

# Business and pleasure

A trend is growing towards doing business at the spa, writes Célia Zwahlen, as it provides a perfect way to balance the stress of work with peaceful relaxation.

With today's hectic pace of life, stress has become part and parcel of our experience of work. We know more about its connections to ill health than we ever did before. Stress has become symptomatic of our society.

If it cannot be avoided, it can, however, be kept under control. Business people today try to maintain a healthy lifestyle and achieve a "work-life balance". To this end, they engage in activities that will not only make them feel healthier, but that will help them unwind from the pressure of work.

Eimear Winters of the Osprey Hotel and Spa in Naas, Co Kildare, says: "People want more frequent breaks to balance long working hours and a faster pace of life. Most people need to combat stress in their lives, particularly in their working life. Spas offer the ideal answer for this."

Spas and wellness centres meet the demand for physical and mental wellbeing, as they offer physical treatments in a setting that relaxes the mind. "The concept of spas has been around for thousands of years. The rebirth of the wellness sector is due to growing health concerns among men and women," says Aoibheann Gallen, spa consultant and founder of Irelandspas. "Today, people live at a much faster pace and, with many households on dual income and better awareness thanks to communications technology, people have started to look at spas as a way to overcome daily stress."

An important aspect of the spa industry is that it attracts business consumers. If the trend for talking business in the peaceful surrounding of a spa is still developing in Ireland, it is, however, a practice commonly followed in some countries.

"Business at the spa and rewarding staff



with incentive breaks to spas are growing trends. It gives an opportunity for companies to treat clients, relax with them and discuss business in a more tranquil environment. In Finland, business people are renowned for talking business with clients in saunas and spa environments in general," says Gallen.

She explains that in places such as Australia and New Zealand, these are developed trends that are proving successful. Some companies there send their staff to spas for weekend retreats at certain times of the year. "People find these incentives most rewarding. Overall this helps people perform better at work and helps create a much needed work-life balance."

One barrier to the idea of combining

business activities with a visit at the spa, however, is the perception of spas as female. "Men are generally prone to associate massage with an exclusively female type of pampering and tend to be 'spa shy'," says Gallen. But a shift in men's attitudes is now taking place and there is a notable upswing of male interest in health and spa treatments.

The décor adopted in many contemporary spas today reflects this. Relaxation and treatment rooms now feature colour tones to suit both gender, such as calming green or warm burgundy, and are increasingly departing from typical feminine colours.

Going to a spa is a very efficient way of rewarding staff, while at the same time ensuring that stress levels don't skyrocket. In Ireland, the practice of mixing business and spa is most apparent at conferences organised in a hotel and spa.

Keeping delegates refreshed helps them focus on the purpose of the event. If they can enjoy the learning experience of the conference in an atmosphere where they can also relax, they will come back from the event having had a positive experience.

In Ireland, the number of hotels with conferencing facilities that feature a spa is testimony to the fact that there is a growing trend towards the spa and business mix. "The spa market has grown extensively over the last four to five years in Ireland, says Eimear Winters. "In saying this, it could be said that the market has become saturated with hotel spas and destination spas. It will be those spas that stay ahead of the competition by implementing innovation combined with unique selling points, high levels of service, value for money and unique attention to detail that will be successful."

At a time when the economy is slowing down, this puts greater pressure on providers of spas to compete to attract customers. But with greater competition comes greater choice, and the negotiating power is now on spa-goers. According to Winters, consumers of spas have high expectations. “The more people visit spas, the more spa-savvy they become. Therefore they are becoming very particular in choosing the spas where they will spend their free time. With this comes a requirement of a very high level of service and value for money,” she says.

But with so many spas on the market, it can be tricky to select one that guarantees to deliver a service up to your expectations. Aoibheann Gallen gives a few tips to help make the right choice: “When choosing a spa, make sure it suits your requirements; for example, you may want a large thermal area to suit your numbers.

“When doing business at the spa with clients, ensure the thermal area is managed professionally – it should never be overcrowded and the hotel should never do a show around when the spa is in use. Depending on your numbers and how long you wish to stay, you might want to book a spa that offers extra activities such as golf, or that is located near other amenities to suit your group.”

Eimear Winters is confident the Osprey Hotel and Spa can cater excellently for corporate groups. “The Osprey Spa offers over 75 treatments and it has eight treatment rooms. All corporate guests of the Osprey Hotel have complimentary use of the spa facilities, which includes a sauna, sanarium, salt grotto, steam room, relaxation room, snow paradise and footbaths.”

She explains further the type of service available there. “Clients who have booked, for example, a spa pamper day will have a dedicated host looking after them throughout the day to cater for their every need. They receive complimentary bathrobes, slippers and healthy refreshments throughout the day.” Such a high standard of service can only instill a sense of exclusivity and luxury, making every guest feel special.

Indeed, the focus at the Osprey is firmly on the client’s need. Winters recounts one extravagant requests made by a corporate client: “One client booked our spa



Hydrofloat at the Osprey Hotel and Spa

exclusively for two days and had one therapist dedicated to each of their clients. Large hampers with spa products along with bottles of Dom Perignon were given to each client.”

Anything is possible at the Osprey, it would seem, and certainly Winters dares to utter the most reassuring words to validate that claim: “Nothing is ever too much trouble for us and nothing is ever overlooked.”

The spa offering in Ireland is one of the best of Europe. There is no doubt – the quality is there. Ireland’s beautiful, tranquil countryside also contributes greatly to the variety of spa offerings around the country, from the most secluded to the most accessible.

But accessibility and exclusivity need not be separate. Just one hour from Dublin in the countryside of Co Carlow is the four-star Mount Wolesey Hotel Spa and Country Club. The picturesque scenery there is conducive to both business and pleasure.

Standing on its own 18-hole championship golf course, the Mount Wolesey features the award-winning Sanctuary Spa. The latter offers the very best of Asian and European rituals, including Swedish massage, exotic wraps, steam rooms, flotation tanks and hammam. It has 14 spacious treatment rooms and an extensive list of specialist services.

“With each room specifically designed to reawaken your senses, illuminated only by

warm candlelight and with soft, calming music, the Sanctuary Spa is your very own luxurious haven to which you can escape from the pressures and stress of everyday life,” says Ann Marie Hayes, business development manager at the Mount Wolesey.

Hayes’s description of the spa is indeed tantalising: “The relaxation room features ergonomically designed beds, headphones with music of your choice, candlelight, herbal teas, water and fruit. Everything you need to just lie down and chill out. This is where you can rest undisturbed between treatments, or in between dipping into the plunge pool and foot spa.

“The wet treatment area includes the laconium, with a gentle, dry heat to relax you and help your circulation, a fantastic steam room and sensory showers with thunderstorm, tropical rain and waterfall features,” concludes Hayes.

With impeccable service and an elegant interior with ultra modern amenities, the Mount Wolesey makes for an ideal place for golf breaks, romantic getaways, spa treatment weekends, or as a state-of-the-art corporate event and conference destination.

Ireland today is blessed with so many spas to retreat in, unwind and feel reinvigorated. The spa experience is a special one. Everybody deserves positive nurturing sometimes – and spas are the perfect way to gently tickle your soul and help you sooth that infamous work-related stress. ■