

I was a spa spy

Getting pampered for a living isn't always as fun as it seems. A beauty insider shares her secrets.

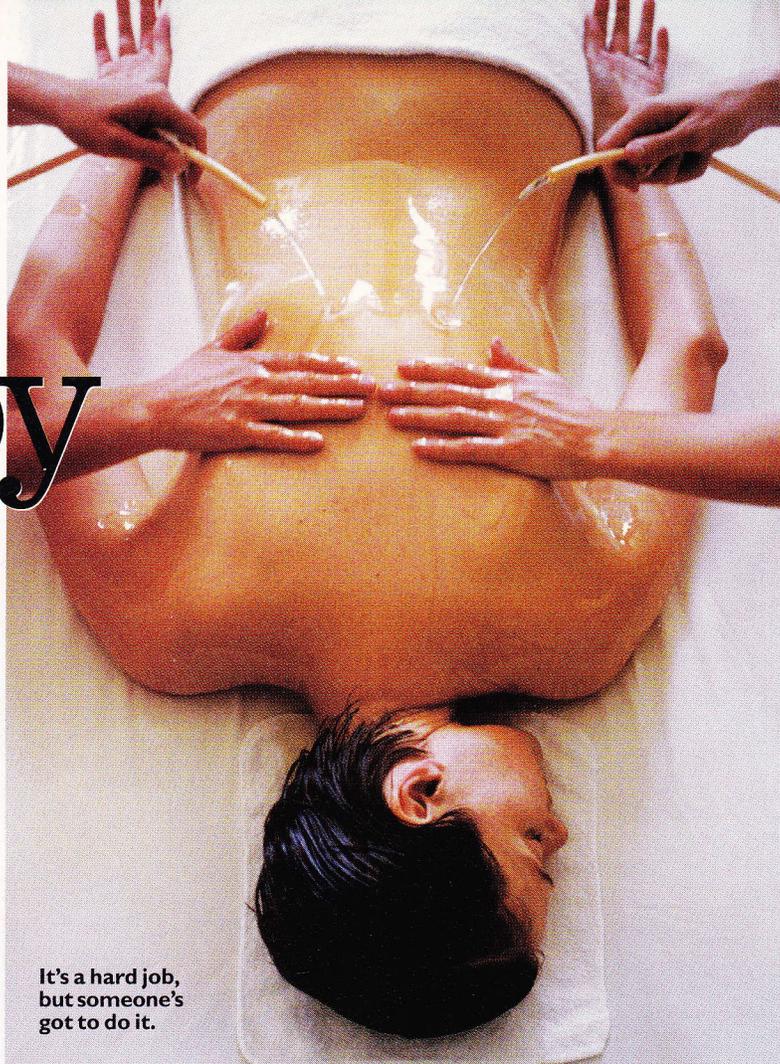
FOR ALMOST THREE YEARS, I WROTE a magazine column about spas. (I know, you pity me.) I was exfoliated, wrapped and rubbed; I sampled an astonishing array of fitness classes and treatments, from country-line-dance aerobics to covering at the end of a hallway while a therapist aimed a jet of seawater at my naked ass.

Unlike most spa devotees, I have a tough time being pampered. Maybe that's because I'm a New Yorker. I'm more comfortable being yelled at. Still, I learned something about spas—and myself—in the process. If you're thinking of spending your hard-earned bucks on a spa, keep my hard-won lessons in mind.

Rule #1 *If a treatment sounds painful, it probably is.*

Case in point: Endermologie. It's French. It's supposed to remove cellulite. It entails lying on a table in industrial-strength pantyhose while a white-coated attendant comes at you with a nozzle-and-hose device. It's like being in a fetish porn film. (Or so I imagine, Mom.) As the nozzle moves across your "problem areas," two motorized cylindrical rollers gather up folds of skin and massage them. Advocates say this mobilizes cellulite so the body can eliminate it. To me, it felt like a heavy-duty carpet cleaner mated with a malevolent rolling pin. As my flesh was being Hoovered, I imagined a wad of it getting sucked permanently into the machine, causing me to have to wear the device on my rear end for life. Alternately, I worried that a chunk of fat would get sucked loose from my nether regions and travel through my bloodstream, causing a stroke. Oh, and afterward, my cellulite was diminished not one iota. I was assured this was because I'd had only one treatment, and everyone needs at least 10. *Bien sûr*, as they say in France.

A white-coated woman came at me with a nozzle and hose. I felt like I was in a fetish porn film.



It's a hard job, but someone's got to do it.

Rule #2 *The tougher a treatment is to describe, the less relaxing it will be.* Take massage. Easy to explain, feels great. Contrast that with *panchakarma*, which involves internal cleansing, which involves enemas, which are not my scene. Then there's *watsu*—also fairly complicated. Suffice it to say that the therapist cradles the client's body in a warm swimming pool, moving it into various positions and swooshing it through the water. People say they experience *watsu* as a return to the womb. I found it too intimate. Anyone who wants that much skin-on-skin contact with me has to buy me dinner first.

Rule #3 *Hot stones, good.*

Hot oil, bad. During hot-stone massage, smooth, heated stones are placed under your back and

on your chakras (I have trouble saying *chakra* without smirking, but I can say *bliss*). The therapist rubs more stones over your body, sometimes clicking them together in a dancelike rhythm. It's hypnotic. One of my least favorite spa experiences, on the other hand, was *shirodhara*, in which essential oils are poured in a thin, steady stream onto your so-called third eye for 45 minutes. This is supposed to balance your *dosha* and *prana*. (It's as hard to explain as it is uncomfortable, which clearly makes rule #2 a corollary of rule #1.) At the two spas where I had

the treatment, the technicians couldn't manage the oil's temperature. Imagine the fun of having boiling oil poured on your head. Now imagine that it's cold, then boiling again. Relaxing, right? Now picture the oil dripping down your skull, filling your ears and flattening your hair so you look like a drowned ferret. Imagine paying \$85 for this. This was not so good for my prana.

Rule #4 Sometimes, stuff that sounds like voodoo feels like magic.

Reiki is a Japanese form of healing that is said to help focus energy and restore balance. The therapist's hands hover over the client's body, making special movements. It all sounds extremely woo-woo. But I've done it twice, and I had major, peace-inducing insights afterward. The first time, my father was ill and I was a wreck. But during Reiki, I had a vision of jagged blue triangles turning into peaceful pink waves, and I suddenly accepted my father's mortality. I didn't know if he was going to live (though he did), but I knew he loved me and that I could let him know I loved him. I felt serene for the first time in weeks. At my second Reiki session, I was newly pregnant and anxious. (I'd suffered a miscarriage eight months earlier.) But as I lay on the table, a beautiful, large white dog, a Samoyed, entered the room, curled up by my side and went to sleep. I was surprised but thought it was cool that the spa allowed pets. Then I realized my eyes had been closed. I'd been daydreaming—or having some sort of vision. Still, my anxiety evaporated, and it dawned on me that whatever happened with my pregnancy, I'd cope. Six months later, I gave birth to my daughter, Josephine.

Imagine the fun of having boiling oil poured on your head. Relaxing, right?

Rule #5 If you work out at a spa the same way you do at home, you should just stay home. Why endure the gerbil-on-a-wheel Precor thing when most destination spas are in gorgeous settings? Instead of running in place, scramble up a wildflower-dappled hill. You're bound to realize that (1) your body is more capable than you thought, and (2) it is a thing of beauty and you spend too much time criticizing it. Oh, there's a third thing: You really should get out more.

Rule #6 Don't go to any old spa if your chief goal is to feel better about your body.

Sure, spas pay lip service to the idea of lifestyle changes instead of quick weight loss. But guests often exercise seven hours a day and may even get a certificate stating the number of pounds and inches lost when they leave. (Um, it's water weight.) That's why I liked Rancho La Puerta, in Tecate, Mexico, and Mountain Trek, in Ainsworth Hot Springs, British Columbia. The guests weren't weight-obsessed and the meals didn't leave me starving. Lesson: Get the scoop on a spa's culture before you go.

Rule #7 The hippies were right: Don't postpone joy.

The worst part of my spa gig was the loneliness. I was on my own and younger and poorer than most guests, so I was often the odd girl out. Once, when I was feeling especially vulnerable, a janitor let me into a spa's main office after hours so I could check my e-mail. On the back of the office door was a list of all the guests' names, with space for comments. Aha! I thought. Here's where employees come to vent! So I peeked. Next to my own name was scrawled: NUTS! WILL KILL HER! Waaah, I thought. OK, so my nose is pierced and I'm a Democrat, but that's so unfair! I've only been here a day, and they already hate me! I quickly checked my mail and slunk back to my room. The janitor locked the door behind me. He probably hated me, too. It wasn't until the next morning that I realized the list had been about guests' food preferences. The comment by my name was there to remind the staff that I'm fatally allergic to walnuts and pecans.

Which taught me that I needed to chill, a lesson I've tried to apply to the rest of my life, as well. No one cares if you're alone or if your thighs are big. For me, writing about spas became a superb exercise in learning to enjoy my own company. Not that I'm sorry the gig is up. Now, on the rare occasions I get to a spa, I can have the treatments I want rather than the ones that are trendy. In other words, no one will ever aim a fire hose at my ass again unless I'm in flames. ■

Five things to pack before you go

A good book Just in case you're not up for dinner conversation about thigh circumference, artificial sweeteners and the toxins in yams.

NoDoz Some spas are caffeine-free. 'Nuff said.

A water bottle Make sure there's a way to attach it to your body.

Workout gear Many spas provide T-shirts, shorts and sweats and tell you that you needn't bring anything else. But I was always more comfortable exercising in my own clothes.

Your favorite alcoholic libation Certain spas offer wine at meals, and others will uncork a bottle you've brought. But at some places, if you want a cocktail, you'll have to take the initiative. And you won't be alone. At one spa, a waiter, pointing to a table of giggling ladies, confided that they were stealing the sliced limes on the buffet table as quickly as the staff could replace them, then smuggling them back to their rooms to enjoy with bottles of Bombay Sapphire.

"They like their gin and tonics," he sighed.