With massage as the most-requested service of many of these establishments, more opportunities for therapists are available than ever before. Here’s an overview of just some of them.

BY JOANN MILIVOJEVIC
ast a net over the spa world, and you’ll find a colorful cast of players: day spas, mineral spas, resort spas, medical spas and cruise spas. There are also “spalons,” a hybrid between a hair salon and a spa where the focus is primarily hair with some spa services, such as pedicures, manicures, facials and perhaps a massage table. Another growing segment is dental spas, which feature some pampering treatments to help ease the stress of getting your teeth drilled.

Spas come in many shapes and sizes and have become as trendy as the makeover TV show, “Queer Eye for the Straight Guy.” In fact, some would argue that the Fab Five have influenced the growth in another type of a spa—those that cater exclusively to men.

The entire spa industry is exploding, and spas are becoming more mainstream,” confirms Lynne Walker McNees, ISPA, executive director. “Spas can be found in large and small towns across the country. The spa industry is indeed growing by leaps and bounds. It’s an industry ripe with opportunity for massage entrepreneurs and those who seek staff employment alike. We’ll take a look at some common and not-so-common spas to see how massage fits into the overall picture. How Big Is It?

The International Spa Association (ISPA) was finalizing their latest report at press time. We present to you here preliminary findings from its recently released 2004 study, as well as statistics from its 2002 study.* According to ISPA’s latest findings, there are nearly 12,000 spas in the United States—a 10 percent increase from 2002. The ISPA studies sliced and diced the numbers to look at the various trends in spas, including the role of massage. PricewaterhouseCoopers conducted the survey, which included phone interviews with 820 spas, and 10 in-depth interviews with spa executives across the United States.

How do spas make their money? Treatment rooms are the largest single segment, accounting for half the revenue. On average, spas generate $48,090 per treatment room. Massage is the most popular treatment, earning 49 percent of treatment room income, followed by facials at 34 percent and wet treatments at 15 percent, according to the study. Let’s take a closer look at various segments of the industry.

Day Spas

According to ISPA, 75 percent of spas are dedicated day spas—representing the lion’s share of the industry. Preliminary findings from the 2004 study show that day spas have increased nationwide by 10 percent since 2002. A distant second are resort/hotel spas, with a 12 percent share.

Hannelore Leavy, founder and executive director of the Day Spa Association, reasoned that the exponential growth of day spas relates to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. After the catastrophe, people were reluctant to travel, yet still sought a refuge for relaxation. “People wanted to go where they felt nurtured and safe,” explains Leavy, “and they wanted to stay close to home.” Day spas answered that need.

Other factors leading to day spa and overall industry growth include increased general awareness of spa benefits (including massage), and aging empty-nest baby boomers, who find themselves with more time and money.

A variety of people from all walks of life seek out day spas so it’s no surprise to discover that they market to a variety of consumers. Some spas promote themselves to the masses, while others target niche markets that appeal to only certain clients (such as those that are just for men).

But no matter the target market, day spas share some common attributes. Spa Finder, an organization that connects consumers with spas through their Web site [www.spafinder.com] defines a day spa as: “an establishment that provides beautifying, relaxing or pampering experiences that can last an hour or may take a whole day. The spa can be freestanding or connected to health clubs, hotels, or department stores.” But regardless of whom they market to or where they are, massage is generally the top-selling service in day spas.

There are many reasons why massage is so popular in day spas. The benefits of massage are becoming more clear to the general public, and day spas, in particular, are often the doorway into a client’s first massage experience. Even for experienced spa-goers, the rationale for spa services, including a massage, is taking on a new

International Spa Association (ISPA) executive director: “Spas can be found in large and small towns across the country. The spa industry is indeed growing by leaps and bounds. It’s an industry ripe with opportunity for massage entrepreneurs and those who seek staff employment alike. We’ll take a look at some common and not-so-common spas to see how massage fits into the overall picture.

The Rocky Mountain states are filled with spas that cater to both customers—and therapists—who love the outdoors. The Red Mountain Spa in St. George, Utah, offers several specialized massages tailored to mountain climbers and those who seek staff employment alike. We’ll take a look at some common and not-so-common spas to see how massage fits into the overall picture.

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meaning. The ISPA study cites “that many people no longer see the spa as ‘pampering,’ but as a requisite to stay healthy and look good.”

Industry experts concur with that position. “The health care system has problems,” says Susie Ellis, president of Spa Finder.

“People are becoming more self-responsible and are finding it [spa and massage] contributes to health.”

The ISPA study points to a change in the nature of spa services. “While the majority of day spas are sole proprietors or small chains—a move that is in keeping with trends revealed in the 2002 ISPA study—there are still those who want to share the benefits of spa treatments with their community.”

She opened her spa 11 years ago, and estimates that about 60 percent of her business comes from massage. Hohn recently added four massage therapists on staff, bringing the total to nine. She pays a flat fee by treatment, and provides benefits such as health insurance, a $500 annual credit for continuing education and vacation after two years. Her massage therapists do both traditional massages and treatments, such as body scrubs and seaweed wraps.

“I think there is tendency for massage therapists to think that working in a day spa is more ‘froufrou’ versus doing massage in a medical or chiropractor’s setting,” says Hohn. “But body treatments are very beneficial. Seaweed body wraps are great for getting rid of toxins, and salt rubs help circulation.”

Hohn’s clientele are primarily professional women between 45 and 55 years of age, but she’s seeing the percentage of men going up each year. And she is not alone in experiencing the increase in male clients. ISPA’s latest study also sees an increase in men who go to spas, a trend that has not been lost on Tom Schmidt who now has three spas, one that primarily targets women and two that cater exclusively to men—Schmidy’s Retreat for Men, in Minneapolis.

There’s no mistaking that Schmidy’s is for men—you’ll find masculine colors like deep browns and greens and mahogany wood accents. Schmidt likens his men’s day spas as “distinctly male allure such as a ‘six pack,’” where you can buy five services and get the sixth free, and the “full of Schmidt” package, which includes body treatments and hair cuts.

Schmidt’s derives about 25 percent of its revenue from massage. Though waxing is more popular than massage at his shops, he takes massage very seriously.

“Massage sort of saved me in terms of stress,” explains Schmidt. “Therapists are extremely important to me. I look for very healthy looking people who love the lifestyle, and are beyond just getting out of massage school with at least two to three years experience.”

In addition to deep tissue and sports massage, Schmidt’s offers stone and Thai massage. As is common in many spas, on-site training gets massage therapists up to speed on more unusual modalities. In fact, most spas (85 percent) pay for employee training.

Schmidy’s employs five full-time massage therapists, and provides benefits such as health insurance, paid vacations and even 401(k) retirement plans. Schmidt also requires his employees sign a “no compete” contract. While the 2002 ISPA study cites average massage therapist compensation to be in the $20,000 to $30,000 range, Schmidt says his top therapists start at about $45,000 and earn up to $60,000 annually, including tips.

Ever the entrepreneur, Schmidt is in the process of starting a small chain—a move that is in keeping with trends revealed in the 2002 ISPA study. While the majority of day spas are sole proprietorships and small corporations, industry consolidation is on the rise.

“We think the success will come from staying small and staying local,” says Schmidt. “Men really like convenience, and a big space can be kind of scary to them because they are not as comfortable with large spa experiences. Intimate, friendly and feeling welcomed are really important.”

Dental Spas

Many people don’t exactly look forward to dental appointments, and that’s why some enterprising dentists are making the experience a little more pleasurable. (See article, page 26.) And it turns out what’s good for the client can also be very good for business—for both the dentist and quite possibly for the massage therapist, too.

While the idea of a dental spa may seem like an odd one, it really isn’t. For years pediatrics have created more kid-friendly environments by adding fish tanks, colorful walls and toys all without compromising medical services. That patient-friendly trend is
now making its way to the dental office. In a recent survey of its membership, the American Dental Association (ADA) found that about half of their surveyed dentists offer some sort of spa or office amenities to patients. Of those that do offer some kind of pampering service, however, only 5 percent offer massages, facials, pedicures and manicures. Yet, according to the ADA, a growing number of dentists say amenities persuade patients to make and keep appointments and help them stay relaxed during dental procedures.

Timothy Dotson of Perfect Smile Dental Spa in Chicago has been a dentist for 17 years, the last three of which he has included “spa” services in his practice. The office setting includes candles and trickling waterfalls in every room, set against a relaxing color scheme of earth tones.

“I, too, have been a little dental phobic,” says Dotson, “and decided to address people like me.”

Dotson started small, with a simple massage chair, but when a patient, Erika Korak, mentioned she would be graduating from the Chicago School of Massage Therapy, a bigger idea was born.

Today, Korak gives patients 10-minute chair massages after their appointments—and for those who want it, a relaxing paraffin wax treatment for their hands—at no extra cost.

“I never thought in a million years I’d work in a dental office,” says Korak.

In addition to tune-up massages, Dotson has set up Korak with her own massage treatment room. She hands out her card to patients, who can then schedule an appointment with her.

She is building her own clientele and splits the treatment fee 60/40. She keeps the 60 percent—getting a higher-per-massage fee than she otherwise would.

And Dotson couldn’t be happier with the arrangement—his business has grown by 100 percent.

On the more extreme side, there’s ImageMax Dental Day Spa in Houston. Here, patients can get much more than a drill and smile makeover. They can get Botox injections, a foot massage, laser hair removal and partake in an oxygen breathing bar to “relax yet energize the mind.”

The pampering services offered by dentists vary widely, and some don’t refer to themselves as dental spas per se, making it difficult to know just how many dentists are jumping on the spa amenities bandwagon. But more are sure to come on board. This year at the ADA’s 144th Annual Session, Shirley Brown, D.M.D.; Ph.D.; Michael Unthank, D.D.S. and Risa Simon, a certified management consultant, spoke to dentists across the country about creating a “comfort zone” for their patients by focusing on guest hospitality and comfort amenities.

According to Brown, “A dentist’s first priority is the delivery of high-quality oral health care. Offering spa-like services and a relaxing atmosphere might be one way to attract otherwise reluctant patients to come in for necessary dental treatment. I think people will enjoy having a variety of dental practices to choose from based upon their individual needs.”

Now that’s something to smile about.
If you’ve dreamed about traveling to faraway lands, a tour of duty aboard a cruise ship just might be the ticket for you. Once tucked away at the bottom of a ship, today’s spas often occupy the top deck with stunning views of the seas. And as in other spas, massage ranks as the most requested service.

Steiner Leisure [www.steinerleisure.com] supplies and manages spas on more than 100 ships that cruise to destinations from Alaska to the Caribbean, to the Mediterranean and beyond. Steiner Leisure employs thousands of spa staff, including massage therapists who work cruise lines like Silversea, Carnival and Crystal Cruises. Facilities and treatments vary from ship to ship, but can include such exotic offerings as dry flotation treatments, Thalassotherapy and Ionithermie algae wraps.

In addition to visiting exotic ports of call, cruise ship spas provide massage therapists the opportunity to work with an international staff, and to learn new massage and body treatment techniques. According to Jody Droze, manager of Luxury Operations Maritime at Steiner Leisure, massage therapists must be fully licensed and everyone must attend Steiner’s London training academy for a duration of two to eight weeks. Recruits learn about the essentials of customer service, the realities of working on cruises and, most importantly, how to become skilled at signature techniques such as the Ultimate Indulgence, a synchronized four-hands massage method.

“Our treatments are created by Elemis, which is owned by Steiner,” explains Droze. “They have created 24 exotic spa treatments that incorporate many different cultures.”

Among them is the “lomi lomi” massage, reportedly a centuries-old technique that was used on Hawaiian kings and queens. While most passengers will try an exotic body treatment on their first visit, Droze points out that those who get a second treatment often book a more traditional massage.

To start employment with Steiner, massage therapists sign an eight-month contract and live on a ship—with room and board provided. Compensation varies widely depending on season and ship, and ranges from $200 to $1,000 per week, according to Droze. There are no medical, vacation or retirement benefits. After the initial eight-month contract, massage therapists can work shorter stints such as four- or six-month rotations. Most massage therapists do three or four contracts, while some have worked aboard ships for several years.

While time off may include strolling along beach in Mexico or riding a donkey on a Greek Island, workdays can be long—up to 12 hours—and massage therapists administer body treatments as well as conventional massages.
“It’s a very different work environment and you need an open mind,” cites Droze. “But it’s also very exciting because you get to see the world and earn money at the same time.”

Steiner also owns Mandara Spas, which are both on board ships such as Silverseas, and in luxury resort hotels in locations such as Thailand, China and Hawaii.

**Destination/Resort/Hotel Spas**

If you have a taste for the exotic, but prefer to be land-based, consider a destination or hotel spa. As on cruise ships, customer service is of the utmost importance, and most massage therapists are expected to do body treatments in addition to massage.

Just like there are particular living conditions to consider aboard a cruise ship, customer service is of the utmost importance, and most massage therapists are expected to do body treatments in addition to massage.

The Westin, part of Starwood Hotels and Resorts Worldwide, has spas at a number of their properties, including the Westin Casuarina on Grand Cayman in the Caribbean. Set on a beautiful stretch of famed Seven Mile Beach, the Hibiscus Spa is a full service spa offering a variety of wet treatments, facials and massage.

Joette Thompson, one of the top massage therapists at Westin’s Hibiscus Spa, says that good massage therapists can make as much as $1,000 per week (tax-free in the Cayman Islands) offering a variety of wet treatments, facials and massage. Casuarina on Grand Cayman in the Caribbean. Set on a beautiful island an especially interesting place to work and play. While

Many spas like this one have developed their own product line, which can bring in significant income. Savvy therapists who acquire a good working knowledge of spa products will increase their overall marketability.

According to Thompson, many massage therapists make the mistake of thinking they’re on vacation when they work in beautiful places such as the Cayman Islands. But work is as demanding here as it is anywhere else. Because of this, the average massage therapist lasts about six months. Thompson, a Caribbean native, is an exception. She’s been with the Westin for six years. “Those who are successful involve themselves in the community,” explains Thompson. “And it’s very easy to make friends here.”

Grand Cayman is just an hour’s flight from Miami. It is renown as an offshore financial center, and as a world-class scuba diving destination. As such, it tends to attract wealthier travelers, and features many attractions for more discriminating travelers such as gourmet restaurants, golfing, deep-sea fishing and resorts with fine spas.

Living on this pristine island can indeed be a joy, with days spent on a silky sand beach and frolicking in warm clear Caribbean waters. But it’s also a small island, just 22 miles long and seven miles wide with a population hovering around 35,000. People from all over the world live on Grand Cayman—about 50 percent are non-Caymanians. The mix of nationalities can make the island an especially interesting place to work and play. While the spa is often in the market for good massage therapists, Thompson advises that you visit the island before you apply.

The Westin’s Hibiscus Spa looks for licensed massage therapists with a minimum of 500 hours hands-on experience, and prefers those with a variety of modalities. Unlike many spas, massage therapists aren’t required to administer beauty treatments.

There are, of course, also many luxurious resort and destination spas within the continental United States. In general, you’ll find the highest concentration of resort/hotel spas in the southwest. But there are exceptions: The Kingsmill Resort and Spa in Williamsburg, Virginia, is an award-winning property on the shores of the historic James River. King’s Mill, owned by Anheuser-Busch, has Virginia’s largest golf resort with three 18-hole championship courses and a 9-hole Par 3 golf course. There are a variety of instruction opportunities for the novice and seasoned golfer alike.

Both hotel guests and people from the community partake in the spa and fitness center at King’s Mill. In line with most other spas, about 80 percent of the clientele are female. There are 10 massage therapists on staff who are either full or part time, and massage accounts for about 60 percent of the business.

According to King’s Mill Spa Director Kate Mearns, they are an exception to the industry’s rapid employee turnover trend. The spa opened in 1996 and some massage therapists have been on board since inception. “We offer flexible schedules and cross training in massage and other treatments,” says Mearns. “Massage therapists can choose to do only massage or they can do both, it’s their choice.”

Massage therapists are paid by the hour with commission and tips. While employees get discounted services so they, too, can enjoy the spa services, there are no health or vacation benefits offered. The spa does, however, provide for training. Massage therapists can take advantage of both on-site and off-site workshops. Work hours are flexible, a benefit appreciated by many massage therapists, according to Mearns.

**Industry Outlook**

New players in the market include luxury and medical spas. Spa Finder defines a medical spa as one that combines spa expertise with medical cosmetic services such as Botox and microdermabrasion. Medical spas can be day spas or overnight spas, and massage therapists figure highly into the mix of services. While still a small part of the overall spa industry (2.8 percent), they are growing fast and are expected to gain momentum in the years ahead.

“On the luxury end, I’m seeing that people are choosing longer massages, such as 90-minute, two-hour and even four-hour massages,” notes Ellis. “I’m also seeing a trend toward booking time instead of treatment. For example, in place of booking a sports or Thai massage, clients book a time slot, usually two hours. The therapist consults with the client to figure out what the client really needs.”

In answer to the growing luxury market, Spa Finder has relaunched and renamed its flagship magazine, now called Luxury Spas. The bimonthly magazine began appearing on newsstands earlier this fall.

As shown by the most recent ISPA study, spas of all types continue to grow at a healthy pace, and show no signs of slowing down.

“If we had reached saturation, we’d see spas closing,” says Ellis. “We’re seeing spas being added to our program.”

Studies, industry experts and spa owners concur that massage has been, and will continue to be, a mainstay spa service—creating a wide range of opportunities for massage therapists.

JoAnn Milivojevic is a freelance writer, based in Chicago, Illinois, who hopes to sample the variety of spa massage services very soon. She can be reached at: JoAnnmill@comcast.net.