

METROPOLIS

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Water on the Brain

At first sight, the hydrotherapy bath reminds me of a slightly sinister appliance in a luxury private hospital. Perforated by scores of vents and other apertures of differing sizes, it is equipped with a formidable multitude of chrome taps and dials marked with words like "Pump" and "Reservoir." As I lie in a swelling pool of gasping-hot liquid tinted deep red with additive, a suave therapist hands me a pair of red goggles. "Put these on," she purrs, and turns up the heat. Suddenly the room turns red. A glittering rack of nozzles, also in buffed chrome, swings over me, and the therapist points to some silver tins in the corner. "I guess you won't be needing the PMS Comfort," she says, smiling.

"Epsom salts?" I ask.

"These are the Colors of Well-Being," she replies, scooping another spoonful of the red stuff from a silver can. "Do you like the red?" As I sink down into the cadmium bath, I look around at the aromatherapy candle, the beige walls, the smiling face of the therapist, and a mystical photograph of a waterfall. New Age pianist Daryl Kojak is playing softly on the sound system. "Do you feel *away* yet?" she asks. I wonder to myself if "away" is quite the word I have in mind.

This is the Color Hydrotherapy Wellness Bath at the Away Spa, on the fourth floor of David Rockwell's modish W Hotel on 49th Street and Lexington Avenue. One of the new generation of high-end Manhattan spas that have sprung up during the last two years, Away bills itself as a "peaceful yet energizing retreat for the mind and body," a sanctuary for the well-heeled but terminally strung-out New Yorker.

In a curious reprise of the nineteenth-century European hydrotherapy spa, Away attempts to restore the client's "energy levels" through water treatments. Its direct antecedents are the popular medicinal *bains turcs* of 1820s London, such as David Urquhart's fashionable Jermyn Street Baths. Those were inspired by the Islamic bath, which adopted

From ancient Rome to Victorian England, every age has had its version of the spa. Today's iterations are elaborate, but can they compare to the grand public baths of old?

Written by Lawrence Osborne
Photography by Guy Kloppenburg



An unsettling mix of space age and New Age, Away Spa's hydrotherapy bath (opposite) includes "Colors of Well-Being" additives. The clinical vibe recurs at Bliss (above), where water treatments are administered under medical lighting.

the precise rituals and refined architecture of the Roman *thermae*, or public hot baths, that the conquering Arabs of the seventh century found throughout the Byzantine provinces they overran. Though constantly morphing over the centuries, the spa has remained one of the great constants of cultural history.

Also a product of its own age, Away, designed by Rockwell with Club



Sport International/Wellbridge, continues the hotel's all-pervading mood of chirpy healthiness. Visitors enter from the nature-themed hotel, with its minimalist sheets of water, glass-encrusted columns, and benches topped with rectangles of grass. Indeed, the W reminds me of a grandiose hotel-spa in Vichy or Aix-les-Bains, where every detail has been oriented toward some higher medical goal. Light woods, stone, dried flowers, and seed pods predominate.

The spa itself repeats the autumn-leaf motifs of the hotel's lamps; its walls, like those of the hotel, are dotted with monochrome nature photographs—of everything from rice paddies to Karl Blossfeldt blooms—and austere linen curtains sport real flowers pressed inside them. "We

are all about the senses—living in the present," says Terri Beckham, Away's PR manager. "It's the closeness to nature that makes our spa so much more relaxing than others." Looking around the W, however, one wonders just how much of the actual outdoors Rockwell has in mind. It's nature strained through a very tight sieve.

After a Vichy shower, in which jets of high-velocity water pummel the skin, the Javanese Lulur beautifying ritual, once used to make royal brides presentable, takes place in a muted room filled with candles. The Balinese full-body massage reminds me of a hair-raising afternoon I once spent in a Turkish bath in Fez. But what is unlike that tormented and athletic ordeal in a sweaty basement is the body scrub of rice, turmeric, and jasmine flowers that follows. "Spas used to be for elderly women," my therapist tells me as she applies a Jasmine Frangipani lotion to finish, "but now men are flocking to them as well. The spa is mainstreaming with a vengeance."

The luxury spa boom is indeed upon us. From grand resort and "destination" spas to the comparatively humble day spas of Manhattan, the spa is undergoing its most radical (and costly) reinvention in decades. According to the International SPA Association, the number of people visiting spas increased by more than 15 percent in 1999, with an average of 33,000 visits that year. The number of registered day spas has doubled in less than five years. Hydrotherapy treatments are increasingly popular. The Greenhouse in Arlington, Texas, recently spent millions adding Vichy and Swiss shower facilities, and the Canyon



Bliss's brown fur seating and wall of wild turkey feathers (above) are intended to be warm and inviting. As part of its mission to energize mind and body, *Away Spa* will photograph and analyze your aura (opposite). *Equinox* aims for the total immersion experience of European spas, but its manicure thrones (following pages) are more *Star Trek* than *Saint-Tropez*.

The spa has returned to its Roman roots. It was the Romans, after all, who took the Greek steam bath and made it a palatial, mall-like complex.

Health Ranch Resort in Tucson has built a gigantic aquatic center.

Many of the water therapies haven't changed over the centuries, yet we are far indeed from the decorous gloom and tubercular coughing of the provincial French spa towns. Those spas, with their wonderful Third Empire hotels and stucco casinos, seemed to be filled with an odor of approaching middle-class death. The contemporary American spa, on the other hand, may recuperate the socialite hedonism of sybaritic spas like Baden-Baden, where the waters were merely a pretext to flirt, cavort, and self-exhibit. (Smoking, gambling, and prostitution will no doubt be prohibited from the American genre, however; one can't exactly see Bliss nurturing a future Dostoevsky.)

After my gorgeous Javanese ablution and anointment, I stagger with a light head to Away's ethereal and somewhat monkish Tea Bar (there is even a square of grass on the table) to savor the health-giving brews arranged by the resident tea sommelier. A very happy-looking client, perched in a white robe amid the candles, says these are the best teas she has ever had. "They make me feel oxygenated," she says serenely. I sit with one of the teas and try to imagine what a tea sommelier does—or what it is like to be oxygenated. In any case, it cannot be any more esoterically adventurous than undergoing "aura photographic imaging and analysis," another of Away's therapeutic propositions. The spa, it seems, has come a long way since the Greeks first invented the public "hot bath" two and a half thousand years ago.



Equinox uses lighting and acoustics to help the lap pool (opposite, left) and spa treatment rooms (opposite, right) rise above their basement setting. Avon (above and following page) sits prettily in the Trump Tower, evoking the ambiance of a plush hospital.

Stacking Chair by Verner Panton

Conceiving the Pantoflex Chair, Verner Panton used a double shell of polypropylene encasing a "cushion" of air for the greatest possible flexibility and continuous support. Designed with the younger generation in mind, one can not only sit in the conventional way, but will also find it most comfortable to sit backwards, using the back as an arm support. Ideal for contract use, the indestructible Pantoflex chair's sleigh base allows for easy attaching to a table to accommodate floor cleaning.

Polypropylene shell available in charcoal and light gray. Steel sleigh base available in chrome, powder coated black, red, blue and other colors.

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Water on the Brain

continued from page 111

over which hangs a series of opaque canvases designed by Gisela Stromeier. "What we're aiming for," Bordman concludes, "is a complete sensory departure." To produce this effect, he says, he has tried to create both "acoustical segregation—it's very quiet in there—and lyrical lighting."

After my dip, I opt for a glycolic manicure and a "yogi scrub." Robing up in the changing rooms, I take in the triangular mirrors, the sensually curved walls of small green tiles, the bottles of Colgate shaving foam placed by each basin, the tubes of Sea Bath Gelee and Ultra-Hold hairspray, the Healthometer scales, the blow-dryers, and a little sign that reads, "Don't forget to sign up for your complimentary nutrition session!" I then pass through a small reception area decorated with surprisingly realistic plastic trees and jugs of cucumber-infused ice water.

The nine treatment rooms are arranged along a subdued, dim corridor with elegant little windows overlooking the pool. The manicure room sports two enormous padded thrones with foot basins for pedicures and an eerily blue-lit contraption that Glenys, my manicurist, claims is an "ultrasonic disinfection system." Peruvian pipe music plays in the background. "Men get very nervous with their first manicure," Glenys says. "But then they get addicted to them." It must have something to do with having your fingers massaged one by one and then dipped into an almost-scalding tub of melted paraffin wax. "Our spa is about total-body therapy, not just cosmetics," says Marva Taylor, Equinox's manager of spa development and training. "It's a time for pampering, wellness, and spoiling yourself."

The yoga scrub more or less confirms this claim. In a massage room lit with candles, I am covered from head to foot in a creamy, rose-scented brown sludge composed of organic yogurt, licorice-root powder, rose water, and rosemary essential oil. I am then embalmed in lengths of silvery, Mylar-like aluminum foil. Laid down on the table, I begin to sweat copiously. "Okay?" the therapist coos. There is little I can do but blink. Final darkness is imposed by the application of two cold chamomile eye-pads, after which I have a mild panic attack. What if they forget about me? Half an hour later, wilted to the bone, I am unwrapped, scrubbed down with coarse sea salt and oatmeal, and sent to shower. "Isn't that amazing?" Jennifer Fisherman, the spa's publicist, asks me later. "There's nothing quite like our yoga scrub. It's like sweating out your sins!"

But if places like the Spa at Equinox wish to recall the opulent all-in-one therapeutic spas of Europe, the problem facing many Manhattanite spa-goers is simply that of time. Whereas Italians will happily disappear from the world into the enveloping womb of a spa, the contemporary New Yorker is more likely looking at his or her watch every half hour. The American urban spa, therefore, has become a different kind of facility, one that produces an instantly gratifying return, a quick fix for stress where the nerve-racked "patient" can be in and out in less than an hour and a half.

This streamlined simplicity—in which the concept of the day spa is effectively stretched to its limits—can be seen in what is perhaps Manhattan's best-known spa, Bliss. Owner Marcia Kilgore has opened a second Bliss uptown at East 57th Street, where she has pushed her original Soho concept of a refuge for whirlwinding urbanites even farther.

The new venue, in the IYMH Tower along with the likes of Moët Hennessy and Louis Vuitton, is austere elegance itself: minimalist surfaces, gently curved walls, unfinished limestone, and amusing transparent glass screens embedded with feathers. "Wild turkey feathers," says Lee-Ann Rostovsky, Bliss's publicity coordinator. "It's part of the warm, inviting, unpretentious atmosphere here." I notice a pair of couches by the elevator, spookily swathed in brown fur.

We pass through a coolly minty reception area stocked with Remède

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and Decleor skin products, Blisslabs purifying soap salts, and sticks of incense flavored with tea from Mariage Frères in Paris—for connoisseurs, the greatest (and most expensive) tea store in the world. I am duly impressed. “We tried to break away from the stuffy reputation spas used to have,” Rostovsky says. “Spa design has had to reflect a changing clientele.”

In fact, Bliss, designed by UT, has a deliberately clinical feel, as if to suggest a luxurious private clinic. (Perhaps because health care is so exorbitantly expensive in New York, a doctor’s visit here can almost feel like a special treat.) The tones of custom-mixed “Bliss Blue” paint used throughout certainly suggest a pampering hospital, as do the hydrotherapy baths with their overhead medical lights and “vari-speed” dials. In the lounges, the sofas are done out in gray ultrasuede, which complements the opaque glass surfaces all around. Nearby, I fear, someone in a treatment room is being massaged with warm milk.

I am reminded that in the late nineteenth century, a whole pseudomedical industry of hydrotherapy grew up in Vienna, which reveled in weird treatments like the *Elektrische Behandlung*, where patients were submerged in water with one toe attached to a battery. Even more terrifying was the popular *Kühlkappe*, an installation placed over one’s head like a tea cozy and fed by a long rubber hose that sent cooling streams of water around one’s cerebral neurons. More recognizable to today’s spa-goers would have been the so-called *Hydrotherapeutischer Duschapparat*, a medicinal shower with a variety of spray-nozzles aimed at specific parts of the anatomy.

“Actually we do like to project the feel of a doctor’s office,” Rostovsky says. “We like the medical lighting effect, and so do our clients.” It is a curious revelation. But then again, perhaps our culture is as seriously hypochondriacal as was Vienna’s.

Around the corner from Bliss, in the Trump Tower, the Avon Centre Spa also cultivates a plush clinic feel. Decorated by Barbara Barry, the spa feels quite at home in its location, its living-room-style reception area congruent with the gold slabs of the Trump elevators outside. Green-beige tones predominate in photos of leafy arbors, shelves of Coup d’Éclat cream, and a huge bowl of orchids. The coffee-table reading here is *Provence Interiors*. “Penthouse on Park Avenue,” says Margaret Musgnung, Avon’s assistant spa manager, summing it all up.

Inside, though, the look changes somewhat. The spa revolves around a long, circular corridor wrapped around a candlelit relaxation area. Architect James Harb seems to have decided to go for a soothing “Zen hospital” look. “We’re small and intimate,” Musgnung says in a hushed voice as we pad around the circular corridor. “It’s not a factory atmosphere at all.”

“Do people expect a factory?” I ask.

“What I mean is,” she explains patiently, “every client is taken care of individually.”

The rooms of Vichy and Swiss showers seem quite familiar by now, as does the pervasive aroma of seaweed and mud wraps. Musgnung shows me a barbecue-like machine for heating massage stones—perfectly symmetrical black pebbles that are used to massage one’s body. Below are massage oils with names like “Electricity,” “Winning Performance,” and “Toned and Taut.” Next door I can hear someone oohing and aahing under a Vichy shower. The linen walls, meanwhile, seem to transmit a calming vibe even if I cannot help being reminded of the dreaded *Duschapparat*. In the end, I think, it’s not so very different from the spas of old France after all. It’s just that nobody here is actually sick.

Lawrence Osborne is the author of *Paris Dreambook* and *The Poisoned Embrace*. He contributes to the *New York Times Magazine* and *Lingua Franca*.

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