

Do's and don'ts:

Spa breaks

You're in safe hands: follow expert **Alicia Miller's** guide to getting the best treatment

DO consider your spa style

Keep in mind that 'spa' doesn't mean the same thing everywhere in the world. Traditional hammams in Turkey or Morocco will leave you with newborn-fresh skin, but the vigorous scrubbing process and suffocatingly hot steam rooms aren't always relaxing. It's similar with massages in Thailand or Japan: rather than be gently rubbed with warm oil, you'll dress in a pyjama-like ensemble and have a therapist contort your body into novel positions that can leave muscles sore for days. If what you're picturing is scented saunas and soothing facials, you'll probably be best off at a hotel spa, or day spas in the UK, US or Europe.

DON'T forget to research

The best spas will tailor treatments to your needs. So, before you book, ask questions: if you're having a massage, is there a 'routine' that therapists have to follow, or can they spend the whole precious hour working on a specific area (at your request)? Do facials include extractions (eg, removing blackheads)? Ask if you can book the most senior therapist (they'll have the experience to tailor things) and confirm whether the treatment time includes preamble and getting changed. Often hour-long appointments end up being just 50-minutes long once these are factored in.

DO be frank

Therapists aren't mind-readers: what they call 'medium pressure' you may call agony. So, don't be shy: if the touch isn't right, or you're too hot or cold, just pipe up. Before your treatment starts, let your therapist know you won't be buying any products, so they don't shave off minutes at the end with a commission-boosting sales pitch. If there's a lull in your treatment — say,

while a face mask sinks in — ask for a quick head massage, rather than letting therapists duck out for a break. After all, you're paying for their time.

DON'T go in the afternoon

Hotel spas are usually busiest in the late afternoons and early evenings, after guests have just checked in or returned from a day out — and that mass rush for the hot tub can utterly ruin your zen. So if you want the place to yourself, arrive early morning, making the most of the gym, pool and thermal suites before a treatment around 10am (the time when many hotels have kid-friendly 'splash hours' kicking off). On departure day,

top tips

If you want to tip (and you should, if you enjoyed your treatment), aim for 10%-20% of your treatment price. Pay in cash straightaway (carry currency in your robe), as gratuities added to the final bill don't always go directly to staff.

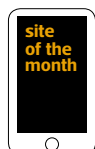
use the facilities to extend your stay — even if you've checked out and are technically no longer a hotel guest, few spas will boot you out.

DO mind the culture gap

In the UK, spa-goers, especially women, are usually assigned therapists of the same sex, but in other countries that's not always so. Request in advance if you have a preference — occasionally, therapists might stay in the room as you change. In Germany and Scandinavia, saunas are taken in the nude and are often unisex. In contrast, the genders are nearly always strictly separated at *onsens* in Japan.



ILLUSTRATION: GETTY



THE GOOD SPA GUIDE

goodspaguide.co.uk

Don't speak spa jargon? This website's handy glossary of terms does the demystifying, explaining unusual terms, ranging

from cupping (an ancient Chinese therapy) to fango therapy (mud-bathing).

Hate spa music? It often serves a purpose, drowning out unrelaxing exterior noise that would otherwise flood your treatment room. Instead of choosing silence, ask to plug in your own tunes, or play a podcast through your phone.