Taking a relaxing dip

Samantha Whitaker searches for the most interesting spa experiences in London


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FISHING FOR TREATMENTS: A client at Aqua Sheko enjoys a pedicure from hundreds of tiny Garra Rufa fish

In an immaculate salon in Soho called Aqua Sheko, I dipped my quavering toes into a tank of tiny Garra Rufa fish. The dead skin on my feet was their lunch, and they looked hungry. Resisting the overwhelming urge to pull my feet away from the tiny, sucking mouths, I let them scuttle over my feet and in between my toes, focusing instead on Founder and Director Karen Ho. "People say it's like thousands of tiny kisses," she says.

As well as nibbling away up to one-and-a-half layers of dead skin, the fish secrete the enzyme diathanol, which supposedly improves skin regeneration. The sensation is more like tiny electric shocks than kisses – although not altogether unpleasant – and very ticklish; the squeals from customers upsetting the attempted atmosphere of sophisticated calm.

A relaxing massage completed the deluxe treatment. Originally found in southern Turkish river basins, the Garra Rufa fish have been used in Asian spas for several years. Ho left a City job to open her first fish spa in Kensington, and opened the flagship Soho store in December. As well as eight foot spas, there are smaller tanks, with smaller fish, for manicures, and there are plans for a full body tank for sufferers of skin disorders such as eczema.

Director of Savana Spa, Valerie Brennan, also left the City to fill a gap in the spa industry, this time for treatments that use purely natural products. All the treatments are unique, designed by Valerie and Co-Director and Co-Founder Tania Mattock, using only ingredients that fit with their natural and holistic approach. "Many products contain propylene glycol to stop it freezing in the aeroplane hold," explains Valerie. "But this chemical is also used to de-ice cars... do people really want to put that on their face?"

The 'Chocolate Mousse Hydration Masque', used in my treatment, is made by Éminence Organic Skin Care, which prides itself on creating effective blends of fruits, vegetables, flowers and herbs that are free of harsh chemicals. Cocoa is high in antioxidants, and cocoa butter has long been used to soothe and hydrate skin. There is also evidence that just the aroma of chocolate is enough to release 'feel good' endorphins in the brain.

During my treatment, I was exfoliated all over with a brown sugar concoction, cleansed with hot towels and massaged with warm cocoa butter. The salon specialises in massage and a surprising 35% of the clientele are male.

When I visited Casa Spa, there were also a suprising number of male clients, attracted by the promise of an authentic hammam experience. It might not have the luxurious feel of Aqua Sheko and Savana, but the spa's shabby exterior gives way to a tranquil, open-plan interior downstairs, with a post-treatment snug, candles, and soft furnishing creating an Arabian Nights feel.

The traditional full-body scrub-down with a *kiis* – or scratchy mitt – is not for the faint-hearted. But after an hour in the steam room, with treatments including a delicious-smelling honey hair-wrap, I felt invigorated and relaxed.

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