

THAILAND: PRESERVING TRADITIONS IN AN AGE OF CHANGE



While spas have been around for thousands of years, their popularity in the last twenty years has exploded as people seek havens from the stresses of everyday life. But times of rapid change carry risks for losing the ancient traditions that explain the attraction of spas and massage.

Here in Thailand the government has taken strong steps to preserve the rich cultural heritage of Thai massage by offering cheap, accessible but rigorous training courses, with re-examination every two years. But all around, we witness a dilution of the core of Thai massage into diversification and gimmickry. 'Sports massage', 'Swedish massage' and even 'Fish massage' (where fish allegedly eat dead skin) have become commonplace but essentially fairly meaningless alien transplants.

We applaud the governments' efforts and base our business on the same principles. Where ancient practice is involved then we must make every effort to follow precise steps and procedures. Where newer treatments are introduced (e.g. wraps, polishes, scrubs) we provide a distinctly Thai character through the use of herbs that have been used medicinally for centuries. It is a lengthy process – customers wait while we prepare fresh ingredients for every treatment ordered. The preparation of herbal compresses (pak ob) from fresh herbs takes a whole day to our six spa assistants.

It is also important to establish a 'house style'. It is very confusing for customers ordering the same massage to see their friends undergoing very different techniques! Various training regimes exist under different teachers and schools, and all have their merits. Customer feedback allows you to de-



velop a common practice that is most desirable to the majority while allowing for additional techniques upon request. For example, the Thai practice of using wooden sticks during reflexology foot massage has been phased out as most customers find it painful, but the staff is trained to use it if customers wish so.

Customer care and quality assurance are essential ingredients in this mix. It is important to know that we have been charged with offering high standards while carefully preserving traditional practice. The problem for customers remains the finding of like-minded proprietors among the plethora of spa and massage providers. It is difficult to find unbiased advice from locals where family relations and commission fees are involved! Perhaps the best way of gaining access to objective reviews is to visit sites like Tripadvisor.com where customers themselves provide honest advice and feedback, often from very recent visits which proves more useful than guidebooks that go rapidly out of date.

This underlines the point that preserving tradition is not simply a conservative or reactionary practice. Embracing modern technologies, such as the internet and e-publications, allows a spa to extensively research good practice and introduce new services after careful training and testing.

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