

[IMAGE]

Become a Smart Spa Consumer

How to Make the Most Out of Your Trip to the Spa

By Angie Patrick

Spa: The word alone evokes an image of crisp white linens, softly scented air, plush robes, soft slippers, miniature cucumber sandwiches without the crusts and utter indulgence in quiet relaxation.

In the early days of the spa boom, this concept was the layman's definition of spa. It still is an integral part of the spa experience, but spas have branched out of the white box and exploded with an array of styles, colors, themes, cuisines and décor. Exciting and vibrant new designs in furniture and architecture within a spa can whisk you away to a tropical Caribbean island or a Moroccan enclave filled with quiet and clove-scented rooms. In a trip to the spa, you can send your mind (and body) on a mini vacation to the Greek Isles of Santorini and the white-bleached homes set against the beauty of the blue ocean; or to a clear Aspen forest filled with the warm wood tones and rich colors of an Alpine chalet. The choices are virtually endless, and all it takes is a day trip to your local spa.

Equally as diverse as the settings are the treatments offered in spas today. Of course, massage is the mainstay for the majority of spa-goers. After all, who can deny the luxury and relaxation a soul-cleansing massage can provide? It's magical what massage can do to a tired and stressed body. It can revive your spirit and invigorate your soul. But the magic doesn't stop there. From facials to stone massage, chakra alignments to *shirodhara* (a relaxation technique that involves pouring aromatic oils gently over the forehead), there is no end to the fascinating and therapeutic benefits that can be found in the spa.

image - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark Many spas have a Web site you can visit to get an idea of the types of services offered, as well as a glimpse into the ambiance and décor. Take a bit of time to browse these sites. Compare prices (if posted), length of services and any perks provided. Some spas have complimentary steam room or sauna access, while others might offer complimentary beverage services. Some might package multiple services at a savings to entice you to linger a bit longer. These are a great way to try new treatments without breaking your spa budget.

With the world as your oyster, how do you mentally prepare yourself for the true spa experience? After all, if you look at a trip to the spa as a mini vacation, a brief respite, a little "me" time, then the preparation and anticipation are almost as much fun as the event.

Make sure you have mentally "unplugged" from the sources of stress in your life as much as possible. Try not to think about work, the kids, your spouse, the bills or any other stressor that might rear its ugly head. Put all these ideas aside for a while and give yourself permission to relax. If possible, take a long shower or relaxing bath before your appointment. Make it a ritual of sorts: light a candle, play soft, soothing music and add some fragrant bath salts. Preparing yourself mentally to receive relaxation is just as important a step as making the commitment to make the appointment. A little "pre-pamper" time can go a long way toward getting the most out of your spa experience.

Squealing into the parking lot on two tires and running to make your appointment time is truly counterproductive to the results you're trying to achieve. The goal is to reconnect with balance and relaxation, and you should give yourself time to enjoy the process. Arrive a bit early to fill out the intake form. Typically, this is a form used by the spa to evaluate your needs and desires, as well as make them aware of any health issues you have that might encumber your experience. This is time well spent, and being thorough on this form can help ensure your visit to the spa is a comfortable one.

The spa treatment you have chosen might require you to fully disrobe. You will be left completely alone during this time to respect your privacy. You will have an opportunity to slip between the sheets on the massage table or don another form of clothing such as a spa wrap or disposable undergarments. If you feel the least bit uncomfortable without clothing, just tell your therapist or spa technician. Adjustments can be made to your treatment that will accommodate your modesty while still providing a quality service.

- Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark While receiving your treatment, try to block all outside thought. Simply concentrate on the moment and the services you are enjoying. It's perfectly acceptable, as well as expected, for you to let your therapist or technician know if the service you are receiving is uncomfortable in any way. You are the focus of the service, and your comfort and level of satisfaction are the most important things.

Once your services have been completed, you will have a bit of time to bask in the warmth and relaxation. I would not advise trying to jump up and take on the world right away. Allow yourself to revel in the peace and serenity for a while. If the spa offers a relaxation room, by all means allow yourself enough time to

enjoy it. Often, a small enclave with tranquil settings and books or magazines is offered as a perk. Also avoid making any major decisions immediately following a relaxation service. You should allow your mind the time to ease back into the reality of hustle and bustle.

Following a massage, drinking water always is a good idea. It rehydrates you and gives you back some energy. If the spa offers a juice bar, indulge in a cool tropical concoction that will extend your mini vacation just a little bit longer.

It's important to talk about the gratuities. How do you know what to tip? It's customary practice to tip for services you feel met your standards and expectations. The whole goal, however, is to exceed those expectations. Most spas will try to do just that, and the service you receive from the technician or therapist is a huge part of that experience. A good rule of thumb is to shoot for between 18 percent and 20 percent in terms of a gratuity.

So, with these points in mind, are you ready to take a fresh look at the spas in your area or at your vacation destination and make some informed decisions? The biggest thing to remember is to *relax*. Your overall experience is only as good as you allow it to be. So take a breath, plan your spa day with plenty of "you" time set aside, and enjoy the wonders and rejuvenation awaiting you. You will be glad you did

Sample Spa Menu

The following techniques and services are typical offers you might find at a resort, destination or day spa. Many of them can be used in combination to achieve stress release and wellness that can last well beyond your initial treatment.

Swedish Massage - Generally regarded as the most common form of massage, Swedish massage involves a combination of five basic strokes (light touch, kneading, rhythmic tapping, compression and vibration), and concentrates on the muscles and connective tissues of the body for improved circulation, relaxation, pain relief, and overall health maintenance and well-being.

Deep-Tissue Massage - Deep-tissue massage utilizes slow strokes, direct pressure or friction applied across the grain of the muscles with the fingers, thumbs or elbows. Deep-tissue massage works deeply into the muscles and connective tissue to release chronic aches and pains. Its purpose is to reach the fascia beneath the surface muscles.

Herbal Wrap - A treatment in which herbal infused, warmed and moist linens are wrapped snugly around the body, followed by plastic sheets and then blankets in order to promote circulation, stress relief and aid in detoxification. Generally, a head, neck and face massage accompany this treatment, which lasts on average between 30 and 45 minutes.

Reflexology - This technique is based on a system of points on the hands, feet and ears that correspond, or reflex, to other areas of the body. Reflexologists believe applying appropriate pressure to these points stimulates the flow of energy, thus helping to relieve pain or blockages throughout the entire body. A very pleasurable form of bodywork, reflexology also is used to ease stress and promote relaxation

Hydrotherapy - This treatment involves the use of water in all its forms (internally and externally) to assist in the healing process. These water therapies can include the use of a whirlpool, the application of ice or heat packs, colonic irrigation, steam baths, body wraps and more. Hydrotherapy commonly is practiced in conjunction with other spa treatments.

Stone Massage - A massage utilizing both hot and cold smooth stones usually harvested from natural rivers, springs or volcanoes. Stones are used with massage oil, often in conjunction with deep-tissue massage to provide relief from tight or sore muscles. The alternate use of hot and cold stones in a single treatment creates a hydrotherapy effect that also helps to revitalize the body and restore energy.

Ayurvedic massage - This type of massage incorporates the knowledge of ayurvedic medicine and uses warm oils and herbs along the specific energy points to help restore balance to the body. Massage strokes, oils and herbs are selected based on a client's specific needs; hence, each treatment is highly customized. Benefits of ayurvedic massage include vitality, stress reduction and relaxation.

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