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▶ Activities / Adventure

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▶ Discovery

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▶ Cities / Culture

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▶ Issue 59 January 2011 £3.75
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TOP TEN: SPA RETREATS

If the Christmas party season has taken its toll and you feel it's time for a fresh start, here are ten of the best places to cleanse body and soul...



1

We list our ten favourites and provide a bit of background, with the idea that you'll go out and explore further. The lists are by no means definitive, so if they generate a bit of healthy discussion then be sure to share your own top ten list with us by sending an email to alex@realtravelmag.com

IN:SPA, MOROCCO

Located just outside the country's frantic and bustling city of Marrakech, Morocco's In:Spa resort prides itself as an oasis of calm and tranquillity, surrounded on all sides by palm trees, desert dunes and the snow-capped peaks of the High Atlas mountains. With personal fitness high on the agenda, guests typically stay for a weeklong wellness package that features regular treks and cycle rides into the foothills of the mountains, along with a full programme of yoga and personal training. That's not to say there's not plenty of time for relaxation, however, as the complex features two calm and tranquil swimming pools, as well as an expert team of masseurs and therapists on hand for those points when you just need to unwind. If you're not averse to a holiday that doesn't entirely revolve around lounging on a sun bed all day, then In:Spa could well be your answer. And with Marrakech only a three-hour flight away – and yet a whole world apart from the UK – this is an altogether appealing prospect. www.inspa-retreats.com

THE SCARLET, UK

It's not often that you can find a place that cleanses not only mind, body and soul, but also your conscience as well. Nevertheless, after a stay at The Scarlet in Cornwall you can remain confident that, while you were enjoying being pampered to the highest possible degree, the environment wasn't losing out at your expense. Everything about this unique spa hotel has been constructed with the utmost green credentials in mind, whilst still ensuring the highest level of comfort and interior design. What's more, it's situated right on top of a cliff, providing some truly spectacular views out to sea. Spa facilities include a number of hot and cold pools, a hammam, several relaxation spaces, a full indoor swimming pool and two outdoor, log-fired seaweed hot tubs. Treatments are helpfully arranged in pre-planned 'journeys' aimed at providing a comprehensive spa experience to all. www.scarlethotel.co.uk



2

3



REETHI RAH, MALDIVES

Visiting a spa in the Maldives is undoubtedly at the very top end of the luxury spectrum, but as expensive and extravagant an indulgence as this might be, there's no denying you certainly get your money's worth. The Reethi Rah spa resort is the last word in opulence; occupying an entire island, the network of shimmering pools and lavish wooden villas set amid gardens of tropical orchids and surrounded by the crystal clear Indian Ocean is, for many people, the archetypal image of paradise. The spa at Reethi Rah is operated by internationally renowned skincare experts ESPA, and offers the very highest level of massage, dermatology, diet and beauty therapies, all carried out in the resort's beautifully-designed treatment centre. A visit to a spa like this might only come once in a lifetime, but the feeling of wellness will no doubt last many months. www.oneandonlyresorts.com

4



VERANA, MEXICO

Quirky, quaint and with a real boutique-y vibe, Verana is the project of two former Hollywood film set designers who decided to set up an isolated spa on the beautiful coast of Mexico's Bahía de Banderas. As you might expect, there's a real charm to the overall aesthetic, although not the kind of sleek and lustrous high-end design seen in the luxury spas found in many top flight hotels. Instead, Verana remains charismatic and thoroughly in tune with its surroundings, promoting an instantly accessible atmosphere that's conducive to relaxation. Set on a sloping hillside, all the individual apartments boast sea views, as do the many pools, treatment areas and yoga platforms. The spa itself offers an innovative array of body scrubs, facials, scent-infused baths and massages, all of which will have you feeling newborn. www.verana.com

BEPPU ONSEN, JAPAN

A slight twist on the western spa format, one nonetheless relaxing or reinvigorating, Japan's expansive network of outdoor hot baths, or onsen, are a truly traditional way to give your body a bit of TLC. The coastal town of Beppu on Japan's southernmost island of Kyushu is widely regarded as the onsen capital of the world, with more hot springs than anywhere else outside of America's Yellowstone Park. While most of these are open-air public baths for all to enjoy, booking a stay at one of the town's many inns, hotels or guesthouses will usually give access to private facilities. Those after a quintessential traditional experience should seek out a ryokan – guesthouses dedicated to upholding the wood and paper aesthetic of feudal Japan – while those seeking more contemporary luxury should head for a hotel such as the Hotel Shiragiku. While you're here, don't forget to sample a hot mud bath or a slightly bit colder 'sand bath'.

www.onsen-japan.info

5

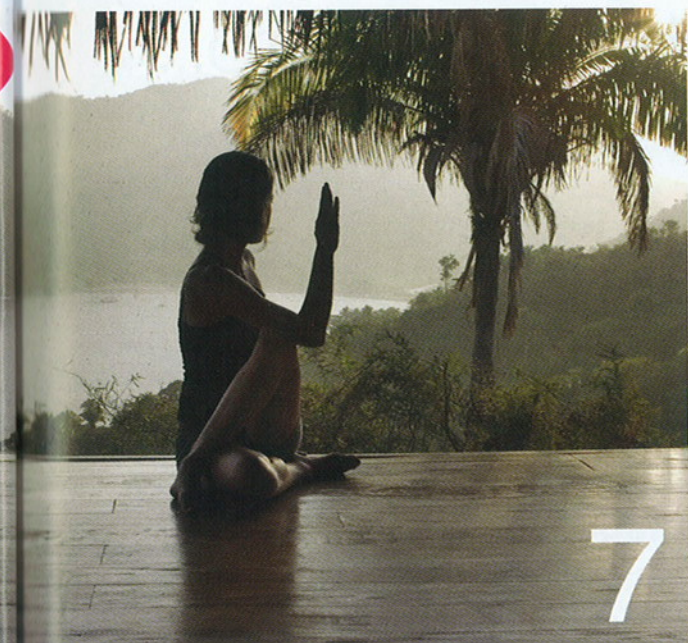


ANANDA IN THE HIMALAYAS, INDIA

As the birthplace of both yoga and Ayurvedic medicine, it stands to reason that India should be high on the list of places to head to if you're looking for a relaxing and reinvigorating retreat. There aren't many locations more spectacular than the foothills of the mighty Himalayas, and it's this setting that makes Ananda one of the most highly regarded spas in the world. Blending a knowledge of centuries-old healing techniques with more modern practices, Ananda achieves a perfect symbiosis between the traditional disciplines of a wellness retreat and the first-class luxury of a contemporary spa. With over 24,000ft² of grounds, guests can relax and enjoy over 79 different treatments and activities, while staying in accommodation that was once the palace of the Maharaja of Tehri-Garhwal. All this makes Ananda a place to come if you have your heart set on being pampered like royalty. www.anandaspa.com

6





7



8

THE BLUE LAGOON, ICELAND

The Blue Lagoon sits atop a fissure in the Earth's crust, where the Eurasian and American tectonic plates meet.

This privileged location provides two key benefits for its operation as a spa: the first is an unlimited supply of hot water for the outdoor pools that guests spend their time soaking in; the second is the unique silica-rich white mud that occurs naturally in the ground. This mud is an excellent exfoliant that can be applied to all areas of the skin and has even been touted as an effective, if temporary, cure for psoriasis. Attached to the main lagoon complex is a luxury spa where guests can partake in a number of treatments involving the signature beauty products derived from the local mud. These include floating massage, nourishing algae treatments, salt glow and silica massage.

www.bluelagoon.com



9

RAGDALE HALL, UK

Destination spas in the UK are often considered the preserve of the very wealthy, with prices soaring above £500 per night for some of the more prestigious establishments – and that's even without the treatments!

Ragdale Hall, however, is different, aiming to provide an array of world-class spa treatment without the world-ending price tag. Set in the midst of the Leicestershire countryside, the quaint Victorian manor boasts a wide range of treatments – some of which are exclusive to the retreat – and includes plenty of facilities such as a candle pool, Colourflow Cave, volcanic salt bath, waterfall pool, rose sauna and various relaxation areas. What's really special about a stay at Ragdale Hall, however, is that prices start from just £113 per night, and are inclusive of all meals and amenities (treatments are still extra, however). The spa itself has also won countless awards, so you can be sure you're not compromising on quality despite saving on price!

www.ragdalehall.co.uk



KAMALAYA, THAILAND

Located on the famously beautiful island of Koh Samui and constructed encircling an ancient cave formerly used by Buddhist monks as a place for meditation and retreat, there is a deeply spiritual air flowing through all aspects of the Kamalaya spa complex. Set right on the beautiful, white sand beach and surrounded by lush forest vegetation, it's a truly picturesque location for a holistic getaway. Daily classes in yoga, tai chi and qigong are open to all guests and take place in spacious, open-sided pavilions, while the team of highly-trained staff offer treatments ranging all the way from traditional Thai massage to colonic hydrotherapy! Also within the expansive grounds are two swimming pools, a number of tea and refreshment areas and even a library and art gallery for those looking to feed the mind as well as the body and soul. Thailand boasts a whole host of top spas, but Kamalaya is sure to leave a lasting impression – not to mention a healthy glow.

www.kamalaya.com



10

LA PRAIRIE, SWITZERLAND

Taking its approach from the medical and clinically therapeutic side of spa treatment, rather than the spiritual or holistic side, Clinique La Prairie on the shores of Lake Geneva in Montreux is a quintessentially Swiss approach to relaxation and rejuvenation. The clinic itself has been in existence since 1931, although the spa was only inaugurated in 2005. Inside its minimal and immaculately presented surroundings you will find a range of beauty therapies on offer, ranging all the way from simple massage to more complex anti-ageing skin treatments and body wraps. The list of treatments on offer is one of the most comprehensive of any spa in the world, and when you factor in the world-class dining to be had as well, you have a thoroughly lavish and all-encompassing spa experience.

www.laprairie.com