

# VOGUE

MAGAZINE

## What It's Like to Visit a Spa During the Pandemic

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WHEN the opportunity arose to see what it felt like to get pampered during this unprecedentedly grim time, it struck me as just surreal enough to be intriguing.

You see, even under the most regular of conditions, I veer toward self-denial. I consider a mani-pedi at a hole-in-the-wall nail salon a relative extravagance; the last time I received a massage must have been a half-decade ago; and, though I'm nearing my mid-40s, I've had a facial only once, purchased as a gift from a friend. And certainly the current circumstances—even in New York City, where Governor Andrew Cuomo gave the go-ahead to commence spa operations again in early July—enhanced my usual puritanical squeamishness. Would receiving a wildly nonessential spa treatment, I asked myself, cross the fault line from self-care to plain selfishness, shutting out the harsh realities of risk and suffering for the sake of mere indulgence?

Still, I had to admit, if there was ever a time in which I yearned for a spa treatment, this was it. I was extremely fortunate—I had a job and a home, and I had remained healthy, as had my family, and while I'd hardly left my house in months, I knew that being able to hunker down was in itself a privilege. And yet I was also climbing the walls. The uncertainty and precariousness, the constant struggle to juggle work and childcare, and the lack of real-life engagement and community had all taken a toll, and I was depressed and anxious. I had barely slept a full night in months, and my shoulders were permanently hunched around my ears—perhaps the only reminder that I still had a body. (As for a face, forget it!) “People are scared, people are tired, and people are desperate for touch,” Kathy Van Ness, the COO of the famed Golden Door in San Marcos, California, which, as I write, is planning to reopen in early September, told me when I spoke to her over the phone about spas in the age of COVID-19. “Our clients want to feel better.” I decided to take the plunge closer to home.

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To arrive at Rescue Spa, in Manhattan's Flatiron district, I took the half-empty subway in from Brooklyn for the first time since the advent of the coronavirus, a once-familiar routine now rendered uncanny, with masked commuters forgoing their usual bullish tactics and keeping a tentative distance from one another. Was this even present-day New York? I wondered as I made my way down a ghost town-like Broadway, passing branches of Equinox and WeWork, onetime citadels of aughties triumph that were, at least for now, standing disused like so many faded mom-and-pop shops. At the all-white, high-ceilinged Rescue, which had reopened in early July, masked employees treated a reduced customer load, in observation of social-distancing orders, and extra sanitary measures appeared to be in full effect. After having my temperature taken (a normal 98.6) and receiving a health questionnaire confirming that I hadn't been in contact with a person ill with COVID and that I would continue to keep on high alert for symptoms, I sat down to receive a gentle, skilled manicure, given by a P.P.E.-wearing technician through a plexiglass panel with an opening at the bottom, the chair and table Cloroxed vigorously before and after my appointment. The setup—half bank-teller station and half glory hole—felt unfamiliar yet somehow reassuring, as did the sharp scent of cleaning products that permeated the manicure station. For my nail-polish shade, I selected Essie's orangey-red Fifth Avenue, perhaps to remind myself of a fabled version of the city that seemed to have little to do with conditions on the ground. "People are so grateful they're able to come in again," Danuta Mieloch, Rescue's founder, told me as I lay down on a treatment table swathed in pristine cream--colored linens in one of the spa's 14 private rooms. "Everyone is so anxious right now—when will this be over, how do I stay healthy, are we going to be okay?—and all of this affects not just your mood but your skin too."

As we spoke, the masked and gloved Mieloch was administering, with the sure but lulling motions of a true expert, Biologique Recherche's exfoliating, hydrating P50 lotion to my forehead, eye area, and upper cheeks, as well as to my upper chest and neck. My nose and mouth, meanwhile, remained tucked beneath my mask. A mandatory prohibition on any treatment that requires the full uncovering of the face—whether it be lip piercing, mustache waxing, or a facial—had remained in place; and so, while some spas have decided to take facials off the menu completely, others have found creative twists on the service. (Caitlin Girouard, Governor Cuomo's press secretary, stated in mid-August that they "are continuing to monitor how and when higher-risk spa services like facials can safely resume.") Since reopening, Haven Spa, in SoHo, has launched a service named, aptly, the 2020, in which clients can receive a treatment that edges around their face covering; and Rescue, too, has begun offering what the spa has been calling

“targeted” treatments, such as the Eye Zone. (“Let your eyes do the talking while your mouth is covered!” the spa’s website cheerfully proclaims.)

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As Mieloch gave me a taste of Rescue’s most popular techniques to tighten and refresh the skin, my face covering remained firmly in place, a situation that struck me, hilariously, as a little pornographic. The mouth and nose seemed to gain an erogenous zone–like aura of the forbidden, not unlike, say, a burlesque dancer’s nipples, painstakingly concealed by tasseled pasties. “All we can do right now is our best,” Mieloch told me as she briskly massaged my jawline, carefully skirting my mask. While the spa was closed, Rescue estheticians had been consulting with clients virtually, walking them through skin-care routines to do at home. There was, however, Mieloch added, no replacement for an in-person meeting and hands-on contact: “To see an esthetician is, first of all, to take care of the heart,” she said. Apart from my husband and daughter, no other human being had touched or been touched by me in months, and there was something almost thrilling in having my corporeal self handled by a complete stranger, albeit one who was most certainly on the clock. (Could this be love? I wondered, nearly groaning as Mieloch’s oiled hands gave my aching neck a quick rubdown.) On my way out of the room, once again aware that I had a face and body, I dawdled for a moment in Rescue’s expansive, airy entrance hall, where the spa sells products to its clients. Here was blatant, seductive commerce, which in a metropolitan environment so often stands in for life, and which, for months, I had nearly forgotten about. Eyeing the goods on display, I felt suddenly flush with pleasure, if not necessarily with capital. A fleet of Byredo perfumes were arranged on one table, their pleasingly squat glass bottles promising transporting scents like Oud and Black Saffron. I lifted one of them to my nose; through my mask, I couldn’t smell a thing.

A few days later, with my thirst for calming but invigorating treatments for body and soul not yet slaked, I drove to Water Mill, in the Hamptons, to spend the night at [Shou Sugi Ban House](#), a Japanese-inspired luxury wellness retreat and spa, which opened last year and offers a variety of massages, scrubs, wraps, and hydrotherapy treatments, as well as yoga and tennis and a slew of “healing arts,” including sound baths, guided meditation, and shamanic and crystal rituals. The urban-spa experience had been a trippy inversion of the usual stepping away from the grit and grime of the crowded city; there were no crowds to escape. And so I wondered if a spa excursion would feel more natural in more secluded and greener pastures.

On the open road, on a clear and beautiful summer day, it was almost possible to forget about the pandemic; whether that was a good thing or not, I wasn’t sure, but for the moment, I pushed my hesitations away. This seemed easy enough to do as, two neat hours after departing Brooklyn, I approached Shou Sugi Ban House’s impeccably pebbled entrance lot, beautifully landscaped with cryptomeria and London plane trees, and punctuated by a large stone Buddha and three black Teslas, presumably ready to ferry guests to their private aircrafts at the East Hampton Airport. As I approached the entrance, I was welcomed by mask-clad, whites-wearing employees in a nifty golf cart, who were set to guide me to my room, directly after taking my temperature with a non-contact assessment thermometer and clamping my pointer finger into a pulse oximeter.

“When you close your eyes, imagine that everything that’s outside the wood gates, you’ve left behind. All the things you need to concentrate on are here,” an esthetician named Nicole told me, sotto voce, while she readied me for one of Shou Sugi Ban’s Earth & Sea Body Wraps. As I lay on an infrared heated mat, she scrubbed my naked body with a dry brush before slathering it with a firming mixture of rhassoul clay, hibiscus powder, and rose-hip-seed oil. As I perspired profusely, allegedly releasing toxins from my taxed system while wrapped mummy-style in a sheet, my face mask securely on, I felt as snug and close as a large peanut in its shell. On the verge of dozing off, I experienced wild snatches of half-dreams, my ensconced state seeming to reveal itself not as the opposite of quarantine but as its actual end point. Now I was truly immovable and therefore truly safe, I mused to myself, jerking fully awake just as Nicole replaced my hot eye mask and bolster with deliciously ice-cold ones. “I just sanitized all the fixtures in the shower again, to make sure,” she whispered as she helped me off the treatment bed, smeared with muddy wrap-muck, to wash myself. When I emerged a few minutes later, feeling as sleek as a seal, all bedclothes had been changed and implements scrubbed, the room standing immaculate.

In a way, the burden placed on luxury spas right now has never been heavier. While tasked with literally life-preserving responsibilities—social distancing between guests, mask-wearing, elevated cleaning procedures—spas have had to simultaneously make sure clients are able to block out the everyday realities related to the pandemic. The serene twilight state into which one ideally slips while receiving treatments at a spa is not easy to bring about even under the best of circumstances, but Shou Sugi Ban House tries its damndest. “You come here and immediately you feel calm,” Amy Cherry-Abitbol, a former corporate lawyer who left her practice to open Shou Sugi Ban, told me. “Don’t you feel calm?” she went on as we sat at a craggy stone table on the spa’s grounds, eating mussels and shrimp in broth sprinkled with edible flowers, a soothing breeze lightly ruffling our hair. As I looked around me, at the spa’s gray-shingled cedarwood structures set peacefully against the blue sky and the flawlessly manicured local greenery, I had to admit that at least for the moment, I did; and if things felt quite different right now outside the spa’s wooden gates, well, then, that was another story.