

Soap, Perfumery & Cosmetics

Monthly Column for October

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What is it about water?

Marketing colleagues are becoming obsessed with the spa concept, and after looking at the reality I wondered why.

The old spa towns were where people used to make a pilgrimage each year to take the waters. It became fashionable to be ill, in fact there were many who became experts at being ill (a trait and skill that seems to have been continued by most mother-in-laws).

The whole spa culture started around the mid 1600s, but by the mid-1700s it had started to become a way of life and by the early 1800s, it was an absolute “must” in the social calendar if you wanted to be seen by the right people. Each spa has its own season and going at the wrong time was probably worse than not going at all. The main consideration was to be seen in the right place at the right time and dressed in the right clothes. Tunbridge Wells started the season in March and carried on until about late October/November after which it became the right time to be at Bath. The mid-1800s saw the spa towns running at full tilt, with even the smaller spa towns like Buxton, Epsom, Streatham, Barnet and Highgate enjoying a passing trade and the less affluent visitors. These places were where every opportunist made a quick profit and charged outrageous prices and no better was this observed than at Harrogate, Cheltenham and Royal Leamington Spa. Not content with the selection of English spas, Germany places like Wilbad, Wiesbaden and Baden-Baden became the watering holes of importance.

Why people suffered some of these awful smelling and often sulphurous waters is something that modern man may find difficult to contemplate - the taste of Epsom (Magnesium sulphate) salts in the waters of Epsom must have been vile. Malvern water, which by all accounts was quite pure and sweet at this time, was considered inferior, because it probably contained nothing at all!

If you had visited the spa because you were genuinely unwell (and there were a few who were in this position), then the regime could consist of a number of very different sessions. You might be immersed or encased in very hot and often evil-smelling mud or equally obnoxious black muck dug from a German bog. If it was a good day you might be almost boiled alive in concentrated seawater (brine) or various salts. A really easy day would consist of being blasted with a high-pressure fire hose, subjected to the stabbing pressure jets in a modified Sitz bath (a painful version of a modern Jacuzzi) or alternatively having vast columns of water dropped onto you from a great height. No doubt red raw, you were allowed to recover in a state of shock.

They had another ingenious treatment at some spas, which was to tightly encase the patient in the wrappings of numerous wet sheets until they were reduced to a helpless mummy-like state. Patients were kept like this for hours, sometimes in the cold, or sometimes in a steam room. It must have been absolute hell, especially if the final option of a skin scouring with a wet towel was selected. However, if you were feeling cold, then the next idea was guaranteed to warm you up.

Probably invented by the Marquis de Sade, was the idea of wrapping a person up in a blanket so tightly that he could not move (unless carried between two attendants). It was a variation of the wet sheet idea! Once bound and quite unable to move, the attendants would apply more and more layers of quilts and eiderdowns until the new and greatly elevated body temperature induced a huge sweating from which there was no relief for many hours. Bearing in mind that these blankets were used from one patient to the next without laundering, this must have been an experience all on its own. At least you could rest easy with the thought that all the poisons had been eliminated from your body.

Eventually, you would be allowed to simply soak in the open baths. Some might be heated, some might be freezing cold, and some spas had a variety. In many (if not most) cases, the previous occupants had been less than careful about their personal hygiene and so many bathers reported the discomfort of a thick scum on the surface of the water.

In some spas one could take a vapour bath, where you could enjoy the sensation of being entombed in a brick cell in which was burnt sulphur and brimstone. By all accounts this was quite a good treatment, probably because you could appreciate the wonders of coming through the whole experience and still being alive.

I had the pleasure of visiting St. Malo some years ago, and took a traditional selection of spa treatments coupled with thalassotherapy (seaweed treatments). It is with embarrassment that I must confess that nothing has changed, though everything is clean, all the pain and torture is still present. The fire hoses, the wrapping in unctuous muds and pastes and the extremes of temperature are still practiced with Victorian vigour.

The use of muds and the vile smelling contents of bogs is the subject of a conference in Rome on Thermalism, where the benefits of Pelan and other peats and clays will be seriously discussed by dermatologists and skin care specialists from around the world. Sometimes the best sceptic is a quiet sceptic, because I am sure that the benefits of spa treatments are going to be proven truly beneficial and that my marketing colleagues have probably got it right. I am off to book my holiday – Droitwich perhaps.

