

# MASSAGE FOR HEALTH

**Kirsty Tuxford** gets pummelled, rubbed and stroked in the name of journalistic research

**M**assage is not just a luxury; it can be an important part of healthcare. But most of us know little about massage: Do you have to strip off? Will it hurt? How do I know which type of massage I should get? With these questions in mind, I surrendered my body to the hands of two different massage therapists.

## Yommana Thai Concept

First stop, a Thai massage studio. I'm terrified that I'm going to be tossed around the room like a mouse being played with by a cat. Isn't this the form of massage where sweet and fragile-looking Thai girls literally beat the crap out of you?



Fortunately, my friend Sara is with me, so I secretly decide to volunteer her for the most painful massage.

We enter into a serene and relaxing environment complete with carved wooden Buddhas and exotic, peace-inducing Thai music. The feel is clean and crisp, and a world away from the busy streets of Madrid.

### The massage

I don't hesitate to pick the "Indo", a gentle massage with aromatic oils. Sara (who is much tougher than me) is left with the Thai yoga massage. Surely that is going to hurt!

I'm told to undress completely, but my masseuse does leave the room and then I slip tentatively under a fresh sheet. Sara concentrates on the complex task of tying herself up in an outfit that resembles both a straightjacket and a judo suit (depending on how you tie yourself up in it!). She gets to keep her underwear on.

As my gentle masseuse begins to literally climb over my body on her hands and knees, my grin fades, my fear of pain rises from my gut, and I wonder what is happening to Sara. I sneak a peek and see that she appears to be surprisingly comfortable given that one of her legs is being twisted at an eye-popping angle and there's a woman sitting on top of her.

She doesn't even grimace, which is more than I can say for myself as I'm mouthing silent screams of pain towards the floor. But this is a "good" kind of pain. I can feel knots the size of golf balls popping and springing about in my back. They've got to go; previously I couldn't move my head for a week and this massage is definitely helping to loosen things up.

The oil smells like a field of fresh spring flowers and its exotic odour makes me think of faraway places — as does the soothing music and the thoughtfully placed bowl of floating flowers under the massage table.

The treatment isn't just about rubbing the muscles, and the final part of the massage involves a good stretch. I sit up and place my hands behind my head, while my masseuse climbs on the table and puts her knee in my back while elongating my spine into an arch.

I feel like a mouse being played with by a cat.

### Ask the expert

Afterwards I admit I feel much looser and more relaxed. I ask Yommana Thiengham (the director/owner of the centre) to explain about the Thai techniques.

She explains that my "Indo" massage "relaxes by working

with the muscles and the energy lines. It's very soft and better for people who have never had a massage. It releases pressure."

The oil has left a beautiful odour on my skin. "The oil is bought in Thailand — it contains lemongrass, thyme and turmeric, which is typical natural oil from Thailand," she says.

Essentially the massages are designed to relax you or revitalise you. "If you feel very tired and you cannot move we recommend the Thai," says Yommana. She goes on to tell me that Sara was very flexible — the latter part of her massage involved yoga stretches.

Working with specific energy lines in the body is the key to Thai massage: "We use the same energy points as used in acupuncture but I use my thumb! This releases blocked energy," explains Yommana.

But don't think that one massage is a cure-all treatment. "We recommend [that people come] once a week. If you work at a computer every day, the muscles are very tired and one massage won't solve everything," she explains.

This is the difference between the western view of massage as a luxury treatment and the eastern view of massage as an essential part of healthcare. Yommana tells me: "In Thailand they don't like to go to doctors. Normally they go for regular massages."

Yommana has trained in massage for 14 years and some of that time was spent at the Hospital Shivagacomarpaj in Chiang Mai. Here she learned how to heal through massage. "You can heal people with your hands," she explains. "I cannot heal a broken bone, but I can help with the muscles around the bone and then I would recommend going to a doctor."

"I can also help with problems with tendons. Normally the doctor tells you to go for an operation, but I can help. I am not a doctor but I have practised my technique for years. In Thailand we never have operations!"

She has something to add for anyone who might feel bashful about taking off their clothes: "Don't be shy — we are not thinking about you naked, we are thinking about how to help you."

Yommana, c/Fuencarral, 137, 1º centro, tel: 91 445 08 91/620 877 051 (Metro: Tribunal). Open: every day: 11am-10pm.

Approximate price for one hour: 75 (discounts available).

www.yommanathai.es Courses in Thai massage available.

## Ay Mi Espalda

The appropriately named, Ay Mi Espalda is just across the road from Retiro park, which means that after your massage, in a relaxed and dribbling state of bliss, you will only manage to stumble blindly into the trees and collapse on the cool grass in the fashion of someone suffering from narcolepsy. So don't schedule anything urgent for the rest of the day.

### The massage

They treat me to the *Paraíso* massage from their relaxing selection of treatments. This sounds relatively painless. I'm given a shower-cap type hat, slippers and a cape to cover my modesty. And this time I can keep my underwear on.

Relaxing classical guitar music fills the room as I get comfortable on the massage table. I realise those pesky knots in my back have made a comeback when Paz, my masseuse gasps as soon as she places her hands alongside my spine. "Don't worry," I tell her, "Get them out. I can take the pain!" She obeys me and pretty soon I'm screaming silent curses at the floor below me again.

Paz manipulates my back and shoulders, my legs at the front and the back and finally my face. I probably look like someone experiencing a large amount of G-force, but the feeling is wonderful. She rubs my jaw, my cheeks and the top of my



Photos of Ay Mi Espalda: Brandon Chik

head and delivers an amazingly tension-relieving eyebrow squeeze. I don't want to move.

### Ask the expert

Roxana Ródenas, the director of Ay Mi Espalda has been working in massage for seven years. She tells me that in the west, we think of Swedish massage when we think of massage, but in fact, this gentle and manipulative form of massage has only been popular since the 19th century when a Swedish doctor began to use it.

As well as Swedish massage, there's oriental — such as Thai and Shiatsu — where more emphasis is placed on pushing on pressure points.

At Ay Mi Espalda they use a mix of styles, and tailor each treatment to the clients' needs. Masseur Paz explains, "We feel with our hands where the problems are. We can feel the tension." Roxana adds, "The masseuse should be very aware about the client's limits."

So it's okay to yell in pain, then? Paz laughs: "Every person has a different level of pain tolerance. We will ask if the pain is too much; if so we'll lower the pressure."

I ask what the tenderest part of the body is, and Roxana responds: "The neck. Many people who suffer from headaches have problems with the muscle in the neck, near the jaw. People don't like it when we massage there, but it's very effective."

And what about men who might get a bit excited, is that ever a problem? "If we're working to loosen the hips — firstly this is a very painful zone — they're not going to get excited," says Roxana. "In the special massages many people fall asleep, especially when we massage their faces. They snore a lot!"

I guess you just have to be prepared to lose your dignity; but you will feel wonderful afterwards.



Ay Mi Espalda, Avda Menéndez Pelayo, 61, 1ºd, tel: 91 409 08 07 (Metro: Ibiza). Opening hours: Mon-Fri, 10am-9pm and Sat, 10am-3pm. Massages start at 32 for 30 minutes. Virtual gift certificates available to buy online. www.aymiespalda.com

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