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Can Spa Resorts Still Be Relaxing During Covid?

Destination spas are positioning themselves as refuges during the pandemic—moving treatments outside and getting creative with their stress-busting cures. ‘Eye hug,’ anyone?



PEACE OFFERING The entrance to Mii amo resort in Sedona, Ariz.

By Debra Kamin

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NEVER MIND the Sweet Slumber massage or the Spiritual Warrior facial. The greatest relaxation Sarah Evans experienced during her October getaway to Miraval Berkshires spa in Lenox, Mass., involved hands-off treatments. These included opportunities to hurl hatchets at tree trunk targets or to enjoy a shamanic sound healing, where Ms. Evans, a New York City publicist and mother of three young children, lay on a yoga mat bathed in the vibrations of crystal singing bowls. Hands-on cures—the antithesis to social-distancing—may have lost their appeal during the pandemic but spas still tout their stress-busting activities, and some weary quarantiners are heeding their call.

Lynne McNees, president of the International Spa Association (ISPA), a trade group, said that it's too early to gauge Covid-19's impact on the \$19-billion spa industry. But, she added, since most large destination spas reopened in June, demand has

been steady, with individual visits rising even as groups like bridal parties have stayed away. Ms. Evans has already booked another spa break for this month, this time in the Hamptons. “It would be incredible to go sit on a beach somewhere, but I want to take care of myself,” she said. “Everything feels more intense right now.”

The outdoor offerings at the Lodge at Woodloch include a vibrational therapy session called Gong with the Wind.

The isolation brought on by the coronavirus has created a secondary crisis. Reported symptoms of anxiety, depression and other disorders have more than tripled since 2019, according to a September study by the American Medical Association. With their ample open spaces, destination spas say they can help. Their activity calendars were packed with rituals focused on stress relief and spiritual well-being long before the term “coronavirus” entered our lexicons, and they’re now positioning themselves as points of refuge in the pandemic.



A pandemic-friendly outdoor massage area at Golden Door.

PHOTO: ASHLEY BURNS

That spin has merit, said Dr. Stephanie Silvera, an epidemiologist and professor at Montclair State University, in New Jersey. Spa-based activities like rock-climbing and hiking boost health in multiple ways. “We know that stress has an impact on the immune system, and cardiovascular activities help calm you,” said Ms. Silvera. “So if you can do them outside, with spacing, there’s a lot of value and benefit.”

No evidence suggests that Covid-19 can spread in chlorinated pools. Saunas are a fairly safe bet, too, if heated to at least 158 degrees Fahrenheit, said Dr. Silvera. The virus cannot survive those temperatures. But Dr. Silvera cautioned that no magic scenario, whether outdoors or not, can entirely erase the risk of Covid-19. Masks, social distancing and strict sanitation remain important measures. “Imagine that each preventive behavior is a layer of Swiss cheese that has some holes, and when you layer them, those holes go away,” she said.

In response to Covid-19, most U.S. spas have bolstered cleaning protocols, instituted mask-wearing and implemented social-distancing guidelines during classes. But many have also gotten creative.

At Mii amo, a destination spa tucked into 70 acres of Arizona red rocks at the larger Enchantment Resort in Sedona, general manager Jim Root has instructed his staff to greet guests with what he calls an “eye hug”—a longer, more personal gaze—since physical touch is limited. And at the spa’s Crystal Grotto, the round clay belly of the resort’s canyon, meditations and shaman-guided rituals are limited to five or six participants. The schedule of outdoor activities like canyon bathing and labyrinth walks has been expanded.



Lakeside at the Lodge at Woodloch in Hawley, Penn.

PHOTO: ANNIE KILLAM

increased demand for the resorts' outdoor adventure programming, which includes options like geocaching, aerial adventure ziplines and photography hikes.

Golden Door, the luxury destination spa in northern San Diego County, shut down from March until September. Kathy Van Ness, the general manager said she used the time to build the Starlight Massage World—a series of open-air treatment cabanas fitted with twinkling lights. “We have 600 acres, and we built outdoor arenas that we’ll use beyond Covid,” she said. The resort is now closed again due to California’s new Stay at Home order. When it reopens, Ms. Van Ness said, most treatments and classes will be offered outside.

Canyon Ranch has resorts in Tucson, Ariz., and Lenox, Mass., both of which are seeing an uptick in first-time guests this year. One consequence: The staff must respond to an

Smaller resorts that don't have swaths of open space to work with have had to shuffle in a different way. Estancia La Jolla, a 210-room hotel and spa on 10 acres in La Jolla, Calif., moved all fitness classes outside and offered spa treatments in tents along the resort's shady courtyards.

At the Lodge at Woodloch, which sits on 1,200 acres in Hawley, Penn., tents for fitness classes were put outside and outdoor offerings expanded, including forest bathing, birding, "nature" yoga and a vibrational therapy session called Gong With the Wind. Outdoor farm dinners were also offered a few times a week (they are now paused for the winter). And new activities were added, including hatchet throwing. "Everyone needs to throw a hatchet now and again," said TJ Walsh, the resort's Covid-19 Taskforce leader.