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Most Exotic Spa Treatments

Whether you like your body scrubbed with powdered black pearls, rubbed with hot jade stones, or wrapped in coca leaves, there's a spa out there for you.

From [March 2009](#)

By Sandra Ramani

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Courtesy of Six Senses Resorts & Spas

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Here's a disappointing scenario: you decide to take a well-deserved spa getaway in an exotic locale—say, [Morocco](#) or Tahiti—and on your first day, you're ushered to your treatment room. The space is furnished with local woods and traditional textiles; the air redolent with the scent of flowers and herbs growing outside; and your therapist—whose own smooth, glowing skin comes courtesy of her grandmother's beauty recipes—invites you to settle in for... a standard European facial using the same brand-name products you'd find at your local department store. Suddenly, your "authentic" spa experience is over before it's even started.

Until recently, this situation was common at spas all over the globe. Many facilities, even those in places with their own time-honored beauty rituals, chose to embrace big-name international cosmetic products instead of ingredients indigenous to their locations.

"There used to be a belief that Western therapies and products backed by marketing and hype were superior," says Luisa Anderson, a senior spa director for Four Seasons Hotels & Resorts, adding that hotel spas also tended to pick well-known product lines to give a "safe choice" to their guests. But these days, as Anderson travels through Asia developing menus for new destination spas, she says she's found a sea change in spa-goers' attitudes toward indigenous beauty rituals: not only do they now seek out spas that use local ingredients, they demand them.

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"Travelers today really want a sense of place," Anderson says, "so spas need to represent the culture of their location and offer something guests won't get at home."

Consequently, traveling spa-goers are now likely to see ancient, and decidedly local, remedies popping up on treatment menus. And while some of these incorporate ingredients that are at least somewhat familiar sounding—cedar, coca leaf, Tahitian black pearl—others may require a bigger leap of faith. (It takes a sense of adventure to submit to a South African fynbos exfoliation, for example, or a Mexican Tepezcohuite Body Drench.)

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Spa guests who are unsure about trying an indigenous ingredient, says Mary Bemis, editor in chief of *Organic Spa Magazine*, should speak up. "Don't be afraid to ask where the product came from, how it was created, and what the effects are supposed to be," she says.


For the most part, though, Bemis and Anderson agree that sampling indigenous spa ingredients is a good thing (or at least a harmless one). Since the trend of using these ingredients can be seen as an extension of eco-awareness, Bemis says, products are often harvested sustainably. And since today's spa-goers are so savvy and well informed, Anderson says, they're also quick to spot a gimmick; they respond to traditional beauty rituals only if they're effective.

"You can't just mash up some papayas and say that works," Anderson says. "Guests want to experience that ingredient that's been tried and tested for a thousand years."

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Coca Leaf Body Mask, [Peru](#)

The Claim: Native to northwestern South America, the coca leaf—which contains the alkaloids used to make cocaine, but is not, in itself, addictive—is an integral part of traditional Andean medicine and has long been chewed, brewed, and applied topically to treat everything from headaches and depression to muscle pain and high blood pressure. Besides having a high concentration of calcium, the leaf also contains skin-friendly alkaloids like papaine and benzoine.

Where to Try It: Designed to detoxify and improve blood circulation, the three-hour Inkaterra Therapy service at the [Inkaterra Machu Picchu](#)'s UNU Spa starts with a stint in an Andean sauna (in a eucalyptus-wood hut), then moves on to a stimulating coca-oil body massage, a coca-leaf body mask, and hydration with a coca-leaf moisturizer.

[Most Exotic Spa Treatments](#)

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