

Spas offer respite from the bustle of Hong Kong

BY ROCHELLE LASH, THE MONTREAL GAZETTE



The Jade Stone Treatment is a signature treatment of the new ESPA at The Ritz-Carlton, Hong Kong, at 465 metres, the highest-elevation spa in the world. The spa has a view of the city's iconic skyline and Victoria Harbour.

Photograph by: Handout photo, The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company

Hong Kong's balance of extremes makes it one of the world's most fascinating cities. Life here ricochets between a spiritual faith in ancient rituals to state-of-the-art technology and stunning, original architecture. It is a heady mélange of old and new, British and Chinese, grassroots and sophisticated. Or simply yin and yang.

Although Hong Kong has hotels, office towers and a transportation system that are as modern as those of any city - it's an almost futuristic city of so many skyscrapers that it makes Manhattan seem mellow - you can still experience its history and traditional culture in many ways. The elegant Lok Cha Tea House presents ancient tea ceremonies in a historic inn in Hong Kong Park, a serene botanical garden gurgling with fish ponds and waterfalls. The tireless Star Ferry has traversed Victoria Harbour since 1888, linking Hong Kong Island and Kowloon. And behind the big-city bustle of modern life is an intimate village of tangled alleys, noodle shops, street markets and tiny open-air temples burning incense to Buddhist gods.

Hong Kong welcomes as many as 36 million visitors a year, about 400,000 of them Canadians, travelling for international finance, mining, shipping, manufacturing and leisure. Given the frenzied pace, intense business style and copious meals, you will deserve a spa break.

The world of wellness bridges the city's same contrasts of traditional and folksy vs. cutting-edge and contemporary. The various goals of modern spa life - fitness, weight loss, beauty treatments, relaxation and healing - are in sync with ancient Chinese practices like tai chi, massage, feng shui and herbal medicine. In Hong Kong, you can "spa" old or new.

On the new side, the Ritz-Carlton Hong Kong is the newest of the new. This dazzling hotel of classic luxury operates on the top floors of a shimmering tapered glass office tower. It opened in mid-2011 as the highest-elevation hotel on any continent, with jaw-dropping views from 490 metres in the sky, or nearly three times as high as Montreal's Place Ville Marie.

Your spa sojourn might start with the thrill of gazing out at the fabulous panorama of Hong Kong and its busy harbour below - from remarkable spaces on the 118th floor. The swimming pool and hot tub are enclosed in glass, so you don't have to be afraid to peek down, even if you're afraid of heights. After a dip and a soak, an attendant will wrap you in a bathrobe, and you are off to exquisite spa services like the hot Lava Shell Body Treatment, which melts muscle tension, or the Radiance Facial, which uses jade stone rollers to refresh the skin, awaken tired eyes and help focus the mind.

Pampering is a big part of a wellness day, and few places spoil their guests better than the luxurious Mandarin Spa. Owned by Jardine-Matheson, the iconic Hong Kong business conglomerate, the flagship Mandarin Oriental in the fashionable Central district has chalked up nearly 50 years of accommodating taipans (business tycoons) and tai-tais (ladies who lunch and shop). The Mandarin Oriental is known for its Michelinstarred restaurant, skyline views and special touches like toiletries by Hermès in VIP rooms. It has such topdrawer services as the Meet & Greet, in which an airport agent collects you upon arrival and ushers you through the long, confusing customs lineups.

According to the gold-standard Forbes Travel Guide, Mandarin Oriental Hotels operate the finest spas in many world capitals, including Hong Kong, where the spa is an exotic sanctuary with the sultry look of a 1930s Shanghai salon. More comprehensive than most hotel spas, the Mandarin's is a twostorey wellness centre with yoga and Pilates classes and private consultations with holistic experts.

The Imperial Jade Ritual is one of the Mandarin's most indulgent, relaxing treatments. This two-hour session blends Chinese massage, a scrub with ground rice and sesame, a body mask of green tea and algae and a ginseng facial. Especially for men, the Mandarin Barber has the air of a vintage gentleman's club and offers massages, facials, waxing and the signature Shanghai Pedicure, in which a barber shaves and kneads your feet until they are silky smooth.

If the Ritz-Carlton and the Mandarin Oriental are too rich for your blood, you can score an excellent location and an attractive contemporary room at a fraction of the price at The Salisbury, a very cool YMCA-affiliated hotel. Adjacent to the iconic Peninsula Hotel near Kowloon Harbour, The Salisbury has a sweeping stylish lobby, a gift shop, a concierge and smart looking modern rooms, as well as good cuisine in the dining room and the cafeteria. It's not quite The Ritz, but the suites have king-sized beds and separate living rooms for up to four people. If you are a hotel guest, it's free to use the swimming pool, sauna and hot tub, so you can experience the all-important water-therapy part of

a spa day, but perhaps without rose petals or a pool attendant.

Even without a formal spa in your hotel, you can create your own wellness journey while experiencing the endlessly fascinating streets and historic sights of Hong Kong. A great way to start the day are the free Tai Chi classes that take place at strategic points. Compared to a bouncy aerobics class, this beginners' martial art is graceful. It's the physical side of Taoism and Confucianism with movements like "pushing clouds." It looks easy, but Tai Chi is a gently intense path to good breathing, balance, flexibility, core strength and stress management.

To step up the cardio quotient, consider climbing Victoria Peak, one of the city's most enduring symbols. Sure, you can take a cable-car, but there is a network of moderate four-kilometre hikes to the summit shaded by trees.

It's time to take care of those tired tootsies. Reflexology is the specialty at Happy Foot, a mostly locals' massage centre with four locations. After welcoming you with Chinese tea and a hotfoot bath, a therapist will knead your soles and toes using techniques that date to the Han Dynasty in 150 BC. The idea is to send "reflex" messages along the body's energy points which relieve tight tendons and ailments ranging from headaches to constipation.

After a long flight, sightseeing and exercising, your aching back might need the experts at the United Acupressure & Massage Centre of the Blind, near Kowloon's famous Ladies' Market. Seasoned masseurs, all sightless, work in simple surroundings and charge unbeatable low prices. Invoking the ancient art of acupressure, the masseurs use fingers, fists and elbows to release tension, increase circulation and reduce muscle pain. There is a beauty bonus: The Chinese always have used acupressure to relax facial muscles and ease wrinkles.

While Westerners turn to vitamins and pharmaceuticals, Chinese medicine uses exotic ingredients to cure almost anything, from low libido to high-blood pressure. After a consultation, half in English, half using gestures, at the Good Spring Medicine Shop, you'll be sipping potions brewed from powdered leeches (to stimulate circulation), moths (for a sexual boost), scorpions (to eliminate blood toxins) or rose petals (to burn fat).

Your last wellness stop in Hong Kong should be a workshop by feng shui master Alex Yu. Part fortuneteller, part faith healer, and a regular on CNN, Yu works to improve our lives invoking the ancient Taoist practice of positioning objects advantageously. He offers lots of take-home advice and cosmic charts so you can strive for the goal of harmony in your energy forces.

In Hong Kong, it always comes back to yin and yang.

IF YOU GO

Via Air Canada, (888-247-2262, aircanada.com) Fly to Hong Kong by connecting to Toronto or Vancouver.

Both Air Canada and Cathay Pacific (800-268-6868, cathaypacific.com) fly daily, non-stop to Hong

Kong from Toronto (starting at \$1,005) and from Vancouver (starting at \$805).

Hong Kong Tourism Board, Canada: 800-563-4582, discoverhongkong.com/canada.

Lodging:

Lodging prices fluctuate. Many hotels add a 10-percent service charge.

Mandarin Oriental Hong Kong: 852-2825-0111, mandarinoriental.com/hongkong; 5 Connaught Rd., Central, Hong Kong. Rooms start at approximately \$575 per night. The Mandarin Spa has a tea lounge, a boutique, Kneipp hot and cold pools, steam and sauna.

The Ritz-Carlton, Hong Kong: 852-2263-2263, ritzcarlton.com/hongkong; International Commerce Centre, 1 Austin Road West, Kowloon, Hong Kong; Rooms start at approximately \$785 per night. The Ritz-Carlton Spa by ESPA has saunas, an aroma steam room, jet showers and a boutique.

The Salisbury, YMCA, 852-2268-7000, ymcakhk.org; 41 Salisbury Rd., Kowloon, Hong Kong. Single rooms, approx. \$120; doubles, \$130-170; suites, \$220-270, including use of indoor swimming pools, sauna and hot tub.

Wellness:

Traditional Hong Kong wellness visits can be set up through a hotel concierge or the HKTB, tel: 852-2508-1234.

Good Spring Medicine Shop: 852-2544-3518, 8 Cochrane St., Central; consultation costs about \$5 Can., plus remedies.

Ser Wong Fan (snake soup): 852-2543-1032, 30 Cochrane St., Central; snake soup costs about \$9 Can.

Feng Shui Master: Alex Yu Geomancy & Physiognomy: 852-2398-9788, 852-9197-6688, alexuyfengshui.com; 14-F, 39-41 Argyle St., Kowloon; workshops are free.

United Acupressure & Massage Centre of the Blind: 852-2783-7065; <http://blindmassagehk.com>; 518 Nathan Rd., 11-F, Kowloon; a 60-minute massage costs about \$26 Can.

Happy Foot Reflexology Spa: 852-2521-0066, www.happyfoot.hk; 11/F, No. 1 Lyndhurst Terrace, Central; 50-minute reflexology costs \$28 Can.; locations also in Lan Kwai Fong, Wellington Street, and Wanchai.

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