

TEST THE water



Spanish spa group Aire has brought its ancient baths concept to the UK. Amanda Pauley discovers why London is primed to take on this mind-body water experience and how it differs to other bath houses in the sector

Having already opened seven Aire Ancient Baths across the globe in dreamy destinations such as Barcelona, Copenhagen, and New York, it was only a matter of time before chief executive Amadeo Serra brought the Spanish spa group's bath house concept to London. The group's eighth space, situated close to Charing Cross, is a temple dedicated to mind and body relaxation via water experiences based on bathing traditions from ancient civilisations.

The experience consists of a tour through seven different baths with varying temperatures – caldarium (hot bath at 40°C), frigidarium (cold bath at 14°C and then an ice bath at 10°C), tepidarium (warm bath at 36°C), balneum (1,000 jets bath), vaporium (steam bath) and flotarium (salt bath) – in a candlelit setting, followed by a selection of premium services which include massage, a wine bath, and cheese and wine tasting.

"Our goal is to help people recuperate using traditions that have been lost throughout the centuries. The bath house is a place to relax and enjoy sensorial experiences, as well as a location to have social encounters and make memories, and that's what makes us different," explains Serra.

But one of the most crucial parts of the Aire experience is that every building is rich in history from the city it is set within. It must be listed, a minimum size of 13,993sq ft, situated in a nice district but not on a main street, and, of course, have a story to tell that highlights the local culture.



Amadeo Serra



"Whenever we choose a location, we always look for a historical or listed building to add to the mystery of the special environment we're trying to create," says Serra. "In London, the 18th century building our spa is set within was the home of novelist JM Barrie, who wrote Peter Pan. As such, we have a first edition of the book in the reception area to help take our clients back to the roots and history of this building."

Rocky road

Serra admits it was tough finding a location that ticked all these boxes, meaning the search for Aire's first UK home took more than two years. "It was also challenging finding a landlord who believed in what we were representing because we wanted to excavate this old English property to build seven pools. Plus, we wanted a lease agreement for a minimum of 20–25 years as the investment was so huge," he adds.

It cost £11.5 million to build the spa, which is £600,000 over the original budget, but Serra was expecting this because of the historical nature of the building, having gone through this experience many times before. "With modern construction, everything is under control, whereas with this kind of building you don't know what you could excavate – things turn up that aren't in the plan," he adds.

These challenges ranged from technical issues, such as not being able to put cables where they would like, to having to keep and restore the original architecture. Of course, coronavirus had an impact too, with it taking five months longer to complete (20 months in total) due to the pandemic restrictions.

Although each spa adapts to the context it's located within, every site has the same foundation – putting value on the interest of the place and ancient traditions, while using Aire's own branded fragrances and oils. This is so clients know the bath houses are part of the same family and, as such, it seems the ideal clientele is the same across the globe too.

"In each location, most of our clients are local and then we complement that with tourists. We usually reach an 85%–90% occupancy across the year and the hope is for the London site to reach that target," says Serra. However, part of the reason people come back to Aire is due to the exclusivity – with a limit on how many people can be in the

bath area at any one time. "It's important for our clients to feel they are in a private area as it's a premium experience. We can't change this rule because if we do then the value of the experience would change," he says.

"Without guests realising it, we're moving them around the space to avoid this feeling of overcrowding – it's all very calculated and organised."

Learning opportunity

However, despite knowing London is primed for an experience like this (Serra also chose the location because it's in the top 10 most affluent cities in the world) he admits the group has a lot to learn about the spa market here.

"We haven't got any other UK locations planned yet as we have to learn from the British market," he says. Part of this is to do with the UK perception of spa, which varies from other locations in Serra's portfolio. "The spa culture is more clinical here. Clients have high standards and know what they want – they really look at the value of the proposal," he explains.

Part of it is also that the concept is quite unusual for the UK market. "Other places in Europe have cultures around the bath house, so they understand it. Here, it's quite different. However, I think clients are ready to come to spaces like this, and come extremely fast," he adds.

"In the US, there's been an explosion in leisure and it's because for a year-and-a-half people have been at home unable to spend their money. Now, the opportunity has appeared, and people are running to these spaces. I think this will happen in the UK too." **PB**

Aire Ancient Baths London in numbers

Size: 13,993sq ft
Cost: £11.5 million
Staff: 50
Opened: June 2021
Brands used: Aire