

SO FRESH, SO CLEAN  
Agua at The Sanderson,  
London: modern age Philippe  
Starck design meets ancient  
oriental massage techniques

# "It's getting hot in here..."

Strip to your smalls and offer yourself as a well-oiled sacrifice to the pretty women in white clothing, with *Arena's* guide to the world's most luxurious, man-friendly spas  
Photography: Morten Laursen

Roman generals used them to plot their latest empire-expansion programme, Russian agents gathered in them to discuss details of the next KGB hit, and now you can plan your "very important cross-media strategy plan" in the steam room and sauna.

The best spas now marry gratifying design with international-class sporting facilities. Indulge in ritual cleansing, sneakily employ trained females to scrub you up a bit, and get massaged in all manner of highbrow ways. There's stuff like obscure Scandinavian design journals and herbal tea in functional modernist packaging lying around in some places. Even the brutish fellows resembling Princess Ardala's bodyguard in *Buck Rogers* (he was called Tigerman, oddly) who used to do the massages have been replaced by pretty trustafarians.

*Arena's* extensively researched elite force of UK spas (that's a lot of "ancient arts awakening sessions"), followed by a brief glimpse at the global players of the spa world, is made up of the most man-friendly, design-aware, high quality retreats out there. There's not a coven of capricious painted divorcées in sight. ▶

UK

This sceptred isle's finest retreats

Babington House

Somerset



Deep in the Somerset countryside Babington House offers urbanites a place to unwind among relaxed, modern surroundings in a Georgian manor house.

Atmos: It's the rural outpost for that cornerstone of the urban dream, Soho House, and marries the best of both worlds.

USP: Where else can you get a Native American hot- and cold-stone massage in a heated Mongolian yurt beside a beautiful duck pond?

Arena spa fiend says: "Book rooms and treatments far in advance but if you're staying the night don't worry about tables in the excellent dining room - as a hotel guest there's one automatically booked for you. Just make sure you're hungry again by breakfast as the continental buffet is exceptional. Watch out for the Tony Soprano-style family of ducks in the outdoor pool, apparently they prefer it to their own chilly pond." Babington House, nr Frome, Somerset; 01373 812266; www.babingtonhouse.co.uk. Rooms from £195; massages from £30.

One Spa

Edinburgh



Nestled amidst a brand new office complex and restaurants off the city's Lothian Road lies this vast urban day spa for Edinburgh's new establishment.

Atmos: Moneyed, with a hint of Scottish Presbyterianism: massages, hot stone treatments, gruelling pool sessions, that sort of thing.

USP: The most comprehensive selection of bathing options in the UK; choose between two saunas, a laconium, hammam, aromatherapy grotto, tropical shower, outdoor hot tub, cold mist or Cleopatra bath.

Arena spa fiend says: "Ask to be shown around so you're not left searching for the unmarked door to the baths. And don't miss the chance to sit in the huge outdoor hot tub on the roof terrace and contemplate the fact you've never been this warm in Scotland before."

One Spa, 8 Conference Square, Edinburgh; 0131 221 7770; www.one-spa.com. Half-day membership £35; massages from £28.



Cowley Manor

Gloucestershire

The new Babington House, a countryside bolthole tailor-made for escaping city-dwellers.

Atmos: Relaxed and indulgent, Cowley is littered with personal touches that prove the owners' want you to feel right at home. Very trendy in places (eg obscure electronic music in the restaurant).

USP: The semi-submerged C-Side spa building itself is an architecturally inspired mix of Cotswold stone, wood decking and green slate.

Arena spa fiend says: "Try and bag a room in the superbly converted stable block right next to the spa rather than the main house - some have the bathroom artfully suspended over the sleeping area. The casually-dressed staff provide ample opportunity to ask fellow guests to get you more towels." Cowley Manor, nr Cheltenham, Gloucs; 01242 870 900; www.cowleymanor.com. Rooms from £205; massages from £69.

The Spa Mandarin Oriental

London



A full-on journey into Eastern spa porn, this West London hotel spa is aimed at the dosha-minded and chakra-aware.

Atmos: Traditionally Oriental. Which means there's a risk of cracking up at the endless chiming of Reiki bells.

USP: Having recently undergone a splendid £50million restoration, the hotel is in full colonial splendour, boasting a Michelin-starred restaurant, Foliage, as well as the Azumi-designed spa.

Arena spa fiend says: "The best treatment is the full body massage performed in synchronised harmony by two therapists, along with the vitality pool, which like an oversized Jacuzzi features an underwater stone slab with body jets down the length. Not so sure about the warm-oil-drizzled-on-forehead technique." The Spa at Mandarin Oriental, 66 Knightsbridge, London; 020 7325 2000; www.mandarinoriental.com. Rooms from £305; head massage £35; treatments £70 an hour.

Agua The Sanderson

London



London's "spa in the city", the Agua is all about contemporary designer chic, Schrage-style.

Atmos: Drawing you in with the kudos of the Starck-designed hotel, the Agua has a slick heavenly direction featuring Venetian mirrors and an acid-etched glass steam room.

USP: Social elevation. A Thai massage will sort out your crap posture, but what you're really buying into is access to The Sanderson's Purple Bar, which comes with spa membership and only costs £250 (plus £1,500 a year, but you get discounts on treatments for that...)

Arena spa fiend says: "Only the scantiest white curtains separate naked body from naked body - so lots of potential encounters if you get 'lost', which is easily done." Agua, The Sanderson, 50 Berners Street, London; 020 7300 1414. Massages from £40 for half-hour; Thai bodywork £85 for one hour.



The Bath House Royal Crescent Hotel

Bath

A singular spa set in the gardens of a classic Georgian hotel, The Bath House offers an intriguing mix of new and bygone age.

Atmos: Bereft of anything so vulgar as a reception desk, staying in the elegant hotel feels like visiting a wealthy maiden aunt. And even in spa terms, tranquillity reigns.

USP: The pool room houses a stone relaxation pool and wooden plunge tubs standing on flagstones. The room is lit by daylight from three arch windows, creating a wholly natural environment.

Arena spa fiend says: "Check out the original Gainsboroughs hanging in the drawing room and sample the decanted spirits in each room (with honesty bar). You can also make use of the hotel's Twenties river launch." The Bath House, The Royal Crescent Hotel, 16 Royal Crescent, Bath; 01225 823333. Signature treatment, £85.

St David's Hotel and Spa

Cardiff



Sir Rocco Forte's oasis on the edge of the regenerated Cardiff Bay is big on celebrities and sports teams. And its spa is "the heart of the hotel's business", apparently.

Atmos: Designed by Tresanton creator (and Rocco's sister) Olga Polizzi, the hotel is visually stunning and the helpful staff seem genuinely proud of their workplace. Luxurious in the modernist sense.

USP: The two-and-a-half hour "Ayurvedic" holistic treatments offer the same level of relaxation as a week on a Thai beach.

Arena spa fiend says: "You don't need to specify your room choice as they all have a view over Cardiff Bay. Book in on a Friday and you're more likely to be sharing the hot tub with that week's obligatory sports stars preparing for their weekend fixture." St David's Hotel and Spa; 029 2031 3084. Rooms from £200; Ayurvedic treatment from £180.

UK

Chancery Court Spa

London



For the New Urban Gent seeking a smooth upper lip and bodywork to match.

Atmos: Five-star atmosphere and treatments, sans the Eastern philosophy bullshit factor and a notable lack of smug yoga-ites in pashminas. And very quiet.

USP: Big on boy-friendly treats - the heated slate floors, chunky wood electronic relaxation beds (whole minutes of fun, there) and general subterranean darkness will satisfy aesthetes, while a stress-busting scalp, face and body massage with Vicky O and some super-hot stones is a better cold remedy than a hip flask of Bruichladdich.

Arena spa fiend says: "Take-aways include (officially) ESPA skincare prescriptions, and (unofficially) highly nickable waffle towels. The CCS is spot on for spa virgins as it's relatively jargon free and the masseuses will explain when to drop your pants."

Chancery Court Spa, Chancery Court Hotel, 252 High Holborn; 020 7829 9888; www.renaissancehotels.com. Rooms £195; ESPA stress buster £90 for 1hr 40min.

History of scrubbing

It's not just modern man who indulges in ritual cleansing - ancient cultures were fond of a good soak...

5000 BC - Communal bathing

The volcanic sulphur springs at Merano, Italy, are used for organised cleansing rituals. In 2500 BC inhabitants of the East make pilgrimages to the famed Great Bath of Mhenjo-Daro in Pakistan to seek respite from pestilence. By 2000 BC social bathing en masse has become an endemic feature of Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Minoan and Native American cultures. The Finns develop "sauna" by throwing water onto hot stones in their winter pit dwellings.

500 BC - Greek laconica

Melding mind expansion and bodily care, the Greeks seek physical purity through progressive bathing techniques. "Thalassotherapy" salt water bathing is expanded through "balneotherapy" - immersion in hot spring baths now called "laconica". Plato declares any mortal who

can't swim "uneducated" while by 400 BC the founder of medicine, Hippocrates, champions wellbeing through water.

200 BC - Rome's balneum

Looking to Greece, Rome adopts the laconica and develops it into the urban "balneum", a man-made bathing complex using lead-piped hot water and steam. Primarily built as garisons for war-weary Roman soldiers, the balneum are opened to the citizens of Rome.

50 BC - Caesar's prudery

Rome expects even the plebeian mass to observe the "correct" practice of single sex bathing, with Julius Caesar decreeing women should occupy the morning shift, men the afternoon. The city's few unisex bathhouses, meanwhile, are populated by the denizens of common prostitution.

25 BC - Agrippa's thermae

General Agrippa, defender of Rome, pours his wealth into developing the grandiose "therma", a marbled and mirrored bathing emporium spanning several city blocks. In a bid to outdo each other a succession of Caesars fashion ever more opulent thermae. The demise of the Empire ushers increased debauchery as Rome's thermae become havens for sexual depravity.

70 AD - "salus per aquam" or "health from water"

Romans build a spa in Bath. Successive aristocrats use the baths throughout the Middle Ages.

1700 - Regency nudity

The English enjoy mixed-sex bathing. In 1738, John Wood of Bath pens: "Modesty was shut out of them; people of both sexes bathing by day and night naked."

Rules of Spa

Spas may be oases of tranquillity and "balance", but they're hardly home turf for the average urban knight. The monks of Tibet tinkle over the tannoy, but the spirit of Gordon Brittas lurks around every corner and uptight women swan about like it's their second home (which it probably is). To relax properly rather than spend the entire time cowering in the sauna trying to avoid the whole scary business, you're going to need intelligence on the done things.

Fitting in

A congratulatory Aqua Libra goes to the guy who rocks up in trackie bums and a Dead Kennedy's T-shirt, but nonetheless a visit to a spa is comparable to clothes shopping; however neurotic the reasoning, you still want to look pretty good. Combine casual designer attire with your usual "rough diamond" charm and you'll be the talk of the steam room (in a good way). Ageing homosexuals will flock to your side.

Nudity

Once resplendent in your robe, dump the pants and feel the calm breeze of the air conditioning against your balls. The masseuses are well trained in the dance of the seven towels and will shelter your modesty - shorts will also hinder buttock manipulation and nobody wants that. But if you're one of those blokes who wears swimming trunks into the showers at the gym, it's worth asking if your massage involves any sort of foot manipulation, as a robe offers little protection in this position.

Stiffies

Massage improves circulation, so you're not actually a perv if you start getting wood during the process. This happens all the time to masseuses and they're trained to deal with it through role-play workshops etc. Usually they'll leave for a moment to let you ponder Coventry vs Derby and lose the hard-on (not quickly crack one off into her handbag). NOTE: Masseuses can be bohemian, open characters but don't fall into the trap of thinking they fancy you (like with

lapdancers). That said, at one of the spas here our correspondent was asked no less than four times if he'd "like anything else". He made his excuses and left.

Sinister medical paraphernalia Freaky implements should be few and far between, just look out for the massage table itself. The hole is for your face, if there's another hole further down it's for pregnant women - not because your hard-on last time became so legendary among the staff they've designed one just for you.

Ikea advert-style peer pressure

Your fellow sauna cellmates will know how hot it is but they'll be trying to ignore it, so don't feel as if you have to remind them by exhaling dramatically. By all means feel free to tut at the Birmingham businessman who leaves the door open or puts on more water every 30 seconds. Anyone who hasn't been in a sauna since a bit of prattling about at the local swimming pool as a kid should, at some stage, consider "what it would be like if I was trapped in here" and run through "lying on the floor" and "short circuiting the stove" scenarios.

# Rest of World

Where to get pampered further afield

## Avanyu Spa Snake River Lodge

Wyoming, USA



Nestled at the foot of Rendezvous Mountain in the Hollywood-packed ski resort of Jackson Hole, Avanyu boasts an indoor/outdoor pool – complete with cascades and waterfalls that you can control as is your want – and a formidable private men's floor. Take a Turkish shower, have a hot stone massage and then sit at one end of the spa bath for a view of the mountains and a beer, or sit at the other and watch CNN on a monstrous plasma TV. **001 800 445 4655.**

## Movenpick Dead Sea Resort And Spa

Jordan



The appeal of the Earth's lowest point – 403m below sea level – lies in the fact it's actually good for you to do nothing but lounge in the sun. On the famously buoyant Dead Sea, you simply lie back and let your body absorb the minerals. As you walk into the hotel lobby a waterfall flows from its source into a man-made river through the 70,000m<sup>2</sup> landscaped gardens. Horse trekking, aerobics, biking, golf and tennis are also on offer before you have another lie-down. **www.movenpick-deadsea.com.**

## The Banyan Tree

Phuket, Thailand



Pitch up at the Banyan Tree alone and you'll end up feeling sickeningly single as doe-eyed couples coo over each other mercilessly – or you'll hit paydirt with a party of well-heeled females intent on "discovering themselves". This is very much pitched at new-age-lite clientele – feeding the body and soul, and all that. But the location and facilities are impressive: in-spa treatments (Indonesian body scrub rituals a specialty), coconut groves, scenic lagoons, undulating fairways, Thai jungle on your doorstep. And if you get fed up of all the self-absorption, you can always slope off for some manly scuba diving. **www.banyantree.com.**



## The Blue Lagoon

Iceland

Iceland's natural geothermal waters are meant to firm up the body, and they're a darn sight more pleasant than a two-hour gym session. At 35°, the Blue Lagoon's crater is 4ft deep and set in a volcanic landscape, lending it an ethereal moonscape quality. You can have a special programme of treatments created for you, where attractive Icelandic women massage different oil-and-mud concoctions onto your body. Once you've tired of all that rubbing, try snow-mobiling and jeep safaris. **003 544 208 800.**

## Therme-Vals

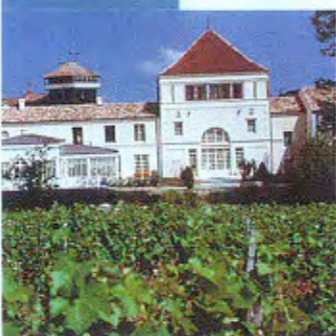
Switzerland



This recently revamped Swiss spa successfully combines the usual array of high-end pamperings with the look and feel of a David Lynch movie set. Constructed entirely out of quartz stone and with more than a hint of the dark side about it, a series of atmospheric chambers house the steam room and hot and cold plunge pools, while psychedelic giant taps pump thermal water directly into the main outdoor bath with stunning views of the surrounding mountains. And then there's the Synchronous Massage: full-body with warm oil from not one, but two masseuses. **www.therme-vals.ch; 004 181 926 8080.**

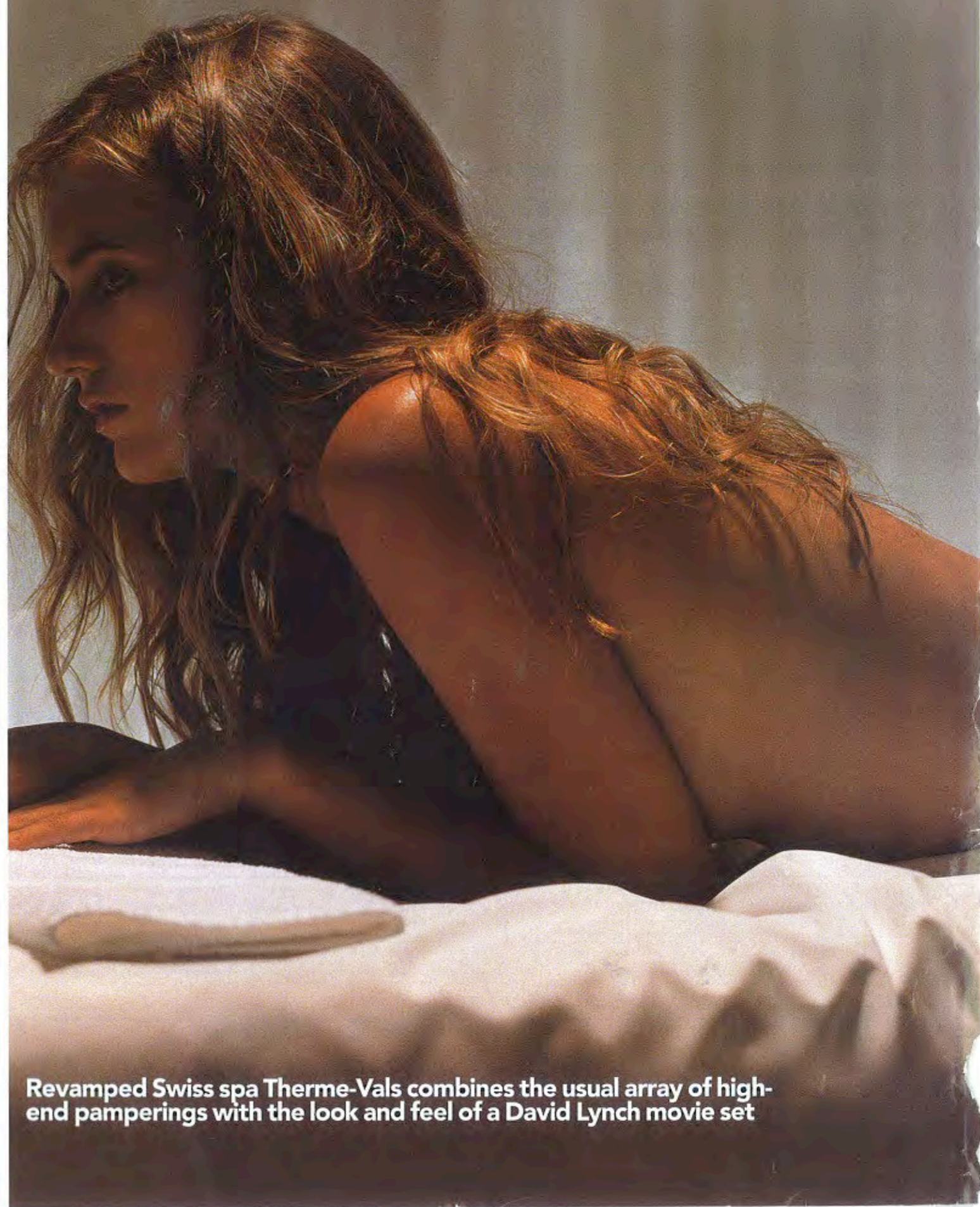
## Les Sources de Caudalie

Bordeaux, France



Centred on a hot spring surging from 500m, this isn't a spa for non-drinkers. Sit in a hot tub full of bubbling grape seed extracts, gazing out over Bordeaux's rich vineyards, before working through the local produce in the evenings. Sauvignon massages, crushed Cabernet scrubs and local honey body-wraps with wine yeast extracts are just some of what's on offer. This being France, they take the food seriously, too: eat at the Michelin-commended, Catalan-inspired restaurant, La Grande Vigne. **www.caudalie.com.**

## A LUXURY SPAS



Revamped Swiss spa Therme-Vals combines the usual array of high-end pamperings with the look and feel of a David Lynch movie set

STYLING: GEORGINA HODSON; HAIR: LANCE LOWE FOR HARVEY NICHOLS; HAIR AND BEAUTY MAKE-UP: LOUISE BRUHN AT ONE USING RUBY AND MILLIE; MODELS: KATHERINE BRUNN AT PROFILE AND LOUISE ADKINS AT SELECT MANY THANKS TO AQUA AT THE SANDERSON; WORDS: STEVE BEALE, LAKSHMI BHASAVAN, CLARE BINGHAM, JENNY DALTON, WILLIAM DREW, MANSEL FLETCHER, LOUISE HALL, SIBON DE LA TORRE, STUART TURNBULL