

8

Spa definitions, history, facility types, challenges, treatments and trends

In addition to understanding the management practicalities of leading a spa operation, spa managers should have a basic knowledge about health, wellbeing and spa products. The next four chapters are focused on essential product information which all spa managers should be aware of.

What is a 'spa'?

The word 'spa' generates a certain amount of confusion. The International Spa Association, (an American organization set up to 'advance the spa industry') defines 'spa' as a place "devoted to overall wellbeing through a variety of professional services that encourage the renewal of mind, body and spirit" (ISPA, 2019).

According to this definition, anybody who offers a facility that provides services in this very broad spectrum can call themselves a spa, and they do! In the last 20 years, thousands of beauty salons and treatment centers have capitalized on the spa trend and re-branded themselves as 'spas', but the question is: just because they offer a few mind, body or soul services does that mean that they are really spas?

Better dictionary definitions define a spa as "a town where water comes out of the ground and people come to drink it or lie in it because they think it will improve their health", or "a place where people go in order to become healthier, by doing exercises, eating special food, etc" (Cambridge Dictionaries Online, 2019).

These definitions help to better clarify the spa product in its entirety as they encompass both the European traditional spa product as well as a more international perception of a spa. The first definition refers to its European, historical roots while the second refers to what many spas have evolved into today.

■ Where does the word 'spa' come from?

There are several opinions on this. It is thought that it is either an acronym for the Latin phrase 'sanus per aquam' ('health through water'), or alternatively it comes from the town of 'Spa' (in Latin Aquae Spadai) – a spa town in Belgium. If you attend any spa conference, it is almost guaranteed that 'sanus per aquam' will be the opening slide in many a power point presentation!

The origin of the word 'spa' is perhaps not so important but, for a spa manager, understanding clearly what constitutes a spa is. First, it is necessary to understand why spas evolved in the first place:

- 1 **Heat and water:** In water, the body's weight reduces by 90%, which immediately alleviates pressure on the bones and joints, as well as giving a sensation of weightlessness. In addition, the range of motion of the joints also increases. When exposed to heat, initially the body tries to regain its original temperature with an increased heart rate and blood pressure, however as the temperature of the body rises, in turn the blood vessels dilate (expand). As the resistance to the blood flow decreases, the blood pressure and heart rate lower. More oxygen is delivered to the organs and there is an increase in the removal of CO₂ gas, lactic acid and other waste products. This is one reason why after having a hot bath the body feels so relaxed. Of course, when soaking in hot water if it is combined with massage jets and minerals the feeling of relaxation is intensified.
- 2 **The 'wonder-drug' syndrome:** The quest for a 'magic bullet' solution to give super health or cure an illness (either in the form of a diet or other one-stop solution) seems to be a recurring trend every few years. People of no matter what era, are willing to buy into and invest in 'quick fix' promises. Spas, particularly in the 19th century, capitalized on this, aggressively promoting their treatments and natural resources as a cure for everything from tuberculosis to even venereal diseases. Even today many spas will tend to over-exaggerate the benefits of their unique therapies and/or natural resources.
- 3 **Pampering:** In the 19th century (the golden age of spas) the aristocracy and many of the upper middle classes, in particular women, did not work. Spas, which were mainly facilities and resorts for the upper echelons of society became destinations in which to recuperate and be treated for a range of maladies, in particular melancholia and anxiety (often caused by a lack of occupation) – places to retreat from everyday life and be nursed and pampered.
- 4 **Social:** In past eras, spas were also just as much about socializing as they were about health, offering programs such as concerts, lectures, theatrical events and even gambling. Visiting a spa offered excellent opportunities for social interaction and advancement as well as excitement and a diversion from the tedium of everyday life. Whilst the social element of visiting a spa is perhaps not what it was a century ago, it still plays an important part in the spa experience.

A brief history

In order to understand today's spa product, spa managers and indeed anyone delivering spa services or therapies should have some knowledge of how spas have evolved.

■ Prehistory

Hot springs, played an important part in the establishment of many of the first human settlements and are on the path of some Nomadic routes. These were in essence our first 'spas'. Several painted caves in France and Spain are in walking distance of natural hot springs and we can safely assume that pre-historic man-made use of these natural resources for bathing and cleaning.

Aside from bathing, the first spa treatment is believed to be the 'sweat hut' – the remains of which are to be found across the globe. Sweat huts, heated with hot coals to induce sweating were common throughout Africa, the Americas and were particularly favoured in the cold northern zones of Western Asia (Finland, Russia, Poland, Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Celtic regions). A few ancient Irish sweat huts still existed in the 19th century! (Smith, 2007).

One of the earliest pieces of evidence we have of man-made baths is from the Eshnunna Palace in Babylon dating from 2300BC and we know that the Egyptians practiced forms of water therapy and herbal remedies. Alongside sweat huts, hot springs and bathing, grooming and touch were our first spa treatments.

■ The Greeks

The Greeks laid the foundation for our modern spa product, giving us the word 'cosmetic' (derived from 'kosmos' meaning adornment and 'kosmetikos' meaning having the skill to adorn or beautify). Greek public baths consisted of a large rectangular hall with seated baths in recesses and domed hot sweat baths at one end; the domes circulated heat given off by a brazier in the middle. The other rooms were heated by hot air from under the floors. Outdoor pools were often found adjacent to the baths, though swimming for the Greeks was not strictly a sport – but more of a form of therapeutic exercise (Smith, 2007).

■ The Romans

The Romans took the Greek tradition of bathing and expanded on it and because of their ability to use concrete to construct aqueducts built magnificent and massive bath complexes.

The remains of famous Roman baths are to be found all over the Roman Empire (for example Baiae near Naples with its hot sulphurous thermal springs which became a fashionable Roman spa resort with its bathhouse and villas). Rome itself also boasted several magnificent bath houses, such as the Diocletian baths which in their day, spanned more than 13 hectares and could accommodate up to 3,000 people at the same time, containing a pool with a water surface of more than 3,500