

Confessions of a male spa addict

Despite the lack of male company, enforced intimacy with strangers and vegan food, David Aaronovitch has been a spa devotee for 25 years. Why? Turns out men just want to be kneaded



It's an early March morning in South Carolina and I'm downward dogging on the beach. There's such an expanse of beige sand that the cyclists, joggers and water birds all seem to take up no more room than their footprints and tyre tracks. We are five mats' worth of spa residents, and the four middle-aged women and I have already completed the mountain pose, the tree pose and the warrior. Deborah, the former golf pro who now teaches yoga at the Hilton Head Health spa, appears beside me and gently adjusts my tilt. A little upward pull on the hips, a soft depression of my head. A day ahead and nothing to look forward to except aerobics in the pool, 60 minutes on the gym cross trainer, a massage with Christie, whose hands are like warming pans, and filet mignon for dinner.

It's 25 years since, stressed and smoking, I first turned up at a spa. Someone had mentioned to someone else in the family that perhaps I'd been overdoing it, and they had a friend whose wife knew a man who owned this place down in Hampshire – big house turned into a health spa – and her fat, unhappy husband had gone there for a weekend and now swore by it. There was a fitness room, the food was approximately non-fattening, the ladies got their nails done, the chaps had personal trainers for an hour or two and then hit the sauna. The masseurs were brawny and painful, the grounds were pretty if wet (it was November) and I quite liked it, although an epiphany it wasn't.

That came later, in Florida in 2005. By then I'd blobbed, I was medicated for high blood pressure and was settling in for a thoroughly unhealthy middle age. I wangled myself an assignment to the gold-standard weight-loss spa in America – a full two weeks at the Pritikin Longevity Center, then by the sea in north Miami. This time I knew people who had been there, mostly Americans. “No, really, David,” they'd say, anticipating my newspaper person's scepticism, “it'll change your life.” And it did, in two ways. Ten months after pitching up at 18½ stone and panting on the stairs, I ran the London Marathon in 4 hours 24 minutes. Me. Not someone else that I am enviously reading about. I did that. Second, it made me a spa addict. From that year on hardly a twelvemonth has gone by when I haven't spent at least a few days – and in one blessed spring, a full month – at a spa.



At the Vivamayr Health Centre in Austria MARK HARRISON

I know what some of you are thinking. Being a spa addict would be culturally more understandable – if still unlovely – in a woman. Women are forced into a vanity that men have no need to mimic. Men are much less likely to be judged harshly on our clothes, hair, skin and nails in the way women are. Male vanity, then, is all the more reprehensible for being

unnecessary. There's also the perception of spas as being sensually indulgent in a way that is supposedly unmasculine. Men do things to the world, while women have things done to them; women get facials, men do golf. It's in the art: odalisques bathe, recline and are waited upon in the harem while their manly sponsors are off governing empires and strangling rivals. Of course, these stereotypes are losing their power, but more slowly than some denizens of artisanal coffee shops might believe.

Not, of course, that there is only one kind of spa. Indulge me – indulge yourself – in my brief guide to spas. And let's start with the one most people think they know about – what Germans might call the *Pamperhaus*. It's the kind of place at which you may spend a day or a long weekend, or which occupies a “secluded, tranquil corner” of a Center Parcs, to which you “escape” after having dumped the kids at the bowling alley.

This kind of spa is a land of beauticians. It consists of a reception area with an incongruous gold head of Buddha and some small infusion sticks (fig is a favourite smell right now), an indoor swimming pool, men's and women's saunas and steam rooms, a hair salon, a nail bar and a suite of treatment rooms. In these rooms an increasingly ingenious range of substances is smeared on bodies or faces that are then wrapped, left for 30 minutes (what do the beauticians actually do in those half hours? Get together and laugh about their clients, is my guess) and then showered and lightly massaged. Everything that happens here is a “ritual”; everything you imbibe or have slathered on you is an “elixir”. It can be a place of mechanical decorousness, where each client is supposedly treated as a unique individual, before being replaced an hour later by someone else equally unmemorable or absurd. The strange intimacy of these surroundings is exemplified by the “popping on” of impossible paper pants, originally manufactured with the medium-sized woman in mind and thus threatening almost inevitable “popping out” consequences for a 6ft, 230lb male.

At the end, the slatherers express their gratitude about how refreshed they feel. And this is not because they've drunk the spa Kool-Aid, but because it's actually true. Even the more peremptory spas let you lie down, be gently brushed by someone who is not actually horrible, direct you towards a hot shower that is inevitably more powerful than the one you have at home, then deposit you in bathrobe and slippers on a comfy couch where you drink fruit tea and snooze, while something approximating to music is played on an invisible speaker. This is nicer than, for example, running a children's party for 20 7-year-olds, or discovering from the garage that it'll be another week before the people carrier is back in service.

Spas are perceived to be sensually indulgent in an ‘unmasculine’ way

At its best, it can be fabulous. Ten years ago, I went for three days to a high-end *Pamperhaus* in Crete. If ancient Sybaris lived up to its name, it must have been like this. There was an indoor pool, an outdoor pool, an airy labyrinth of steam rooms, a reclining room with a view over the Mediterranean and all, said the brochure, fashioned from ethically sourced softwoods, Euboean marble and Syrian stone. Before my flotation-bed experience in a darkened womb – sorry, room – my feet were washed in a silver bowl. It was so decadent that if this had been *Game of Thrones*, I would have had about five minutes to live before some demure nail technician garrotted me with the elastic from my own disposable pants.

The second kind of spa is what used to be called a “health spa” but is increasingly likely to be dubbed a “wellness centre”. This is a place where people go in the expectation that they will emerge healthier (or weller) than when they went in. Hilton Head Health, on the tree-rich island of Hilton Head off the coast of South Carolina, is one of these. Its clientele is mostly female, is 50 per cent repeat customers and if I hear the phrase, “This place saved my life,” once, I hear it a dozen times. It is, says Lois from New York, “literally the last resort”.

Why? Low-calorie diets, lots of exercise, tons of encouragement and some sound lifestyle advice delivered by believable experts. Even the current owner, Kevin, originally a stressed executive in the aircraft industry, felt so strongly that a few weeks in the place had helped him survive that, like Victor Kiam, with whom older readers will be familiar, he ended up buying the place.

Hilton Health’s main schtick is weight loss without too much pain. It is less medicalised and science-based than Pritikin, where you get a 140-page booklet on arrival, but, like Pritikin, it also places an emphasis on how you keep things going after you leave. The trouble is, the repeat custom rather suggests that many people gradually slip off the wagon and come back again. This is the true health spa’s paradox. If it were to work 100 per cent, then the resort would go out of business.



Water aerobics at the Hilton Head Health spaJEFFERY SALTER

In a completely different category is the European health spa, especially the ones recreated around some 19th-century physician’s pet theory concerning detoxification. In Austria, I was

told by the bearded director of the Vivamayr Health Centre, situated on the edge of a beautiful lake in southern Carinthia, that I was “full of putrescence” and prescribed a shelfful of potions and powders to cure conditions I was pretty sure I didn’t have. Five years earlier, in the Czech Republic in Karlovy Vary (formerly Carlsbad), in a consulting room that looked like something out of the Soviet Union of the late Seventies, a gloomy central-European doctor, also bearded, explained to me the almost miraculous curative powers of the waters. Unlike my Austrian, however, he was not keen on colonic irrigation. The Russian visitors liked to be rectally nozzled, he told me, because for them, “Everything must be clean. Outside clean. Inside clean.” On the Atlantic coast there are untried spas devoted to thalassotherapy, the curative power of the sea and of seaweed. In Turkey, the US and by the Dead Sea, warm mud is the magic substance.

The truth is, I love them all. I love the scientific ones, with their common sense about diet and exercise. I love the *Pamperhäuser*, with their fluffy towels and absurd vocabulary. I love the Austro-Hungarian Empire nonsense about intestinal cleansing and the power of hot baths. I love the whole rigmarole, from abhiyanga to Zen.

The people are nice. If you’re not in a supermodel retreat, then the other clients will be the kind of folk who, if they could, would insist on the mirrors being taken out of the gyms. In Britain and America they are also much more likely to be women, and I enjoy the company of women. Hilton Head’s main client base, for example, is women of a certain age in practical gymwear, often squat, tubby, determined, blingless, gutsy and funny. They’ve brought up kids, divorced husbands, survived cancers. Their tables at mealtimes resound with that kind of laughter that sometimes makes men feel uncomfortable and so dub “cackling”. They have stories, too, for example about the woman who came three years earlier dressed like Kim Kardashian – “Surgery *everywhere*; boobs, butt, nose, you name it” – and got so plastered on smuggled-in minis that she got lost in the 300-yard walk from supper to her chalet and had to be rescued from a nearby alligator-infested golf green at midnight.

At one place in Austria I was told I was ‘full of putrescence’

Some, like the Trump-supporting female Methodist pastor from the Midwest, have saved up for four years to come to Hilton Head. So they get their money’s worth, and dance and swim and bob and lift through up to five activities every day, from the dawn beach walk to the evening stretch via boxing, high-interval training and Zumba. And laugh all the way. The only downside comes on a day trip to Savannah, where a rather cutesy woman involves the whole minibus in her pastime of downloading pictures of dogs onto an app and then getting their mouths to move in time to words she has typed in. I think I could throw up that morning’s low-calorie oatmeal.

But what about men? Male spa-reluctance is historically odd. What were the Roman baths but an ancient day spa? You’d shed your toga in the apodyterium, process to the frigidarium, linger longer in the tepidarium and open your pores in the caldarium. Then back to the tepidarium to be massaged with oils by a caring slave and then scraped with an implement called a strigil. A few centuries later, Marx, like me, took the waters in Carlsbad. He may even have been hosed down, as I was, by a frightening old woman called Stana. Goethe and Schiller went there, too. Emperors were spa-lovers, as were soldiers and diplomats.

Male resistance may be weakening even in the Anglosphere. The website Spabreaks.com estimates that in the year to the end of April 2018, British men have made spa bookings totalling more than £1 million, a 17 per cent increase on the previous year. There are now even “stag-party” spa packages. Just don’t be first into the swimming pool the next morning.

I don’t really want more men to go to spas but, on the expectation that more women than men will be reading this confession (some while sipping fruit tea in a room full of Egyptian cotton and the scent of figs), I’ll share with you why I find it all so addictive.



TRX fitness class at Hilton Head Health with trainer David ChesworthJEFFERY SALTER

The underlying reason is this: I think too much. My brain never switches off. All the waking time – and much of my sleeping time – its neurons and synapses are almost audibly connecting. Tick, tick, whirr, whirr. This story, that idea, the other proposition; papers, magazines, radio programmes, films, plays, speeches, analyses, Trump, May, Brexit and bumpsadaisy. Sometimes I just need it to *stop*.

My friend John Lahr said the truest thing about retrieving this situation. “If you stroke a frog’s stomach,” he told me, having done just this in his childhood, “it goes to sleep.” Spa for me is about switching focus from mind to body. It is not about mindfulness but that far more blessed state: mindlessness. It is about going from Stoic to Epicurean. It is about having your stomach stroked.

Start with the food. At spas, you’re not buying it or making it. At health spas, you’re sometimes not getting very much of it. But what you do get – once the first three days on broth and a hard roll have passed – will be good. At Pritikin, once a week we got bison; at Hilton Head, seared lime-infused mahi mahi; at Vivamayr, a lamb fillet that made me cry. Because if you’re going to

starve people who are paying good money, you'd better give them their few calories in a really delicious form. Did you know you can get a pulled-pork Wellington at only 320 calories?

Then the gyms. They're usually good, with loads of equipment and no waiting time, no dank changing rooms full of men doing those odd breathing noises they do when they get naked in front of other men.

Above all, I adore the water stuff. I am Roman: I like cold water, tepid water and warm water. I like it as pools and as steam. I like it as showers and as deployed by old Stana – whoosh into the middle of my back. I like Russian baths, Japanese baths, baths Icelandic, Moroccan and Manx. (OK, I made that last one up.) Above all I love Turkish baths, or hammams, with their running hot taps, wet marble and soaked linen loincloths. I'd even enjoy the post-baths massage if I weren't so nervous of the muscly Turkish masseurs who like to do that thing that makes your neck crack. If they'd promise to forgo that bit, I'd be there every week.

Oh, and gimme mud. Warm, oozy, all-over mud. Follow me follow, down to the hollow. I challenge anyone to think about the customs union when lying in a bed of bubbling clay. Amniotic fluid must have been like that in the weeks before we were unkindly expelled into this thought-stuffed world.

And let's go naked. Not for show, not to be exhibitionist, not for very long, but just so there's nothing to hide. Let me be clear, I am to naturism what a pescatarian is to veganism. I lack the essential commitment to be a nudist; like veganism, it feels essentially pedantic. But being naked for an hour or two in the hammam or at breakfast is rather nice and, again, uncondusive to agonising about NHS spending. (Note: I was joking about breakfast.)



Cycling around Hilton Head island JEFFERY SALTER

Now let's lie down on the slab and get massaged, because I love the feeling that someone really kneads me. I can take pummelling and I can take gentle strokes. I can go with hot oil or cold lotion. Delivered by hand, elbow or even foot. Give it to me Swedish, Thai, Ayurvedic, Hawaiian, Balinese, Javan or even Andorran. Supplement it with hot stones, hot bamboo rods, hot shells. Bash me with birch. Just so long as all I think about is the physical sensation.

Finally, lead me out to the room with recliners overlooking a mini-bayou and its glittering population of tiny terrapins, or the sea, or Central Park, and let me slide away for half an hour.

Why would you not want all this? Well, one possible reason is that, as with all addictions, it can be harder to get the buzz. When it becomes routine and expected, then the mind can sometimes click on again. So recently I've found myself asking whether there isn't something more, well, *extreme*. I don't want to go to that place in Manhattan (there's always a place in Manhattan) where they give you a guano facial – yes, you actually pay to have bird shit rubbed on your face. In Israel, they'll place snakes on your body and their slithering is supposed to loosen your muscles. I believe that in China there's a spa that will set fire to you.

But how about a place with sweat lodges and waterfalls, where you fast every third day and then hike into the mountains, returning to swim naked in a hot spring before being massaged by eagles? And get home to discover that, yes, you do now finally fit into that fabulous but risky jacket you bought in the Paul Smith sale five years ago. Who'd not put their hands up for that?

David Aaronovitch was the guest of Hilton Head Health. Full-board packages start at £2,275 per week, including fitness classes (hhhealth.com). Click [here](#) for the ten best spas for men

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