

He Said, She Said



The Future is Spa

Interviews by Peter Myers Photography by Fee Lee

Resort, day, destination and medical spas have proved not to be five-minute wonders, but how can spas evolve from here? **lifestyle + travel** asks the experts – the top execs at Six Senses Resorts & Spas – and Dr. Richard Visser, of the Visser Wellness and Research Center, Aruba.

Group-Think: Adding Senses

For over a decade, spas have reasserted their influence over parts of our planet. Their aquatic, pampering and calming vibe whispers to us from tranquil places; sometimes even in the middle of large cities. Sold as a remedy to life under advanced capitalism, unfortunately you have to be doing rather well financially to enjoy most spas, especially in the West.

Social bathing was an important cultural process practiced by Mesopotamians, Egyptians, Minoans, Greeks (who introduced hot water tubs and hot-air baths) and Romans – whenever they sought health and relief from their pain and diseases. The Romans perfected the Roman *balneum* and eventually

The Six Senses team, from left: Sonu Shivdasani (Chairman & Founder), Sughra Vibi, Pornthip Serisuthikulchai, Bernhard Bohnenberger (Managing Director), Deepak Mathur, Andrew Gibson, Pamela L. Balce, Anna Keen and Dan Reid (MD - Americas).

the extravagant *thermae* to luxuriate through lazy Sunday afternoons, after an over-exciting morning watching Christians being thrown to the lions. In the Islamic world, the spa was adapted into the *hammam*. As is often the case, all around the world, bathing rituals developed in the same general course, from the Middle East to Lapland, from the British Isles to Russia.

Nowadays, the spa industry has the luxury of studying the spa retrospective and creating effective fusions of different cultural traditions. Modern spas are well-established worldwide as places of regeneration and rest with a holistic approach to mind, body and soul harmony. Trends come and go, of course, but the spa-goer is becoming ever more sophisticated; people are now demanding more than the simple ‘Garden Spa’ concept, where one is given a nice kneading in manicured surroundings; followed, if you’re lucky, by a gooey-paste body scrub.

But how does the spa industry set the trends? Resort and Spa management company Six Senses Group Operations Director Anna Keen: “We glean what people are wanting from spas and go with it, yes; but we don’t just follow the herd. We try to set the trends. Unfortunately, it can take up to a year to introduce a new signature treatment as such a lot of thought goes into it.”



Yoga on the beach at Six Senses' Soneva Fushi Resort & Spa, The Maldives

The group's core treatment is the 'Six Senses Sensory Journey,' in which two therapists conduct a non-synchronised massage - surprisingly effective, because in a synchronised treatment, one tends to lie there wondering when one therapist will slip up. When it is unpredictable, one can relax and switch-off through the 90-minute treatment. Why only 90 minutes? According to Anna, many find the three-hour therapies a bit too long to lay on their backs.

These core spa treatments are still very much in vogue, but people are now more used to spas, and demand treatments that work; educational treatments, other disciplines like Reiki and polarity alignment. As Anna's boss, Six Senses Spas Managing Director Andrew Gibson explains, "People want to combine their annual holiday with a life-impacting experience, a 'vacation of the mind.' They realise the importance of their health and wellbeing. To deal with demand, travel agents have to produce spa brochures, and tour operators are offering a slew of spa tour packages."

It is Andrew who is in charge of deciding the way the wind is blowing, trend-wise: "There's a definite trend towards the 'holistic' spa resort environments that we are creating, with specialists brought in from time to time and readily available spa cuisine. But people don't want to spend their holiday in a boot camp, so we try and avoid implementing any kind of 'regime,' even in the special meditation/yoga/colour therapy/pilates retreats we run from time to time. While introducing as

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many new ideas as possible, we verge somewhere towards being a medical spa at one end of the spa spectrum; and share a few treatments with a beauty parlour, at the other end - with a whole lot in-between. The aim, of course, is always to be a destination in ourselves. People choose the spa and the destination follows."

This is not to say that the destination is insignificant. Andrew explains that, "one way we can create uniqueness is by fitting in with local communities, and using local influences on design, building materials, products and staffing. Like languages, traditional treatments are being lost all over the world, and our task is to try and capture these and allow them to endure. For example, sugar cane is famous in Mauritius and has been used there since time immemorial in a medicinal capacity. We are developing treatments using these products, and resurrecting the heritage."

A visit to Six Senses' headquarters in Bangkok shows that the team practices what they preach: an oxygen/power-snooze room rejuvenates staff; salt lamps emit negative ions to reduce the harmful positive ions in air and dust; abundant plants help to reduce chemicals and carcinogens in the atmosphere and by-product from cleaning products; and crystals are given to execs who travel by plane frequently.

Modern Medicine Man

Hailed as one of today's most progressive experts in the field of holistic medicine, Dr. Richard Visser devotes his life to the exploration and dissemination of integrated mind-body medicine. A modern medicine man, he is on a continuous quest to revolutionise the way people think about health and healing. He is also the host of the *Wild Medicine* television series, in which he investigates today's most innovative and exciting healers and healing methods - some cutting-edge, utilising state-of-the-art technology and bio-medicine - and others ancient and primordial in nature.

Richard Visser's mission is to 'explore, impart, and apply the latest innovations and developments in restorative medicine.' He has his own healing practice at the **Visser Wellness and Research Clinic** in the southern Caribbean island of Aruba which conducts integrative medicine, combining all forms of healing; including *feng shui*, reiki, yoga, past life regression, osteopathy, Oriental medicine, nutrition, general medicine, psychology and Thai massage.

In which direction does Dr Visser see the spas of the future heading? "People are demanding results: they want to feel - but also look - better. This is why wellness, alternative medicine and current spas will start merging to some extent, with anti-aging medicine and 'light plastic' approaches [Botox, collagen, laser hair, laser facials]. In regular plastic surgery, dermatology and anti-aging clinics, patients are not able to get the attention, the pampering and the basic rest they need after their procedures. In

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contrast, spa resorts take people out of their environment, and give them the rest and attention they need. However, since this group of spa goers are getting more sophisticated, they want to combine the two. Also, both groups are becoming very similar in spending patterns and health conscious living.”

But will the more ‘esoteric treatments’ put off less alternative clients? Probably, admits Dr Visser, but argues that the esoteric movement does have a following: “I think past life regression etc will be introduced as special events; debuting in spas as samplings; down the line, they will become a stronger influence.”

What about invasive treatments like colon cleansing, a vital part in wellness medicine both in Indian and Chinese traditions? “Colon cleansing is a key factor in starting a wellness regime, in a nutritional approach. It improves digestion, metabolism, blood cleansing - it is also anti-carcinogenic. I strongly believe that this has to be, in a direct or indirect form, part of the ‘new’ spas.

Dr Visser’s **Wild Medicine Wellness & Anti-Aging Spa** is being developed within ‘beyond-stars boutique hotel and museum complex’ Kura Hulanda in Curaçao. Here, one will be able to experience holistic medicine, nutritional therapy, physical fitness & yoga, anti-Aging medicine, lifestyle programs, weight management, and natural detox. Completion is set for late 2005.

But how ‘medical’ can a spa get before it loses its current pampering-centric connotations? One of Dr Visser’s current projects is a study on primary school kids and obesity which he is presenting as his PhD thesis in Public Health at the University of Medicine, Havana, Cuba. Can a medical issue such as this be treated as part of a holistic spa vacation? “We are dealing with a pandemic here, and I do feel that parents going for spa treatments will want to start dealing their kid’s obesity as it will affect most of them!

“I will incorporate this into my spa, and it will be addressed as a whole package - complete with the fitness, the diet, the ingestibles and the psychology to make these kids health-conscious. Why can’t we create a family health vacation?”



Six Senses Spas
www.sixsenses.com

New Six Senses Spas will open at the Imperial New Delhi, Hotel Arts Barcelona, Penha Longa Hotel & Golf Resort, Portugal, Porto Elounda, Crete, and Mount Juliet, Ireland are set to open between December 2004 and May 2005. The latter is set in a 15th-century monastery surrounded by greenhouses which are being adapted into treatment rooms.

Visser Wellness and Research clinic, Aruba
www.wildmedicine.com

Kura Hulanda, Curaçao
reservations@kurahulanda.com, www.kurahulanda.com



Top: Dr. Richard Visser
Bottom: Kura Hulanda Resort, Curaçao