

## It's the Water

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Hydrotherapy circuits bring spas back to their watery roots.

"I don't consider a place a real spa unless it has a hydrotherapy circuit," says Jasmine Kaloudis, a Philadelphia yoga teacher, holistic health blogger, and avid spa-goer. That prerequisite makes her seem like a bit of a "spa snob," Kaloudis admits, but she has a valid point. Centuries before facials, body scrubs, and fluffy white robes were invented, spas and water were inseparable.



In fact, the term "spa" most likely comes from the Belgian town named Spa, where people have been soaking in thermal springs since the 14th century. Another theory is that the word "spa" originated as an acronym for the Latin phrase sanitas per aquam (dating back to Hippocrates' days), which translates to "health through water."

Today, of course, the definition of spa has been expanded to embrace a host of health, beauty, and fitness services. Meanwhile, hydrotherapy—the healing springs, deep soaks, relaxing baths, and bracing plunges—has all but disappeared from many treatment menus.

Still, there's hope for traditionalists who wonder, "Where's the water?" At a growing number of spas, hydrotherapy circuits, in which guests move from one experience to another, continue to take center stage. Typically available for a nominal charge or free to guests who book a treatment, these 21st-century bathhouses help a spa stand out, impart a sense of value and quality, entice more guests to the spa, and encourage them to linger longer.

### Heat, Cool, Relax, Repeat

All hydrotherapy circuits are based on four simple steps: Heat up, cool down, relax, repeat. The sequence hasn't changed since the ancient Romans, whose bathhouse rituals typically included a hot bath (caldarium), followed by a cold dip (frigidarium), and a relaxing warm soak (tepidarium). Before departing, bathers would have scented, warm olive oil massaged into their skin, or perhaps go for a swim in the large main pool.

The process of alternating between swelteringly hot and bracing cold temperatures "shocks the body into triggering an endorphin rush, accompanied by profound relaxation," says Axel Binneboese, general manager of Refuge (Carmel, CA). Here, guests move from the heat of the dry sauna or eucalyptus steam room to water as cold as an icy river, followed by relaxing by a firepit, under a warm waterfall, or in a quiet room.



### Elaborate Experiences

Some hydrotherapy circuits take the hot/cold/relax model to elaborate extremes. The just-opened Aquabella Sensory Spa by Clarins at The Westin Playa Bonita Panama (Panama City, Panama) includes a Hydrothermal Wellness Circuit with two walk-in rain showers (one with swirling rain, the other with shower jets and alternating water temperatures), an herbal sauna with music and colored lights, a crystal steam room, a foot-massaging warm stream with rounded river stones, and an ice fountain. And that's in addition to hot, warm, and cold pools. In case it all becomes too confounding, wellness hostesses and butlers help guests navigate the circuit. Ancient Romans never had it so good. "We wanted to create something special," says Glen Champion, vice president of Bern Hotels & Resorts, who helped plan and design Aquabella's circuit. The idea, he says, was to "raise the level of quality," while giving spa-goers the option to "take more control of their overall experience."

The Water Lounge at the Grand Velas Riviera Maya Spa (Quintana Roo, Mexico) is perhaps the Disneyland of hydrotherapy circuits. Here, the Water Journey includes visits to a eucalyptus steam room with a starlight fiberoptic ceiling and color therapy; a cinnamon-scented dry sauna with individual facial mist sprays; a rosemary-scented clay room with hydrating mud and individual showers; a misty mint-scented ice room with floor-to-ceiling windows; rain showers with lateral water jets ranging from Arctic cold to comfortably warm; pebble walking paths with jets aimed at lower legs; plus a freezing polar pool; a hot whirlpool; and a relaxing warm water pool with "bubble beds" and cascades aimed at the lower back. "Our Water Journey is different [from other circuits] in its size—40,000 square feet," says spa director Leticia Fernandez. "Also the sensorial experience with different scents in each room and the amount of pampering set it apart."

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