

French Immersion: The sensuous -- and healthy! -- spas of France

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There is a soft, almost cocoon-like quality to French hydrotherapy spas. Maybe it is because we all started our lives floating in warm water, or that our bodies are mostly water, but the spa experience in France feels healing, comforting and renewing.

The treatments, called *soins*, which translates as ‘care’ all use natural and vibrant sea or spring water. They are designed to make you feel *bien dans ta peau* — “Good in your skin.” It’s all about pleasure and relaxation. Even the soft murmur of French in the background helps you to let go.

I first discovered the sensuous world of these spas in 1994, on a trip with my 19-year-old daughter Heather. We both arrived stressed out—mine from work and Heather’s from college finals.

We slipped into the nurturing space of the French spas as easily as we slipped into the bubbling warm water.

We spent idyllic days padding around in thick terry cloth robes and rubber slippers being *soignée* by the attentive staff.

We were painted with warm algae and wrapped up to rest. Or massaged while warm seawater showered down on us. Or settled into a *bain hydromassant*, bubbling baths with algae or essential oils and jets that massaged us from head to toe.

The natural and vibrant water was full of life force and minerals. We got over our jet lag. We got rid of toxins; we filled up with energy and well-being. I felt better than I had in years. Heather's comment? "This is sooo cool mom." I agreed.

Since those days, I have returned many times to the French spas. I always feel a renewed *joie de vivre* after my stays. For Americans, they're an undiscovered treasure. I've also wondered, is this one of their secrets for staying slim and beautiful?

French spa treatments were originally designed as medical "cures" to help heal physical problems. The fresh water, full of vital minerals, cleanses and replenishes the body. This, combined with rest and fresh air, also calms the mind, and renews the spirit.

Thalasso is the Greek word for sea. The salt air and seawater along the Atlantic and the Mediterranean coastlines, full of negative ions, are the foundation of the thalassotherapy spas. Inland, the spas are situated near natural springs or fresh mountain water.

In typical French style, the spas feel elegant and luxurious. Guests are encouraged to rest, to be outside in the fresh air and to "take your time." Exercise and diet are not the focus, though the food is always fresh, light and delicious.

The most benefits come from spending at least four or five days. The soins take about 2-2 1/2 hours for four soins, scheduled close together, morning or afternoon. Then you have the rest of the day off, to rest or sightsee.

For visits of more than two days, many spas require a medical consultation to discuss your health and the goals for your stay. Programs such as anti-stress, anti-aging, well-being, beauty or slimming are some of the choices offered.

Most spas also allow you to visit for the day and choose soins a la carte. But staying for a longer period allows you to slow down and enjoy France's *art de vivre*, their art of living. I always feel a renewed sense of health and well being that lasts for months after I get home.

Here are spas in three distinct regions of France and all distances are by train. North: The Normandy coast, just two hours west from Paris. South: Aix-en-Provence, three hours from Paris; and east, Annecy in the Rhone Alps, three and a half hours from Paris. Each area offers history, cuisine and excellent sightseeing when you're not being "soignée."

Fly into Paris, then take the train with a France Rail pass from www.raileurope.com. For each of these destinations, you could get by without a car, as the spas are within walking distance of the towns. But for the fun of poking around for a few days, choose the rail 'n' drive option. http://www.eurorailways.com/products/trains_passes/rail_and_drive/francedr.htm

— **Ouistreham: Riva Bella Thalazur Spa and Hotel**

On the Normandy coast of the Atlantic, this spa has wide beaches for walking, fresh salt air and uses the vibrant water and algae of the Atlantic for treatments. The quiet atmosphere invites you to slow down and relax.

The spa has a huge saltwater pool available for soaking and relaxing when you're not having soins. There's also an exercise room and sunroom, Jacuzzi, sauna and hammam.

Hotel Riva Bella is adjacent to the spa, making it easy to go back and forth in your thick terry cloth robe and slippers. Packages of hotel, meals and spa treatments are available and their restaurant specializes in the fresh seafood of the region.

Ouistreham is a two-hour train ride from Paris, then a short taxi ride to the spa. If you want to sightsee all the WWII history, including the invasion beaches, the Caen Peace Memorial and the American cemetery are nearby. Tours are available or you can rent a car for a day or two.

It's a short walk from the spa to the shops and restaurants of the quaint town of Ouistreham.

Hotel and Spa: Thalazur Ouistreham at Hotel Riva Bella: www.thalazur.fr

Normandy region: www.normandie-tourisme.fr

— Aix-en-Provence: Thermes Sextius Spa

The Romans founded the town of Aix-en-Provence over 2000 years ago because of the abundance of springs and the healing qualities of the water. The Spa Thermes Sextius is built on the site of the original Roman baths. You can see the crumbling walls of the ancient buildings and the spring, which comes up from a depth of 80 meters at a temperature of 97 degrees, through a glass floor in the entry. The pure water is full of calcium, magnesium, lithium and other minerals, all said to be helpful in relieving stress, fatigue and even cellulite.

When you purchase a group of soins, called a *forfait*, you may also be entitled to use the pool, Jacuzzi, steam, sauna and exercise room for the day. This spa is so popular with the locals that it gets booked up. So be sure to make reservations in advance.

Aix, a vibrant university town, just 30 minutes north of Marseilles, has over 50 fountains. Cobblestone streets wind into the old town, with daily open markets, sidewalk cafes and shops. Cezanne made his home here and the

town hosts many cultural festivals. I recommend the Hotel Augustins, a former 12th-century abbey, a short walk from the spa and steps from the main street, Cours Mirabeau.

TGV from Paris to Aix, a distance of 500 miles, 3 hours.

Spa: www.thermes-sextius.com

Hotel: www.hotel-augustins.com

Aix-en-Provence: www.aixenprovencetourism.com

— Lake Annecy: Imperial Palace Hotel and Spa

Lake Annecy has been called the purest lake in Europe and sparkles just beyond the park-like grounds of the Imperial Palace Hotel. At the hotel's newly opened Cristal Spa you can soak in the pool, enjoy the sauna and steam room and then one of their many treatments including massages, body scrubs and facials.

The hotel, which originally opened its doors in 1913, has just undergone a complete renovation and includes three restaurants and a casino.

The town of Annecy offers cultural and culinary delights and for outdoor enthusiasts, bicycling, hiking, parapenting in the mountains surrounding the lake and a variety of water sports in the summer. The hotel is open all year and winter sports are nearby.

Hotel: www.hotel-imperial-palace.com/

Spa: www.hotel-imperial-palace.com/en/bien-etre-165

Annecy: www.lac-annecy.com/

Annecy is also just a 30-minute drive from Geneva airport where you could rent a car or take a bus into the town.

Soins Speak

For soins available in Ouistreham and Aix-en-Provence, each spa has designated English speakers who can help you.

Here are my favorite soins:

- Bain Hydromassant-bubbling bath with jets and essential oils or algae
- Application de Boue or Algues-mud or algae wrap
- Massage sous affusion, also called massage/modelage-massage with warm water showers.

Due to the cleansing effects of the soins, be sure to drink plenty of water before, during and after. Enjoy!