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Bettie Lass, of Alapretta, Ga., left, relaxes during a hot stone manicure by manicurist Peter Huynh at the Chateau Elan Spa in Braselton, Ga. (Tania Fuentes/AP Photo)

To Your Health

New Spas Target Good Health, Clean Teeth

By Tania Fuentes
The Associated Press

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— Mention the word spa and you're inclined to think: guilty pleasure.

Not so fast. With baby boomers getting older and hectic lifestyles the norm, the spa industry finds itself returning to its origins in preventive health care.

"It's a big shift from a place of pampering to a place of wellness," says Lynne Walker McNees, executive director of the International SPA Association, based in Lexington, Ky. "You're getting a lot more savvy spa consumers so they are driving the demand. Even in the last two years we've seen the numbers jump."

Spa visits aren't limited to the time-tested standards — facials, pedicures and massages.

Instead, a four-day spa package could include teams of doctors working with you on ways to manage chronic pain. Resorts and hotels often staff certified nutritionists and fitness instructors.

Aromatherapy at Dental Spas

Hospitals and medical centers are pairing with spas to offer services for post-surgery patients and corporations.

Even the once-dreaded trip to the dentist has morphed into a pleasant retreat at dental spas that incorporate aromatherapy and massage during teeth cleanings.

"What we're finding is that if you're stressed out, you're not healthy," Walker McNees says. "After 9/11, we were all rocked to the core. People are looking for a safe haven to take care of themselves."

Nearly 155.8 million spa visits were made in the United States in 2001, according to a PriceWaterHouseCoopers study commissioned by ISPA.

The 2002 report also found women aren't alone in the quest to relax, regroup and recharge. Men account for nearly 24 percent of spa customers.

Spa vs. Doctor Visit

With an estimated 9,600 facilities nationwide and 1,300 in Canada, the spa industry drew \$10.7 billion in revenues in 2001. Visits continue to rise — by 71 percent between 1999 and 2001.

A cross-section of women, ranging from 29 to 60, participated in the first session in May. Other sessions will be offered monthly through December. Cost for the all-inclusive, 4-day, 3-night program starts at \$2,450 (single).

Dine in a White Robe

Staying at the resort spa is worth the investment. Some amenities: massage and hydrotherapy suites, secluded quiet rooms, a full-service salon, luxurious locker rooms with Italian marble tiles, dry sauna, wet steam and whirlpools.

Guests also can dine at the spa's Fleur-de-Lis restaurant in plush white robes, provided in each of the 14 well-appointed theme suites.

Bettie Lass, 52, of Alpharetta, Ga., considered the wellness package a vacation.

"I've gone to spas often and been pampered," Lass says during a hot stone manicure. "But the health aspect of the program was the part I really wanted to know at this point in my life."

"I really needed someone to tell me, 'This is where you are, this is where you need to be, and this is what you need to do to get there.'"

Virginia Freedman, of Johnson City, Tenn., enjoyed the camaraderie and lavish treatments like deep-cleansing facials, Swedish massage or the ultracalming hydrotherapy baths, where guests are immersed in warm waters filled with fragrant sea salts.

"It's a wakeup call," says Freedman, who is in her 60s. "I've allowed myself over the past 10 years to stagnate because I believed I'd gotten older. It gives me the motivation to know that I'm still living, I can make a change."

The wellness package fits perfectly, says Chateau Elan Spa director Michelle Ufer-Herold.

"Finding the mix where you can have hotel guests and day guests here and still have this program has been our search," she says. "Although you'll come and go through it as a group, it's really catered to each individual's specific needs."

At Arizona's desert resort, Miraval, activities promote balance, self-awareness and self-acceptance. It also has been ranked as the No. 1 resort and spa by the Zagat Survey. Ayurvedic treatments, acupuncture, Chi Nei Tsang, Shiatsu, Jin Shin Jyutsu and Trager are among more than 100 treatment options available there.

A Lesson in Rejuvenation

"You're seeing more partnerships between hospitals, health systems and spas," says Carla Minsky, marketing director of Sundara Spa in the Wisconsin Dells.

A relative newcomer on the scene, Sundara opened in March and is located near Madison, Wisc. The vision for the spa was based around wellness, Minsky says.

"From using feng shui in the design to serving healthy, organic spa cuisine, it just seems like a real natural to me," she says.

Tamyra Wallace, 44, of Denver, felt the difference upon completing the Lotusea Wellness Program.

"I needed to take a break for myself," she says. "The nutrition analysis and fitness profile opened my eyes to things I need to work on. I book my physical a year in advance but this was more comprehensive.

"To have time to rejuvenate and learn about your health, that's the total package." ■

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"It's not just, 'make me pretty,' " explains Michael Tompkins, associate hotel director at Canyon Ranch Health Resort in New England's Berkshire Mountains.

"What we are seeing is spa guests now using us as their primary health care facility," he says. "Spas are a really safe way to try an alternative approach to preventive medicine," he says. "People are looking at spas for the full mind, body, spirit aspect of health."

The luxury destination spa also provides sanctuary at facilities in the Sonoran desert of southern Arizona, Las Vegas and Florida. For nearly 25 years, the resort's integrative approach has made it a model for the ultimate spa experience.

A weeklong Life Enhancement Program offered at Canyon Ranch's spa in Tucson, Ariz., focuses on aging, stress reduction, weight management and medical risks. Guests can choose from an unlimited menu of spa services, such as ayurvedic treatments, yoga and therapeutic bodywork. Or, try your hand at a culinary nutrition workshop or daily spiritual fitness classes (relaxation, meditation and breathing techniques).

Expect to pay between \$1,500 to \$4,400 for the most popular packages — which stand as bona fide vacations. This year's summer sampler in Arizona costs \$1,590 per person based on double occupancy. The 7-night package is \$2,565 (June 8-Sept. 27). Winter/fall rates begin at \$2,170.

"This gives the resort an edge," says Madeleine Noa, sales and marketing for the Royal Hawaiian Hotel in Waikiki, Hawaii. "Where it was once the food and beverage departments that brought in the revenue, it has since shifted to the spa."

The backdrop for the hotel's Abhasa Waikiki Spa is an open-air garden under a canopy of palms. Travelers unwind amid nature and holistic treatments which incorporate many products indigenous to Hawaii.

"It's a tough economy, but people don't see this as a luxury or indulgence," says Dr. Pamela Peeke, ISPA's medical adviser and contributing columnist for *Prevention* magazine.

"Physicians so rarely have a chance to deal with prevention," adds Peeke, assistant clinical professor at the University of Maryland School of Medicine. Spas encourage rest and rejuvenation, the Pew Scholar in nutrition and metabolism explains. Medical-based services have a legitimate place at spas.

Working from Inside Out

Winsor Pilates creator and fitness trainer Mari Winsor agreed. At 53, she divides much of her time between her fitness studios in Los Angeles.

"We do a lot of rehabilitative work in our studios," Winsor says. "The health benefits far outweigh the aesthetics. It's more about working from the inside out. You do that and your inner beauty shows."

Obesity, diabetes and heart disease have become universal concerns.

"People my age now work out," Winsor says. "They're interested in improving the quality of life. The alternatives for fitness are much better suited for a generation of people who want to be around longer to see their grandchildren."

This spring, Chateau Elan Spa in Braselton, Ga., launched a pilot program with Tennessee-based Lotusea Wellness Group, Inc. The program blends spa treatments, fitness assessments, medical labwork and consultations.

Sandra Breeding, of Johnson City, Tenn., decided to create the Lotusea Wellness Program years after she established a health-oriented franchise aimed at the corporate sector.

"This is a holistic approach," the former hospital administrator said. "You've got to focus on prevention and education, not sickness."

After considering several locations, Breeding chose Chateau Elan Spa, a 30,000-square-foot European-style health spa which sits on a small lake 40 minutes north of Atlanta.

The picturesque, serene setting and helpful staff ease any qualms about health issues. "It's so stress-free, you're not in a waiting room with others who are sick and that makes you feel good for that minute," Breeding says.