



Soneva Fushi, Maldives



Huvafen Fushi, Maldives

Spa therapy

Ancient beauty treatments (and an exchange rate that can't be beat) have turned Asia's day spas into a major tourist attraction. Spa expert Judy Chapman spent five years finding the best. By Victoria Meppem

There's nothing quite like your first Balinese spa experience. Sensual notes of ylang ylang and frangipani mingle with the warm scent of coconut oil, as skilled hands knead away every care and concern. Aaah... It's like heaven on earth. Just ask spa expert Judy Chapman. She turned her love of ancient beauty treatments into a lifelong career.

It was a *Mandi Lulur* treatment (a classic Javanese beauty ritual originally reserved for royal brides) for \$20 that was the catalyst for her quest to fully explore the diverse spa culture in Asia. And just as spa therapy has been an integral part of Balinese culture, this healing art has long held fascination for Chapman.

Her passion has led to jobs as a health writer and time as the editor-in-chief of *Spa Asia* magazine. She's also authored four books on the subject. Her latest, *Ultimate Spa: Asia's Best Spas and Spa Treatments* (\$65, Periplus), took five years of extensive travel and dedicated research to compile. A showcase of the most beautiful spas in the region, the book features stunning photography and detailed descriptions of indigenous spa therapies, as well as luxe treatments readers can try at home.

"I guess my love of the industry evolved naturally from my upbringing. I grew up quite spa-like," Chapman says of her childhood near Byron Bay. "We had an outdoor shower in the rainforest, ate healthy food and went to yoga ashrams." Today, she and her sister Jessie, a well-known yoga teacher, run Radiance Retreats, which offers clients lush yoga and spa retreats in Australia and Asia.

"Traditionally, spa culture comes from Europe and the Roman times, and the word 'spa' was synonymous with European destinations," says Chapman. "But Asia has always had its own version. Japan has had its traditional hot spring bathing; in India, bathing is considered a route to spiritual purification; and the Balinese pay homage to *Dewa Wisnu*, the God of Water, with a shrine in their homes and a flower-filled foot bath is usually offered at the start of a spa treatment."






CHI spa, Thailand



The spa at the Lulu, Taiwan



The focus is on curative treatments and spiritual wellbeing at Asia's best spas – and don't these views just lift your spirits?

Pangkor Laut, Malaysia



Many of the treatments on spa menus were once practised in temples, monasteries and royal palaces. In India, extensive beauty rituals dating back 5000 years were offered in ancient palaces and forts for women in preparation for their wedding ceremonies. In sixth-century Japan, Zen Buddhist temples were built next to volcanic hot springs and the monks created bathing facilities to purify the mind and body.

The number of treatments available can feel overwhelming – not surprising considering the incredible melange of influences that permeate Asian culture. “Because the countries that gave birth to Ayurveda, traditional Chinese medicine and the healing systems of Malaysia and the Philippines are virtually next door to each other, it's common to find spa menus that combine a variety of influences,” says Chapman. “Most of the treatments originate from Asia's holistic medical systems, as in the past doctors were often healers, philosophers, shamans, monks and priests all in one. There are massages in Malaysia that integrate indigenous martial art techniques and in some spas, the yoga system is worked into the treatment. At the Per Aquum Spa at Huvafen Fushi in the Maldives, the ‘Quintessential Aquum’ treatment starts with an hour of yoga and meditation, followed by an Indian head massage, then Thai and Maldavian massage. The beauty of spa culture today is the focus on wellness – it's so much more than just pampering.”

Another reason spa treks to the East are becoming more popular is that, unlike in the West, they cater to all budgets and styles. While prices at Kirana Spa, a lush rainforest retreat in Ubud, Bali, can hit the \$1350-a-day mark, Chapman says one of her favourite treatments is also one of the cheapest. “The Wat Pho in Bangkok is a temple where the Ayurvedic philosophy was first introduced to the Buddhist monks, who were originally the only ones allowed to practise medicine. There's just one big room full of mattresses and a traditional Thai massage will cost you around \$10; and it's unbelievable, the best I've ever had! In my experience, price doesn't always necessarily reflect quality.”

THINGS TO LOOK FOR IN A SPA

- **Eco-conscious establishments** that offer 100 per cent natural treatments and products.
- **A menu that includes organic tea**, pure water and nutritious food.
- **Activities**, particularly slow, gentle ones that encourage breathing, like yoga and tai chi.
- **Complimentary pre-treatment foot baths** or water therapy to help you relax before undertaking your massage.
- **Smaller menus.** “I look at spa menus like restaurant menus – less is more,” says Chapman. “If there are too many options, it's not only confusing, I start to wonder about the quality.”
- **Happy staff.** “No matter how beautiful the surrounds,” says Chapman, “in the end, it's the therapists that make a world of difference.”

SPA TREATS TO TRY AT HOME

GREEN TEA & PAPAYA FACIAL CLEANSER

Easily two of Asia's best-loved ingredients for beauty and health, they've been scientifically proven to work topically on the skin.

125ml infused green tea, water cooled

½ cup mashed papaya

2 tbsp green clay (available from good health stores or you can order this clay online at www.newdirections.com.au)

DIRECTIONS Blend ingredients to make a light paste, apply to face, neck, chest and hands, and gently exfoliate. Rinse in tepid water.

MALDIVIAN BLACK PEPPER SCRUB

Shared with us by the gorgeous Four Seasons Island Spa in the Maldives, this easy-to-create body scrub stimulates circulation, has rejuvenating properties and is nourishing for the skin.

3 tbsp fine sea salt

2 tsp black pepper

1 tsp dried basil

4 tbsp mix sweet almond and grape seed oil

4 drops black pepper essential oil

DIRECTIONS Mix all ingredients together and apply to the skin using gentle, upward circular motions. Rinse in warm shower or bath.

ASIA'S BEST SPAS...

Thinking about trying a spa treatment on your next holiday to Asia? These are some of Judy Chapman's favourite destinations

1. THAILAND

CHI SPA AT SHANGRI-LA HOTEL This Bangkok spa offers divine Himalayan treatments in a space reminiscent of a Tibetan monastery. The stones used in their Himalayan Healing Stone Massage are hand-carved by monks. Visit www.shangri-la.com.
SMED SPA This is Bangkok's newest day spa where medical doctors work alongside traditional healers and complimentary practitioners. It's a beautiful concept and the six-hour Total Body purification package is exceptional. Visit www.smedspa.com.

2. MALDIVES

SONEVA FUSHI BY SIX SENSES SPAS This spa company is leading the world with their barefoot luxury eco-philosophy. The premises is a chemical-free zone, and they use Australian Sodashi spa products. Visit www.sixsenses.com.
HUVAFEN FUSHI This one's worth a visit for the stunning *Lonu Veyo* outdoor salt pool alone. The pool is inspired by ancient Buddhist practices, where monks would bathe in seawater before beginning prayer. Visit www.huvafenfushi.com.

3. BALI

JARI MENARI The therapists at this spa deliver the most therapeutic and memorable massages in the world – for under \$30. Visit www.jarimenari.com.
COMO SHAMBHALA ESTATE This was one of my first ever Bali spa experiences – where you take gorgeous treatments like the Mandi Lulur overlooking the sacred Ayung river. Visit www.comoshambhala.bz.

4. MALAYSIA

PANGKOR LAUT The first establishment to introduce the “spa village” concept, where Ayurvedic, traditional Chinese medicine and Malaysian treatments are all under one roof. Visit www.pangkorlaut.com.

5. INDIA

SOMATHEERAM This is where I discovered the world of Ayurveda and the wonderful *Shirodhara* treatment. Ayurvedic doctors are unique in that they view illness as a blessing rather than something to be feared. Visit www.somatheeram.com.