

Modern Spas Embracing Ancient Times

Spas can be seen everywhere. They come in many different shapes and sizes and range from day spas, destination spas to medi-spas. Although they may seem to have sprung overnight this is certainly not the case. History would tell us that the origins of spas can be traced to early civilizations.



Ancient History

Etymologically, spa is traced from the Latin verb 'spagere' meaning to pour forth. Another accepted credence is that the word spa is derived from the Wallon word 'espa' which means fountain. However, it is also commonly claimed that the word is an acronym of various Latin phrases such as "Salus Per Aquam" or "Sanitas Per Aquam" meaning health through water.

Popular belief has it that the origin of spa dates back to the Roman era where it was believed that hot, natural spring waters were considered the best cure for wounds and tired muscles. Bathing became a far more complex ritual than a simple immersion or sweating procedure. For instance, the bathing ritual would comprise of undressing, bathing, sweating, receiving a massage and resting. Roman soldiers would then rejuvenate, relax and treat their sore wounds in water. The bathhouses then became a place for recuperation of injured soldiers as well as recreation centers. The Romans elevated bathing to a fine art and the bathhouses built during those times were reflective of this social phenomenon. In fact, Romans are attributed to building the most architecturally and technically advanced spa bathing houses throughout their empire.

Others believe that the origin of the word 'spa' comes from the Belgian town called Spa which rose to fame in the 14th century since a thermal spring having curative properties was discovered there. It is speculated that the town was so prominent that the very word spa became synonymous in the English language with a place to be pampered and restored.

Ancient Egypt was also believed to be the birthplace of the first spa providing the first documentation that a bath culture existed with the first hot tub being chiseled out of solid granite for King Pharaohs about 600 BC.

Healing Water

There is a myriad of answers to the origin of spas but they are all intertwined under the same theory, that is, bathing and healing through water. Spas may have evolved through the ages but it stuck to its core of cleansing, heating, treatment and rest. Today's rituals are still very much reflective to the rituals of those observed by the Romans.



The meaning of spa has constantly evolved through the ages to accommodate several types of treatment no longer limited to bathing rituals. Spas, however, continued to retain water therapy as their nucleus akin to their older counterparts. Apart from additions to treatments, new mechanical inventions (such as hydrotherapy tubs, vichy showers, swiss showers, etc.) have been developed to improve the spa experience. Spas, as they are known to us today, continue to be centers for healing and nourishing the mind body and spirit.

Today's spas are an interesting combination of ancient traditions and modern mechanical wonders. However, the heart of the modern spa, just as the ancient spa, is water and the rituals that evolve around it. The modern-day spas of today embrace and celebrate their origin albeit constantly looking for new ways to express it with spas offering wide variety of techniques, from traditional to modern, to meet the diverse need of the clients.

Spas may have started as a retreat only for the affluent but with today's health conscious populace, awareness of the health benefits of spas has reached mainstream masses. Spas now appeal to and are accessible to those who seek alternative ways to relieve stress and improve appearance.

With the paradigm shift towards 'holistic' wellness, spas have emerged as a more cost-effective and less time-consuming alternative to vacations. In recent years, the value of healthy lifestyle and relaxation has found its place in modern society and spas became the place to address these needs. The wealthy no longer have the exclusive access to spas. Increasingly those with disposable incomes are turning to spas to take care of their health. This results in a dramatic rise in the number of spas in Asia, the spa industry gaining economic and commercial presence.



In Singapore, spas initially struggled against the tide of public opinion during its early years. Spas, which are mainly stand alone spas and hotel spas, sought to be differentiated from other business activities constantly suspected of engaging in vice activities and be recognized as a legitimate and important business. Through the joint efforts of the Singapore Tourism Board and Spa Association Singapore (“SAS”), spas soon became a Singapore attraction ripe for development.

The Case of Singapore

The Massage Establishment Act was enacted as early as 1959 in Singapore to provide for the licensing and control of massage establishments. Save for a few exceptions, no person shall carry on an establishment for massage without a license issued by the Police Licensing Division, authorizing him to do so. It is known that many establishments provide cover for undesirable activities. Hence, there is a need to control these massage establishments and the persons offering the service. Unlike its other Asian neighbors, the Police Licensing Division in Singapore also requires certification of therapists before issuance of the Massage Establishment License. This is a testament that Singapore continues to advocate the paramount importance of having skilled personnel. Massage therapists in Singapore are required to undergo National and International training and certification such as Workforce Skills Qualifications – Certificate in Spa Services under Singapore Workforce Development Agency (WDA) or CIDESCO International diploma. They are encouraged to regularly upgrade themselves to ensure a systematic career path for their future.

SAS also pioneered the Accreditation Programme in Singapore to aid in developing and maintaining the standards in the spa sector which eventually promoted self-regulation and maintenance of high standards in the industry. SAS members have to undergo Accreditation Assessment before being admitted as members and thereafter once in every two years.

Dubbed as the spa hub of Southeast Asia, Singapore continues to promote to the general public awareness about spas and its wellness and health benefits. Through the government’s expanded effort and that of SAS, the spa industry in Singapore is determined to deliver its aim to become a spa destination on a global scale. This is made possible with the continued cooperation of SAS with the WDA for manpower and skills development, SPRING Singapore for economic growth and productivity for members, Police Licensing Division for licensing regulations, IE Singapore for international expansion for members and the Singapore Tourism Board for the further promotion of Singapore as the spa hub of Southeast Asia.

By Spa Association Singapore

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