

Where Magazine

In Search of Bliss

Hedonism expert MICHAEL FLOCKER explores New York spa life for men.



Having written books on metrosexuality and hedonism, you would think I would have experienced the full range of scintillating indulgences and personal grooming pleasures available in this little burgh we call Manhattan. Well, I thought so too, but I was mistaken. Sure, I'd had my share of manis and pedis, facials, exfoliations and eucalyptus immersions. I'd experienced Swedish massage, reflexology and Shiatsu (after which I briefly considered pressing assault charges, though that's another story). But in a city such as this, there is always another level of luxury to be explored—another tier of titillation with which to flirt. And for weary travelers and locals alike, New York has no shortage of wellness havens to help rejuvenate both the senses and the spirit.



BLISS 49 SPA

For this article, I was determined to experience the very best in personal restoration, so I decided to head straight for the top of the line. I chose the Bliss 49 Spa in the W New York Hotel (541 Lexington Ave. at 49th Street) as the center from which I would draw my journalistic conclusions.

I had heard rumor of an amazing array of specialized treatments designed to target any and all of the modern-day woes that can wreak havoc on the face and body. I began by perusing the Bliss Web site (www.blissworld.com) to determine which of the available services might be best for my professional research. As I scrolled through the extensive menus, I must confess that, jaded though I may be, there were more than a few treatments that raised my left eyebrow.

First and foremost among these shockers was the Betweeny Wax. Hmm, not quite ready for that, I thought. Under the massage listings, the Nerve Whacker seemed a bit alarming, though it paled in comparison to the prospect of a Lymphatic Drainage. I felt I could pass on the Chestcial/Backcial, thank you very much; and as far as my visage was concerned, the Instant-Lifting Seaweed Task Mask seemed intriguing, as did the new Oxygen Blast. But what I really wanted was something progressive, something out of the ordinary. Clearly, an investigation such as this would require the advice of a professional.

Having recently returned from an exhaustive holiday abroad, my main concerns were restoring my energy and some sort of treatment -- anything at all -- for the cursed and persistent bags beneath my eyes. After a brief telephone consultation with a silky-voiced consultant, my personalized package of treatments was settled upon. I would undergo the one-hour Hot Milk and Almond Pedicure (\$65), followed by an 85-minute treatment known as the Hangover Herbie (\$215), a combination facial and body treatment—hangover not required, I was told.

Upon my arrival at Bliss 49, I was amusingly told to “pass through the clouds,” make a right and take the elevator to the fourth floor – “the clouds” being a reference to the painted frescoes lining the hallways. Presented with a waffled white robe, a pair of Sensei massaging slippers and a gift bag of samples, I was given a brief tour of the men’s facilities and invited to slip into my robe and wait in the serene lounge, where magazines, lemon water, wine, beer and chocolates were available to help pass the time. Within minutes, I was ushered into the pedicure room as my nail technician filled a foot basin with a mixture of steamed whole milk and almond oil. (Note to the boys: lots

of leg lifting, so keep the undies on.)

It suddenly occurred to me that if this thing were going to last an hour, I should have at least brought a magazine. But I needn't have worried. Upon spotting a pair of headphones, I realized that the flat-screen television mounted before me was for my personal use. Not wanting to seem crass, I chose to watch a PBS documentary about Czar Nicholas and the doomed Romanovs as the process got underway. "Oh, those poor royals," I thought as my feet soaked in the milk and oil.

Over the course of an hour, my feet and calves were scrubbed and massaged, my nails clipped, buffed and oiled. And despite the fact that I arrived with very clean feet, an awful lot of digging and scooping took place with implements resembling dental tools. It occurred to me that many men who scoff at the notion of a pedicure would quickly reconsider upon seeing the extent of the excavations involved and the results achieved. Really, it can be like discovering tooth-brushing after 20 years of going without.

My feet nicely restored to the condition of a 10-year-old's, I was off to the treatment room for my "Herbie." I had considered getting tanked the night before in order to truly assess the effectiveness of the hangover-reduction claims, but couldn't be bothered. Never mind, I thought, surely there are plenty of other toxins floating around in my system just waiting to get sucked out. I slipped into the disposable (and alarmingly transparent) boxers provided and climbed onto the table as requested. After being fully rubbed down with a pungent herbal oil, the various layers upon which I was resting were wrapped around me. A rice paper-like shroud and an electrically heated vinyl blanket were folded in upon me, leaving me to sweat like a spent mummy. Sealed up from the neck down—as if in a body bag—I made a mental note: "Hangover Herbie not for alcoholic claustrophobics."

My bodily detox under way, I relaxed and enjoyed a multifaceted facial, a cranial massage and 15 minutes of reflexology administered to my feet, which were temporarily unwrapped at the bottom of my body bag. I think it was very nice, but I'm not sure. I fell asleep. I did wake up at one point to hear Billie Holiday cooing:

"You go to my head / and you linger like a haunting refrain / And I find you spinning 'round in my brain / like the bubbles in a glass of champagne."

The attention paid to my face, head and feet made my body-bake pass quickly, and I was soon wiping away the essential oils in my private shower with a lemon and sage soap, and shampooing with herbally-infused hair products. I toweled off, briefly pausing to admire my newly flawless feet and headed straight to the mirror to check the results. My skin did indeed look very fresh, my under-eye bags had diminished considerably and my eyes themselves had a dreamy faraway twinkle.

Once I'd changed back into my street clothes, I emerged from the tranquil atmosphere of the spa and ambled leisurely toward Park Avenue to catch a cab downtown. I felt clean and revived, free of stress and toxins. In truth, I think I'm more likely to get a half-

hour pedicure and a nice strong massage next time. It may be a matter of attention span, but perhaps I'm more of a clip-squeeze-and-run kind of guy. But I will say this: Though a trip to a day spa may seem to be little more than an extravagant indulgence, it is the subtle aftereffects that really matter. Sure, it can be pricey, but it also helps to slow down the clock, clear the mind and restore a sense of peace and calm that allows us to focus on the moment at hand, as opposed to the world at large.