

A photograph of a room with a large window. The window is framed by gold curtains and offers a clear view of the Taj Mahal in Agra, India, set against a blue sky. In the foreground, there is a green armchair with a brown striped pillow, a small round table with a bowl of fruit, and another small table with a lamp and a glass of orange juice.

Each room at the elegant Oberoi Amarvilas, Agra in Agra, India, offers a stunning view of the Taj Mahal.

India's Ancient Beauty

Experiencing India is like the old story of the blind men and the elephant—each of the sightless men experiences a different part of the enormous animal, and each comes away with a completely different impression.

India is unimaginably vast and varied. It offers so many terrains, climates, cultural influences, opportunities for shopping, dining and sightseeing, spiritual influences, sights, sounds, colors, flavors and smells—it simply cannot be boiled down into a nutshell. People's experiences there are varied as the country itself. Some find it enchanting, some say it's mystical, some characterize it as metropolitan and others find it completely overwhelming. During my visit, I found it to be all of these and more.

My overriding interest in visiting India, of course, was to explore its rich heritage of beauty and wellness. The Ganges River that flows through the country is revered by many as a holy body of water that bestows life, healing and beauty, and India is the original source of

many beauty rituals, including ayurveda, vedic gemstone healing and shirodhara. Traditionally, these practices were performed privately in villages and homes throughout the country, but as the nation's economy has boomed and tourism has exploded, India is now the site of a number of brand-new, world-class spas incorporating these treatments into their menus and combining them with luxurious amenities.

I decided to see for myself how these modern interpretations of ancient beauty rituals were presented to guests, as well as examine how my experiences in India might contribute to the success of spa businesses in the United States. And Denise, a client from Austin, Texas, accompanied me to research treatments and gather ideas for her new spa.

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Urban oasis

Our first stop was New Delhi, the government center of India, which is located in the upper middle plains. The city is a study in contrasts—gleaming new buildings amidst remnants of ancient mosques, and upwardly mobile professionals and wealthy residents among millions of poor have-nots. There are more than 13 million people in New Delhi, plus thousands of holy cows allowed to wander untouched among them.

Thanks to the endless cacophony, the crowds and the terrifying traffic—and the long journey to Indira Gandhi International Airport followed by the harrowing trip through the city to the hotel—Denise and I were both exhausted and on edge by the time we arrived at The Ashok Hotel, New Delhi. The five-star

Ashok Hotel is grand with 550 rooms, 110 suites, and 12 restaurants and bars. Its prime location in the heart of the capital makes it a popular destination for tourists, diplomats, businesspeople and celebrities, and the service is meticulous—the helpful staff will arrange tours, dinners, trips to the theater, golf outings, financial transactions, and even doctor and dentist appointments. The décor is tasteful and modern, with endless expanses of gleaming marble and rooms featuring colorful bedding, draperies and accessories.

Once we arrived, a soothing visit to the hotel's Amatrtra Spa awaited us, and we were eager to relax in the new 45,000-square-foot facility located on the bottom level of the hotel. The facility is state-of-the-art, complete with a fitness center, pool, Jacuzzi and gorgeous grounds. Facilities for men and women are completely separate and only same-gender therapists work on guests.

“Amatrtra” is defined as the silence that occurs during meditation between recurrent chants of “om,” and the stated treatment philosophy is to blend therapeutic and rejuvenation treatments based on traditional Indian ayurveda with Oriental spa rituals. They claim to combine astroscience and ayurveda into an approach called Astroveda, which involves customizing each regimen by identifying the most beneficial therapies, oils, mantras and dietary prescriptions for the guest, then prescribing aromas, colors and precious therapeutic gems for each user based on the planetary diagnosis.

After our arduous journey, I chose the Globe Trotter Travel Recovery Massage from the international menu. I was presented with a robe and slippers large enough to fit my 6-foot-5-inch frame, and I also appreciated the offer of a pair of disposable boxer briefs, which are so much more comfortable and offer much more coverage than the paper thongs used by most spas. After I changed, I was led down a beautiful, illuminated pathway to the treatment suite. It was lovely, but I noticed the floor was slick, and it would be easy



The Oberoi Spā at Wildflower Hall, Shimla in the Himalayas in Shimla, India, incorporates its striking landscape into its treatment offerings.

to slip and fall if one wasn't careful.

The treatment began with a delightful foot ritual and a brief Hindu prayer, and then I was settled onto the large, heated bed with a built-in face cradle. Beneath the cradle was a beautiful glass vessel containing floating flowers and lemongrass essential oil, which was not only lovely to look at, but allowed the lemongrass to prevent my sinuses from closing up during the treatment.

I was given a choice of one of nine essential oils to add to the 100% virgin olive oil that would be used for the massage, including rose, geranium and clementine, but I opted for an incredibly fragrant sandalwood. The therapist was one of the most adept I've ever experienced, and the massage included lots of circulatory-enhancing strokes that revived me from my travel-induced sluggishness. The 90-minute treatment ended with a special face, scalp and hair massage using the olive oil, and I then remained in my private suite for a luxurious steam, sauna and shower. When Denise and I reunited, she reported a similarly excellent experience, and we both felt completely invigorated.

As for the takeaways, in the midst of the chaos of New Delhi, a peaceful spa oasis was welcome indeed. Our treatment fortified us

so we were able to face the crowds and noise to experience some of the wonders the city had to offer. And while thoroughly separating the sexes at Amatrra was probably based on cultural and religious guidelines, I appreciated the fact that the men's amenities, such as the robes and briefs, were not an afterthought, as well as that the accommodations for male guests were as well thought-out, appropriate and luxurious as they were for women.

Finally, while the full impact of some of the treatments, such as the Astroveda concept, eluded me, I did appreciate the unique indigenous touches of the aromatherapy additives, face and scalp treatment, and the initial foot ritual that were part of my massage.

Rock star service

From New Delhi, we traveled to Agra, the site of the Taj Mahal. This time we had to navigate a tumultuous domestic airport in New Delhi for the short flight, but once we arrived, we were treated to incredible service. Our hotel, The Oberoi Amarvilas, Agra, is located just a little more than 650 yards from the Taj Mahal, and it's been rated as the sixth best hotel in the world by readers of *Travel & Leisure* magazine. We arrived



Massage, skin and body care are among the services that can be selected at Wildflower Hall, Shimla in the Himalayas' Oberoi Spa.

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on Thursday, and the Taj Mahal is closed on Friday, so our driver phoned the hotel, and the moment we arrived, we were ushered to a golf cart and whisked off to tour the monument while the hotel staff saw to our luggage.

The Taj Mahal itself is magical and breathtaking. Often cited as one of the seven wonders of the world, it was built by Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan in memory of his beloved wife and was completed in 1653. Pure white marble, exquisite ornamentation, precious gemstones and its picturesque location make this one of the most romantic and mesmerizing places on earth.

Denise and I decided right then and there to incorporate Taj-inspired mosaics and marble into her new spa.

After our tour, we returned to The Oberoi Amarvilas, Agra, tired, hot and sweaty, and were greeted at the entrance by Shipla, our luxury guest coordinator, a lovely woman clad head to toe in a colorful sari. This gracious, hospitable woman whisked us to our well-appointed rooms, where our luggage was waiting. Every

room in the hotel offers a view of the Taj Mahal beyond a balcony laden with fragrant bougainvillea, and we started each day on these balconies with fresh watermelon juice as the rising sun caused the white monument to positively shimmer in the early light. The sight was truly breathtaking.

At The Oberoi Amarvilas, Agra, the Oberoi Spa is located on the lower lobby level and consists of four therapy suites, a steam and sauna area, changing rooms and a well-equipped gym. There are also three therapy suites on the fourth floor of the hotel, each with magnificent views of the Taj Mahal, and this is where I received my treatment. Each therapy suite is equipped with two massage beds, a freestanding bathtub, and a steam and shower. The décor is elegant, with rich wood floors, and all of the senses are engaged thanks to beautiful music and lovely fragrances.

I requested the Balinese Deep Tissue Massage, and my therapist told me she received her training at the world-class Banyan Tree Thai Massage Academy in Phuket. This superbly accomplished woman couldn't have been more than 5 feet tall, but she had the strength of someone twice her size, and even jumped up on my back in order

The suites at The Oberoi Amarvilas, Agra's Oberoi Spa allow complete relaxation and renewal with treatments that uniquely combine Eastern and Western techniques.



INDIA IS THE ORIGINAL SOURCE OF MANY BEAUTY RITUALS, INCLUDING AYURVEDA, VEDIC GEMSTONE HEALING AND SHIRODHARA.

to work as deeply as possible. In her private suite, Denise received the Four-Handed Indian Massage, with two therapists working in perfect synchrony for 90 minutes. She was literally

unable to speak for some time when we reunited for dinner that evening.

This hotel and spa experience exemplified how it costs nothing to treat people well, and even though this was an expensive destination, it was the service that made our visit to The Oberoi Amarvilas, Agra so memorable. Amidst the beauty and grandeur of the locale, the staff worked hard to anticipate our every need. No matter what we requested during our stay, someone appeared in less than a minute to assist us. I really and truly felt like a rock star at this hotel and spa, and I think any spa would do well to offer clients that same royal treatment, no matter where it's located.

Natural beauty

We left Agra the next afternoon, returning

to New Delhi for the night, then caught a propeller plane that took us to Shimla, which lies in the foothills of the Himalayas. Our destination was the hotel Wildflower Hall, Shimla in the Himalayas, an Oberoi Resort, situated 8,500 feet up in the legendary mountains among 23 acres of pine and cedar woods.

The cool, tranquil setting offers beautiful mountain views and lots of outdoor activities, including white-water rafting, biking and hiking. On the trails, it's even possible to spot bears, deer, snow leopards and monkeys. The 85-room hotel combines traits of a Swiss chalet and British colonial décor, and with the Burmese teak floors, hand-knotted rugs, arched windows, fireplaces and rich furnishings, the result manages to be both elegant and cozy.

The hotel's newly opened Oberoi Spa features private suites that open up to the outdoors, bringing the unique essence of Shimla's mountainous environment into each treatment. While Denise went off on a guided hike, I chose to have another Balinese Massage Treatment, along with shirodhara, an ancient Indian treatment in which warm, medicated oils flow from a specially designed copper vessel. The oil is directed onto the "third eye" on the forehead and is purported to trigger healing,

restore balanced health and calm the mind. I ended the treatment with a Cedar Wood Chip Bath, a luxurious soak in a tub full of fragrant cedar chips, followed by a steam and shower in my private suite. Between the treatments and the bracing mountain air, I felt completely energized and, if possible, several years younger.

Shimla has a long history as a destination for the British and well-off Indians who wanted a place to escape the summer heat, dust and crowds of the country's lower elevations. Wildflower Hall, Shimla in the Himalayas preserves this genteel, colonial resort ambience by effectively combining the best of what the surrounding nature offers with a truly luxurious facility. Peaceful, pristine, green and gorgeous, this spa makes the most of the overwhelming scope of its spot in the Himalayas. One literally feels on top of the world.

Entrancing India

I left India impressed by two things useful to U.S. spa owners. The first is how advantageous it is to source new and exotic treatments. As spas compete for fewer clients, they must be more creative than ever to come up with ways to stand out among other spas. Standard-issue Swedish massage and by-the-numbers facials aren't enough these days—treatments, products and ingredients must be effective, and also must appeal to the senses and ignite guests' imaginations.

Even more important, however, is to focus intensely on the clients' experience. That means customer service is nothing less than five-star, regardless of whether yours is a high-end resort spa or a cozy, neighborhood day spa. From the initial phone call up until your client departs, your priority, as well as that of your entire staff, should be to anticipate every need, accommodate every request and then go above and beyond what's expected, such as when the staff at The Oberoi Amarvilas, Agra, coordinated our stay to make sure we didn't miss our Taj Mahal tour—without our even having to ask.

Attentiveness, value, excellence and exceptional service are the elements that every spa needs today in order to thrive in what is clearly emerging as the new economy, and these are lessons the Indian spa industry offers in spades. ✎