

Spas connect with history to spark future

Retreats center business around landmarks

BY BETH J. HARPAZ
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NEW YORK — Most spas take pride in providing a thoroughly modern experience, offering the latest product formulas, complex therapies and state-of-the-art facilities.

But a half-dozen new spas have opened this year in landmark hotels and historic places, and are taking their inspiration from their surroundings' past.

In May, The Spa of Colonial Williamsburg, Va., opened, offering treatments that spa manager Kate Mearns calls "a modern-day interpretation of five centuries of wellness." For example, a treatment using hot stones, linen wraps and cool aromatherapy cloths was inspired by a Powhatan Indian sweathouse ritual. Traditional remedies and ingredients also inspired the spa's lavender baths, lemon verbena manicures and massage oils containing cypress, juniper and rosemary.

Any profits the spa makes will be returned to the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

"Everything they do is done with integrity, to preserve the past," said Mearns, who is also former director of the International Spa Association.

In February, the Beach Plum Spa opened in Plymouth, Mass., at the John Carver Inn, where 75 percent of the guests are visiting Plimoth Plantation to learn

about the Pilgrims. Others go whale-watching, or visit the replica of the Mayflower in the town's picturesque harbor.

"They do a lot of walking while they're here, and they're tired," said Debra Catania, whose family owns the inn. "I wanted to have a spa, but I didn't want to have a generic spa in an area that's so well-known for history and the ocean. So I came up with the beach plum theme."

Beach plums are fragrant wild roses, with hips rich in anti-oxidants. Early New Englanders used them in jams. Beach Plum Spa uses them in oils, lotions and other products. "They smell wonderful," Catania said.

She also used plum as a design color, along with cream and a crystal silver that she says evokes the ocean and stones.

"I want people to walk in and feel like they're still in Plymouth," she explained. "They're not in an Asian spa at the Mandarin Oriental. You have to go traditional 18th century here; I didn't want the zen feel, the plain bamboo. But I couldn't put a picture of a pilgrim on my wall in a spa."

The happy marriage of modern spas and historic places is being driven by the demographics of the aging post-World War II generation, according to Joe Goldblatt, who teaches at Temple University's School of Tourism and Hospitality Management in Philadelphia.

Goldblatt said spas with connections to historic places provide two things to aging boomers: a way to heal physical maladies, and an antidote to what he called "rootlessness."

"As people age, they want to connect to their roots," he said. "The world is rootless. People are moving all the time and are not connecting with their families. As they age, they become more interested in history. History gives them a sense of grounding and gravitas."

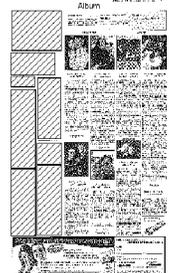
In addition, consumers today are looking to acquire experiences, not just material objects. "The experience economy is moving toward health tourism," Goldblatt said. "The one thing that does not change as people age is infirmity. Baby boomers and even Gen-Xers are looking for ways to relieve the pain. These spas are offering pain relief, plus comfort and connections to history."

The Web site SixNewThings.com, which earmarks notable new destinations, did a roundup of six new spas this summer, and half were connected to historic properties. The West Baden Springs Hotel, which has a spa, opened in May in French Lick, Ind., about two hours south of Indianapolis, after being shuttered for 75 years. Both West Baden and the newly reopened Bedford Springs Resort in Bedford, Pa., which also has a spring-fed spa, are National Historic Landmarks.

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The mineral waters at Bedford Springs have been attracting visitors since the 1790s. In addition, Linden Spa opened in July at The Inn at Perry Cabin, in St. Michaels, Md. The Linden Spa was named for the stately linden trees that have lined the drive to the inn since the building was built in 1816.

The Mount Washington Resort in Bretton Woods, N.H., which dates to 1902, also opened a spa this year. "This makes the third of New Hampshire's four grand resorts to introduce a significant spa facility in the last few years — including the Mountain View Grand in Whitefield and the Wentworth by the Sea in Portsmouth," said Christina Diaz, spokeswoman for the New England Inns and Resorts Association. "It is



Resources:

Beach Plum Spa at the John Carver Inn, Plymouth, Mass.;
www.johncarverinn.com or
 800-274-1620.

Hot Springs National Park, Springs, Ark.;
www.nps.gov/hosp/ or 501-620-6715.

Linden Spa at the Inn at Perry Cabin, Michaels, Md.;
www.perrycabin.com or
 866-278-9601.

New England Inns and Resorts Association,
www.newenglandinnsandresorts.com/ or 603-964-6689.

Springs Eternal Spa at Bedford Springs Resort, Bedford, Pa.;
www.bedford-springsresort.com or 866-623-8176.

The Spa of Colonial Williamsburg, Williamsburg, Va.;
www.thespaofcolonialwilliamsburg.com or 800-688-6479.

West Baden Springs Hotel, French Lick, Ind.;
www.frenchlick.com or 888-694-4332.

interesting that spas and pampering have become such an essential amenity at these properties that it warrants a huge investment on the part of the owners. Clearly, the guests are demanding it.”

In the early 19th century, so many people sought cures in Hot Springs, Ark., that Congress established the Hot Springs Reservation to protect the mineral water flowing from the hillside. The reservation was later made a national park.

Interest in taking the waters to cure disease declined in the late 20th century. But with the popularity of spas and springs on the rise again, the National Park Service recently approved a private developer to reopen Hot Springs’ 85-year-old Quappaw Bathhouse. The new spa is expected to open next year.



AP ILLUSTRATION BY THE SETAI

The Setai, a condo set to open in early 2008 that offers comprehensive resort amenities, including a 12,000-square-foot spa, provided this graphic rendering of the spa's Jacuzzi area.