

In a Spa's Embrace: Nirvana of the Body

By STEPHEN DRECHER
Published: March 15, 2011

THE man in the Brooks Brothers suit seems different this afternoon. His eyes are glassy, his face is shiny and his gait is slow. In his fingertips he carries a tiny shopping bag. It holds his jar of Calming Cream.

New York is a city of perpetually tired people, and until this morning he was one of them, until he went to his spa.

His body was wrapped with seaweed paste. His temples were massaged with saffron oil. His cheeks were dabbed with chamomile cream. A yellow crystal on the solar plexus has been known to do wonders, too.

A proper spa cure, with seawater or sulfurous mud, requires a week or two at Abano, Quiberon or the Golden Door. This being New York, a city of quick learners, the process of self-renewal takes as little as an hour any weekend at many spas and salons around town.

This exhausted New Yorker might have had a facial, a massage or a body wrap at Bloomingdale's, Bende's or Bergdorf Goodman. He would have liked to crash the red door of Elizabeth Arden on Fifth Avenue, but the salon does not take men. And he considered trying the new spa across the avenue at the Peninsula Hotel, but it will not be open to the public until next week.

Instead, he took the cure on two successive weekends at two Madison Avenue salons of different schools: the Susan Ciminelli Day Spa, where the young alchemists dispense stardust, and Georgette Klinger, which is to the facial as Greece is to mythology.

"Oooh, the Ultimate Hour," said the young woman confirming my appointment at the Susan Ciminelli Day Spa.

The Ultimate Hour is a new-age fugue. Three treatments, which usually take an hour each, are reorchestrated into 60 minutes for people in a hurry: a seaweed body wrap, a "lymphatic drainage" facial and a vigorous foot massage known as reflexology. The hour costs \$195.

The roar and blue smoke of the M1 do not penetrate Ms. Ciminelli's pastel sanctuary on Madison Avenue. Like the classic California spas, it cultivates a faux-Zen hush. The air is spicy. Totems and crystals hit all the right spiritual notes. One whispers and treads lightly.

Kym, a young woman in a peacock-blue T-shirt and a sach, was assigned to seaweed and feet. She explained what was to happen, with a postscript: "Oooh, would you like a crystal layout?"

Oooh, I would.

Prepared on a table as if for surgery, with hair tied back, the body is covered from shoulders to ankles with a warm green paste made of seaweed and herbal water. Then it is wrapped in plastic and swaddled with towels. The table is heated.

Regression is the word that comes to mind.

Thumba met metatarsal as Kym began her search for deleterious "crystal deposits," annotating her progress in reassuringly scientific terms: "I'm finding a lot of stress. The ball of the right foot indicates some trouble with the endocrine system."

Reflexologists, she explains, believe that the entire body can be mapped on the soles. "Your gall bladder is in your right foot, and most of your liver is, too," she said. "There's a little bit of liver in the left."

She made no sense, but my entire body was buzzing.

Another young woman named Robin took charge from the shoulders up. Robin is an aromatherapist.

A gentle spray of steam was aimed across my face. Fingertips worked from shoulders to temples, applying algae-based cleansers and intoxicatingly fragrant oils. Marjoram, rosemary, saffron, lemon grass, eucalyptus and peppermint are all said to have curative powers.

This made no sense either, but I was becoming lightheaded.

Robin concluded her work with a seaweed mask, which, she said, "includes silica to purify the blood." The result is known around the salon as the Ciminelli Glow.

Then Robin slipped away. Kym, after one last too, slipped away, too.

She returned with a handful of crystals: rose quartz, tourmaline, something yellow for the solar plexus, something blue for the lungs, and something purple for what she called the third eye. Most people call it the forehead.

Kym put a wire pyramid, which she called an intensifier, over the crystals and left me to braise. The pulse slowed. The mind drifted. ("Could that be basil? I think I feel better. How much longer? I don't want this to end.")

And then it was all washed off with a shower.

I was advised to fill a little shopping bag with \$227 worth of French Seawater, Calming Day Cream, Calming Bath, Essential Oil, Cleansing Milk, Algae Deep Cleanse, Algae Fine Powder and Sea Mineral Mask.

Instead, I went home, fell into a dreamless nap and woke to a spicy fragrance lingering on my collar, which made me smile. Oooh, the Ciminelli Glow. Caring for Siegfried

For those who prefer the operatic school of beauty, the Georgette Klinger salons stage a Wagnerian tribute to moisturizer called the Day of Caring for Men. The five-hour treatment costs \$205.

Ms. Klinger's midtown salon is decorated in the international language of glamour: a swirling stairway of chrome and glass; furniture modeled of clear plastic; Wedgwood blue walls that anticipate the day the world is inhabited only by ash blondes.

Yet Ms. Klinger, who is celebrating her 90th year in business, cultivates the clinical, heave-the-medicine-ball ambience of the grand European spas. The staff members wear nurses' uniforms. Their message, delivered with Eastern European accents, is that being pampered is hard work.

The process of renewal begins with tough questions: What kind of shampoo are you using? Are you eating a balanced diet? Are you using a night cream?

With "gratuities not included" stamped on my diagnosis slip, I was admitted for the Day of Caring: a massage, facial, scalp treatment, lunch, shampoo and blow dry, manicure and pedicure.

"The Waltz of the Flowers" played while Pia, a masseuse, considered the work ahead of her.

"Turn your head to the right," she said. "Now that's more comfortable."

How could she possibly know?

"I can read your whole life history. It's all in your muscles."

Pia tried to change the course of history by combining the broad strokes of Swedish massage with the controlled pressure of Shiatsu massage.

"Be passive," Pia urged.

"Don't fight me," she repeated.

I fought. After an hour, Pia won.

Elizabeth, a facialist, found me contented and dazed. "We're running late" was our introduction. She put me in what looked like a dentist's chair in a room with a medicinal smell. There was her ominous "tsk, tsk" in the air.

The facial began with cleansing creams and hand maneuvers, including an intriguing butterfly stroke along the chin.

A snoopspan of steaming chamomile tea was then set in front of me. Elizabeth threw a towel over my head and the pot, and left the room without a word while my pores breathed.

Then came a scientific sequence of soft pads, scratchy pads, creams, astringents, and stinging and burning sensations. This was not the sort of facial that hurls a person to sleep.

The massage was all but forgotten. My clean face, shining with moisturizer, and my chart were passed to a hair expert. One look and Mary presented the bad news: "There is an enormous amount of tension here. It all collects in the scalp. I can feel it."

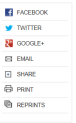
Mary dissipated the stress in my scalp with steam, herbal paste and a massage. The paste would have to stay in my hair for at least an hour.

I was dismissed for lunch in a white robe and plastic showercap, feeling like a hospital patient hooked up to a bottle. Three clients with wet hair, wet fingertips, wet toes, shiny faces and lunch trays were installed in an alcove along a busy corridor.

Social barriers quickly broke down. A woman dressed just like me broke the ice: "I'll bet you guys thought we do this because we enjoy it."

Other Klinger customers, with quilted Chanel bags swinging from their shoulders, passed by and stared while I ate lunch. The meal was a parody of spa cuisine. Too much and too pallid, it included iceberg lettuce, tuna salad, tomato slices, fruit, cookies and a glass of water.

After an hour, Sue the manicurist took me away to her little room. She buffed my nails to a manicure's satisfaction while I contemplated her nail polish choices. Between pink and red



there is a rainbow.

Like waiters who insist on being your friend, the Klinger staff would not accept silence. Somehow the talk turned to Chanel.

"Do you know what a Chanel suit costs?" Sue asked.

"Yes."

"Two," she said anyway. "Do you know what two means?"

"Yes."

"Two thousand," she pressed on. "I bought one through a friend in Paris. I only paid five hundred."

Hand cream was applied, the signal that it was time to change partners. A shampoo and blow-dry finally liberated my hair, which was promptly soaked with mousse.

It was, heaven forbid, pedicure time. The effect of the vibrating foot bath fell short of reflexology. Its electrical cord, draped through a sink with running water, was a serious distraction.

One final moisturizer was applied from the ankles down.

"Yah, you'll just slide right out of here," said Eugenia, the pedicurist.

The slide was halted briefly by Bonnie, a consultant who explained how to continue the spirit of the Day of Caring. She advised me to leave with Eye Cream Firmative (\$18.50), Firmative Throat Cream (\$35), Cleansing Lotion (\$18.50) and Deep Pore Cleansing Mask (\$18.50).

I slid out the door, went home and took a long, hot shower. Where the Spas Are and What They Do

New York City has a district for spas as it does for buttons, flowers and furs. Most salons are near 57th Street and Fifth Avenue in Manhattan. Here are some of them and the treatments they offer. BLOOMINGDALES, 1000 Third Avenue (at 59th Street). The Estee Lauder Spa, (212) 705-2318. Treatments include detoxifying facial, \$80; body massage, \$50; deep-cleansing back treatment, \$50. (Body wraps available at Riverside Square store.) The Lancome Institute, (212) 705-3166, offers body massages, \$50; facials, \$50.

DR. RONALD SHERMAN/TRISH McEVoy SKIN CARE CENTER, 800A Fifth Avenue (at 61st Street); (212) 758-7790. Dr. Sherman is a dermatologist; Ms. McEvoy is a skin-care specialist and makeup artist. Facial, including hand treatment, light massage and makeup, \$95.

DORIT BAXTER SKIN CARE, BEAUTY AND HEALTH SPA, 47 West 57th Street; (212) 371-4542. Treatments include seaweed slimming body mask, \$70; aromatherapy, \$45; massage, \$60 to \$165. Full-day spa program (5 1/2 hours) includes mud treatment, body scrub with sea salt, facial, paraffin treatment for hands and feet, pedicure, manicure and lunch, \$220.

ELIZABETH ARDEN, THE SALON, 691 Fifth Avenue (at 54th Street); (212) 546-0200. Women only. The Maine Chance Day package (5 1/2 to 6 hours) includes sauna, body massage, lunch, face treatment, makeup application, manicure, pedicure, haircut or trim, \$490-75, including tax and gratuities. The Miracle Morning package (4 1/2 to 5 hours) includes body massage, face treatment, makeup application, manicure, haircut or trim, lunch, \$208-25, including tax and gratuities. Treatments are also available separately.

FREDERIC FEKKAI SALON AT BERGDORF-GOODMAN, 754 Fifth Avenue (at 58th Street); (212) 753-9500. Facials for men and women, \$90; services for women only include exfoliating body treatment, \$90; seaweed detoxification treatment, \$90; mud treatment, \$90; body massage, \$75; and sea salt body scrub, \$45.

GEORGETTE KLINGER, 201 Madison Avenue (at 53d Street); (212) 838-3200. Also 978 Madison Avenue (at 76th Street); 714-6900. For women, the Day of Beauty (6 hours) includes facial, body massage, scalp treatment, shampoo and blow-dry or set, manicure, pedicure, makeup lesson, lunch, \$260. For men, the Day of Caring (5 hours) includes facial, massage, scalp treatment, shampoo and blow-dry, manicure, pedicure, lunch, \$205. Treatments are also available separately.

INSTITUT JEANNE GATINEAU AT HENRI BENDEL, 712 Fifth Avenue (at 56th Street); (212) 373-6388. A 90-minute or 3-hour package can be designed from 25 available treatments; 90 minutes, \$125; 3 hours (including lunch), \$250. Manicure, pedicure, makeup and waxing are free with either package. Treatments available individually include anti-stress facial, \$80; clarifying facial, \$45; hydrating facial, \$45; all-over body peel and polish, \$80; lymphatic massage for the face, \$45, or body, \$80; and a variety of massages, \$45 to \$125.

LIA SCHORR SKIN CARE, 686 Lexington (at 57th Street); (212) 486-9670. Treatments include Swedish massage, \$50; seaweed body wrap, \$70 (\$80 with scrub); facial, \$50; aromatherapy wrap, \$70; seaweed facial, \$78; scalp treatment with seaweed, \$45 to \$75 depending on hair length.

THE PENINSULA SPA AT THE PENINSULA HOTEL, 700 Fifth Avenue (at 55th Street); (212) 902-3910. European deep-cleansing facial, \$60; oxydermie anti-stress facial, \$75; massage (Swedish or sports), each \$60; Shiatsu massage, \$75. European body contour wrap, \$60; phyto-aromatic scalp massage, \$35; neck and shoulder massage, \$35.

REFECHAGE, 1027 Third Avenue (at 64th Street); (212) 319-1770. Treatments include seaweed body wrap with aromatherapy oils, \$100; foot therapy, with paraffin bath and massage \$65; honey and almond body polish, \$70; four-layer facial, \$80; hand treatment with seaweed mask and massage, \$35.

ROGER THOMPSON SALON AT BARNEYS NEW YORK, 106 Seventh Avenue (at 17th Street); (212) 929-9000. Facials, \$50.

SUSAN CIMINELLI DAY SPA, 601 Madison Avenue (at 57th Street); (212) 688-5500. Treatments include facials, seaweed body wraps and massages (Shiatsu, Swedish, reflexology or lymphatic drainage), \$16 each. The Ultimate Hour includes seaweed body wrap, lymphatic-drainage facial and reflexology massage, \$195.

Photos: Stephen Drobner getting a facial at Susan Ciminelli Day Spa in Manhattan. The result is known as the Ciminelli Glov. (Ruby Washington/The New York Times); Reflexology is a vigorous foot massage felt throughout the entire body. (Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times)

[FACEBOOK](#) [TWITTER](#) [GOOGLE+](#) [EMAIL](#) [SHARE](#)