

Massage messages

Sydney Morning Herald

Genevieve Swart

November 13, 2008

Wet etiquette can raise a sweat, Genevieve Swart writes.

Spa etiquette is a tricky business. A full-body massage is a delight, of course. Yet it is natural to feel uneasy about exposing your hidden bits to a stranger - especially one who's about to smother you in oil and rub it all over.

With the rising popularity of spa treatments, that eternal question - what to wear? - is whispered anxiously at resorts around the world.

The International Spa Association's response is: "Spas will never compromise your modesty. Most often, you will be given a robe to change into before your treatment. Under the robe? It's up to you."

This is no help at all. What is etiquette for, if not to establish certain rules for social situations?

At the Peninsula Hot Springs on Victoria's Mornington Peninsula, my therapist, Jane, puts me at ease. "It really is up to you," she says. The spa provides disposable G-strings (boxers for men) that help establish boundaries. They can, however, get in the way of sweeping massage strokes. After soaking in a herbal bath for half an hour, I opt for the (very barely) modest G-string.

The search for an aqua elixir is millenniums old. Cleopatra is said to have established one of the world's first spas on the shores of the Dead Sea in Egypt in about 25 BC. In Roman times, legionnaires would soak their battered bodies in hot springs with curative powers. In the 18th century, "taking the waters" in spa towns such as Bath in England became a popular pastime among the idle rich. Now, day spas have become the latest trend to soothe the stresses of modern life. Fair enough, the Romans just had war - we have desk jobs.

In 1992, Charles Davidson, founder of the Peninsula Hot Springs, was inspired by the pleasures of bathing in Japan - where 17,000 commercial hot springs account for a billion-dollar industry - and determined to open something similar in Australia.

The result was Victoria's first spa with natural hot springs, open since June and about an hour's drive from Melbourne. The complex was designed by last year's Royal Australian Institute of Architects gold medal winner, Gregory Burgess. It has four outdoor hot pools,

a cold plunge pool and an indoor pool with a view of a lake. Inside are steam, massage and relaxation rooms and a cafe selling nutrient-packed juices.

Here for the afternoon, I am ready to be pampered to within an inch of my life - but confronted by an exquisite dilemma. Do I choose the kodo rocks, a massage with ancient stones and aromatic oils; restore my skin with a herbal mask of lilly pilly, desert limes and wattle seed; or have my body wrapped in a mud cocoon while enjoying a scalp massage?

The spa's signature treatment - Moonahgai Calling - proves a winner. It combines several treats, using Li'Tya organic products. The Li'Tya range, inspired by Aboriginal healing practices, is derived from native plants, ochre and salts.

After an oddly formal welcome ceremony in the Spa Dreaming Centre (what's the etiquette on turning indigenous traditions into tourist fodder?), I move into the steam room. Jane gives me a full-body salt exfoliation - a heavenly scrub that makes my skin tingle - while my investigation of spa dos and don'ts continues. Should you chat to your masseur, like your hairdresser? "Again," she says, "it's up to you." Silence often accompanies extreme relaxation, but some people do feel the need to unburden mind as well as body.

Other tips include: switch off your mobile phone - its nagging ring may be why you're uptight in the first place. Wash your feet. If your toes are particularly whiffy or warty, the masseur may have to use gloves. Shower first - clean skin will absorb products well. Take your jewellery off. Do not snore. Yes, it's relaxing, but you shouldn't actually go to sleep. And do not groan loudly for an hour. This is just embarrassing for everyone.

After an hour and a half of sublime pampering, including a massage and hair treatment, I take a dip in the thermal pools. The water is 38 degrees, so even outdoors in the rain, it's a pleasant - and possibly healthy - experience. Natural mineral water is sourced from a cold spring water aquifer 10 metres underground, while the hot water is pumped up from 637 metres. This geothermally hot water explains the rather unlikely whiff of sulphur (this is Victoria, not volcanic Central America) that welcomes visitors to the springs.

Which raises one last point of spa etiquette: what is one supposed to say about the smell?

TRIP NOTES

* Peninsula Hot Springs, 140 Devonport Drive, Fingal (Rye Ocean Beach), Mornington Peninsula, Victoria. Phone (03) 5950 8777. Visit <http://www.peninsulahotsprings.com>. Open 9am-7pm daily. A bathing pass for the hot springs is \$18.50 adults, \$9.50 children. Spa treatment, \$75-\$440.