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Just 'Spa'-velous

Hotels have new way to pamper guests

By Elizabeth Sanger
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Pools and treadmills are yesterday's hotel amenities. Nowadays discerning guests covet honey, sesame and green tea scrubs, bikini waxes, and triple oxygen facials.

With that in mind, Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide said yesterday it is buying Bliss, owner of two trendy day spas in Manhattan and one in London, to recreate the relaxing oases in its hip modern W hotels. The first Bliss spa will roll out in the W New York, on Lexington Avenue, later this year, followed by one in Times Square.

In the past five years an increasing number of high-end hotels have built spas to further pamper their well-heeled guests. "It's the new prestige requirement, the new swimming pool," said Dana Dickey, a senior editor at Conde Nast Traveller and editor of the magazine's annual poll that ranks the best urban and resort spas.

In top rated hotels there's a constant competition to have the best, noted hotel consultant John Fox, a senior vice president at PKF Consulting in Manhattan, and the industry believes in copycat tactics. More importantly, upscale hotels have found the beauty business to be very profitable, he said.

It's no wonder. Spa services don't come cheap. The 14,500-square-foot spa in the Mandarin Oriental New York hotel that opened two months ago in the Time Warner Center at Columbus Circle books treatments by the hour - \$190 for every 60 minutes, not including tax or tips. The managers recommend a minimum of two hour visits and reservations are usually required two weeks in advance. A full-day package costs \$885 for a "holistic journey" which includes a foot ritual, full body salt scrub, massage, facial and lunch.

For business and leisure travelers who pay \$800 a night, the steep price for being coddled isn't a major concern, Fox said. Certainly not for those in the Mandarin's \$12,595-a-night presidential suite. But he expects spa treatments to trickle down to the masses in more run of the mill hotels, just as other perks, such as VCRs and Internet access, have become commonplace in homes away from home.

The Mandarin Oriental's spa attracts many more locals than hotel guests. About 70 percent of its business comes from New Yorkers, said spa director Suzanne Ng, and 70 percent are women.

Starwood has 180 spas among its 740 worldwide hotels, including one in the St. Regis in Manhattan. It will pay \$25 million for Bliss, which opened an outpost in SoHo in 1996 and is credited with jump starting the spa experience

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by attracting celebrities and supermodels, including Uma Thurman and Liv Tyler, for facials and massages.

Bliss created its own skincare products, which are sold in department stores, and launched a witty catalog of beauty items. Luxury goods purveyor LVMH Moet Hennessy Louis Vuitton bought Bliss in 1999.

Dickey said she expects hotels to open more spas and create better ones. Two treatment rooms will become four - one might be a tiled wet room with a Vichy pressure point massage shower - and more exotic offerings will be added to the menu.

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