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PURSUITS

Spas Go Back to the Well

Luxury-seekers pay top dollar for warm baths, cold showers

By CANDACE JACKSON

ON A RECENT TRIP to Mandalay Bay's all-suite hotel in Las Vegas, Brandy Toth checked out the Bathhouse spa. But the Boston-area marketing manager passed on the more elaborate treatments: deep-tissue massage, "scen-tao stone reflexology" and a vitamin C facial. Instead, she took a dunk in a warm bath.

"I thought to myself, 'I'm paying money to sit in a bath of water,'" she says of her visit to the warm and cold soaking pools, which she says were "conducive to relaxation."

The latest trend in the spa world doesn't involve being injected with Botox or having your chakras balanced. It goes back to basics: water. At the new Trilogy Spa in Manhattan Beach, Calif., spa-goers can buy a \$45 day pass that includes a "waterfall shower with Plumeria wash" that pummels them with as much as 20 gallons of water a minute. New York's Cornelia Day Resort offers a "Watsu" pool—that's "water" plus "shiatsu"—in which customers, submerged in a pool hand-filled with bottled Evian water, pay \$200 to be stretched and massaged by a bathing-suit-clad therapist. And at the new water-themed spa at the Standard Hotel, Miami, the traditional Turkish hamam—communal steam rooms, soak tubs and cedar-lined saunas—meets modern touches like flat-screen televisions.

The move toward water, long a staple in European and Asian spas, comes as the saturated spa industry looks for new ways to continue expanding. After double-digit growth for several years, sales have started to flatten, slipping by 1.8% in 2003, the latest year for which data are available from industry tracker the International SPA Association. At the same time, the number of spas in the U.S. doubled between 2000 and 2004 to 12,100.

Spas say water treatments can attract first-timers who are nervous about complicated seaweed wraps or potentially painful exfoliation sessions. "There are many people who have emotional issues about being touched by someone they don't know," says Deborah Woods, the owner of Skin Deep, a Huntington Beach, Calif., day spa that is adding a 1,500-square-foot "water experience," which includes a self-service scrub bar, coed bathing area and soak tubs. "Water is not scary," says Ms. Woods.

The treatments also can be revenue boosters: At the spa at the Hotel Vitale in San Francisco, which opened last spring, a \$60 soak in one of the rooftop tubs is usually sold as an add-on to a massage like the \$95 San Francisco Treat. Offering "do-it-yourself" showers and tubs that people can hang around in for hours also opens the possibility of selling monthly memberships or day passes, such as the \$30 ticket Ms. Toth purchased in Las Vegas.

Installing and maintaining water-treatment equipment can be costly. The Watsu pool at Cornelia, filled with salinated Evian water, includes a \$10,000 sanitation system and must be serviced by a pool technician at a cost of \$2,000 a month. "It's definitely an investment," Lynne Walker McNess, president of the spa association, says of wet-spa equipment.

Some spas claim that their water has potential healing benefits. For example, Kohler Waters Spa, in Kohler, Wis., offers a new "Cooler-Near-the-Lake" therapy, which involves a therapist running ice cubes alongside a client's spine while warm water massages the person. The spa's Web site says the \$135 treatment "assists healthy circulatory flow." A spokeswoman says clients have reported such treatments were effective. Medical professionals aren't handing out a lot of prescriptions for water treatments yet. The American Medical Association says, generally, there isn't enough evidence to prove the effectiveness of many spa treatments.

But spa owners say customers are mainly looking for pampering or relaxation. "I think water treatments create a feeling that fits with what people's expectation of what a spa ought to be," says Ginny Lopis, a co-owner of the Lodge at Woodloch, a destination spa that will open this summer in Hawley, Pa., with a large "aquagarden" of soaking pools and hydromassage waterfalls.

Spas were originally invented for water rituals. Ancient Greeks had vigorous communal bathing cultures, and thousands of Romans bathed together in huge thermae, according to Mikkel Aaland, the author of "Sweat," a book about the history of bathhouses and saunas. Later, hamams were smaller social gathering places throughout the Middle East; the Japanese maintain a strong bathing culture to this day, often using coffee beans



SPA	TREATMENT	COMMENT
THE BATHHOUSE AT CALISTOGA RANCH Calistoga, Calif. (below right)	Callstoga Cure Scrub and mineral bath \$350	A spring provides 103-degree water for the "Healing Waters Soaking Pool"; some treatments use Napa-themed products, such as grapeseed.
KOHLER WATERS SPA American Club, Kohler, Wis. (below left)	Rain Water Experience Massage with water \$135	Treatments feature Kohler Co.'s products like BodySpa jet systems, which the company says are "the force of hydro-power harnessed to fuel a water revolution."
THE SPA AT RANCHO-VALENCIA Rancho Santa Fe, Calif.	Vivacious Vichy Massage with water \$115 to \$175	One section of this spa will be dedicated to "water wellness" when it opens in July; each treatment room will have an outdoor shower and tub.
STANDARD, MIAMI Miami Beach, Fla.	Soul Temple Massage, scrubs, soaks \$225	"I wanted to bring it back to the social aspect," says André Balazs of his indoor-outdoor "hydrotherapy playground" that includes a "mud lounge."
SUNDARA INN & SPA Wisconsin Dells, Wis. (above)	Sundara Body Boost Water massage, polish \$135	Some guests begin spa visit with a "purifying bath ritual," which includes alternating between soaking in a hot tub and a cold plunge pool.



and tea. Some American spas, like the Golden Door Spa in Escondido, Calif., have offered water regimens for many years, and spas centered on mineral springs have been around for decades. But the new treatments often combine simple bathing or showering with massage, scrubs or aromatherapy.

With the new water treatments, some in the industry worry there is a danger: Many massage-therapist certification programs, which vary greatly, don't require hydrotherapy training. Some spas have added their own water lessons. Watsu therapists go through a specific, trademarked program. Massage schools are rethinking their classes as the indus-

try demands. Diane Trieste, a vice president of the Cortiva Institute, a massage-therapy school with locations nationwide, says the school added a hydrotherapy element in January, covering the effects of hot and cold water, the use of massage hoses and the dangers of tearing muscle by misuse of water jets.

Of course, water is still just water, and that isn't always an easy sell. Peter Bittenbender, who owns a creative agency, recently enjoyed the Standard's \$185 Turkish Hamam scrub and massage, but balked at paying \$20 for an add-on herbal soak. "I have a gorgeous bathtub in my new apartment," he says. "Maybe if they were rubbing your feet."