



SPA GAZING

New Year's Resolution: why not treat yourself to a spa? You know you're worth it, says Roger Wheeler

Over the past few years spas have become big business, hundreds of hotels now boast 'spa' facilities for a 'chill out weekend'. Try typing 'lads pampering' into Google – the sexist search engine will simply ask did you mean 'ladies'.

You will have noticed the many articles that have been written about spas and most of these articles are written by women. Spas appear to be run by women for women. Women love pampering and laying in warm candlelit mud baths listening to ambient whale song.

Where are the spas for men? I mean real men, why shouldn't guys enjoy some proper pampering? So I set out on a quest to find some and it wasn't easy. Leaving no hot stone unturned, I set off on a quest to find out about spas.



I'm not at all certain whether most of them really know what men want. I wasn't looking for the rough tough hammering you get in a Turkish Haman nor was I seeking a delicate bit of aromatherapy, just somewhere with a bit of class and style that understands what men want.



We all know what men usually want but that was not what I was looking for.

Most spas in hotels are designed for women. When asked how many male customers they had, one therapist said "a few, usually dragged along by their wives". They do try to deal with us guys, but having a very pretty young lady gently rub sweet smelling oils into my ample flesh was one of the most unusual situations I have ever been in. It was all very nice, but they obviously usually attend to women, although apparently men do go on their wedding days and have manicures. Oh well, I will never be a 'new man'

Spas come in all shapes and sizes but the only real deal that I found was the **Porchester Baths** in Queensway in darkest Bayswater, West London. This is one of London's few remaining, traditional, public Turkish baths.

This grand bathhouse opened in 1929 and whilst being renovated recently still retains its bohemian atmosphere. There are no fragrant candles, soft music or fluffy robes and slippers. Instead, it provides the same

basic experience that people have been enjoying for 80 years.

The week is divided into men-only days (Monday, Wednesday, Saturday), and women-only days (Tuesday, Thursday, Friday), with Sunday for couples. When you arrive you are given a check cloth that can be wrapped around your waist, or not, as you wish, its men only after all.

Stepping through the door into the expansive, tiled lounge is like to stepping back in time. There are men of all ages, colours, shapes, and sizes; playing chess, drinking tea or just relaxing peacefully various benches and loungers. They do provide simple freshly cooked meals, which we were told were excellent.

A grand central staircase leads down to the Frigidarium, an ice-cold plunge pool. Carry on down the stairs to the basement and you'll find three Turkish baths, two steam rooms, and a sauna. The hot rooms come in three different temperatures: warm, hot and ouch! Stay in them as long as you can (15 minute max) and then into the cold pool, trust me its good. Your admission also lets you use the main public swimming pool which is in the same building.

As with all men-only baths, the Porchester used to be quite cruisy, not so today. Of course this is central London and of course that means you can meet friends both new and old.

They have two very experienced masseurs; I let **Zsolt Kovacs** pummel me for about an hour. Zsolt, a jazz musician in his spare time, is from Budapest and he certainly knows what men want. I had a **Turkish Black Olive Soap Massage** and a **deep tissue massage**. He is very chatty and explained how the black olive would nourish and soften my skin, while the fresh aroma of eucalyptus would clear airways. All I know is that afterwards I felt fantastic.

Admission is a very reasonable **£22** and I could happily spend all day there. The building is listed, owned by Westminster Council and the more mature readers may recall the famous Porchester Hall Drag Balls of the 60s and 70s. The spa is run by Courtneys a private company. We will be going back. www.courtneys.co.uk

