

RELAXING AT THE TOP

From a Thai massage costing the same as a take-away dinner to luxurious aromatherapy treatments costing thousands of dollars, the wellness industry is thriving. But what makes a world-class spa?

NEED SOME DOWN TIME? HOW ABOUT A RELAXING

Evian bath at Spa V at Miami's Hotel Victor? A bathtub filled with 1,000 litres of Evian water and scattered with hundreds of rose petals will set you back US\$5,000. Or perhaps an elixir of youth? The HD Diamond and Ruby Peel formulated by aesthetician Scott-Vincent Borba involves a facial scrub of crushed gemstones before a lactic acid peel. It costs a cool \$7,000 for that bejewelled glow. The Duchess of Cambridge, Kate Middleton, prefers the Bee Venom Facial, an exotic mask combining diluted bee venom, shea butter, manuka honey, and lavender oil that retails at over \$55,200. For the thrifty, a 50-millilitre jar is a beauty bargain at \$112. From plasma facials to caviar skin crème and extreme detoxes to Egyptian mud chambers, the luxury spa industry is booming.

The affluent echelons of global society are dipping into their deep pockets to reverse the effects of stress and slow the ageing process. And the rest of the world is following suit. The panacea for the modern work environment is wellbeing in the form of lotions, potions, treatments and programmes. How can a global industry estimated at \$60 billion be wrong? 





different treatment options. Healing clinics have a series of medical treatments, and a set of [trained] doctors. This is where you go when you want to have a health check and create your own healing journey," Biging says.

SHA Wellness Clinic in the Valencia region of Spain is widely recognised as one of the world's leading medi-spas. Perched on a mountain overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, the sleek white building is the creation of Uruguayan architect Carlos Gilardi and award-winning European designer Elvira Blanco Montenegro. The hushed, slightly clinical vibe within is carried across the structure; in the pool areas, the glass-fronted SHAMADI restaurant, the luxurious suites and the relaxation areas.

SHA's goal is for guests to "feel younger and full of energy long after their pleasant stay, so that they leave rejuvenated inside and out thanks to a fundamental change in the organism that improves their quality of life, slows down the ageing process and prevents the onset of diseases." To this end SHA Clinic combines Oriental techniques with the latest in Western medicine to address an array of modern maladies. SHA's programmes run the gamut – from aesthetic treatments to general health programmes or packages to address concerns such as sleep quality or weight loss. The Fertility Success Programme, provided in partnership with the Reproduction Unit of Clínica Vistahermosa Hospital, has the highest fertility success rate in the world.

Most SHA-programmes start at seven days and are likely to involve a macrobiotic diet, consultations with medical professionals and a schedule of therapeutic massages, as well as programme-specific add-ons ranging from fango therapy [mud spa] to lymphatic drainage. If that sounds too clinical there are a host of outdoor activities to distract you until your next appointment. The list of doctors and procedures leaves no doubt that medi-spas are serious business.

There's a clear distinction between medically orientated spas and those focusing on relaxation. Tara Disch, director of marketing for Sundara Inn & Spa, a superb destination spa in Wisconsin, America doesn't see medi-spas and destination spas as competitors. "I think there are times that that might be what you are looking for, and there are also times that a destination spa is what you're looking for. There's a purpose for each and it's not for everyone – either one," she says.

Sundara and SHA are on opposite ends of the wellness spectrum – SHA's disciplined, results-driven focus is a far cry from Sundara's tranquil cocoon of indulgence. Looking at the Ripley's Believe it or Not Museum and Circus World's blaring neon signs in nearby Wisconsin Dells, it's hard to believe an oasis of serenity is sitting in a pine glade along the road. "Wisconsin Dells has long been a destination for families, but the original owner of Sundara decided that Wisconsin deserved a place like this. You don't have to go to the big city to have a true spa experience, you can have it right here," says Disch.

Rather than a strict regime, Sundara takes a somewhat lenient approach. "We're not trying to force anyone into a particular mould. Our mission is wellness, but that is defined in



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so many different ways. We have coffee and tea and all the things that people enjoy," Disch says.

The spa experience here starts the same way for everyone – with Sundara's Purifying Bath Ritual, a self-guided treatment designed to cleanse the skin and clear the mind. Guests follow a circular path, being scrubbed, steamed and soaked into submission. Not one thing makes a spa stand out, but rather a combination of treatments, ambience, therapists and products. Sundara's signature product is the sandstone body polish used in the bath ritual. "The sand was discovered when they were building the site and we sent [it] to the lab to be incorporated into the product," says Disch.

While the products make a difference, it's how they're used that creates a point of distinction. World-class spas all use top brands or bespoke products in creating their signature treatments, but ask what makes them special and they give the same answer – the staff. "You can have a beautiful property. You can have a beautiful location. You can offer wonderful services, but if you don't have warm, welcoming, friendly, trained staff, then it doesn't matter. No-one is going to come," claims Disch, a sentiment echoed by Igor Mitric, treatments manager at the Bulgari Spa in London's Bulgari Hotel.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The Spa Club sauna at Sans Souci Spa; the pool at Sundara Inn & Spa; sleek interiors at the SHA Wellness Clinic.



The more than 2,000-square-metre Bulgari Spa offers a selection of advanced beauty, grooming and health-enhancing treatments, including Swiss Perfection Cellular Skin Care treatments – the only spa in the UK to do so – but Mitric believes it's the service that makes the difference between good and great. "A great spa has health expertise with hands-on therapists. It's very intimate what we do – it's often one to one – so it has to be out of this world," he says.

The Bulgari spa is an urban spa, in the middle of a bustling metropolis. Mitric suggests the trick to creating relaxing space in a city environment is time. "We invite our guests to stay for a longer time – if you look at our menu you'll see that we don't do express treatments. It's all about stopping and recharging and finding a balance in life – taking the time to relax," he explains.

"There is a big difference between destination spas and urban spas," agrees Andrea Fuchs, general manager of San Souci, a stunning hotel and urban spa in Vienna's arts district. "People go and stay a week or two and the spa treatment is the focus of the stay. In the urban spa-hotel the focus is the city and the culture, and the spa treatment is an add-on."

An add-on it may be, but like the funky hotel surrounds – San Souci is the first hotel in Vienna designed by Yoo Studio involving renowned designer Philippe Starck – no stone has been left unturned in creating a premier spa experience, from the chandeliers suspended over the pool to the incredible Lomi Lomi massage treatment hailing from Hawaii. The Lomi Lomi is to massages what Ferrari is to cars. "We simply wanted to create an incomparable product," says Fuchs.

It can't be that easy, otherwise everyone would be doing it. And while new spas come and go, only a few make it to the top and stay there – perfectly-coiffed, toned, relaxed and beautiful. ☺

WORDS GISELLE WHITEAKER

PREVIOUS PAGE FROM LEFT: SHA Wellness Clinic in Spain is widely recognised as one of the world's leading medi-spas; an Ayurvedic treatment at the Sundara Inn & Spa.

THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The spa in London's Bulgari Hotel; the opulent lobby at San Souci, in Vienna's arts district; the Tranquility Garden at the Sundara Inn & Spa in Wisconsin, US.

IMAGES: THE BULGARI SPA, LONDON BULGARI HOTEL; SHA WELLNESS CLINIC; SUNDARA INN & THE SAN SOUCI SPA