

# DISCOVERING DESTINATION SPAS

Why are destination spas becoming so popular worldwide but not in the Middle East?

By Karim Asmar  
and Nagi Morkos  
from Hodema



Today, based on the international paramedical and well-being trends, a new form of spas called the destination spa is creating tourist interest in remote areas. According to Travel to Wellness, an online magazine that focuses exclusively on the exploding wellness-tourism niche, "a destination spa is a facility where the prime draw is the spa and the focus is on wellness." This also encompasses "the art of well-being and the promotion of activities and educational sessions designed to help developing skills for a healthy life style."

In other words, the guest will find a total wellness experience ranging from treatments to healthy food and cooking classes. Destination spas include meals in the package, as well as classes and services, so that customers do not have to pay during their stay for the activities. Destination spas are often located in distant, exotic, sometimes far fetched venues, such as the Ananda Spa in the Himalayas (member of the International Spa Association) or the Chiva-Som International Resort in Thailand. The latter is an ultra luxury health resort combining international standards with traditional customs, impeccable standards and vast experience. Such a journey provides a change of atmosphere and scenery - it is an escape from every day life. This is why destination spas are not located in cities unlike the usual urban hotel spa.

## A GLOBAL EXPERIENCE

At a destination spa travellers expect to live an exclusive experience from check-in through to check-out. From the moment they enter the spa, they are immersed in an environment of safety, pampering and care. Travelling by car from Bangkok to Chiva-Som in Hua Hin is quite stressful, but the moment you enter the world of Chiva-Som, you forget the jet lag, the road trip and the fatigue. Other wellknown spas are Vichy, Evian and Eugénies-Bains, with Michel Guerard's light cuisine (3 stars Michelin). They are old-style, family destination spas where guests venture outside for activities and eating out. Today's destination spas are increasingly closed and protective from the outside world, offering a choice of activities available inside such as classes in nutrition, meditation, yoga and Tai Chi.

**MODIFYING THE ACCOMMODATION**  
What distinguishes destination

spas from other treatment centres is that they are as much care-centres as hotels, providing state-of-the-art-luxury. However, the hotel is programmed around the purpose of the stay. Thus, room amenities are in line with the spa treatments, mini bars are filled with alcohol free and sugar free items. Living rules also condition the stay. For example, mobile phones are restricted in public areas, as well as smoking or speaking in a loud voice.

## LOCALLY-INSPIRED TREATMENTS

Treatments and cures also depend on the type and theme of the spa. For instance Ayurvedic treatments are common in India, whereas treatments around the theme of grapes and wines are found at the Caudalies spa in France. The Zara spa in the Dead Sea, although not technically a destination spa, provides mud treatments from the Dead Sea itself. The success of such destination spas has allowed the commercialization of branded beauty treatment products.

## FOOD FOR HEALTH

Food at a destination spa has a different purpose. Beyond the eating experience, which is often excellent, the customer will learn about dietary control and life style improvement through cooking techniques and new culinary cultures.

## CHALLENGES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Although the hammam or turkish bath were widespread throughout the Ottoman empire, and steam room hamams are today part of the basic menu of any modern spa in the world, it is surprising to note that there are no true destination spas in the Middle East and the Arab world.

Since such retreats need peace, calm and serenity, the turmoil in this part of the world may be one discouraging factor for clients. Moreover, the cultural concept of gender mixing is still difficult to accept and hinders the lifestyle image of destination spas. Nevertheless, Dubai, looking for new trends, has perceived this market niche and is currently developing many destination spa projects. Another potential spot for an independent destination spa is the Dead Sea in Jordan, the mountains of Oman or the hidden valleys of Lebanon. Still, the climate and the culture as well as the absence of local manpower and the high operational costs of such retreats may constitute a challenge.



## WHAT ARE THE HOTTEST SPA TRENDS AND VARIETIES?

*Michèle Haddad,  
analyst at  
Hodema, reports*

### MEDICAL SPAS

Medical spas offer physical, health and wellness programs, in addition to cosmetic treatments, dentistry and dermatology. People working in medical spas are licensed, specialized professional doctors. Wellmax Spa ([www.wellmax.com](http://www.wellmax.com)) is one example of such a medical spa. It is located in California, in La Quinta Resort and Club. The philosophy of Wellmax is to prevent diseases by undergoing tests such as a genetic test, pulmonary function test, cardiac stress test and others.

### FOCUSED ACTIVITY SPAS

This kind of spa offers a limited number of activities to achieve specific objectives. It offers help to quit smoking, recover from grief, achieve spiritual awareness, detoxify, improve sexual health or provide physical therapy.

### GEM SPAS

Spa trends are all based on a luxurious, exclusive, tasteful experience. The gem spas are ultra luxurious forms of spas where treatments are done with diamonds, private spiritual and wellness counselling, as well as ruby massage with private spa rooms and hotels. An example of this trend is the Mii Amo Spa ([www.miamo.com](http://www.miamo.com)), member of the leading hotels of the worlds. The spa is located in the Enchantment Resort in northern

Arizona at an altitude of 4600 feet. Mii Amo Spa is surrounded by the red rock of the mountain, and it offers a variety of activities and packages including more than eleven treatments using cinnamon, natural elements and crystals. The spa offers 5000-year-old ayurvedic Indian treatments and other facilities related to the spirit and meditation, in addition to the popular activities.

### ECOLOGICAL SPAS

Ecological spas conserve the environment by using natural and organic products. The concept may include elements such as using vinegar instead of soaps for washing, solar panels and fluorescent for the lighting. Ecological spas aim to educate people about the importance of a good and healthy environment. They also offer healthy food to maintain a balance between the human being and his environment.

### LIFE IMPROVEMENT SPAS

Generally, spas focus on massage, facials and other mainstays. But a newly developed concept stresses on the expansion of spa cooking classes, spa cookbooks and spa chefs for healthy recipes. This kind of spa meets the objectives and the philosophy of Chiva-Som where treatments, food and education are combined ([www.chivasom.com](http://www.chivasom.com)). Chiva-Som helps people achieve the total

lasting health by providing them with all the support and consulting needed in addition to spa cooking classes and cookbooks.

Chiva-Som is one of the best concepts in the world of spas, rated in the top destination spas in the world (Condé Nast October 2005).

### MOBILE SPAS

They deliver their services wherever customers are, whether at home, work or in a hotel. Mobile spas include face treatments, body treatments such as for cellulite and muscle tension, and massage for physical and mental well-being to reduce stress. Mobile spas are also providing their customers with all the services offered by beauty lounges such as manicures, pedicures, make up and waxing. Customers of mobile spas don't have to move, drive and go home after the treatment. Instead they stay in their place, relax and pamper themselves. Mobile spas have proven to be very popular in North America.

### RESIDENTIAL SPAS

In residential spas people can benefit from presentations to educate themselves concerning healthy lifestyles, medical issues, smoking cessation and ways to manage stress. The largest and important example exists in the United States - Canyon Ranch in Miami Beach

Florida is one of the leading residential spas. It has a registered facility called SpaClub of 20,000 square feet with all kinds of salons and facilities for wellness and fitness. These include spa and beauty lounges with treatments, all types of massages, masks, aromatherapy and fitness classes.

### BRANDED SPAS

As with hotels, brands are increasing in a big way in the domain of spas. Branding gives independent or small spas the chance to integrate into the international market. Management companies offer the guarantee of competence and the know-how, both for the investor and the customer, while the brand or affiliation gives an international edge. Independent spa operators, who may have the know-how, are confronted with the issues of guarantee of quality and marketing for the customers. They resort to a branded spa as a solution. The Leading Hotels of the World is one of the first groups integrating the concept with the brand called The Leading Spas of the World, which already represents more than 400 of the finest luxury spas. 

This section of the spa report was prepared by the hospitality consulting firm Hodema for Hospitality News. You may contact Hodema by e-mail at [info@hodema.net](mailto:info@hodema.net) or by telephone on +961 1 381101