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Spa Vacations for Men: The New Executive Perk

Once spa getaways were ladies-only. Now, U.S. wellness retreats are wooing male execs with beer body scrubs and recreational tree climbing. And some CEOs are paying their employees to go



PHOTO: F. MARTIN RAMIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, GROOMING BY ELISA FLOWERS

By Matthew Kronsberg

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18 COMMENTS

FOR ONE WEEK this summer, the crowd at Cal-a-Vie, a Provençal-style wellness resort spread over 600 acres of chaparral in Southern California, looked...different. “We had a corporate retreat here and it was 90% men,” recalled Terri Havens, who owns Cal-a-Vie with her husband, John. “Twenty-five years ago, you couldn’t get a guy to come in. We never dreamed we would see the day when we had more men than women here.”



PHOTO: F. MARTIN RAMIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, GROOMING BY ELISA FLOWERS

Circular reasoning was at work. “My image was of a bunch of ladies in robes getting their nails and their hair done,” said Peter Shaper, a founding partner of a Houston private-equity firm. And that image—widespread as it was—kept men away: Guys didn’t go because they thought guys didn’t go. Mr. Shaper’s wife, who frequented spas with her mother and sister, spent years trying to convince him to join her on a trip, emphasizing the fitness and sport options, rather than the ylang-ylang-scented pampering. Eventually he went along to Arizona’s Canyon Ranch, among the biggest names in American wellness retreats.

The verdict? “She was right,” he said. He hiked, biked and did a boot camp class. “I didn’t do any facials. I may have gotten a massage. At first I wasn’t even that excited about that part.” It was enough to entice him to try other spas with her, including Cal-a-Vie, which has long been trying to beckon guys like Mr. Shaper. Cal-a-Vie co-owner John Havens had “really rich leather boxing bags made for boxing class and he [added] rowing machines and TRX and then serious hikes. Macho stuff,” said Ms. Havens. Even the spa offerings took on a testosterone tinge. “Instead of a mani-pedi,” she added, “it’s now a hand and foot sports conditioning.”

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Mr. Shaper's first visit to Cal-a-Vie was followed by another, with the business leadership group YPO, the Young Presidents' Organization. After that, he came back again, and then again. Friends—fellow CEOs and entrepreneurs—began to take notice. "I'd get some ribbing about it, but eventually I said "Look, you guys will be shocked. You need to try it." Among those he converted: Chris Papouras, an oil industry executive, who had long written off the male spa experience as a "metrosexual boondoggle." Instead, he found it to be an "intense, physical experience," the only lowlight of which was "recognizing how out of shape I am." That recognition spurred a life-changing return to fitness, and a return visit.

WASHINGTON SCHVITZED HERE

Few jobs are more stressful than being a U.S. president. Sometimes a soak and a rub is the only balm



Franklin D. Roosevelt in Warm Springs, Ga., in 1924 PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

Long before spas became ground zero for "girlfriend getaways," mineral springs and baths drew weary power players of both sexes, including a number of American presidents. Near

Berkeley Springs State Park, you'll find a small stone tub fed by a 74.3 degree spring, marked as George Washington's Bath Tub. Washington first visited the spot in 1748, when he was 16, and frequented it for much of his life. The oldest spa structure in the U.S., dating to 1761, is the Jefferson Pools (formerly known as Warm Springs), now part of the Omni Homestead Resort in Warm

While guys still constitute the minority of spa-goers, the industry's efforts to lure more men are paying off. At Primland, a resort in southern Virginia where activities include hunting, recreational tree climbing (it's a thing) and motor sports, males have gone from just 10% of the spa's customer base when it opened seven years ago to 42% today. Golden Door, a hyperluxe Southern California wellness retreat styled like a Japanese ryokan, has seen a nearly 70% jump in male clientele since 2012, said general manager Kathy Van Ness. The spa resort now offers a Men's Camp Week—think sleep-away camp with herbal wraps and ultracompetitive water volleyball—six times a year, up from just twice in 2012. Looking ahead, she added, "I think we could get to 10."

Among the guests at the spa's next such retreat will be chef Ludo Lefebvre, an owner of five Los Angeles restaurants. Mr. Lefebvre said he made his first visit to Golden Door, in 2015, after years of cooking, making TV shows, writing books and traveling the food festival circuit had taken a toll on him. "I was at a breaking point," he recalled. Mr. Lefebvre spent his week there hiking, exercising, playing tennis and meditating. He had personal trainers and daily in-room massages. "I have the personality to be a bit extreme, so I did everything the first time, which I don't recommend," he added, "My body hurt."

Springs, Va. Thomas Jefferson bathed there for three weeks in 1818 to treat his rheumatism, saying in a letter to his daughter that “the spring with the hot and warm are those of the first merit.”

Virginia’s Warm Springs should not be confused with Franklin Roosevelt’s retreat of the same name in Georgia, where he found relief from the effects of polio in 88 degree spring-fed pools. Reopening those pools—now part of Roosevelt’s Little White House State Historic Site—for biannual public swims is the focus of a fundraising drive. Three years after Roosevelt’s death, Harry Truman secretly spent election day 1948 at Elms Hotel & Spa in Excelsior Springs, Mo., where, the hotel website says, he “enjoyed the electric cabinet, salt rub, mineral water tubs and a massage.”

Many Presidents made spa treatments part of their routine, even outside of the spa. In his memoirs, Henry Kissinger recalls that Richard Nixon, “lying naked on the rubbing table” during a stay at the Kremlin Grand Palace, “made one of the more courageous decisions of his Presidency,” when he reasserted his hard line stance in the SALT talks. Mr. Kissinger called it “a heroic position from a decidedly unheroic posture.”

like they do. You don’t know how to hunt the animal if you don’t know how it feeds.” The presumption in many places seems to be that guys feed on booze, cars and golf. The Lodge at Woodloch offers a “Renew and Brew” body scrub (or pedicure), with a hops- and barley-infused exfoliating treatment, followed by a massage and a craft beer. At the Four Seasons in Chicago, spa-goers are offered a “Bourbon Hand and Foot Detailing” (note auto lingo), an undainty mani-pedi. Meanwhile, at the Ritz-Carlton spa on Georgia’s Lake Oconee, you can get massaged with warm golf balls.

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Despite the price tag of just under \$9,000 for the seven-night stay, he’ll be returning for his third Men’s Camp Week this September.

At this point, you’d be forgiven for deciding to forgo the spa vacation in favor of something more relaxing—like a triathlon. But not all male guests are drawn to the physically demanding aspects of the spa experience. Take Steven Kolb, the president and CEO of CFDA, the Council of Fashion Designers of America. “I don’t do classes,” he said, referring to his semi-frequent visits to the Lodge at Woodloch, in the Pocono Mountains, about 100 miles from New York City. He goes there “mostly after a busy work time like Fashion Week, or for a special occasion like a birthday,” and when there, “I like a quiet room facing the lake and pine trees, the waterfall hot tub and lunch wearing a bathrobe.” Add in a deep-muscle massage and a deep-pore facial and he’s set.

Some men, no doubt, regard a facial or a pedicure with profound suspicion—at least until they get their first one. To get them in, especially for the first time, said Billy Smith, Primland’s spa manager, “you have to think

While a gimmicky golf ball massage might be a once-a-year indulgence, other spas offer services that resonate throughout the other 364 days. These include full medical consultations that physicians and nutritionists

back home can follow up on. A spa visit can also help cultivate a habit of self-care that many men resist until they reach a crisis point. Bart Lorang, founder and CEO of a Denver software company and a spa enthusiast who believes that a digital detox is key to reducing

stress, gives his employees \$7,500 a year toward vacations where they are entirely disconnected. It can be Burning Man or Birmingham, as long as no work is done. Of course, he said, a wellness retreat is not a bad option. “My personal favorite is **Miraval**,” a desert resort just north of Tucson, Ariz. “I also recently went to Deepak Chopra Center [in California]. When people are looking for something that’s a little different, or their anxiety levels are high, I encourage them to go to one of these places. It might seem indulgent and expensive, but it’s important to realize that [men] need some TLC too.”

Manly and Pedi // Eight Destination Spas Across the Country That Offer Guy-Friendly Treatments and Activities



Miraval's spa jacuzzi PHOTO: KEN HAYDEN

Miraval

Tucson, Ariz.

At this retreat in the Santa Catalina Mountains, outside of Tucson, activities range from rock climbing and mountain biking to making your own dreamcatcher.

Minimum Stay 1 night

Crowd Factor Medium, with 118 casita-style

rooms and suites on 400 acres

Cost From \$549 per person per night

Which Includes Meals, fitness classes, and activities like the 35-foot-high ‘Desert Tightrope’

But Not Spa treatments, Pilates and some activities like the hands-on beekeeping experience, ‘All the Buzz’

Sample Treatment Deep River Stone massage incorporating heated basalt stones and cool marble. miravalresorts.com