

The life aquatic

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at the huge Fortina Palace is one of three spas at the hotel, which has also introduced therapeutic spa suites equipped with Dermalife detox machines and showers for mud and algae treatments. In Turkey, the family-friendly thalasso resort of Lykia World – 293 rooms, 19 pools, 10 restaurants – is an inexpensive alternative to the excellent but scarily priced Forte Village Resort & Spa in Sardinia. And in Madeira, the spectacularly located cliff-top CS Madeira Atlantic Resort & Sea Spa will soon have a rival for its thalasso treatments with the opening of a new spa hotel, Colombo's Resort, on the neighbouring island of Porto Santo.

Further afield, the Samudra Retreat Samui on Koh Samui, Thailand, opened last December with pavilions by the beach for mud wraps and Dead Sea salt scrubs. On Mauritius, the seductive Shanti Ananda Maurice combines thalasso with Ayurveda, while in South Africa the Arabella Western Cape Hotel & Spa near Hermanus lets guests enjoy a maximum marine experience, lolling in seawater baths while gazing out to sea (whales come thrillingly close).

Piping in and filtering seawater is an involved process, though, and many spas focus simply on treatments using just seaweed, algae or marine mud, which carry far stronger concentrations of minerals. The sleek Kohler spa at The Old Course Hotel, Golf Resort & Spa in St Andrews, Scotland, for instance, uses Phytocéane, a French thalasso line based on a vegetal coral, *Jania rubens*, with excellent moisturising properties. 'So many skin problems – dullness, dryness, lack of bloom – are a result of dehydration, and we're delighted with the results,' says Kohler's spa director.

Marine-mud therapy is practised on the Italian island of Ischia at the 15th-century Mezzatorre Resort & Spa and L'Albergo della Regina Isabella, which has seawater and thermal pools. In Puglia, the resident doctor at the 50-room Masseria San Domenico resort is fascinated by methods of

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preventing disease. 'Algotherapy with algae and mud combined with steam, I find, has an excellent curative and detox effect, results which have been proved by measuring the hydration, PH-balance and sebum before and after treatment,' he says. 'Thalassotherapy is also very effective in rehabilitation after fractures. Guests are so happy after treatment; I would almost say they are addicted.'

And in Jordan, on the shore of the Dead Sea – which is in fact a lake that loses water only through evaporation, hence its highly concentrated mineral content – the new Kempinski Ishtar Hotel opens this spring with what it says is the largest thalasso spa in the Middle East. Treatments will use, of course, Dead Sea mud, renowned for its almost miraculous effect on skin disorders such as acne, eczema and psoriasis and on treating muscle sprains and joint pain.

Meanwhile, in Ireland, I discover the kind of seaweed bath I gave myself in Maine. Well, almost. The organic seaweed used at the new spa at glamorous Dromoland Castle is harvested by hand by a company called Voya, off the coast of County Sligo, and checked for fishy foreign bodies before guests plunge in. 'Seaweed wraps are an excellent cure for fluid retention and the feedback we get is very positive,' says Dromoland's spa manager Michelle Ryan.

Voya has run a 10-room seaweed-bath centre in Sligo since 1913. According to its managing director, Mark Walton, the history of thalasso in Ireland goes back even further. 'The Irish were collecting seaweed for medicinal purposes way back in the 1700s,' he says. 'They had to: they couldn't afford a doctor. Seaweed baths are still very popular here. Babies are brought in because seaweed's so good for cradle cap, and one of our regulars is an 85-year-old retired farmer. He comes every week, for his rheumatism, and you can't call him a spa fashion victim. Seawater, seaweed – we came from the sea and it's right the sea should do us so much good.'

THE FIVE BEST SPAS FOR THALASSOTHERAPY

Vilalara Thalassa Resort, Algarve, Portugal
Set on a breezy cliff-top in an undeveloped stretch of the Algarve, the resort has a kindly, quiet atmosphere that makes it a good place to come on your own. Its thalasso centre is one of the best anywhere, with two seawater and three freshwater pools; Turkish bath, algae and mud treatments; aqua yoga; and doctors and an osteopath supervising. A spa menu in the hotel restaurant does delicious non-carb meals (400 calories maximum). New owner Amorim is rebranding it as the flagship of its new spa brand, Blue & Green.
00 351 282 320000;
www.softelvilalara.com.
Doubles from €175

Hotel Svoboda, Strunjan Bay, Slovenia
An absolute bargain, yards from a beach, with spa doctors specialising in the treatment of respiratory diseases, rheumatic pain and osteoporosis. Treatments include full-body seaweed wraps, mechanical lymph-drainage sessions of legs, and massages with mud. It's a fairly functional hotel (the restaurant is self-service, for instance), but well equipped, with good fitness, sports and children's activities. Most staff speak some English.
00 386 7 373 1924;
www.slovenia.info.
Doubles from £80

Thermae del Parco, Forte Village Resort, Sardinia
Sprawling resort with seven hotels, on the edge of a mile-long beach. Expensive, quiet but flash, and brilliant for children, who can be dispatched at the children's club or teen centre (with go-karting) while you head for the spa. Work your way around six outdoor thalasso pools, each with a different temperature and salinity; at the end of a week of daily sessions you feel terrific. Italian footballers visit to recuperate; when Ronaldo damaged his knee, a week here in the pools helped him get fit enough to play again.
00 39 070 92171;
www.fortevillageresort.com.
Doubles from €430

Kempinski Hotel Ishtar, Dead Sea, Jordan
One of the new generation of glamorous thalasso resorts. On the Jordan shore of the Dead Sea, this hotel will, when the spa is completed this spring, be using some of the most famously curative mud in the world. Dead Sea mud has an incredibly high concentration of minerals, and its effect on skin problems is renowned. Even if there is nothing wrong with you, floating in the super-salty water is deeply relaxing.
00 962 5 356 8888;
www.kempinski.com.
Doubles from £115

Gurney's Inn, Montauk, New York, USA
Has a spectacular setting on a vast, broad, white-sand Hamptons beach; the relentless roar of the surf alone makes you feel better. Opened in 1926, the hotel feels like a wonderfully old-fashioned slice of Americana. The spa, opened 25 years ago, is the only true thalasso centre in the whole of the USA, with a large indoor seawater pool and enormous range of mud, algae and seaweed detoxes, anti-cellulite and curative treatments. The late founder of the spa, Nick Monte (who lived to the age of 90), drank a glass of seawater every day.
00 1 631 668 2345;
www.gurneysinns.com.
Doubles from \$335