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LIFESTYLE



A full body massage with chocolate and aromatic oils may not do anything for people with a cocoa craving but it is high on the feel-good factor.

COVER STORY

# The spa effect

The wellness game is stepping out from five-star luxury to a trendy salon near you, says **Samita Bhatia**

**I**t's a seductive and hard to resist environment: the massage rooms are picture-perfect settings of soft, inviting tables, warm body oils and naturally perfumed scrubs. Dim lights, cool colours and the gentle blend of aromas from burning candles and flowers are the perfect formula for instant nirvana (mandatory warning: please leave that cellphone at home). The spa is the latest hotspot for those seeking Wellness of mind, body and soul.

So in the shadows of the Qutub Minar, at One Style Mile, wayfarers are tucking into Mediterranean fare at Delhi's trendiest restaurant Olive, following it up with brisk retail therapy at upscale boutique Kimaya for designerwear — and finally sinking those tired feet into a milky Cleopatra Bath at Spa Zieta. The most stressful decision here is to pick between the multitude of therapies. How about a hot, pressure point therapy adminis-

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tered with volcanic stones? Or, why not soothe your skin with a Moroccan mud pack? And get rid of those aches and pains with a Japanese Shiatsu massage — all in a couple of hours. No scouring travel brochures for the best spa holiday in distant corners of the world.

One Style Mile in bustling Mebrauli is a beacon of a hot new movement: of the spa stepping out of the intimidating environs of five-star luxury resorts and into the neighbourhood market, in humdrum bylanes and on busy street corners. It's a peaceful spot in the clutter of noise and life lived in a high-stress zone. The spa is the new mantra for on-the-spot de-stressing and is spawning an industry that's on the brink of a boom. "The spa is going mainstream — and a luxury spa break is no longer the preserve of the rich and famous," says Laxmi Paula Horan, director Seven Palms Spa Consulting and the woman behind Club Mud, a spa at Goa's Anjuna Beach.

Let's start at the very beginning. In olden days spas mushroomed in places like Bath, England around hot mineral springs that were thought to possess therapeutic and properties. With water as a means, they provided restful and regenerative treatments.

The word spa comes from a Latin word that means health by water. But today's spas go much beyond the mandatory hydrotherapy cures. The waterbed therapy may be a signature treat at many spas, but they are just as adept at skin exfoliation (with magical body scrubs), reflexology, skin toning, and other beauty aids. They are also doubling up as slimming centres with a range of anti-cellulite treatments and are the place to head for a bit of 'age-management'. Yes, botox too has stepped into the spa.



**Spas aim to be oases of calm that counteract the stresses of modern day life**

With so much on its menu cards, the spa industry is burgeoning. It's no surprise that a happening sparty (deconstructed, this is a party hosted in a spa) is replacing regular parties for the jaded set (and can kitty parties be far behind?). It has even become part of the corporate world and incentive travel jaunts to exotic locales are becoming yesterday's news. Instead serious mind-body pampering sessions have become the new way to honour corporate executives for meeting their targets. "Spa pleasure is the new

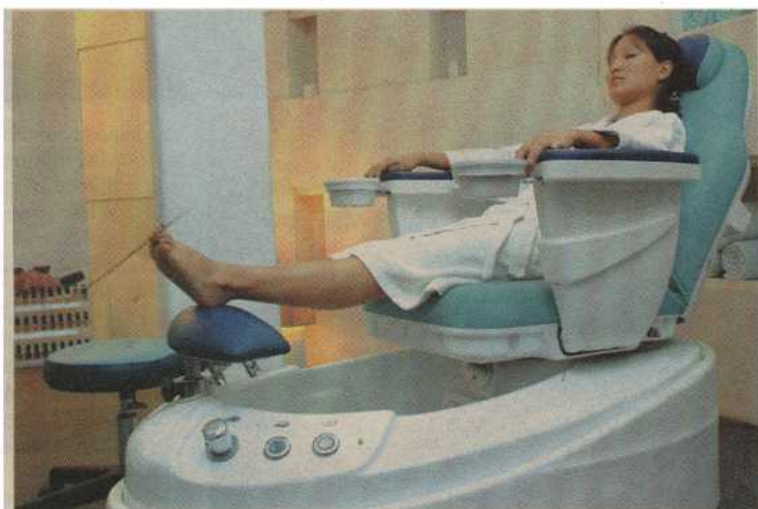
buzzword and companies are increasingly using spas to build relationships, to reward their employees as well as manage their health," says Samaya Dalmiya, wellness (or spa) consultant.

There's more: anniversaries, birthdays and wedding showers are being celebrated with rounds of body and mind care in the cool comfort of a spa. And gift certificates from spas are stylish new presents for friends, clients or even business partners. Also, don't think spas are just for women because even men are signing up for their share of wellness and relaxation.

Holistic healing has, of course, been around for some time now. Spas have been part of the vital ingredients of destination resorts in a variety of locales: from Ananda in the Himalayas to resorts like Devi Garh in Rajasthan. The Oberoi Group's Vilas properties always throw in spas with the rest of their high-priced offerings.

In addition, an increasing number of luxury hotels have been adding spas to their list of services. B. Venkatesh, director sales and marketing, Devi Garh Resort says: "Travellers are beginning to look out for hotels that offer spas or spa holiday packages." So Devi Garh is popular both for being an exotic heritage property and for its spa holiday packages.

However there's no need to fret if you don't have a spa holiday lined up this summer. That's because you can always check into the nearest destination day spa — even if it's not part of a luxury hotel complex. Says Roshini Roy, chief operating officer, Asian Roots, a women's only, luxury day spa: "The spa experience is becoming more affordable as it steps out of five-star hotels." And housewives, working women, executives on the move and



A manicure and pedicure take on a new meaning on the luxurious pedi throne at Spa Zeita

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(From left to right) Beauty expert Blossom Kochhar, Parineeta Sethi and Laxmi Paula Horan: taking the spa industry mainstream; (Inset below) A waterbed massage

teenagers are all enthusiastically making their appointments.

"Spas are proving to be a huge draw for teenage girls looking for acne treatment while for older people it's about feeling and looking good," says Nirvan Shroff, Spa Zieta, a day spa that has signed up over 300 members since it opened last May. Blossom Kochhar's Day Spa too has witnessed a steady increase in appointments since it opened last year. "Bridal spa packages are very popular for relaxing before the big event," says Kochhar. The spa's signature chocolate wrap therapy is also a huge draw.

Whatever doubters might think, the spa industry has proved more than just a fad. "Till recently savvy entrepreneurs thought it was very trendy to set up a restaurant or lounge bar. Today to the hip set is considering opening spas," says Satinder Pal Singh of Wellness Store, a spa consultancy that has set up day spas including Spa Zieta and has been involved in hotel projects as well. About 30 per cent to 40 per cent of Singh's busi-

ness inquiries are from entrepreneurs who want to set up day spas as part of beauty salons or simply as stand-alone establishments. Singh adds that cosmetic surgery and dermatology clinics are also adding spa-like treatments while gyms are adding spa floors.

Today Horan too fields some seven to eight inquiries a week from would-be spa owners who want her help in setting up spas.

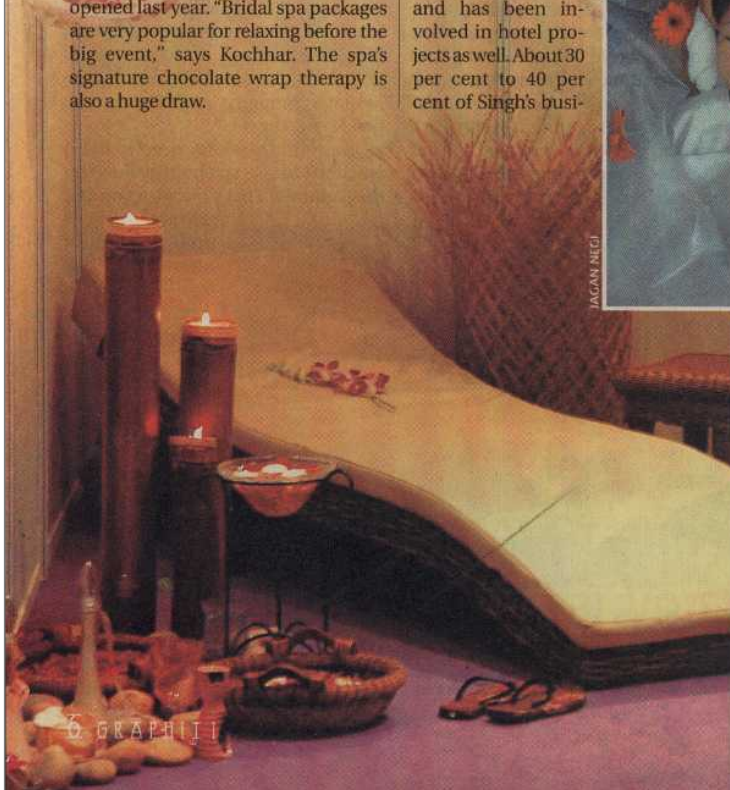
The fact that spas are the Next Big Thing is underlined by the fact that international giants from the spa world are eyeing India as their next stop.

The famed Four Seasons Spas is setting up shop in India in the coming months, and other top names in the spa business have come calling. Christine Galle-Luczak, representative of Chiva-Som that ranks among the world's best luxury spas, says, "India is a growing market and we are looking for the right partner here." This year may just be a boom year for spa and beauty products too — and that includes everything from lotions to magic portions.

Inevitably, spa cosmetics are also making forays into the Indian market. The huge success of the French cosmetic brand Clarins in spas around



JAGAN MEJJI



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the country egged The Wellness Group to begin importing some of the best spa products from Australia and America. In the next three months, the famed Dead Sea products from Israel will also become available here.

"It won't be long before spas lose their pampering image and are looked upon as a necessity," says Parineeta Sethi, director, Exposure Media Marketing that brought the spa industry together for the three-day Wellness Asia exhibition in the Capital recently. And what's giving the spa industry impetus? Sethi, who is also editor of *asiaSpa* magazine, says: "It's the increasing consumer appeal of the spa that is creating room for more. People want to reward themselves for working hard and for unwittingly living in the high-stress zone. They feel they owe it themselves to seek some 'instant wellbeing'."

Other niches also are being filled quickly. One popular alternative is the



A gentle exfoliation massage is a prelude to the hot stone therapy

medispa, or a spa that offers medical treatments on its list of services. "It's the natural extension of a spa or even a skin clinic," says Dr Chiranjiv Chhabra who

has just added a medispa to her Skin and Wellness Centre.

The medispas, as their name suggests, marry medicine with beauty treatments. It's possible to mix-n-match and to opt for the two-hour caviar facial for skin toning as well as sign up for mesotherapy to knock off cellulite. These places are also equipped to handle anything from botox shots for crow's feet to treating skin pigmentation. Their owners insist that all procedures are done under the supervision of a licensed physician who has been trained in the relevant disciplines.

So simply lie back, let a team of therapists polish and spoil. And whether you want to soothe the soul (or deep cleanse the sole), lose weight, tone the body or de-stress — somewhere in the maze of the spa menu, you are sure to find what you are looking for. ◆

Photographs by Rupinder Sharma