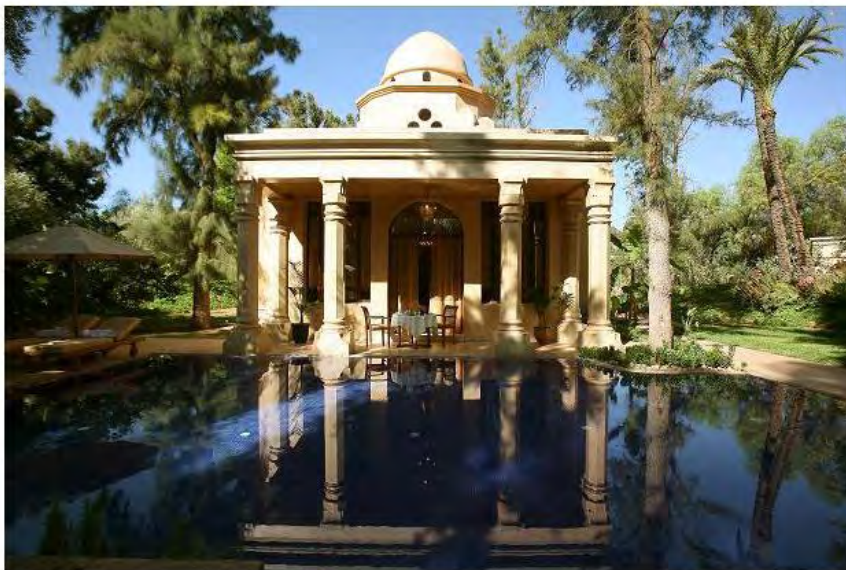


THE TIMES Spa Guide



You don't go on a beach holiday for culture, that's for sure
Sathnam Sanghera

Wishing on a spa



Times2 team
January 3 2012 12:01AM

From foodies to fitness fans and parents to city execs, everyone needs a new year lift. Here's where to head for

To get fit

Champneys Fit Camp

Aim To lose weight and achieve fitness goals.

Unique selling point (USP) The only fit camp to use Ki system armbands, which measure your metabolic profile.

We say Having to get back into shape — whether after Christmas overindulgence or years of neglect — is a daunting idea. But if the two, four and seven-night packages offered at Champneys' spa resorts are a boot camp, that boot is a Prada stiletto.

While there is pain — starting at about 7am, a typical day consists of four hours of physical exertion, with healthy meals portion-controlled — there is plenty of pleasure to be had, too, including massages and Thalassotherapy sessions. For me, the beautiful surroundings, early morning swims and an excellent facial more than offset the humiliation of being unable to complete more than a couple of push-ups in the gym.

As Justin Edwards, the fit camp manager, put me through my paces (the camps are tailored to push the limits of the strongest and weakest in each group of up to 20), he said that most people enjoy the country hikes, group games and Zumba classes in particular. It's not only customer feedback that tells him this — on arrival, everyone is fitted with a Ki system armband that measures the steps they take, the calories they burn and even how long they sleep.

Before I arrived, my biggest fear was not having control over what I ate. But the food was excellent and the portions added up to 1,500 calories a day. "People don't feel hungry," Justin said, "though I think there may be a bit of contraband in the rooms at night — wine and all that." Well, it is supposed to be relaxing.

Details: Two nights cost from £349.95 per person; four nights from £599.95; seven nights from £995. Champneys, Henlow Grange, Coach Road, Henlow, Bedfordshire (0843 316222; champneys.com)

Emma Bartley

A city break

Dior Institut

Aim To experience the best of French luxury skincare at a new spa in Marrakesh.

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Last updated December 2 2011 3:57PM
A secluded rain-forest spa at an island resort geared up for adults only

The Giri Residence, Ibiza

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A serene retreat offering exotically named treatments on the quiet side of the island

Chi Yu, Marlybone, London

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Es Saadi Spa and Palace, Morocco

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What's this ?

USP The first Dior Institut outside Paris; the staff are Dior-trained.

We say For the true treatment lover, the Es Saadi Palace has it all. The hotel, only ten minutes' drive from the thrum of the old town, is an oasis of tranquillity, with cooling fountains and some of the most fragrant and vibrant hotel gardens we'd ever seen. Inside, the spa is equally opulent.

For the traditional Moroccan experience there is a choice of facials, massages and hammams. Meanwhile, the pristine white and minimalist Dior spa, designed to resemble the quilted motif of the iconic make-up compacts, offers the best in French skincare and beauty.

The way to get the most out of your stay is to combine the two. I started with a traditional treatment aptly named Le Bienheureux — the blissful. It's a four-hand massage in which two therapists use their hands, and also warm water-filled balloons, to soothe away aches. The sensation is a sublime mixture of pressure, modelling, smoothing and vibration.

Duly relaxed, I opted for a Dior facial and make-up session. Inside a cool make-up parlour, with the entire range of Dior make-up at my disposal, the beautician performed a long appraisal of my skin tone and trouble spots before deftly applying the best products. When we hit Marrakesh that night I didn't want to take it off, though perhaps I was a little overdressed for a souk.

Details Prices start at about £450 a night for a mini-break in a junior suite. Fourth night free. An hour's make-up session is £75. The "blissful" massage costs £200 for 80 minutes. Es Saadi Palace, Rue Ibrahim El Mazini, Hivernage, Marrakesh (00 212 5 24 44 88 11; essaadi.com)

Vanessa Jolly

Self-catering

Spa@the Stables

Aim Organic spa treatments, either in the Stables salon or in your holiday cottage.

USP A self-catering retreat for those seeking luxurious relaxation in

We say Bruern Stables feels like a home from home — or, rather, the home that you wish you had. Each cottage is individually decorated with the obligatory country accessories: Aga, exposed beams, roaring fires and row upon row of bookshelves. Our house for the weekend, Cope Cottage, was stylish but quirky enough that we could kick off our wellies without feeling guilty.

The Phoenix Rose spa sits beside the picturesque covered swimming pool and gym in the cottage gardens and is the brainchild of Sadie Brewin, who runs a thriving local beauty business. I opted for a body massage and, while I let her soothing hands work their magic on my tense London shoulders, she filled me in on local news and explained the provenance of the PureBliss products she used, all of which were made locally and delicately scented.

We left feeling thoroughly relaxed and rejuvenated. Who needs the stress of a second home in the country when you can rent a holiday cottage with its own spa?

Details A four-night midweek stay in Cope Cottage, which sleeps two, costs about £530, depending on the season. A Phoenix Rose full body massage, lasting 1hr 20min, is £60. Bruern Holiday Cottages, Bruern, Chipping Norton, Oxfordshire (01993 830415; bruern-holiday-cottages.co.uk)

VJ

A quick uplift

Aromatherapy Associates

Aim To harmonise, rejuvenate and boost flagging spirits.

USP Tailor-made treatments for individual needs.

We say When the prospect of booking a spa in the countryside provokes almost as much stress as staying put, where better to turn than an urban retreat no more than a few stops from home or work? The Aromatherapy Associates treatment room is opposite Harrods in Knightsbridge, but it is as tranquil inside as any rural bolt hole.

The treatment was an intensive massage carried out by an experienced masseuse, which lasted one and a half hours. A half-hour facial followed. It was deeply, satisfyingly relaxing, and a great

gift for frazzled friends in need of a break. I enjoyed choosing an oil to suit my mood — the therapist offered a choice of four after running through a questionnaire. Was I jet lagged, sleep-deprived, suffering from aching muscles? I picked, without realising it, the company's De-Stress Mind oil (highly appropriate) and positively wallowed — in and out of consciousness — in its luxuriant fragrance over the next two hours.

The facial was designed to quench the skin — it included a number of Aromatherapy Associates' excellent anti-ageing skincare products, such as the Instant Skin Firming Serum and the Rich Repair Nourishing Cream. The dominant aroma was of rose. This treatment is perfect for those moments when you need a brief break from life but don't really have the time.

Details £150 (£750 for a course of six). Aromatherapy Associates Boutique and Treatment Rooms, 5 Montpelier Street, London SW7 (020-7838 1117; aromatherapyassociates.com)

Emma Tucker

Luxury

Raffles Praslin Seychelles

Aim To relax and unwind at the iconic Raffles' first beach-side resort.

USP The spa is based around the theme of the black pearl. Just 200 metres out to sea from the hotel's private Takamaka beach lies the only black-lip oyster farm in the Indian Ocean.

We say I knew that I had found paradise as soon as I arrived at Raffles Praslin. The white sand, aquamarine sea, coco-de-mer palm trees — oh, and a black pearl farm, right on the doorstep — had me hooked.

The wonderful team at the spa clearly understand a woman's psyche. Pearls are everywhere, from the inlaid furniture to the mother-of-pearl chandeliers that tinkle in the sea breeze as you drink lemongrass iced tea.

We tore ourselves away from our private villa, with a butler and the biggest plunge pool we had ever seen, to experience some of the pearl-themed treatments. The Pure Pearl signature treatment is 90

minutes of heaven: a full body exfoliation using pearl powder and essences of bergamot and ylang ylang. Then a body wrap, rehydrating body mask and sea-derived eye mask, with face, scalp and foot massage.

But even that can't match the Seashell Therapy. The spa has 13 treatment pavilions, each named after a different pearl. I was taken to one of the three open-air pavilions by the waterfront and lay listening to the waves as my therapist used smooth, heated seashells to massage my limbs.

The only snag is that to actually purchase one of the black pearls, you need to drive to the other side of the island to find the farm shop. But it's well worth the trip if you can spare £250 after all that pampering.

Details Pure Pearl Treatment costs £120 for 90min, Seashell Therapy is £106 for 60min. Villa prices start at £435 a night. Anse Takamaka, Praslin Island (00 248 4 296 000; www.raffles.com/praslin)

VJ

A family break

Calcot Manor

Aim A chance for shattered parents to switch off and be pampered.

USP A grown-up, sophisticated hotel that caters brilliantly for families.

We say Our time at this 14th-century farmhouse in the Cotswolds couldn't have been more relaxing, given that we arrived frazzled, with two children under the age of 3. Our bedroom had an adjoining room, so the children could sleep in a separate area. Nothing was too much trouble, from warming food to collecting bottles to be sterilised. Travel cots and highchairs were set up in our room when we arrived.

Our two-year-old son played happily in the Ofsted-registered crèche while we enjoyed massages. That night, while we ate in the restaurant, it was the same friendly carer who babysat for us. All the food on the the children's menu at the Gumstool Inn is home-made and organic, eliminating any "what can they eat?" worries.

Adults are looked after equally well: the spa, which uses products from Guinot, Spiezia and Aromatherapy Associates, is in a quiet corner with treatment rooms that overlook the surrounding countryside.

Details Doubles from £260 per room, family rooms start at £315 a night (Sun-Thurs). A £30 supplement per child (0-16) covers breakfast, high tea and use of the Playzone and indoor pool (01666 890391; calcotmanor.co.uk)

Julie Wilson

To cleanse your system

The Mayr Clinic, Austria

Aim To cure a sluggish digestive system.

USP The setting of Lake Wörthersee ensures a mental and physical detox.

We say This is not for the faint-hearted, but it delivers results fast. Dr Franz Xaver Mayr concluded that a healthy bowel is the key to health and beauty. Clients are advised to do the Organic Pharmacy's pre-Mayr detox, but I arrive still bloated with a gassy stomach.

After an initial assessment, I am put on a tea and broth fast that builds up to include corn cakes and organic meat or vegetable spreads. Many of the spa's guidelines follow Chinese medicine: food should be eaten according to the seasons and lightly cooked. The adage "breakfast like a king, lunch like a prince and dine like a pauper" is closely followed: dinner is tea with a dollop of honey that I manage to make last for at least 30 minutes.

The first few nights are tough and I go to bed famished, but I never wake up hungry and, as the week progresses, I enjoy an increasing feeling of lightness and calm. After six days of the "cure", combined with abdominal massage and kneipping (dipping your feet in hot, then cold water), I have lost 5lb and my skin is clear. My energy levels are quite low, though, making it harder to get back into a fitness routine. However, a few months on, the bloat hasn't returned.

Details A week at the Mayr Clinic costs from £1,110. E-mail ilana@360travel.co.uk or call 07710 574400. The Organic Pharmacy's Pre-Mayr detox is £160 (theorganicpharmacy.com)

Carolyn Asome

If you love food

Pennyhill Park

Aim To eat myself fitter.

USP A Michelin-starred haven for foodies at Britain's biggest spa.

We say If you think that the England rugby team was unjustly criticised this year, then a visit to where it spend weeks training puts things into perspective. The spa occupies 45,000sq ft and has everything a tired prop forward could wish for: a huge fitness suite, treatment rooms, pools and tubs, three thermal zones with herbal saunas, an Osmanian steam room and an ice cave.

The spa is the only place in the UK to offer elemental herbology treatments: the seasons are considered as much as energy levels and skin type when choosing products. The massage combines aromatherapy, reflexology and a dry pressure-point massage.

Like the spa treatments, Michael Wignall's tasting menu is tailored to individual needs. It also offers moreish surprises, not least a clam cassoulet served with cuttlefish gnocchi and a quail egg in what looks like a ceramic TV from the Seventies. I offset my carbs the next day with a walk around the grounds, past the site of a new kitchen garden and a heather patch that is the source of the hotel's honey.

Details The "Pack a Little Extra" package is £375 for two, including access to the spa. The tasting menu is £82 per head. Pennyhill Park, London Road, Bagshot, Surrey GU19 5EU (01276 471774; pennyhillpark.co.uk)

Shaun Phillips

A taste of India

Ayurveda Pura

Aim To revive skin, body and mind from the onslaught of the festive season.

USP A day spa that fosters physical and mental health by creating harmony between the body and Nature.

We say I never knew that my forearms could feel orgasmic, but under the palms of Dr Deepa Apté, the Indian-born founder of Ayurveda Pura, they experienced pleasure like never before. Having trained first as a medical doctor before learning the ancient Indian art of ayurveda, this woman knows her subject. Based in a development in the shadow of the Millennium Dome, she is the spa's real draw. Sitting in a candlelit room filled with the sound of chanting, she took my pulse, inspected my tongue and told me (correctly) that I'm prone to spots, get irritable when I'm hungry and find it hard to relax — a classic Pitta, or fire and water, body type.

My massage started with liberal applications of warm sesame oil. She used strokes and pressure designed for Pitta people and, although I've no idea if it removed excess heat and air as intended, it was quite possibly the highlight of my month.

She followed up with a facial, using her own botanical products including rose water, a herbal scrub, masks and frangipani moisturisers. The facial erased the damage of a week of Christmas parties, leaving my skin smooth and clear.

Details Pristhabhyanga back massage £45, Refresh Ayurvedic facial £60. 48 Newton Lodge, Oval Square, Greenwich Millennium Village, West Parkside, North Greenwich, London SE10 0BA (020-8312 8383, ayurvedapura.com)

Daisy Greenwell