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Aventura Spa Palace: blissful pampering but marginal food and wine

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CANCUN, Mexico — It was pure bliss: I was in a Jacuzzi, gazing at the Caribbean sea at sunset, having my head gently massaged as gentle music played in a room set with scented candles.

Just recalling the experience relaxes me. And that says volumes about the week I spent recently at the Aventura Spa Palace near Cancun.

I may not be a spa connoisseur. I've never been to the famous Canyon Ranch in Tucson, Ariz., or its sister spa in Lenox, Mass. But I've had enough manicures, pedicures, facials and massages to earn educated consumer status. My credentials include six years of living in Hungary, where spas abound that capitalize on the natural hot springs bubbling under the country.

I hadn't spent a few days relaxing at a spa since I left Hungary two years ago, so I was excited about my vacation.

At Aventura Spa Palace, a smiling staffer greets you with a glass of champagne. I liked this place immediately.

The massive complex of pinkish buildings is so big it has two lobbies, each looking like the hacienda of a wealthy family. Giant wrought iron chandeliers hang over brightly tiled floors, carved wooden furniture upholstered with rich fabrics and giant plants resting in terra cotta pots.

The standard rooms were nowhere near as grand, but each houses a Jacuzzi big enough to fit four, and a well-stocked bar. No need to worry about those horrendous minibar charges. The approximately \$1,000 I paid included all meals, drinks, five spa treatments, and excursions to nearby sites such as several Mayan ruins.

I'd come to Aventura Spa Palace with three close friends who were as eager as I was to sit in the sun, sipping margaritas while reading novels in between appointments. On our first night we opted to dine at the Mexican restaurant— one of six eateries at the resort offers. I don't remember what I ate. The food was nothing special. The best meal I had was a lunch of seafood paella prepared on a large grill by the pool. Sunshine and seasoned shrimp is a recipe that is hard to spoil.

But if the food was only OK, the wine was downright awful. The waiters would say how wonderful the Mexican wines were, and while Mexico has some wonderful attributes, chardonnay and merlot are not among them. There were some imports, but they were nothing special, and in a week we had pretty much tried them all. I think if I had spent more than a week at the spa, the mediocre dining would have worn on my nerves.

On our first morning we rushed to make our treatment appointments.

The woman who was assigned to help us was nice enough but clueless about how to use the computer. We grew anxious; valuable tanning time was wasting.

Eventually, a guy waited on us who had the patience of a saint as we bombarded him with questions about the varied offerings and substituted treatments that came in our package with those we deemed more intriguing. Those swaps were done without a

problem, although you have to pay the difference if you opt for more expensive pamperings.

Service at the spa was generally excellent. Gratuities were included in the price and I was really impressed that the staff didn't linger around waiting for extra tips. Also, no one even hinted that I might want to buy products used during the treatment— a pleasant surprise.

The resort's grounds are immaculately kept. The beachfront has plenty of chairs and thatched umbrellas to ward off the sun. There are also six pools, including one with a bar you can swim up to.

Although I liked the concept of the swim-up bar, it wasn't my favorite. It was where the activities such as water aerobics and volleyball took place and consequently had this summer camp meets the Love Boat atmosphere that I found hokey. Those leading the group events adopt a Richard Simmons like persona, and let's just say I'm not a Richard Simmons fan.

I was far happier at a quiet pool with regular visits from the waiter bringing me whatever I wanted. I visited Aventura during low season and there is the possibility that finding serenity could be difficult during the height of the winter months.

I know I sound like a snob, but the nightly theme shows were also too corny for my taste. There is also a disco, which was pretty pathetic. My high school dances had more decorations, but what truly scared me was I think the music was just a recording from what was played at my prom. Trust me, I haven't been in high school in a while.

The resort is so large these functions can be ignored. There are bars without entertainment. There's also a selection of board games, pool, and chess.

For a wider selection of diversions, Playa del Carmen, a small beach resort with bars and restaurants, is a 15-minute cab ride away. Those really seeking excitement can take a taxi or resort-sponsored trip to Cancun, although that is an hour away. People

yearning for a diversified or sophisticated nightlife would probably be disappointed at Aventura.

My friends and I did leave the resort one day to visit Chichen Itza, a spectacular Mayan ruin. It really shouldn't be missed. I wish we could have been spared our guide's incessant rambling on the bus, as well as the 45-minute stop at a complex that sold tacky souvenirs.

The guide seemed to think it necessary to talk for the entire three-hour trip, which left him highlighting orange trees and stray dogs as if they were some unique Mexican phenomenon. He was very knowledgeable about the site once we arrived, and did shut up for the ride home.

Exercise junkies visiting the spa have two full gyms at their disposal, a climbing wall and a running path. There's also a broad array of classes, including yoga and tai-chi. I thought several days of rain would force me into the gym. But the complex housed an oasis that included saunas, whirlpools, steamrooms and lounge chairs in a lovely pastel, plant-adorned setting. The treadmill just didn't measure up.

Choosing treatments was tough because there were so many and they all sounded divine. There were five different facial choices. I selected one promising regeneration and hydration.

I am a veteran facial client, and have had a few that seemed more like an endurance test than a cleansing procedure because the blackhead extraction was so painful. My technician at the spa must have had feathers for fingers because I didn't feel anything. I feel into a deep trance. It was wonderful.

I also had a selection of enjoyable hand, back, foot and massage treatments. But my other favorite was the Talasso Slimming Treatment, which was supposed to flush toxins from my body. It began with my sunset soak in a mineral-enhanced Jacuzzi,

and was followed by a full body scrub, I was slathered in a seaweed pack and wrapped in a warm blanket. At first I felt like a burrito, but soon grew to enjoy my cocoon. After a warm shower to rinse off, a deep massage practically put me to sleep.

Pure bliss.