

SUNDAY MONEY

SPENDING

Beyond the Body Wrap: What Makes a Spa Stand Out?

By SUSAN STELLIN

GOING to a spa was once a luxury reserved for special occasions or for people with deep pockets. But as the spa and wellness industry has grown in recent years, getting a massage or a facial has become nearly as routine as picking up a nonfat decaf latte.

In fact, "there are now more spas in the U.S. than there are Starbucks," said Susie Ellis, the president of Spa Finder Inc., an industry group whose database counts more than 15,500 spas in the United States. (Starbucks has about 10,000 stores across the country.)

American spas had \$9.7 billion in revenue last year, according to the International Spa Association. Customers spent an average of \$75 a service for treatments ranging from a basic Swedish massage (still No. 1 in popularity) to more exotic services like craniosacral therapy (essentially, a head rub), reflexology (typically, a foot massage that uses pressure points to relieve tension) and body wraps.

But as more people embrace spas, the industry remains lightly regulated and sparsely researched. Some spa-goers say that the experience can be hit or miss, regardless of the price.

"I've gotten incredible massages, but I've also been disappointed a lot," said Margi Young, a yoga teacher in Manhattan who has tried a range of services all over the world. Among the highlights were "22 Thai massages in 23 days in Thailand," she said, for the bargain price of just \$3 to \$10 each. But her spa visits in the United States have had mixed results, even when she has spent more than \$100 for an hourlong treatment.

"I had a fabulous hot stone massage once; it blew my mind," she said. "But then I've gotten other ones that were just — eh. It's very inconsistent."

Although people who work in the spa business are enthusiastic about the benefits of the treatments offered, the industry recognizes that as it expands and moves toward promoting health and wellness — as opposed to just pampering — more rigorous quality control may be in order.

At a gathering of spa industry representatives held in New York in May, the top concern cited by the attendees was a looming shortage of qualified employees, followed by a lack of industrywide standards.

Although 38 states and the District of Columbia require some sort of licensing for massage therapists, and many spas offer their own training beyond what state or local regulations require (typically 500 hours of coursework), gauging the quality of a



Jennifer Miller, right, a massage therapist at the Sanctuary on Camelback Mountain resort in Arizona, gives Carolyn Witt a Watsu treatment, a water therapy massage.

Jeff Topping for The New York Times

experts say, some of the best therapists have innate skills but not necessarily formal training, particularly in foreign countries.

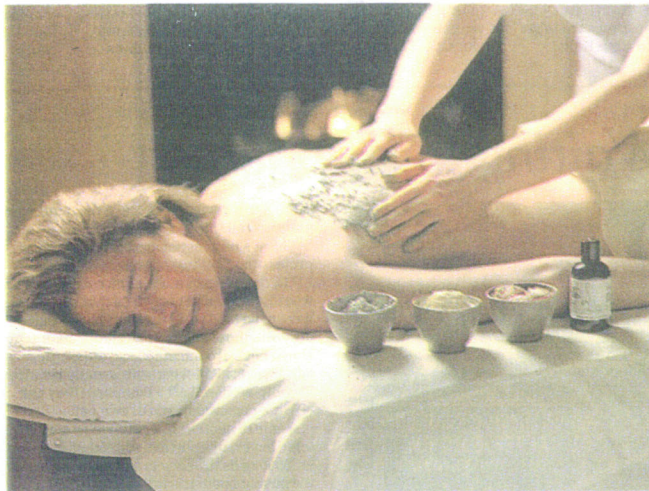
So how can you maximize your chance of a blissful experience?

"My No. 1 tip is that when you call a spa, don't ask who's their best therapist because they'll always tell you, 'They're all good,'" said Ms. Ellis at Spa Finder. "I ask who's the most popular therapist. If it's hard to get a booking with them, it's generally because they have some special abilities that a lot of people recognize."

SpaFinder.com offers a database of spas that consumers can search according to a range of criteria, including location, occasion (for example, a mother-and-daughter trip versus a romantic getaway), activities offered (like hiking or yoga classes) and treatments, including options like a "BlackBerry hand massage" or a "gentlemen's facial." (About a third of spa visitors are men.)

After visits, spa aficionados can post reviews — much like hotel reviews available elsewhere on the Web. Companies that publish hotel and restaurant ratings, like Mobil and Zagat, also rate some spas.

Spa Finder also publishes a magazine, *Luxury SpaFinder*, whose editor in chief, Gary Walther, offers another tip to maximize your spa-going: Look over the menu of spa offerings ahead of time "and think it over instead of having to decide on the spot," he said. And while some spa menus can be pages long, he said, "there's somewhat of a movement among spas to start making menus more straightforward."



A customer receives a maple sugar body polish at Stoweflake Mountain Resort and Spa in Vermont. There are now 15,500 spas in the United States, an association says.

If you are in doubt, he recommends booking a time slot in advance and then deciding on a specific treatment after talking to a therapist in person about what ails you — whether it's aching shoulders from hunch-

ing over a computer or tight muscles from playing sports.

Lynne McNees, the president of the International Spa Association, says that giving the therapist feedback during your

treatment is also important. For example, she advised, "speak up and say, 'more pressure, less pressure.'" If that doesn't work, she said, "Don't be afraid to terminate a treatment; you have the right to terminate a treatment at any time." She also suggested speaking to the spa director about your experience, which would also be the time to request a refund. Of course, spa directors also want to hear about outstanding service.

The association's Web site, experienceispa.com, also has a search tool to help consumers find a spa, from a database of the group's 1,000 members, and a glossary of spa terms and advice on choosing a spa.

To be considered a spa by the association, a business must offer at least two out of three types of treatments: massage, skin care (facials, for example) or other services like body wraps or scrubs.

Another resource is a trade group, Associated Bodywork and Massage Professionals. The group's Web site, massagetherapy.com, offers a tool to search its database of 59,000 members.

But Les Sweeney, the group's president, said personal referrals still carry more weight with consumers. "The No. 1 way that our members tell us that they receive new clients is word of mouth," he said.

More hotels are building or renovating their spas — including **Hilton Hotels**, which recently announced plans to develop 70 new spas. And many hotels are competing with

resort and destination spas to offer weary travelers the chance to rejuvenate and unwind.

While spa-goers and those in the industry say luxury properties often have high-end spas, that doesn't mean you can't have a great experience at places that charge lower rates. Neil Jacobs, senior vice president of Asia-Pacific operations at Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts— and head of the

brand's spa committee — says that this is especially true in parts of the world like Asia where body treatments are part of the culture.

"Odds are a \$5 massage on a beach in Thailand will be equally as good as a \$150 massage you find somewhere in New York," he said, which is why he tells travelers not to shy away from treatments in foreign countries.

Dede Nickerson, a movie producer based in Beijing, said she seeks out recommendations about great therapists and spas

from her yoga instructor and people who work in the field. But she also tries out hotel and local spas, especially when she is traveling for work.

Two of her favorites are the spa at the Grand Hyatt in Tokyo and Spa Samui on the island of Koh Samui in Thailand; in China, she often holds business meetings while getting a reflexology treatment with a colleague. "I get great surprises when I least expect them because I kind of try everything wherever I go," she said. □

Spas look to set more standards in a lightly regulated industry.