

The Zen of Spa Gazing

The Covid-weary could opt for a spa break and revel in some coddling, kneading and healing in stunning landscapes

Gustasp and Jerroo Irani



La Sources de Caudalie in France

Cleopatra, the gorgeous queen of ancient Egypt, bathed in asses' milk to maintain her smooth, supple skin. The milk of 700 asses was drizzled on her daily to impart that youthful glow. Today, milk baths, and a luxuriant soak in thermal waters figure on the menus of some of the best spas in the world and help us to connect with the ancient wisdom of wellness of different cultures.

Our sensual journey of wellness began at Les Sources de Caudalie, an enchanting resort-cum-wine spa, a 20-minute drive from the alluring French town of Bordeaux. Subsequently, we experienced profound therapeutic pauses at the Roman baths in the city of Bath, UK, a mountain spa resort in Leukerbad, Switzerland, a rubdown by the Zambezi river in Zambia, our spa trek ending in a Japanese ryokan, or traditional inn.

It was love at first sight at Les Sources de Caudalie. The view of a sun-warmed chateaux and half-timbered buildings rising in the midst of green vineyards. During our stay, we walked and cycled in the vineyard, sipped heady estate wines, and savoured haute cuisine at the resort's two Michelin star restaurant. However, at Caudalie, which has the first trademarked vinotherapy spa in the world, the grape is the diva. Warm spring water is melded with vine and grape extracts, and the Caudalie range of cosmetics is enhanced with grape extracts as well.

The treatments at Caudalie, one of the most luxurious spas in the world, gift-wrap the heady promise of anti-aging with exotica such as the wine maker's massage; honey wine wrap; Merlot friction scrub; the half-day Body of your Dreams Ritual; the Love Ritual for Two, etc. These may seem to have emerged from the owners' wine-soaked dreams but are in fact based on recent studies that suggest that wine not only tastes good but is good for you in other ways as well.



The Roman bathing ritual at Walliser Alpen Therme in Switzerland. We experienced the sublime again in Leukerbad, Switzerland, a three-hour-20-minute journey by a comfortable Swiss train from Geneva or Zurich. This village is snuggled in a valley and is the largest and highest thermal water spa resort in the Alps, with a choice of spas, ranging from the spiffy to the family-friendly.

At Walliser Alpen Therme and Spa, the pursuit of wellness has creative twists. In the mood for a champagne breakfast in a thermal pool? Perhaps you would like to bathe and dine like a Roman senator? Or how about lolling in the thermal baths on a moonlit night, surrounded by snow-dusted peaks, the water aglitter in the moonlight? Or perhaps an aqua floating session by candlelight, led by a pool guide?

At the Walliser Alpen Therme and Spa, we floated for a while in the outdoor pool, and felt the snow-whipped mountains were closing in on us. Suddenly, snowflakes started to pelt us like confetti. That transient moment of beauty coupled with a deep sense of well-being is branded forever in our collective memory.

away frenetically to capture everything, including the Roman baths where toga-clad Romans had built a spa and a temple to their Goddess Minerva. Later, we sank our aching limbs into warm hissing waters at the modern Thermae Bath Spa (psst! one of the best spas in the world), which harnesses the same waters so loved by the Romans. For us, the indisputable high point was the rooftop pool with its all-embracing view of a spectacular city.



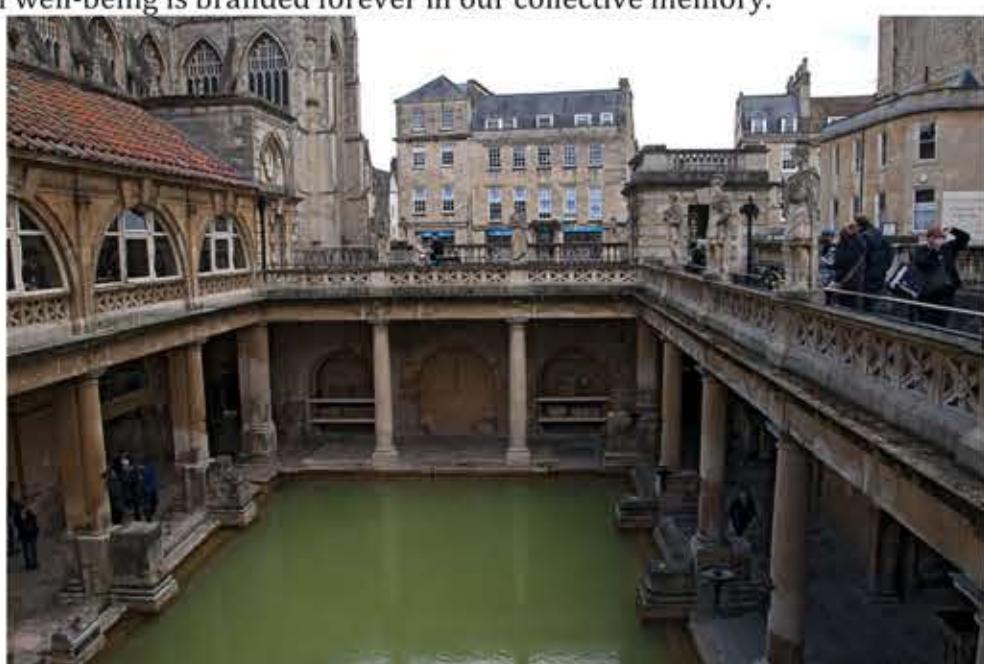
The Royal Livingstone spa in Zambia

One of our most dramatic spa experiences happened at The Royal Livingstone, Victoria Falls, Zambia. There, the occasional giraffe or zebra makes a guest appearance on the lawns of the safari-style resort, located on the Zambian side of the Zambezi river in the Mosi-oa-Tunya National Park.

We reveled in a Zambian massage in a gazebo set up on the banks of the Zambezi river. Warm African oil was drizzled on our bodies and the gentle pressure of the therapist's palms loosened tensed muscles. As the song of nature wafted into the gazebo, our spirits took flight. The grunts of a pod of muscled hippos wallowing in the softly flowing river; the shrill screech of a fish eagle, the happy chortling of the river; the distant roar of the mighty Victoria Falls downstream...



The Beniya Mukayu spa in Japan



The Roman baths in the UK

From natural beauty to the handiwork of man. The historic city of Bath in the UK has been a center of wellness since Roman times and rises like a bewitching honey-gold gem in the Avon Valley. The UNESCO World Heritage Site's Georgian architecture is a must-see stopper, and prompted us to behave like typical tourists on steroids – clicking

The search for inner peace and outward beauty propels many spa addicts. And what better place to find these elusive qualities than in Japan, that land of whispering gentility? In the spa town of Yamashiro, near the historic town of Kanazawa, we stumbled on a minimalist 17-room ryokan, or local inn. Lyrically called Beniya Mukayu or richness in emptiness, the Relais & Chateaux inn unfolded like a Japanese Haiku poem.

Our suite had an outdoor onsen (hot springs) bath – a wood tub on the balcony into which steaming hot water flowed from the Yamashiro hot springs. As a cold wind gusted in from the large picture window and whorls of steam wafted upward, a dreamy languor swept over us. At the understated spa, one of the best spas in the world, we were massaged gently with herbal poultices and then reveled in a foot bath, strewn with curative mountain herbs.

By then, we felt like we had acquired new baby-soft skin. As dusk shrouded the inn, we walked across a leaf-strewn path to a quaint little tea house for a candlelit Japanese tea ceremony.

Indeed, at a wellness retreat, one can tiptoe into a world of beauty, grace and sensual delight.

Text and uncredited photographs by Gustasp and Jerroo Irani.