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Don't be fobbed off with an overpriced footrub in a hotel basement; this year, try a *real* spa break that gives you *real* results. Whether you want to relax, recharge, detox or slim, we've selected the very best. Just turn the page; you'll feel better already...

ILLUSTRATIONS: YULIA BRODSKAYA



BARCELO ASIA GARDENS, SPAIN

What a bizarre, beguiling place this is: high-rise Benidorm may be on the horizon, but here in the dry hinter-hills, it's another world... Barceló Asia Gardens resembles a resort you'd expect to find in Mexico or Polynesia: white daybeds in thatched gazebos, **wild gardens of hibiscus and strelitzia, bubbling basins** and giant stone head sculptures. It's a hulking place, but a meditative mood prevails – not least in the pleasingly plain Thai Spa, with its indoor-to-outdoor pool, and its therapists, who've been trained at the Wat Po Temple in Bangkok. Tatami beds are used for the classic Thai massage: slip into ethnic pyjamas and you'll soon be dough in the hands of a specialist. The going can be tough for the uninitiated: no limb is left un-yanked, no toe un-pinched, no inch of scalp un-karated, but it sure feels good afterwards.

● *A seven-day Thai Spa Experience costs £967pp, B&B, including three 60-minute Thai treatments each; daily 90-minute yoga, meditation and Chi Kung session. Doubles start from £182, B&B. Thai massage, £86 for 60 mins (00800 4227 2356, www.asiagardens.es).*



IN THE UK

PAN PENINSULA, LONDON

It seems spa heresy to suggest a chilled-out afternoon in the UK's financial centre, Canary Wharf. Here, worker bees barely have time to inhale packed sandwiches at their desks, let alone stop for a massage. But that's exactly why the spa at Pan Peninsula is such a find: it's moments from the buzz of the shops and cinemas – **but nobody seems to know about it.** Up on the third floor of a glass skyscraper, where you'd expect to find a CEO's office, you'll discover a contemporary-but-calm spa with chromotherapy steam cabin, crystal laconium, traditional dry sauna, sensory shower and a hydrotherapy pool. Treatments have an Asian slant (this is one of the Thai-born Six Senses group), the most relaxing being the epic 110-minute Thai herbal massage; it will take every scrap of stamina you have not to fall asleep. And if any poor office worker reading this thinks their daily workload prevents them from any pampering, the good news is it's open till 9pm in the evening.

● *Thai herbal massage, £120 for 80 mins; £170 for 110 mins (020 7531 2320, www.sixsenses.*



INN AT PALMETTO BLUFF, USA

How many people can say they wallowed in the tub, post-spa treatment, in full view of a two-metre alligator? And *still* felt relaxed? Anyone can at Palmetto Bluff in South Carolina, a *Gone With The Wind*-style mansion with rooms spread across the estate in white clapboard cottages. Its spa, like the rooms, sits on a freshwater lagoon (hence the alligators), so **you might also spot blue egrets, bald eagles and snapper turtles as you bob.** And why the bath? Because each of the spa's treatment rooms has an open-air veranda overlooking the lagoon (don't worry, nobody can see you through the old-style mozzie screens), where a clawfoot tub awaits, filled with lemon balm and jasmine. Therapies run the gamut, but all have a Southern twist – pumpkin and peach body peels or a rejuvenating bath sprinkled with Spanish moss and citrus. No wonder Southern gals look so fine.

● *Body wraps and scrubs from £94 for 60 mins; a bath filled with scents to suit you can be added for £42. One-bed cottages from £287, room only (00 1 843 706 6500,*



HOSPES MARICEL, SPAIN

For those who only ever manage to catch 19 winks, Mallorca's Hospes Maricel hopes to help with its Learn to Sleep programme. The wood-and-stone decor and sea views in its new Bodyna spa are calming, but it's the appliance of science that gives this retreat its edge. After you've unwound in one of the thermal cabins, and had **a medical assessment with a sleep pathologist**, sensors are taped to your head, face and chest. Then you're left to slide into crisp Egyptian cotton sheets to get some zzzz's – not easy with wires coming out of your ears. Luckily, the earthy eco-chic of the 'Dreamer's bedrooms' – dry-stone walls, floor-to-ceiling windows, natural fabrics – makes drifting off easier. Next morning, you're given a prescribed programme to address your sleep problem. Expect tailored treatments and exercises, sunlight sessions and relaxation techniques. By the end of four days, the insomniac should be rested, relaxed and equipped with strategies to get a good night's kip every night.

● *The four-night Learn to Sleep programme costs £2,650pp (00 34 971 707744, www.hospes.com), full board, with consultations*