



Spa Special, March 2007



Natural healing

AMERICAN BEAUTY

When a group of Native Americans decided to build a luxury spa resort on their land in Arizona, they looked to Mother Earth and an ancient river for inspiration. Emma Forrest visited and found wild horses couldn't drag her away. Photographs by Kerrick James



The dramatic, mountain backdrop forms an essential part of the spa experience at JW Marriott Camelback Inn, opposite Sheraton Wild Horse Pass Resort & Spa.

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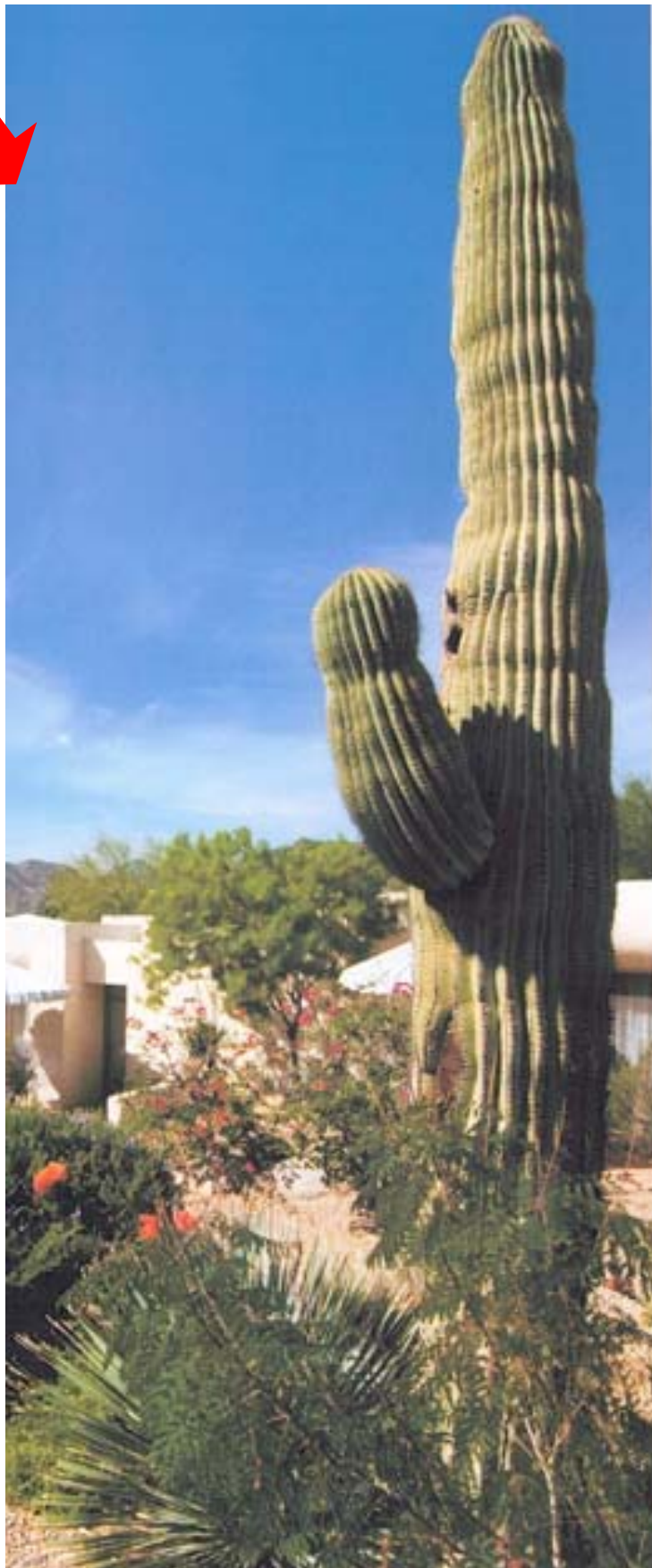
IT IS ALWAYS HARD FOR ME to picture the wisdom of Native American culture alongside the greed of gambling. Five years ago, the Maricopa and Pima tribes made a maverick choice. Instead of building another casino on their land in Phoenix, Arizona, they would have a spa. It made far better sense to me that they should allow their land to be used as a place of renewal. Still, it is an uncomfortable irony for the traveller with a conscience that some of the world's most luxurious spas come from people familiar with hardship (Thailand, Bali and South Africa spring to mind). Of the ancient people white invaders have attempted to wipe off the map, the Native Americans have fared dreadfully. For the Pima and, arriving later, Maricopa tribes, the Gila River was the lifeblood of the community. In 1887, they saw their beloved river completely dammed up following the gold rush.

Once they decided to build Sheraton Wild Horse Pass Resort & Spa, the Gila River Indian Community, which consists of the Maricopa and Pima tribes, made plans to create a replica of a section of the Gila River on the property. The river winds across the hotel grounds, around the

The lovely thing about the Aji Spa is that the signature treatments are inspired by myths. My first body treatment is called Blue Coyote Wrap

Above, a sunset on the ceiling at Aji Spa at Sheraton Wild Horse Pass. Right, a cactus towers over adobe casitas at JW Marriott Camelback Inn. Far right, Maricopa and Pima cowboys





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golf course, past the equestrian centre and right around the Aji Spa, Maricopa and Pima culture surrounds you from the moment you check in: the creation story of the Pima is painted across the ceiling of the lobby; in your room, the bed may be Sheraton but the bedspread is custom designed by local artisans.

All the doors of spa and hotel face east in keeping with Maricopa and Pima beliefs. All the entrance lobbies are circular, representing their traditional homes and the circle of life. The spa is named Aji after the Pima word for sanctuary. As you enter, your eyes are drawn to the sunset painted on the ceiling (the exit depicts sunrise). The hotel's cultural concierge, Ginger Sunbird Martin, was instrumental in getting all the details right.

The spa includes three relaxation rooms (men's, women's and mixed), steam room, sauna, plunge pool, garden and an adult-only outdoor swimming pool that meanders like the Gila, leading to a traditional Pima dwelling in which to meditate. The therapists would be considered world class anywhere, but the lovely thing about the Aji Spa is that the signature treatments are inspired by Maricopa and Pima myths. My first is a body treatment called Blue Coyote Wrap.

I've had so much sun by the pool that, by the time I come in for my wrap, I have a thumping headache. My therapist, Susan Heller, is tanned and toned, and I'm amazed to learn she has a daughter at college. She paints me lapis-blue, head to toe, and leaves me in a body capsule (my head poking out) that steams my blue body mask for 20 minutes. I shower, then, before she begins one of the greatest massages I've ever had, she drops oil in the centre of my forehead, or 'third eye'. The pain dissipates almost instantly. 'Is



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► your headache gone?" Her intuition is extraordinary, if not a little spooky.

My companion on the spa break, Toni, has been to only one other spa, the famous La Costa in California, and that was 15 years ago. Toni comes out of her massage session logging her therapist, Erica Pendley, and wiping her eyes. "I cried," she admits.

Heller says, "I believe the space in which one works can promote the flow of positive energy. For me, the Indian land does make a difference."

"Aji provides a total atmosphere of renewal and rejuvenation, mind and body," Toni decides. "La Costa, on the other hand, was body, body, body."

It is true that those incredible mountain backdrops make even the experience of sunbathing feel like so much more than mere "tanning".

Tribal elders assisted with every detail at the spa. Aji is allowed to use white clay for the signature facial, which leaves me glowing and unmarked. White clay is a "generic healing remedy," part of the tribes' day-to-day life, and traditionally used as face paint in ceremonies.

Unfortunately, Toni can't say too much about her Bluebird Facial because it made her fall fast asleep. For a facial that involves deep cleansing, I'd say that's a winner.

The boutique at Aji is excellent, and its selection of candles, meditation CDs, playlists, linens, ►

Above, a plunge pool at Aji Spa. Above right, Boulder Resort & Golden Door Spa. Below, wild horses thunder through the land around Sheraton Wild Horse Pass Resort & Spa.

HEAD WEST

Luxury lovers are spoiled for choice in Scottsdale, Arizona, with more than 50 spas in and around the city. Caroline Metcalfe tries out four

BOULDERS RESORT & GOLDEN DOOR SPA

Located in Camelback town, which sounds as if it was made for de-stressing, the Golden Door Spa tops all the others in the Scottsdale area for the sheer number of treatments and therapies on offer. The range extends from a horse-whispering experience at a local ranch to a massage for cancer patients who have had chemotherapy, radiation or surgery. Other innovations include a Native American Rainstick ceremony and a detoxifying enotherapy and-cellulite treatment.

There is a full menu for men, too, including sport pedicures and nutritional advice, all backed up with classes such as Pilates for shoulders and golf yoga, as well as horse riding, hot-air balloon flights and a day trip along the Apache trail.

The spa is beautifully calming, with a Zen garden and meditation tapes, and the resort is in the process of going organic with all of its food, drink and spa offerings.

The resort property extends over 1,300 acres and includes two golf courses. Guests sleep in



detached traditional casitas or large villas, all scattered throughout the property and tastefully designed to blend into the landscape.

Mountain lion, wild boar and coyotes are said to roam freely, but only the coyotes were in evidence on our trip. Curiously, the two-million-year-old boulders look Disneyfied: I half expected a log flume to appear on the horizon. Contact 00 1 480 488 9000; www.theboulders.com. Double casita from \$197. Spa packages from \$220, including two treatments.

JW MARRIOTT CAMELBACK INN AND SPA

The spiritual home of the yummy mummy, packed with weekenders and day trippers, Camelback Inn ►



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► cosmetics and bath products would pass muster in New York, London or Los Angeles. I have a lovely quinoa salad for lunch. Every glass of water comes with a raspberry in it. The hotel also has two restaurants, Ko'Sin and Kai.

At the relaxed but elegant Ko'Sin, which features south-west American cuisine, we sample a tasting menu that includes the most delicious wild salmon ever to melt on my tongue. This is preceded by 'lollipops' of extremely tender venison, lamb and buffalo, and culminates in a dessert frenzy in which crème caramel came out the winner.

I am keen to work with Heller again, and she agrees to come in early on Sunday so we can 'channel'. She tells me she was meditating for our session during her morning jog.

Heller gives me a cranio-sacral massage session that makes me both sigh and pulse with energy. At one point, her delicate contacts on my jaw, neck and scalp cause me actual jolts of energy. Does this happen to everyone?

'I can only say that if one is not open to or aware of their surroundings, the treatment may or may not stand out from others,' says Heller. 'I believe that the grounds are special, therefore my work is enhanced. I find it a gift to be surrounded by this culture.'

More than 30 per cent of staff at Sheraton

► is no oasis of calm. There can be queues in reception, queues in the showers and an overflow in the overlit waiting room, with women perching on the ends of loungers, lusting over the meagre supply of magazines.

The therapy rooms, in contrast, are dark and womb-like, and all my treatments were fantastic, whether they used stone therapy or indigenous plants. (Book ahead for the popular Dr Ferricone Anti-aging Facial.) We slept in pretty casitas, ate at the lovely Chaparral restaurant and relaxed poolside in a private cabana.



Activity options include a wide variety of fitness classes. I tried the 7am power walk, a four-mile loop into the hills: tough but invigorating. Another option is the Personalised Aerobic Lifestyle System, an analysis of your fitness and well-being, with detailed results and a programme for continuing improvement to take home. Contact 00 1 480 948 1700; www.camelbackinn.com. Doubles from \$211. Spa packages from \$185, including two treatments.

THE WESTIN KIERLAND RESORT & AGAVE SPA

There's something for everyone here: golf and spa treatments for men, stylists for frazzled mothers, a kids' club and water park for children. The spa takes its name from the agave plant, harvested by Native Americans for medicine, food and thread.

Treatments include the Blue Agave paraffin wrap and Follensage deep-tissue massage, which uses a special tool fitted with semi-precious stones. Each is supposed to represent a healing property and target a specific problem, such as poor circulation or digestion.

The spa zone includes a modest Zen garden and a pool with private cabanas equipped with running machines for exercise in the open air (curtains can be drawn across for privacy). It's attractively designed but rather small. Until recently, the resort focused on fitness rather than pampering, so there is a large gym where guests can try the For-Max programme for golfers. There are, however, plans to redress the imbalance.

Outside the spa zone, there's an appealing lobby with a bar area and library, and distant views of the mountains. The wonderful Desco restaurant offers fusion cuisine with Cuban and South American influences. Sit at the bar to watch the chefs in action. Contact 00 1 480 937 6500; www.kierlandresort.com. Doubles from \$189. Spa packages from \$260, including two treatments. ►

My therapist's delicate contacts on my jaw, neck and scalp cause me actual jolts of energy. Does this happen to everyone?

A meditation teepee, above, and sculpture, above right, in the extensive grounds of W Marriott Camelback Inn. Right: the spa pool at



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► of security and all the cowboys. As we eat a breakfast of mesquite pancakes with apple butter, we lazily watch the handsome cowboys lead children across the river from the Kofu Equestrian Centre. It is owned by Chuck Pablo, a Pima local, who is happy to chat about the different horses, and points out some wild ones nearby.

Because of the success of the resort, Martin, the hotel's cultural concierge, tells me that the money it has put back into the community has funded myriad improvements to local life.

'We have a brand new hospital,' she explains, 'and a police and fire force who can respond and protect. There are new jobs. My mom is actually the oldest female firefighter. She spent 25 years looking after her seven children. All of the sudden the tribe says, "If you want a career in fire, we'll provide it."'

The resort's success has also contributed to the preservation of the Maricopa and Pima languages and cultures. It's now profitable to know how to speak the languages, to learn the crafts.

With so much to think about, Tom and I go very quiet during our dinner that night at Kai, which serves Native American cuisine. We become observers as if watching theatre. Martin had said that if the Navajo were rock'n'roll, then the Pima are ballet. It looks like an elegant dance as four waiters descend on a table, one for each diner. The chef explains to us that he's telling

WHEN YOU AREN'T BEING PAMPERED

- **Join the weekly Scottsdale ArtWalk**, when more than 100 galleries open to the public. Every Thursday, 7pm-8pm. www.scottsdalegalleries.com
- **Look for the Wild West** among the old town's historic buildings. www.scottsdalecvb.com
- **Shop at Fashion Square** for designer names and chain stores. www.fashionsquare.com
- **Get back to nature at Desert Botanical Garden** with its vast array of succulents and cacti. www.dbg.org
- **Be inspired at Taliesin West**, former home of architect Frank Lloyd Wright and HQ of his foundation. www.franklloydwright.org

► JW MARRIOTT DESERT RIDGE RESORT & SPA

This beautifully landscaped Marriott property is a good choice for families with children. There's plenty for everyone to do, it's big enough for you to enjoy the spa while they play and the younger ones will like the resident rabbits.

With its sweeping desert views and cactus garden, the resort is ideal for a meditative, early morning walk or run. It also has two golf courses and several pools. One of these is in the tranquil spa, Revive, which is notable for its poolside cabanas, pretty Zen garden, bistro and juice bar.

The 41 treatment rooms look a little clinical, but many of the scrubs and wraps have an organic bias, integrating local plants into the ingredients, as in the mesquite clay, ocotillo root

body butter and prickly pear cleansing buff. I can highly recommend Desert Rain Hydrating Body Drench, which includes a body scrub, body wrap, head and neck massage and moisturising treatment with aloe and prickly pear.

The slightly off-hand Russian staff and head-bangingly loud music in the Salon Mia, used for manicures, pedicures and Aveda hair treatments, struck a jarring note, but the overall tone was elemental. After dinner at the excellent Montage Steakhouse, sitting outside around the fire pits at night in super-comfortable sofas was a high point.

Contact 00 1 480 293 5000; www.jwdesertridge.com. Doubles from \$189. Spa packages from \$345, including two treatments.



get some great ideas – on the massage table, in the bar, tasting the blood-orange-and-wasabi sorbet.

Which brings me to my final note. On the nights we slept there, we both had incredibly intense psychic-like dreams. It could have been the delicious food, full of colour and tastes that you'd never have thought of putting together. It could have been the unusually intuitive spa therapists. My guess is that the food, the spa and your sleep are all influenced by the tribal grounds themselves. 🍌

Sheraton Wild Horse Pass Resort & Spa, Chandler, Arizona (00 1 602 225 0100; www.wildhorsepassresort.com). Doubles from \$209. Spa packages from \$350, including one night in a traditional room and one spa treatment. Spa day pass: \$20 for hotel guests, \$35 for