

The Art of Beauty Spa at the Ritz-Carlton, Berlin, provides guests with sophisticated skin care options in an atmosphere of rich luxury.

The Axis of Relaxation

For my most recent European trip aimed at studying and experiencing international spa trends, I decided to devise an exercise in contrasts.

To that end, I chose to visit two diverse places: the Eternal City of Rome, with its opulence, timeless attractions and long-lived traditions; and Berlin, a hip, thriving European capital that emerged from the Cold War with vigor and has been on an energetic trajectory ever since.

Rome, I reasoned, is where spa began. Romans were enjoying communal bathing, or *balneum*, as early as the second century B.C., and Roman *thermaes* were eventually constructed throughout the entire empire, which extended from England to Africa, and evolved into central entertainment complexes offering sports, restaurants and various types of baths.

In ancient Rome, according to spa expert Mikkel Aaland, a typical routine might begin with a workout in the *palestra*, followed by a visit to three progressively warmer rooms. The first would be the *tepidarium*, where the bather was anointed with oils; the next would be the smaller *caldarium*, with its choices of hot or cold water; and the final room would be the steamy *laconicum*, featuring massage and an early form of exfoliation performed with a curved metal tool. The ritual concluded with a cool dip in the pool of the *frigidarium*. And with that background, so steeped in history, I wondered how today's Roman spa experience would compare.

Moving north, since its reunification in 1990, Berlin has risen like a phoenix from the

Image courtesy of The Art of Beauty Spa and the Ritz-Carlton, Berlin



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Signature services from La Prairie, expertly trained therapists and careful attention to detail ensure guests with a satisfying visit of revitalization at the Ritz-Carlton, Berlin's The Art of Beauty Spa.

ashes, evolving into a dynamic, sexy, creative city with much to experience, including world-class clubs, opera, theater, shopping and dining. Ultra-modern and immaculate, the city's only graffiti that is sanctioned is found on the Berlin Wall monument, and the high-tech, sleek, fashion-forward German metropolis is truly one of the most astonishing examples of reinvention in modern times. How, I wondered, would this trendsetting European city interpret spa?

Focused, flawless and golden

My first stop was Berlin, where I settled into The Ritz-Carlton at Potsdamer Platz. Adjacent to the iconic Sony European headquarters, this Ritz-Carlton offers a traditional counterpoint to the glass-and-steel Sony building with its Art Deco style of architecture. The Potsdamer Platz section of Berlin is also a popular tourist destination, a commercial and entertainment hub that is easily accessed by underground and surface railways.

As with all of its properties, Berlin's 302-room Ritz-Carlton delivers impeccable service in an elegant setting, providing visitors to this

fast-paced city with an upscale haven, and because of its location in such a bustling area, it offers many options for relaxation. One of its newest—and most innovative—is the Bath Butler in which, true to its five-star pedigree, the hotel offers its guests customized, in-room bathing experiences. Order up The Gentleman's Bath, for example, and your Bath Butler draws you a green fir aromatherapy soak and discreetly disappears, leaving behind a glass of cognac, a plate of canapés and an optional cigar.

The Ritz-Carlton, Berlin's spa, The Art of Beauty Spa, is actually a La Prairie boutique facility. Part of the hotel's spacious health and wellness area, the combination workout room and spa comprises approximately 4,300 square feet with four treatment rooms. Decorated with ornate marble intarsia, colored glass and golden mosaics from Bisazza, the spa features a stunning indoor pool able to be reserved for private events and alongside of which clients can request spa treatments to be performed.

I chose the La Prairie Radiance Gold Facial from the menu of signature services. The high-end Swiss skin care company is known for its state-of-the-art range of anti-aging cellular treatments and for its use of rare and exclusive ingredients, such as gold and caviar. The spa menu promises the Radiance Facial will visibly lift, firm, brighten and energize skin thanks to "pure golden drops of Cellular Radiance Concentrate Pure Gold" accompanied by gentle heat and select masks that enhance penetration. And after racing around Berlin trying to take in all the city had to offer, I felt I was the ideal candidate for this sophisticated skin treatment.

My beautician, as they are referred to, was extensively trained, as are the vast majority of technicians in Europe. In fact, three years of core training are required, along with regular continuing education. She began by conducting one of the most thorough skin analyses I have ever had, complete with an in-depth review of my habits and lifestyle. The resulting facial was a model of efficiency—the cleansing, steam, precise extractions, masks and moisturizing were all focused, flawless and brisk. She also offered something I had never experienced—a complimentary brow grooming during the treatment, which left my eyebrows artfully

and tastefully shaped. The service ended with the therapist's recommendations for a quality continuing skin care program.

One of the best features of The Art of Beauty Spa was the treatment bed. More of a chair than a bed, it allowed my head to be positioned higher than my feet while the therapist was situated behind me on a raised stool. For the first time ever during a facial, I did not experience a sore back from lying prone, nor did I fall victim to my usual blocked sinuses, and consequently, this was a much more comfortable position in which to receive a 90-minute facial treatment.

According to La Prairie, its Cellular Radiance Pure Gold Serum contains quartz liquid crystals, reflective pigments and La Prairie's signature Cellular Complex to super-charge skin's ability to de-age. After the treatment, my skin indeed looked refreshed and revitalized, likely attributable to the combination of the therapist's training and expertise and the luxury ingredients in the high-class La Prairie products.

The Art of Beauty Spa is incredibly dedicated to providing guests with a deluxe spa experience, and visitors definitely get their money's worth. *But it's also about more than just pampering* here—the treatments are relaxing, but also highly results-driven and delivered with a no-nonsense

approach. I felt fabulous when I left, and my skin was truly radiant.

Knowledge, wellness and health

Continuing on in my spa-scouring journey, the next stop was Absolute Spa at the Holmes Place Health Club in Berlin. Holmes Place operates 16 health clubs in three European countries—Germany, Austria and Switzerland—employing more than 1,000 staffers and attending to in excess of 60,000 members. It bills itself as a provider of health, fitness and wellness and offers fitness training and classes, nutrition counseling, and massage and spa treatments.

Holmes Place Berlin is located in the beautiful Gendarmenmarkt sector, and the Gendarmenmarkt square is considered by many to be one of Berlin's most beautiful. Flanked by the twin churches Deutscher Dom and Französischer Dom, it's crowned by Karl Friedrich Schinkel's neoclassical masterpiece, the Konzerthaus.

Fitness clubs are relatively new to Europe, and Holmes Place and the Absolute Spa are clean, sleek and modern. The spa itself is an Aveda Concept Spa, the first I had visited in Europe, and it lived up to its well-publicized commitment to eco-sustainability. The menu offered a full complement of facials and spa treatments, as well as an array of massages, including sports, stone, lymphatic drainage, cranial sacral, shiatsu, Reiki and reflexology. Under the circumstances, I opted for a sports massage, reasoning that in this fitness-oriented setting, the therapists would likely have an advanced mastery of anatomy and physiology, making their massages technically superlative.

Turned out, I was correct. My therapist was accustomed to working on athletes and brought a deep understanding of flexibility and sports-related challenges to the table. The facilities here are no-frills in nature, and the approach is decidedly less luxury-driven than at The Ritz-Carlton; however, as with the facial at the Ritz, the massage demonstrated the German penchant for efficiency and results-oriented effectiveness.

And while the massage was masterful in a traditional sense, there was also a nice, unexpected twist. In a nod to the club's wellness approach, I was invited to customize my own massage oil using an array of Aveda aromatherapy essences.

A sight of towering architecture and beauty, the Westin Excelsior in Rome is home to the well-equipped WestinWorkout, dedicated to promoting wellness for each of its guests.

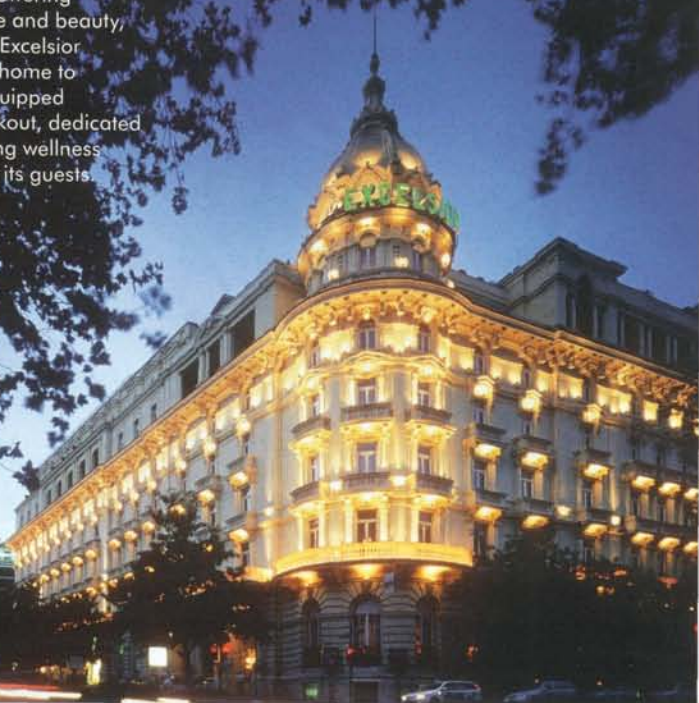


Image courtesy of the Westin Excelsior



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An indoor swimming pool is just one of the highlights at the WestinWorkout in Rome's Westin Excelsior. Other amenities include a Turkish bath, sauna and soothing massage rooms.

Smart, simple and warm

Finally, I turned my attention to Italy's capital city. As one of Rome's most celebrated avenues, the Via Veneto is the cradle of *la dolce vita*, or the sweet life, immortalized by filmmaker Federico Fellini. It is also home to the recently refurbished Westin Excelsior. A monument to turn-of-the-century style, the hotel dazzles with rich custom fabrics, Imperial, Renaissance and Biedermeier style furnishings, and walls and ceilings hand-decorated by master artisans. Located just a few minutes from the Spanish Steps and the Villa Borghese gardens, the Excelsior has served as a gathering place for celebrities, artists and royalty since 1906, hosting a who's who of marquee names from Joan Crawford, Orson Wells, Elizabeth Taylor, Richard Burton, Burt Lancaster, Frank Sinatra, Catherine Deneuve, Prince Ranier and Princess Grace of Monaco, and the Kennedys to modern celebrities including the Rolling Stones, Whitney Houston, Diana Ross, Kevin Costner, Will Smith and Jim Carrey.

The WestinWorkout within the Excelsior is a comprehensive fitness, nutrition, lifestyle and spa facility dedicated to complete health and wellness. It's managed by a group called One on One Wellness Professionals, which operates in the wellness sector offering customized services and solutions designed to realize a "Wellness Lifestyle: psychological and physical well-being

and an improved quality of life." Like the Absolute Spa in Berlin, it offers guests a holistic approach to health, relaxation and well-being, and all its staff members are extensively trained at the One on One Wellness Institute.

In addition to the smart, contemporary fitness center at the Rome WestinWorkout, the facility offers massage rooms, a sauna, a Turkish bath and an indoor swimming pool, plus a full menu of spa treatments. You can also opt for in-room treatments, which come with a complimentary spa basket containing plant-based aromatherapy oils and a selection of aromatherapy room sprays. But, after days of walking Rome's bumpy cobblestone streets and alleys, my back was aching and sore, so I chose to receive a deep tissue massage. The spa area is small but welcomingly warm and is decorated in a modern, earth-toned palette. Simple and understated, it was the complete antithesis of the ornate, Old World style of the hotel.

My massage therapist was extremely strong and knowledgeable. Thanks to her extensive training and understanding of physiology, she knew exactly what to do when I described my back problems. After 90 minutes, I arose from the massage table with realigned posture, a feeling of restored stability and balance, and a surge of energy. It put me in the perfect mood to head to a dolce vita-style café, where I lunched on the best *polpettine con passì e pinoli*, or meatballs with raisins and pine nuts, I have ever tasted.

European wellness

The lasting result of my visits to Rome and Berlin was an up-close look at the growing wellness trend in Europe. No longer exclusively dedicated to luxury and pampering—although those remain a primary focus—more and more modern European spas are broadening their approaches to encompass a more holistic attitude in regard to well-being.

Today, in growing numbers, spas seem to be offering solutions for the whole person using results-oriented services and, in many cases, naturally sourced products and ingredients. It's a direction likely to soundly resonate in the United States and, as a matter of fact, there are many spa leaders already embracing this philosophical and practical direction. X