

## Spa Couture—The Parisian Luxury Experience

Visiting a spa in Paris is like visiting a spa nowhere else in the world.

Rich, luxurious French style graces the interiors of The Four Seasons Hotel George V Spa in Paris.



My passport is well-weathered and dog-eared because I frequently travel to many cities around the globe, but the French capital—with its wide, elegant boulevards, singular architecture, romantic cafés, chic shops and a luminous quality that can't be found anywhere else—seeps deeply into my heart. I easily find myself longing to return when I've stayed away too long.

From fashion and food to art and literature, Parisians know how to serve these all up with characteristic skill, grace and flair. So it stands to reason the Parisian spa experience would be equally distinctive and memorable. After all, in a city that enjoys multiple-hour lunches, long summer holidays and some of the world's cleanest subways, it just makes sense that the pampering would be elevated to an art form.

But are there things American spas could learn from the Parisian spa experience? What are the unique qualities of French service, treatments, and spa environments, and what elements from these can be borrowed so that American clients long to return to stateside spas as much as I miss the buttery croissants and walks along the Seine when I'm away from Paris for too long?

To find out, I reached for my trusty passport yet again and crossed the Atlantic to visit two of the finest spas in Paris—The Four Seasons Hotel George V Spa and Sothys L'Institut Paris—for the ultimate French spa experience. Not surprisingly, each facility was as extraordinary as I had hoped, and the reasons why could be summed up in two words. Akin to what makes French couture the global standard for fashion, in Parisian spas it's all about the training and the details.

Each of the technicians that I encountered at George V and Sothys were masters of



their craft, and much of that is due to the training requirements in France. Massage therapists, for example, generally attend school for as many as three to four years, and estheticians—or beauticians, as they're known in Europe—typically study all aspects of facial, body and makeup services for up to two years. Pedicurists may train for as many as two years as well, and are so well-versed in all things relating to feet, they even fit clients for orthotics in some cases. This level of mastery transcends by-the-numbers treatments, elevating both the experience and the results.

Then there's the care for detail. Parisians don't just bake a cupcake—they craft and adorn exquisite *petit fours* that sit like twinkling jewels in the bakery window, appealing not just to the taste buds but also to the eyes, nose, and even a sense of touch with their creaminess. The same attention to detail was evident at these spas: each of the senses was carefully considered and catered to from the moment one entered, throughout the entire treatment, and right up until checkout.

Not surprisingly, I am once again counting the minutes until my next trip to Paris, when I plan to return to both of these spas. In the meantime, here's a closer look at my last visit with

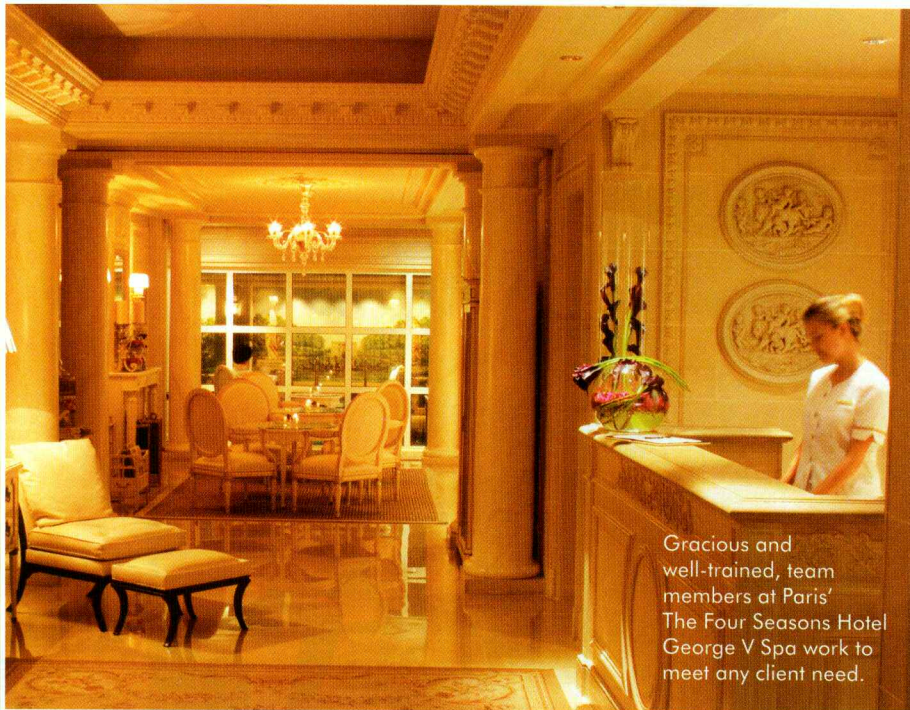
some valuable insights for American spa owners and professionals.

### Harmony, comfort and well-being

The George V embodies much of the rich history of the city itself. Opened in 1928, just off the illustrious Champs-Élysées, it set new standards for its time in design, luxury and hospitality. Early press reports celebrated the installation of telephones with both outside and inside lines, fitted closets in each room, and suites with two bathrooms, "allowing two guests to take a bath at the same time and to be ready to go down to dinner together!"

Designed around an interior courtyard, the white stone, Art Deco façade also set the tone for a new, more modern French style in the 1920s. In 1997, Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts assumed management duties for the hotel and embarked on a \$125 million renovation project, restoring and recapturing the original decor. At the same time, the management also added modern amenities and technology.

Included in the revamping was the new spa, complete with 11 treatment rooms, including one for couples; a pool; saunas; steam baths;



Gracious and well-trained, team members at Paris' The Four Seasons Hotel George V Spa work to meet any client need.

two rooms for hairstyling, makeup, manicures and pedicures; a relaxation room; and a fitness area and juice bar.

The spa also maximizes its rich French heritage, particularly with treatments such as the recently introduced new package inspired by the beauty rituals of Marie Antoinette, called *A Stroll Through Versailles*. The package's body treatments and facials all feature the queen's favorite scent of orange blossoms and conclude, of course, with a selection of delicious pink pastries.

As for my own experience, from start to finish, it could only be described as *magnifique*. To start, the front desk staff treats every guest with the utmost courtesy and professionalism. Several staffers speak flawless English, and others speak Japanese, in addition, of course, to French. The first order of business was a spa tour, which was a great idea to help new clients learn about the facility and prevent wrong turns.

Moving into the spa service itself, I opted for the one-hour deep tissue massage. Before the treatment started, I was offered my choice of bottled water or a specially infused water blend as I sat in the spa waiting area with a view of the pool through lovely French doors. When the massage

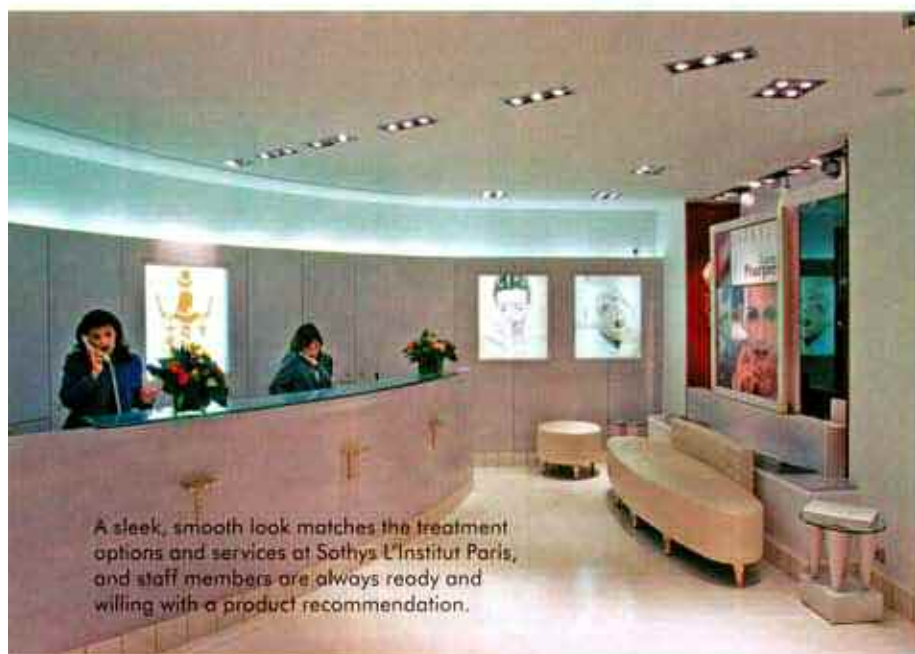
began, it was executed perfectly—I have never experienced such flawless effleurage strokes. I noticed the therapist, who also happened to be the massage team leader, employed breath work along with body weight balance, increasing the efficiency of the treatment as it conserved the therapist's energy. I was told that therapists receive ongoing training at the George V Spa, and it clearly showed.

After my massage, I enjoyed a complimentary use of the steam room and sauna, and the fitness room was also available to spa clients. Checkout was just as gracious as check-in, and, as I left, I overheard that one of the arriving clients was actually a resident of Paris. Obviously, the spa is attracting many local Parisians who appreciate quality as well as those who are guests of the city.

In regard to what I took away from the visit, the details made all the difference between an ordinary spa experience and an extraordinary one. For example, the men's locker room was truly that—outfitted with upsized lockers and robes that fit a 6-foot-5-inch man, meaning I didn't have to squeeze my shoes into a too-small compartment or wander through the spa with my robe sleeves at my elbows. In the treatment room, the lighting and temperature were adjusted perfectly, and I was delighted to discover the tables were large and long—one of the few times my feet didn't hang over the end. What's more, my table was even heated and featured recessed arm rests on each side so my arms and hands didn't dangle as the massage therapist worked.

IN PARISIAN  
spas, it's all about the  
training and the details.

I also loved the fact that the George V Spa truly reflects the well-appointed, classic style of the adjoining hotel. The owners and operators wisely didn't try to create an Asian or modern ambience in the space—instead the furnishings and appointments all mirror the hotel's style.



A sleek, smooth look matches the treatment options and services at Sothys L'Institut Paris, and staff members are always ready and willing with a product recommendation.

A spokesperson told me the original owners wanted the hotel to feel more like a private home than a hotel, and the spa certainly does evoke the comfort and charm of an elegant residence. The quiet, soothing, sensual environment caters to all the senses and, even in the heart of such a busy city, relaxes you completely.

### Efficient, effective and precise

My next visit was Sothys L'Institut Paris. Sothys has been a leader in French skin care since the 1940s, and the Sothys L'Institut Paris, nestled among the high-end shops on Paris' elegant rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré, is a flagship that evokes understandable pride among Sothys staffers.

The facility truly is a temple to beauty, featuring materials such as gold leaf, gilded brass, golden Castilian stone, bleached plane tree wood, brushed aluminum, blue rosewood and thickened glass in the hushed and soothing reception area. Treatment rooms bear irresistible names like Aroma, Serena, Aqua, Harus and Amon, and all of the excellent treatments feature the exclusive Sothys Digi-Esthetique Method, a proprietary manipulation method that boosts circulation and energy.

In addition, a recent development is the Secrets de Sothys offering, which incorporates a journey of the senses and utilizes its own treatment room with distinct textures,

fragrances, sounds and attention to tactile variations developed to maximize the client's well-being. With special attention paid to creating a sensorial dimension, Sothys focuses on scents, music and hand movements to create the perfectly personalized space.

Other treatments at Sothys are targeted and designed for results, as well—among the most popular facials are the Lift-Defense 2 for firming and line reduction and the Oxyliance to boost vitality and cellular energy. Best of all, the highly trained technicians are ready and able to customize any treatment to address a client's specific needs.

I chose the Institute Detoxifying Treatment for Men. The 75-minute experience started with a soothing back massage and segued into a detoxifying facial. My technician was so skilled that the extractions were virtually painless, and although my skin is somewhat oily, I was dehydrated from traveling, so my technician adjusted several products and techniques to account for this imbalance. She also worked with Sothys' collection of men's products, which are lightweight and fragrance-free, making them ideal for the sensitivity I happened to be experiencing on that day. Before I left, she also assembled a regimen that I could take with me on trips to help me cope with jet lag and dehydration.

As for the takeaways, like a classic Chanel suit, Sothys L'Institut Paris was all clean lines and no frills. Those elements, plus the fact that every corner of the place was bright, fresh and spotless, made me feel instantly at ease and comfortable. The attention to detail was impeccable—choices in refreshments, lighting and music were all



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## INTERNATIONAL TRENDS



With touches such as private showers in the treatment rooms and a range of relaxing menu items, Sathys L'Institut Paris embodies the French spa experience.

delightful and completely customizable. Best of all, though, were the men's accommodations. There was a separate external entrance, along with a separate men's section, and what's more, there was a shower right in the treatment room—the ultimate in privacy. I appreciated the technician's skill and her product recommendations based on some real problems that I was encountering with my skin, and the vast, bright retail area made it easy to choose products and tempting to purchase additional items.

### Pure Parisian pleasure

The Parisian way—whether it's in a shop, café, hotel or spa—is sure to never neglect the little things. A restaurant sets out a receptacle for umbrellas on a rainy night. A shop clerk carefully wraps a purchase in tissue paper and secures it with a thick cloth ribbon. The hotel manager notifies a guest that a package has arrived with a handwritten note. These are the details that make a guest feel pampered and cared for, which is the goal of every spa. So take a cue from these Paris "couture" spas. Combine attention to detail with immaculate facilities, a highly trained staff and divine treatments, and you'll always be in demand. )

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