

SPOTLIGHT ON SPAS

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THE RITZ-CARLTON HOTEL COMPANY



HONG KONG TOURISM BOARD



MANDARIN ORIENTAL HOTEL GROUP

HONG KONG offers an array of spa and wellness options, old and new, that offer sanctuary from the city's relentless pace

ROCHELLE LASH
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

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.

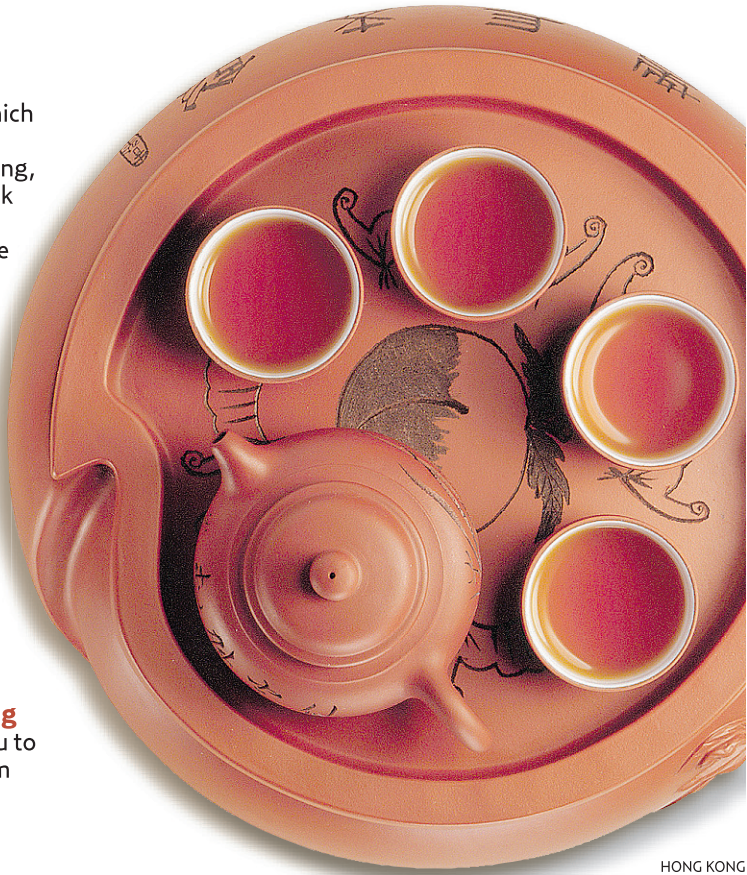
Hong Kong welcomes as many as 36 million visitors a year, about 400,000 of them Canadians, travelling for international finance, mining, shipping, manufacturing and leisure. Given the frenzied pace, intense business style and copious meals, you will deserve a spa break.

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Tai Chi classes, which take place for free throughout Hong Kong, offer a chance to work on your balance, breathing and muscle strength.

An indulgent bath at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel in Hong Kong, where the spa is rated one of the best in the world.

Chinese tea tasting ceremonies allow you to taste everything from oolong to white tea. Each has different restorative qualities.



HONG KONG
TOURISM BOARD

Taking the waters in Tuscany a thermal treat

THERESA STORM
and SAN QUIRICO D'ORCIA
POSTMEDIA NEWS

We would fly back to Italy just to return to Adler Thermae Spa Resort near the medieval hamlet of Bagno Vignoni, in the heart of Tuscany.

The proven healing properties of Bagno Vignoni's thermal waters have long drawn travellers: the Etruscans, medieval pilgrims travelling the Via Francigena, aristocratic Romans, and now international health and rejuvenation seekers.

It is a spa resort like no other; at least none I have discovered on worldwide travels. Nestled in the green, tranquil Italian countryside, Adler Thermae is a haven of relaxation, which my mother and I craved after touring Italy's bustling cities and overindulging our tastebuds.

As expected, it was ideal for a health and wellness fix. Unexpected was Adler's luxury and stellar service, the range of facilities, services and programs, sightseeing excursions and gourmet Mediterranean cuisine.

Best of all, Adler Thermae is nearly all-inclusive, the exceptions being spa treatments and personal training, some tours (nominal charge), lunch (with buffet breakfast and afternoon tea, our bellies said no) and beverages.

In short, it is heaven. We began our quest to de-stress with a long soak in the sprawling, steaming, mineral-rich, outdoor/indoor 36-degree pool, open year round.

Located in a park-like courtyard between the hotel's two-storey guest room wings



THERESA STORM

The thermal waters of Adler Aquae are the centrepiece of the Adler Thermae Spa Resort in Tuscany, while an adjacent infinity lap pool appeals to swimmers.

and main building housing the spa, reception, bar and terrace and dining room, Adler Aquae is the resort's centrepiece.

The thermal pool, with waterfalls and bubbling massage beds and corrals, is flanked by a 25-metre fresh-water infinity lap pool, a circular wild river channel and a children's thermal pool. An underground Dead Sea salt grotto is booked privately (nominal fee).

Plenty of sun loungers dot the grounds.

Happily ensconced in loungers outside the terrace of our ground-floor superior double room, we

gazed at the golden Val d'Orcia stretching over the undulating conical hills and the iconic row of tall, slim cypress trees dissecting the horizon. This entire agricultural valley is a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site, as is the nearby historic town of Pienza.

Afternoon tea called for Adler's white robe and slippers, the acceptable all-day dress code. Bar manager Marco served the perfect cup of tea, having just returned from earning his tea master certification in Sri Lanka.

As Day 1 melted into Day 2, Adler's near-inclusive setup invited indulgence. Why not

partake in all the things to do and sample all the facilities?

A circuit of the sauna park tested our heat tolerance: a steam sauna with Tuscan herbs, an Etruscan sauna with salt steam, an olive wood Finnish sauna on a lake island, and our favourite, the Philosopher's Cave Turkish steam bath in a grotto dripping with stalactites and stalagmites, reached by a boardwalk crossing the lake.

Afterward, we took to the loungers and waterbeds of the two-floor, glassed-in relaxation area overlooking the lake.

Of course, trying Adler

Spa's exclusive treatments with Tuscan ingredients, such as the grape facial, is a must.

And, with so much included, it was easy to justify spoiling ourselves with lovely treatments and a bottle of Italy's finest at dinner.

Getting dolled up for evening dining – four or five “light” courses of Tuscan specialties – was a highlight. The first night we were shown to our table in the enchanted, elegant Starlight Roof Restaurant, thus named because the roof retracts for warm-weather dining.

Saddled with a wine list rivaling an ancient tome,

I asked for help. From then on, we enjoyed the charming attention of tuxedoed maitre d' Manfredo Venditti and the ministrations of the all-male waiters, impeccable in starched black and white. And, yes, we enjoyed a little flirting, too.

For four days, we luxuriated in this Italian utopia.

No wonder Adler Thermae was awarded the world's best relaxation and spa hotel in the 2011 TripAdvisor Travelers' Choice awards.

We never wanted to leave. We can hardly wait to return.

For more information, see adler-thermae.com.

HONG KONG A gamut of spas, from exotic sanctuaries to do-it-yourself

CONTINUED FROM G1

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 Michelin-starred restaurant, skyline views and special touches like toiletries by Hermès in VIP rooms. It has such top-drawer services as the Meet & Greet, in which an airport agent collects you upon arrival and ushers you through



THE RITZ-CARLTON HOTEL COMPANY

The Jade Stone Treatment is a signature treatment of the high-altitude spa at the Ritz-Carlton, Hong Kong.



HONG KONG TOURISM BOARD

Chinese tea-tasting ceremonies allow you to try everything from oolong to white tea, each with restorative qualities.

IF YOU GO

Via Air Canada, (888-247-2262, aircanada.com) round-trip fare from Montreal to Hong Kong starts at \$1,055, plus taxes, with connections in 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-per-cent 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, ymcahk.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](http://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.

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 two-storey 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 hot-foot 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.