

Anti-Stress Special



6 chill-out spas

Here are some spas that might not pack on the muscle but will pump you up with relaxation. And who knows? You may also get a new outlook on life.

MAHARISHI AYUR-VEDA HEALTH CENTER

Lancaster, Massachusetts

How does it feel to have warm sesame oil poured on your forehead for half an hour? Sensational. This oil therapy, called a "shirodhara," was just one of the many treatments prescribed for me at the Maharishi Ayur-Veda Health Center.

When I first arrived at this Gilded Age-style mansion, I visited Jay Glaser, M.D., the spa's physician, who not only gave me a physical but asked a lot of touchy-feely questions like, "Are you truly happy with your life?" and "What are your deepest desires?" I couldn't figure out if his questions were extracting or extracreepy. After all, I had never been to a spa before, let alone a get-in-touch-with-your-feelings health center. But Ayurvedic medicine, an Indian approach to health that seeks to balance three governing agents, or "doshas," (referred to as "vata," "pitta," and

"kapha") in the body, has been around for 6,000 years. So who was I to doubt?

Dr. Glaser told me I had a "kapha" imbalance. That means I have thick, wavy hair, oily skin, and a tendency to gain weight easily—great, and a tendency to gain weight easily—great, now I have a legitimate excuse if I put on a few unwanted pounds. Then he gave me an at-home diet that included eating tons of healthful grains, most of which I hadn't ever heard of.

The most delightful part of my spa experience was the panchakarma program—for those of you not fluent in Ayurvedic lingo, that means the massage, steam bath, and nonrequired enema (I passed—no pun intended). One of these hands-on miracles was called an "abhyanga," in which two technicians gently rubbed sesame oil all over my body in synchro-

nized motions. And yes, it was just as relaxing as it sounds.

After I was all greased up, I headed off to join the seven other guests for a vegetarian lunch in the east sun room. Though I welcomed these opportunities to be social (it seemed to be the only times I saw the other guests) my dining experiences were a bit odd. We were instructed to leave the oil from the treatments in our hair, so everyone was wearing turbans and it was hard for me to concentrate on anything besides bursting into peals of laughter as my fellow guests kindly translated the strange Ayurvedic terms for me.

This quiet health center offers no strenuous activities. In fact, there is very little to do here except take a yoga class—which was both relaxing and



The Maharishi Ayur-Veda Health Center.

accessible—or a nature walk through the charming, forest-covered grounds. M.A.H.C. is for anyone who wants an unconventional, mostly uneventful, yet definitely pleasurable experience. Rates: \$3,190 to \$4,190 per week for basic treatment, \$1,000 for additional, optional programs. (508) 365-4549. —Andrea Dawn Clark

RIO CALIENTE

Guadalajara, Mexico

Suspicious of all things New Age, I was skeptical whether I could survive in a place that billed itself as a “window to an inner self” or subsist on a diet of grains, beans, nuts, and seeds. But I need not have worried. Three hours and one reflexology massage into my stay I, too, joined the swelling ranks of Rio Caliente devotees.

Nestled in the wilderness of the Primavera National Forest, the 24-acre ranch (as it's referred to) is lush with cacti, banana trees, and flowering bougainvillea. Volcanic springs provide the mineral-rich water that fills the swimming pool, dipping baths, Jacuzzi, and (when filtered) drinking glasses of all guests. Touted for its sweet taste and healing powers, the water also contains traces of lithium—which may account for the abundance of smiling faces I met everywhere. Mood enhancers aside, I had great fun in the yoga classes; hikes and horseback rides through the surrounding pine forests; afternoon sessions of tai chi chuan; and water aerobics. Noticeably absent were any kind of machines (for exercise, telephone calls, or otherwise). Why use a Stairmaster when you have the mountains?

At Rio Caliente one is pampered yet never spoiled. The rooms are plain but comfortable, each with a pretty tiled bathroom and a fragrant pine fireplace. Food is simply prepared and served cafeteria-style in a large airy dining room. I didn't lose any weight on a diet of, among other things, cheese enchiladas, ripe avocados stuffed with salsa, lemony lentils—but that was due more to second helpings than anything else.

My Swedish body massage, scalp treatments, and reflexology sessions were all heavenly—and cheap enough (\$25!) to allow me to indulge in at least one daily. My only advice is to sign up for treatments immediately upon arriving. There are a limited number of treatment specialists and

places go fast! And definitely skip the evening lecture on dreams and creativity. The only thing more boring than listening to one person talk about her dreams is listening to 30 people talking about them.

I left the spa feeling truly relaxed and recharged—not least because my bank account was still intact. Rio Caliente is a bargain. Daily rates that include group activities, meals, and a single room start at \$79 (plus tax). Special seven- and ten-night packages are available from May through October. (415) 615-9543.

—Lygeia Grace



(Clockwise from top) The Doral, what luxury! Rio Caliente, natural wonder. The Kerr House, cozy nurturing.



THE DORAL

Miami, Florida

Rumor has it that if gambling had been legalized in Florida, The Spa at Doral would have ended up a casino. That's not nearly as hard to imagine as you might think. Sure, there's plenty of peace and quiet at this little spa set in a formal garden behind a much larger and faster-paced golf resort. But opulence—lots of it—greeted me at every turn.

I arrived late on a Thursday night and walked into a suite that was bigger than my New York City apartment. I counted four sinks, two toilets, a bidet, two dressing tables, two televisions, a terrace, two showers, and a Jacuzzi—which all added

up to one big fear that the guests would be jaded and aloof.

Not so at all.

Everyone I met was friendly and warm except for a few guests from the main hotel who were out of sync with those of us staying at the spa—I wanted to break a cellular phone that kept ringing at the pool. In fact, bonding with other women became the best incentive for me—someone who hates exercise—to take part in the classes, which ran the gamut from a sunrise walk to tai chi chuan to boxaerobics.

Solitude is also easy to come by at The Doral, though, and should not be underrated. After a peaceful lunch on the terrace in my room, I spent one afternoon with Jane Austen in my own whirlpool, another sunbathing nude in a private nook off the women's locker room. The rest of the time

I fit in as many spa treatments as possible. My favorite was a Total Body Fango, in which I was covered from head to toe with thick, warm Italian mud and looked as beautiful as a piece of sculpture. After being left to doze in an electric cocoon, I was loafed, rinsed, and finally rubbed down with a fragrant French cream. Mmmm.

There are many ways to relax. And if you have extra money burning a hole in your pocket, lounging in the lap of

luxury is a pretty good choice.

The Spa at Doral starts at \$275 a night in the off-season. Packages go up to about \$4,000 per week in the winter. (800) 331-7768. —Sharlene Breakey

THE KERR HOUSE

Grand Rapids, Ohio

Staying at The Kerr House is a cross between a never-ending lazy Sunday and a visit to the loony bin. Decidedly, there is not much to do here but mill around with the six to eight other inmates and analyze your life during treatments and your health during yoga. The five days in this large Victorian house-turned-spa are mostly spent in a warm cotton robe sipping the house tea, waiting to be led off to the

