

open up and say spa

by nirmala nataraj

yogi times talks with susie ellis of spa finder



When most of us think of the typical spa establishment, a flurry of images springs to mind: ladies who lunch, decadent massages, and five-star resorts where you can spend an arm and a leg to feel more relaxed. But according to Susie Ellis, president of Spa Finder, Inc. (the world's most extensive spa marketing/media research company), the spa industry is one that's constantly in flux.

Susie began her career at the world-renowned Golden Door Spa in Escondido, California, then went on to become the first spa director of the Greenhouse Spa at Donald Trump's exclusive Mar-a-Lago Club in Palm Beach, Florida. Today she spends her time handing out valuable spa know-how in her "Ask Susie" column for *Luxury Spa Finder* magazine and in her blog on *SpaFinder.com*. And, of course, given her street cred as a leading authority on everything related to the world of health and beauty, she's at the helm of Spa Finder's goal of providing consumers with a treasure trove of information—

where to find the best establishments, how to get the best deals, and how to stay abreast of the dizzying trends that have spa turbines whirring.

Yogi Times recently had a conversation with Susie to find out what's on the cutting edge of the spa industry in 2008 and beyond.

Yogi Times: What are some of the major changes you've seen in the spa industry over the last two decades or so?

Susie Ellis: I first started in the industry in the 1970s, when the seed of the spa industry was just taking root and there were only a handful of places calling themselves spas. Since then, the idea of health has come a long way. Today we're seeing a lot of spas focus more on total well-being and more of a holistic mind-body-spirit perspective. There's also clearly the addition of the whole medical aspect of a spa treatment, which is a major change that is continuing to take place in the spa industry since spas began as places to get pampered. You're also seeing

treatments that are customized for a more diverse clientele: men, teens, tweens, pregnant women and so on. There are more options today than just the typical destination spa, like a Golden Door or Canyon Ranch. You have resort spas, and you have day spas (which didn't happen until the 1980s). One thing that hasn't really changed is the fact that no matter how conscious people are becoming of the variety of choices, they still primarily go to spas to relax and de-stress.

YT: What are some of the significant spa trends we can expect to see more of in the upcoming year?

SE: Clearly, a major thing we are seeing is the demand for more detox programs. The thing is that the definition of "detox" varies from one establishment to the next. Medical spas are also coming up big. One area is prevention and wellness—people want to go somewhere to improve their immune function or overall health. The other is aesthetic—cosmetic-enhancement therapies are cropping up all over the place.

The insertion of the medical doctor into the spa world is becoming very important. The medical tourism industry is filling some critical gaps in traditional healthcare. Americans who can't afford domestic healthcare are beginning to travel to other countries, like Thailand or India (which have very good medical facilities), where cutting edge procedures are being offered for a fraction of the regular cost.

YT: What's your take on spas that incorporate spirituality and holistic mind-body-spirit treatments into their menus? How popular are these becoming among the general clientele?

SE: Naturally, aside from the cosmetic alternatives, we're going to see a lot of complementary alternatives—things that fall outside traditional medicine. More people are becoming open to trying things like noninvasive Ayurveda, acupuncture, meditation and biofeedback. Attention to the importance of sleep—through sleep yoga, diet and exercise—is also a big trend. And with a lot of resorts and day spas, we are seeing more retreats—whether for a weekend or a week—that focus on education and harmonizing various aspects of one's life.

YT: What about the cultivation of eco-friendly spas? Is that gaining more ground?

SE: Of course. Eco-sustainability is an aspect of the spa world that is getting bigger. People are beginning to talk more about their health and the overall health of the planet, so it's pretty much a given that spas have started becoming mindful of how they can contribute to this. There's a wonderful resort and spa-management company in Asia called Six Senses that is doing a lot of work in this area, with natural mud spas, organic gardens and the like. Then, Rancho la Puerta, which is in Tecate, Mexico, is another great spa for people who are into the yoga and spa lifestyle. They also have organic gardens, a program around healthy meals, week-long yoga and Pilates programs, and other offerings specifically tailored for people who are interested in health and wellness and products/treatments that are environmentally friendly.

YT: Do you have any favorite spas in California and on the West Coast?

SE: Destination spas are very different from the experience you might get from going to a resort or hotel because the spa experience is what they specialize in. And there are only 50 or so destination spas in the United States. Golden Door Spa (in Escondido) has always been considered one of the top destination spas in the world, and for good reason—their program is absolutely terrific. Rancho la Puerta (in Tecate) is also one of my favorites. I love going for an entire week... getting a chance to bond with other people, make friends and eat organic. You really feel and look different after one week. Overall, places in good weather areas, which are amenable to doing outdoor things, are an important aspect of the spa experience. It's inspirational to be out in nature, to have that incorporated into your treatments, rather than just locked inside a structured building.

YT: For people who can't generally afford spa treatments, what's the inside scoop on getting great deals?

SE: Spa Finder is a great resource for people who are working within a specific budget. The Web site divides spas on the basis of which ones are more affordable, and which ones are more luxury. There are some great spas that are in the more affordable range, such as Red Mountain Spa (in St. George, Utah). It's in bedrock country, so there's lots of great hiking, not to mention wonderful healthy food and excellent services. Canyon Ranch (in Tucson, Arizona and Lennox, Massachusetts) has always been an iconic destination, but it's more on the expensive side. Rancho la Puerta is in more of a median range, as is Mayflower Spa (in Washington, Connecticut), which is smaller and more intimate, and also offers unlimited spa treatments to guests.

For people who aren't interested in the destination spa, but rather, want to go to a day spa, a lot of establishments have deals to attract new clientele—like two-for-one discounts, 20% off discounts during the week, and other seasonal deals. Spa gift certificates (which you can purchase on *SpaFinder.com*) are also becoming popular, so it's a great idea to ask for them

as presents. In addition, because there are so many different kinds of spas these days, it's not unusual to find places that are smaller and may not have as many amenities but are also more affordable. It's also a good idea to check into your local ethnic neighborhoods, like a Chinatown or Koreatown, to get great acupuncture, reflexology, or other affordable yet rigorous massage options.

YT: A lot of establishments seem to have an aversion for using the term "spa." What are your thoughts on that?

SE: The reason is probably that a lot of places, such as Canyon Ranch, consider themselves wellness resorts and want to do away with some of the frivolous associations around the word "spa." But for a consumer, it's a convenient label, and it's also good in terms of marketing—so that people can pinpoint what it is the establishment does, since it may not always be clear in the name. All the same, there really is no one strong, specific definition of what a spa is. The term originally meant "health through water" (in Europe), but now, it's not necessarily associated with mineral springs. Of course, the spa has connotations of catering to an affluent clientele, but now we are starting to see it used more in a wellness context. Now, mind, body, spirit, beauty and health don't have any distinct lines separating one from the other.

YT: Does that mean that spirituality is starting to play a larger role in the spa industry?

SE: I think there is an interest in modalities (such as yoga or meditation) that are considered spiritual, but I don't really see the word *spiritual* being something that's quite popular as a marketing term. Moreover, it means different things to different people. There is definitely a deeper interest in holistic treatments, in bringing one's life into balance, so I think the term *holistic* is more viable, as spirituality can just be too broad. But things like mindfulness, working with the breath...these are universally beneficial things we can take into various areas of our life, and they are important to spa culture.

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