

Great Day Spas

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ComfortZone

Aching Muscles? Frayed Nerves? A Day Spa Can Cure What Ails You. Here Are the Area's Best—and Those That Rubbed Us the Wrong Way.



YOU ARE LYING ON A COMFORTABLY padded table. Talented fingers soothe your brow with lotions that promise to restore your skin to the smoothness of babyhood. The lights are low, the music is soft, the air is redolent of lavender.

As your mind floats free, you realize that the only decision you'll have to make in the next few hours is whether you want cranberry juice or herbal tea while you relax before your next treatment.

This is the "aah" in day spa.

It almost doesn't matter whether spa treatments deliver all the health and beauty benefits they claim. These moments of bliss are worth every penny. If somebody else is paying the bill, all the better.

Gift certificates to day spas are among the most popular personal and corporate gifts. One size fits almost everyone. Day spas appeal to women of all ages and to an increasing number of men.

A "just for men" salon called the Grooming Lounge will open in downtown DC, near Connecticut and L Streets, in January. Along with haircuts and hot-lather shaves, the spa will offer manly treatments such as stress-reducing facials and business manicures.

Day spas are popping up all over Washington. However, all spas are not created equal. Any hair salon can add a back room or two for facials and massage and call itself a spa. While the services may be good, a noisy salon cannot duplicate the spa experience of total relaxation. At a day spa you should feel like you've gotten away.

A day spa should offer a range of body treatments—scrubs and wraps, as well as a variety of massages and facials. To create the right atmosphere, a spa needs a quiet

sitting area where clients can wait before or between treatments—and have privacy while in a robe. Changing rooms, lockers, and showers are a nice touch.

The attitude and aptitude of a spa's staff make a big difference. Though some technicians are solicitous, others seem to care little about the client's comfort. Over the years, while testing spas, *Washingtonian* staffers have been abandoned nearly naked and freezing in cold treatment rooms, trussed up in itchy herbal wraps, and left alone in malfunctioning whirlpool tubs. We have been at the mercy of estheticians who seemed to take sadistic pleasure in extracting blackheads and then pushed the salon's products much too hard. We've paid too much for questionable services. We have been rubbed the wrong way.

We've also been wonderfully pampered. With that in mind, we sent staffers to check out some of the newest and hottest spas. Some left our reviewers with glowing skin and soothed nerves. Others made our testers more stressed than before. Here's what they found.—LESLIE MILK

Shapes Salon & Day Spa

Warm and Wonderful

FROM THE MOMENT I STEPPED INTO Shapes Salon & Day Spa, I felt cared for. After a warm welcome, I was led away from the noisy hair-and-nail salon and through frosted-glass doors.

I felt like I had walked into a Mediterranean garden at midnight. The lighting was softer. A small yellow rotunda was lit up overhead. The walls were painted a deep purple with scenes of palm trees and white-stone fountains. In the bathroom were individually rolled hand towels and burning candles. At that point, I forgot I



was in a strip mall next to a grocery store.

After slipping on a cozy cream-colored robe and squishy black slippers in the locker room, I settled into one of four big, comfy chairs in the waiting area and filled out a health questionnaire. A few minutes later, Carol, the attendant doing my 50-minute "signature facial," offered some water and told me to help myself to the fruit and cookies on the table. Then she led me to Room 1, a small and immaculate space with lavender walls and soothing music.

Throughout, Carol made sure I was comfortable. When she felt my hands were cold, she tucked them under the blanket. She went to great lengths to relax my tense shoulders. She steamed, cleansed, masked, and moisturized my face. When she was through, my skin was supple and more rosy.

The best part was that I didn't have to switch rooms for my next treatment: a one-hour massage with Brandi. She came to me.

Brandi glided her hands along my back and worked out any kinks with swift, deep kneading. The downside? That the treatments had to end.

Shapes Salon & Day Spa, 2435 Centreville Rd., Herndon; 703-713-0222. Also at 5622-K Ox Rd., Fairfax Station; 703-250-0000. www.shapesdayspa.com

—BROOKE LEA FOSTER