



RETURN TO NATURE WITH AN Eco Retreat

With the environment coming to the forefront of our collective consciousness, many environmentally friendly, or “green,” words and terms have entered the popular lexicon. One of these, “eco retreat,” is increasingly used to describe spas and retreat centers that offer nature-based vacations along with environmental education.

by Karen Menehan

Renewing body and spirit at an eco retreat can be a life-changing experience, one that helps you create a sense of balance within yourself and within your relationship to nature.

Most spas and retreat centers offer outdoor activities, and many provide nature classes—but an eco retreat should do more than offer guests a natural experience, spa-industry experts say. What happens behind the scenes, in terms of healthy environmental practices, is just as important. Another thing they agree on: Resorts and spas are operating at varying levels of commitment to the environment, so several factors may affect how you choose your next getaway.

“An eco retreat is an environmentally sustainable and socially responsible vacation destination with an environmental educational component,” explains Chrissa J. Pullicino, media relations manager for Omega Institute for Holistic Studies in Rhinebeck, New York. “Eco retreats seek to minimize their environmental impact, support their local community and its economy, and educate staff and visitors on sustainable practices and environmental conservation.”

Here, Pullicino and spa-industry colleagues share recommendations on what to look for when choosing a retreat that will improve not only your health, but also the health of our planet.

Celebrate nature

One definition of eco retreat is “a place that celebrates the outdoors and surrounding wilderness

At the Omega Institute, woodland hiking trails, gardens and a lake for swimming, kayaking and canoeing are available to guests.

Other nature-based activities offered by eco retreats throughout North America include outdoor yoga classes, backpacking, mountain biking, meditation, walking, trail running and orienteering.

Connecting to nature allows your mind and body to focus on the present moment, instead of your

usual work-, family-, technology- and duty-based life, Johnson says.

“It allows us to retain perspective about what’s important and how insignificant each of us really is in the grander scope of nature, the environment and the beauty that surrounds us,” she adds. “It enables us to step back and experience life in a simpler, less complicated way and to shift our focus from ourselves to a more peaceful and yet powerful setting.”

Nature can also teach us about ourselves and our place in the circle of life, and eco retreats tap into that by offering environmental education.

The Omega Institute leads the way in this area. Its Omega Center for Sustainable Living is an environmental education center that features a classroom for visitors who want to learn more about green building and sustainable living, as well as a water garden and constructed wetland to treat 5 million gallons of wastewater per year.

“The center demonstrates how nature, technology

and society can be integrated in a holistic way, honoring the connection we share with each other and with the Earth,” Pullicino says. The center is scheduled to open later this year.

Less ambitious yet still important education ranges from environmental writing workshops at the Women’s Environmental Institute retreat and conference center in North Branch, Minnesota, to workshops on organic farming, sustainable living, rainforest ecology and biodiversity at the Rainforest Retreat Eco Lodge in Karnataka, India, and teachings in environmental sustainability and horticulture at the Andrews Environmental Retreat Center near Madison, Wisconsin, where guests may also participate in ecological restorations.

Behind the scenes

Spas and retreat centers that bill themselves as “eco” can be at very different points on the environmental path. This actually makes perfect sense, notes spa consultant Amy MacDonald, whose company, Amy MacDonald & Associates, specializes in helping spas plan and implement environmentally healthy practices. Although it has been possible for any facility to engage in nature-friendly practices for decades, stewarding the environment has taken on new urgency only in recent years. Also, MacDonald adds, consumers—spa guests—are at varying stages of environmental knowledge and consciousness.

So choosing a spa or retreat based on its environmental practices is oftentimes a reflection of what is important to spa guests when they think about

what being green means to them, she explains.

“For some people, it’s knowing [the retreat is] not using a lot of plastics; for other people, it might be that it’s doing its best to conserve water; for other people, it’s that it’s doing its best with solar and wind,” MacDonald says. “Basically [they’ll choose] a spa that lines up with their core values.

“Some people might go to a spa just because it recycles,” she adds. “If that meets their needs, at least they’re not going to a place that doesn’t do anything.”

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area, and provides options less dependent on technology,” explains Holly Johnson, a spokesperson for Devil’s Thumb Ranch resort and spa in Colorado’s Rocky Mountains. “It’s an experience that celebrates the ‘leave only footprints’ philosophy of bringing back what you take in and leaving what nature has in place.”

R & R Resorts bills itself as “committed to creating a transformational space for individuals to experience wellness through nature.” R & R owns and operates the wellness-and-retreat centers Pura Vida, in Costa Rica’s Alajuela province; Pura Vida USA, in Georgia’s Blue Ridge Mountain foothills; and Maya Tulum, on Mexico’s Yucatan Peninsula. These properties offer activities, such as hikes through the Costa Rican rainforest, kayaking, nature trail walks, snorkeling and other nature-inspired activities.

At Devil’s Thumb, which bills itself as “environmentally friendly,” guests may ski, canoe and hike, along with other nature-based activities.

If you drive or fly to any spa or retreat, offset your carbon emissions at www.carbonfund.org or another website.

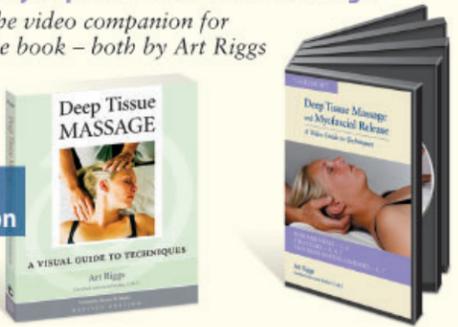
The majority—76 percent—of U.S. spas have incorporated environmentally sustainable practices into their business plans, according to Megan Newquist, director of public relations for the International Spa Association. These include basic steps, such as recycling and use of e-mail instead of paper-based communications; more advanced activities, such as using organic products and nontoxic cleaning supplies; and even more progressive practices, such as gathering rainwater for reuse and building facilities with indigenous, sustainable materials—adobe, straw and reclaimed wood among them.

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“We’re seeing energy-efficient laundry systems, spas encouraging guests to cut down on the number of towels they use, the use of eco-friendly paraffin in our manicure and pedicure treatments, recyclable packaging,” Newquist adds. “At destination spas and [other types of] spas where cuisine is offered, many are opting for organic, vegetarian products made with absolutely no animal testing and no machinery farming.”

If you care about the environmental practices at your retreat center, find out what those practices are.

The variety of environmentally friendly practices implemented at spas is as diverse as the spas themselves. At Devil’s Thumb, the spa’s pool and Jacuzzi are heated by geothermal heat, an environmentally friendly means of pulling warmth from the Earth. This resort also uses natural, local ingredients in its spa products. And Fégate Island Private, a spa in the Seychelles selected as a finalist in *Condé Nast Traveler’s* 2008 World Savers Awards contest, recently launched a fleet of 14 solar-powered guest buggies “as part of an ongoing drive towards achieving carbon-negative status,” its website notes. “The new buggies will lead to a reduction in CO2 emissions of almost 42 tons per year.”

The Omega Institute takes its commitment to the environment perhaps further than any other North American retreat facility: 100 percent of Omega’s electricity comes from wind and solar technology, the institute purchases organic food whenever possible from local farms and does not purchase factory-farmed animal products. Among many other actions, Omega has installed water stations, is phasing out the sale of bottled water and creates and preserves habitats for native animals.

Do your homework

Some spas claim—as any sort of business might—to be a lot more eco-friendly than they really are, a practice called greenwashing, in an attempt to cash in on the public’s growing concern over the environment, MacDonald says. Other spas might have good intentions, but do not know how to go about implementing healthy practices, she adds.

“At the end of the day, a lot of companies large and small don’t want to go the extra mile [or] they get overwhelmed,” she says. “I keep telling them, ‘It’s baby steps. If you’re going to say you’re an eco retreat, then do your homework and be transparent.’”

The guest needs to do his or her homework, too. If you care about the environmental practices at your retreat center, call and speak to a spokesperson there. Then follow up on what they tell you, MacDonald suggests. If they say they use organic body-care products, for example, check the product company’s record to see if it’s really certified organic.

You can also check with the spa or retreat center to see if it has committed to any environmental standards or certifications available. Although there is no certification pertaining specifically to eco retreats, the Green Spa Network’s (<http://greenspanetwork.org>) member spas must sign a pledge indicating they will conserve water, energy and other resources, recycle, reduce the use of hazardous substances, promote the use of natural and organic personal-care products and support socially and environmentally responsible suppliers. For any type of business, there is the U.S.’s Green Seal (www.greenseal.org) and Canada’s hotels may earn a Green Key rating (www.hacgreenhotels.com). Any type of facility can also apply for the U.S. Green Building Council’s Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification.

Be accountable

The reasons for choosing a real eco retreat are many. They offer healing for mind and body, the opportunity to reconnect with nature and education on how to reduce waste and consumption upon returning home.

Choosing an environmentally friendly retreat or vacation also allows you, the consumer, to send a message. Your dollars are your vote, in a sense, for what you believe to be important.

“By choosing an eco retreat, consumers are voicing support for a new green economy,” explains Pullicino. “Given the current economy, people may find they have fewer dollars to spend on vacation. By investing in socially responsible vacation destinations, consumers not only get to experience a learning vacation, they can also feel good about how they spent their hard-earned money.”

After all, without a planet capable of sustaining us, we’ll be hard-pressed to continue *any* kind of lifestyle, much less one that involves polluting and otherwise contributing to global warming.

“It has become evident that we need to change the way we relate to our planet if we expect our children to live full and healthy lives,” Pullicino says. “It is imperative that humanity become fully accountable for its impact on the Earth, and eco retreats are a step in the right direction.”

Karen Menehan is MASSAGE Magazine’s editor in chief.

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