

THE 'ESPA' EXPERIENCE

As CEO and Founder of ESPA, Susan Harmsworth has refined the spa experience and has changed the way people look at urban hotel spas. Combining luxurious settings with world class treatments in over 45 spas, there is no stopping this irrepressible spa expert!

TEXT KRISTINA PÉREZ

At 65, Susan Harmsworth the CEO and Founder of ESPA shows no sign of slowing down, as the spa brand she launched in 1993 now has 45 spas under her management across the globe. After giving up her journalism career in the 1970s, Harmsworth joined Vidal Sassoon, which was opening across North America, and later started a successful day spa in Toronto. After a trip to France fuelled her interest in thalassotherapy (the healing power of the sea) clinics and the benefits of marine-based therapy she returned to the United Kingdom to manage the renowned Grayshott Hall in Surrey and had a hand in reinventing the spa experience by introducing complementary medicine and holistic health practitioners. Harmsworth used this accumulated knowledge to debut the ESPA brand with the Turnberry Resort and Spa in Scotland, making her a globally recognised spa expert. Over the past 15 years, she has expanded ESPA's operations from its headquarters in the U.K. to include spa concept and design through to pre-opening, recruitment, post-graduate training and provision of products and treatments. Harmsworth is now working on new projects that include an ESPA at the Peninsula opening next year in Shanghai and the Ritz Carlton Bangalore in 2010. *L'Officiel* caught up with her in Beijing at the opening of ESPA's The Peninsula Spa.

L'OFFICIEL: How have you seen the spa industry change during your 40 years in the business?

SUSAN HARMSWORTH: The spa industry is now mainstream with hardly a new hotel being built without a spa. The guest expectations are now very high and the budgets being invested in design and specifications are large. Spas now drive business into hotels. Look out for spa hotels rather than hotels with spas.

Have the clients and their needs changed?

In the spa industry, it's interesting how many more men are now visiting spas. ESPA has always attracted a high percentage of male clients as our product ranges and treatments are unisex. However, in the last couple of years, we've definitely seen a dramatic increase globally with regards to male clients visiting spas. In resort spas or business hotels (with a low percentage of external visitors) the male clientele can account for up to 50 percent.

What was your inspiration for founding ESPA and how is its philosophy different from other spa brands?

I created ESPA for a purpose. First came the need, the concept

and finally the reality. Increasingly, during a lifetime within the spa world, I realised that modern lifestyles are demanding more than just traditional skin care. I believe that as our world increases in speed there is a powerful and deep need to stop, consider and rediscover our natural balance. The ESPA philosophy is focused upon enhancing an individual's lifestyle in a way that is both holistic and versatile. Above all, our commitment is to products and treatments that really work. We never rest on our laurels or create 'cookie cutter' spas, we pride ourselves on making sure each ESPA spa is individual.

How do you incorporate the local culture into the design of the spa? In Beijing, for example?

The design concept of this spa is based upon an Imperial Garden, providing a haven of tradition and an accent of nature in the centre of the city. The materials used have been respectfully chosen to reflect the garden theme—stone carvings, wooden screens to provide areas of half-seclusion when moving through the spa, elements of traditional Chinese flowers and plants, antique Chinese silk embroidery of floral themes using accents of Chinese red, antique vases and glass works also using flashes of red in gentle lighting to bring warmth and focus to the spa.

When you approached the creation of the new ESPA in Beijing, which elements of traditional Chinese medicine did you take into consideration?

We considered and graciously implemented the elements of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) that we knew to be popular with all visitors to China. Combined with the fact that there are so many amazing sights to see in and around Beijing that involve a great deal of walking, the traditional elements that have been developed into luxurious treatment experiences or Peninsula Ceremonies address the main areas of concern—the feet and legs, back, neck and shoulders. Elements of TCM make up a great deal of the core ESPA philosophy and treatments so we are comfortable working with meridians and pressure points in a sophisticated and genuine manner. Taking traditional foot massage and genuinely reflective Chinese massage to another level, we target the areas that most visitors need addressing in the form of 'Vital Qi' a combination of Chinese massage and Reflex Zone Foot Therapy, using ESPA products to achieve ultimate relief from a walking-weary body.

Are there any new, location-specific treatments?

'The Jade Hot Stone Massage' is a Peninsula Ceremony created specifically for Peninsula Beijing. Jade is known as the 'stone of heaven' and is believed to possess many regenerating and rejuvenating qualities. It is lovely to be massaged with as it is so smooth. We use the stones gently warmed allowing the therapist to skillfully use them to work deeply over areas of tension and energy blockages.

Which ESPA treatment do you choose personally to unwind after so much jet-setting?

My favourite body treatment is the ESPA Oriental Joint Release. As I travel so much, it is really great for relaxation. The treatment

includes body rocking, entire body diagonal stretching and tension releasing rotational movements, as well as a deep Oriental Head Massage. It is perfect for releasing any blocked energy and I always feel deeply relaxed afterwards. I also love the ESPA Face and Back Facial. I am very much a 'mind person' so I find that any work on my head relaxes me more than anything else.

Do you have a favourite ESPA location?

There is more than one, dependent upon the need and mood. Peninsula Hong Kong has an exceptional team of therapists whose treatment skills and gracious customer care exceed all expectations within a beautiful spa environment. If you have more time and want to truly escape, One&Only Reethi Rah by ESPA in the Maldives commands an impressive space with spectacular views of the ocean, where natural healing therapies can be enjoyed in luxurious treatment villas.

Can you tell us more about the Ayurvedic influences in the ESPA treatments?

ESPA introduced a series of treatments over eight years ago, which are influenced by Ayurvedic philosophy. These treatments are extremely popular and very advanced, therefore only a select number of spas provide them, once their therapists attend our post-graduate training in order to preserve integrity and effective delivery. We don't profess to be Ayurvedic doctors, therefore it is important to stress that relaxation and balance is the objective of these treatments, they do not feature invasive or medical methodology. ESPA created three traditional Ayurvedic herbal oils and *oshadi* blends, which complement these experiences with authentic, *dosha* specific ingredients.

