure you do your research.

PLAN YOUR VISIT

'The key to making the most of your visit is in the planning,' says

Lina Lotto, spa director at SenSpa (www.senspa.co.uk). Think about what you want to gain from your spa visit. Is it relaxation? Do you want to kickstart a fitness or weight-loss programme? Are you recovering from an illness or stressful event and need some nurturing? Are you beauty-focused or do you prefer holistic therapies? Is activity important, or do you just want to relax? These sorts of questions will determine which spa you should choose and how you spend your time there,' she advises.

Once you've decided on your goals, it's time to start researching. Talk to friends and family for recommendations, but remember, one person's paradise could be another's idea

of hell – if you're after a peaceful retreat, a tip-off from someone who enjoyed a fun, giggly hen weekend at a popular spa might mean it's not the place for you. Invest in a spa guide, such as *The Good Spa Guide 2009: The Best Spas in Britain* (Good Spa Guide, £18.95) or visit websites that offer reviews and direct links to spa websites for more detailed information (try www.wahanda.com, www.goodspaguide.co.uk or www.spafinder.co.uk).

'Take time to read about the spa you intend to visit,' says Lotto. 'What is its philosophy? Does it resonate with you? For example, at SenSpa our philosophy is "organic and chemical-free", so the products we use are natural. Some people care passionately about this, while for others it's not important. Also, our concept is oriental, so many of our treatments are derived from techniques used in Thai traditional massage.' This is great if you want to try out Eastern-inspired treatments, but not so good if you're interested in the latest technology.

Your choice of spa will also depend on whether you're visiting alone, with a partner or in a group. 'If you're going with your partner, check there'll be enough to keep them entertained,' says Tracey Stapleton, managing director of The Spa PR Company. 'You won't be able to relax during your facial if you know you'll be returning to a bored husband, so make sure there'll be enough facilities, such as a gym, outdoor activities or simply a bar where he can read the papers. Also, see if joint treatments, such as tandem massage, are available, and book them in advance so you can enjoy a treatment together.' If you're planning to go away with a

group of friends, check your preferred destination allows large parties.

BE SPA-WISE

Spa trips don't have to cost a fortune, and choosing the most expensive destination doesn't necessarily guarantee the best experience. 'Spas are much better at promoting themselves these days, especially as new spas are launching all the time and creating more competition. If you shop around on websites, such as www.spaseekers.com or www.lastminute.com, you'll find some really great deals,' says Stapleton. 'Some spas also offer brilliant discount packages to returning visitors so, if you enjoy your experience at a particular spa, ask if it has a similar scheme.'

If you're simply looking for a pampering treatment or two, the increasingly popular day spa could be the answer. Many day spas, such as Nirvana Spa in Berkshire (www.nirvanaspa.co.uk) and The Sanctuary in London (www.thesanctuary.co.uk), have pools and lounge areas, so you can relax in-between treatments. Check whether treatments are included in the price of your day package for value for money. If you want your spa benefits with a dose of luxury, a hotel spa break could be the best choice. Perfect for a more romantic break, destinations such as The Grove Hotel in Hertfordshire (www.thegrove.co.uk) or Calcott Manor in the Cotswolds (www.calcotmanor.co.uk) allow you to book a one-off treatment or spend a day using the spa facilities but still enjoy fine dining, sight-seeing or the luxury of your room.

To help you find the right spa destination, turn the page for *H&F's* ultimate guide to the best spas for every goal. ➤

HOW TO GET THE MOST FROM YOUR SPA STAY

Follow our expert tips to avoid the pitfalls and maximise the benefits.

■ **Take time** to choose treatments by researching the spa's website or brochure. Book in advance to avoid disappointment and help plan your time. You may need to rest and rehydrate after some treatments, so don't schedule exercise classes afterwards, and avoid having body treatments straight after meals.

■ **Let the spa know** in advance if you have special dietary needs, and take a look at the menu on offer. Some spas offer strict diets, while others provide more indulgent, calorie-laden choices – great if you fancy some indulgence, but not so good if you're looking to kickstart a diet.

■ **Find out** what's included in the price of your visit – some spas provide robes, towels, pool shoes, toiletries and hair dryers, so you can travel lightly. Be aware also, some spas will charge for robes and other items if you're not staying overnight or have opted for the 'basic' package.

■ **If you** have a health condition or are pregnant, check the treatments you want are not contraindicated.

■ **Finding** a good therapist is often as important as finding a good spa. Wahanda's website (www.wahanda.com) reviews individual therapists as well as spas. A good therapist will think about details, such as what kind of pressure you want for a massage. If they don't ask, don't be afraid to tell them what you'd like.

■ **Decide** how far you're willing to travel. City-centre spas are easy to get to, while some country retreats are hidden away and only accessible by car.