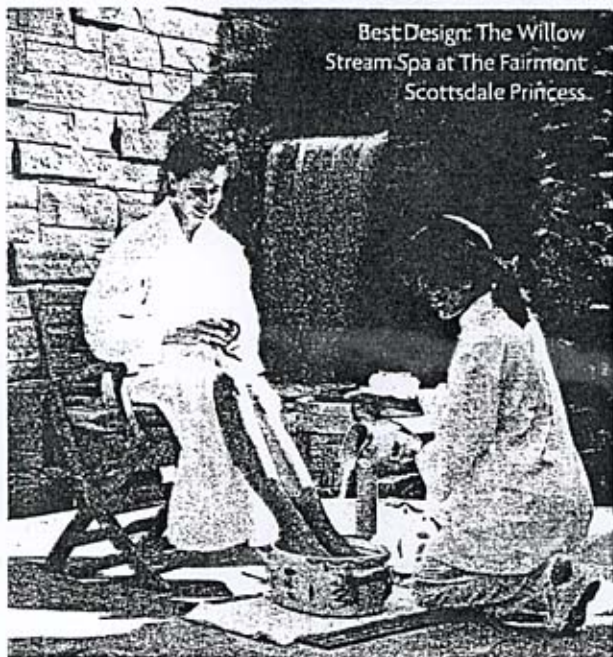


Best of the Best

Over the past year, I've visited many new spas across the country. They all had outstanding facilities and services, but they excelled in different areas. The following reviews, based on my experience, just skim the surface of the burgeoning inventory of fabulous new hotel and resort spas. For more information on new spas, see the "new and notable" section on page 84.



Best Design: The Willow Stream Spa at The Fairmont Scottsdale Princess.

Best yoga: Golden Door Spa at The Boulders, Carefree, Ariz. Yoga classes were among the best I've experienced, with top-notch instructors. The circular studio ringed with mirrors and capped by a ceiling painted with a

Spa Planning 101

How should planners go about finding the right hotel spa? First, make sure it's not a glorified fitness room. "A true spa offers a holistic experience, not just some exercise machines and a pool," says Brian Richardson, vice president of brand marketing for Fairmont Hotels and Resorts, operators of Willow Stream spas.

Nancy Soccorso, spa director at the Sonesta Beach Resort Key Biscayne (Fla.), suggests that planners check out the possibility of offering attendees customized classes in yoga or meditation to add a wellness component to the spa experience.

Pay attention to the details, says Alexandra Tucker, spa sales manager for the Spa Palazzo at the Boca Raton (Fla.)

skyscape mural was both serene and highly functional.

Best scenery: Few views anywhere can top the mesa-like red rock cliffs of Sedona, Ariz. Mii amo, a destination spa at Enchantment Resort is nestled in this dramatic setting. It was designed to bring the outdoors in: Even the treatment rooms have drop-dead views. It's easy to see why this spot is sacred to the Apache Indians.

Best small spa: The Spa at Sonesta Beach Resort Key Biscayne (Fla.). The atmosphere is bright, modern, and tropical, and the quality of the treatments is up there with the big guys.

Best design: Willow Stream at the Fairmont Scottsdale Princess. The elegant three-level space, linked with a waterfall, was inspired by Havasupai Falls in the Grand Canyon and designed to take visitors on a journey through earth, air, fire, water, and wood (representing the strength of the willow tree). Rooms are bathed in a golden light; tactile stone treatments evoke the Arizona landscape. Even the often overlooked locker rooms are gorgeous.

Best spa cuisine: Mii amo. Okay, it's trendy, but the complimentary dish of warm edamame (soy) beans were unbelievably fresh and tasty.

Best spa treatment: A watsu massage at Golden Door Spa at the Boulders. A watsu is similar to shiatsu in the water: you're cradled, stretched, and given pressure-point acupressure in a special warm-water pool. The effect is both relaxing and invigorating.

Best indoor pool: The Spa at Pinehurst, N.C. As a swimmer I appreciated this tranquil indoor pool that's long enough for laps.

Best fitness facility: The Sports Club/LA at the Four Seasons San Francisco. Everything \$50 million can buy, including a 10,000-square-foot weight training gym and a cardiovascular center with 150 pieces of equipment that feature personal TV monitors.

Resort and Club, "The architecture, the cleanliness, the outdoor surroundings, and even soothing sounds like waterfalls in the spa are important factors to consider," she says. Tucker's other tips for planners:

- Look for a large selection of treatment rooms and water elements, with a variety of treatments offered.
- An inhalation room is a nice perk for travel-weary attendees. It's similar to a sauna, but less hot, with herb-suffused air that helps clear up jet lag and reduce tension.
- Make sure all spa personnel, including aestheticians and massage therapists, are well-trained and experienced.
- Book the spa immediately after the hotel contract has been signed, and provide all the details as to what day the spa will be needed, what hours, and how many attendees are to be accommodated.

—Bill Gillette