

SPA
DESTINATIONS
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SEARCHING THE GLOBE FOR THE PERFECT MASSAGE

Massages vary
in type, style
around the
world

by Cori Brett

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The long road to Mohammed started in Kona, Hawaii. I had just come off the golf course, fresh from a tie with my match-play opponent, a young Japanese woman half my age whose only golf experience was at the driving range atop her office building in downtown Tokyo. Then my day really started. I boarded a red-eye flight in Honolulu and was met nine hours later in Newark, N.J., by a driver who took me to John F. Kennedy International Airport for another red-eye to Marrakech, Morocco. All I could think of was: "When I get there, I'm signing up for a massage, first thing."

My destination was Hotel La mamounia, Marrakech's grand luxury hotel with a history to match. Winston Churchill often stayed there, honing his painting skills by creating landscapes of the hotel's lush hardens and fragrant orange orchard.

Upon arrival, haggard and rumpled, I rushed down the elegant, white marble staircase to the spacious spa and asked breathlessly for a massage appointment. Now? Great! Relaxing for a few minutes in the mosaic-tiled steam room, I was shown to a private massage room, dimly lit and decorated with a mural of the distant Atlas Mountains.

I climbed onto the table and covered myself with a towel, already starting to unwind in anticipation of the relaxation to come.

“Mohammed,” he said, entering the room, and began at my feet. He was slowly working his way upward with a firm, confident stroke, rearranging the towel as he progressed, and I started to drift off. Suddenly, I felt two large hands take hold of my breasts and begin to squeeze rhythmically.

My eyes flew open in shock and surprise. Wild thoughts went through my mind. Should I scream? Was this just a cultural thing or was I being violated? Did women have any rights here? Would anyone come even if I did scream? I decided to adopt a “wait-and-see” attitude, and, in the end, it proved to be a relaxing and professional massage.

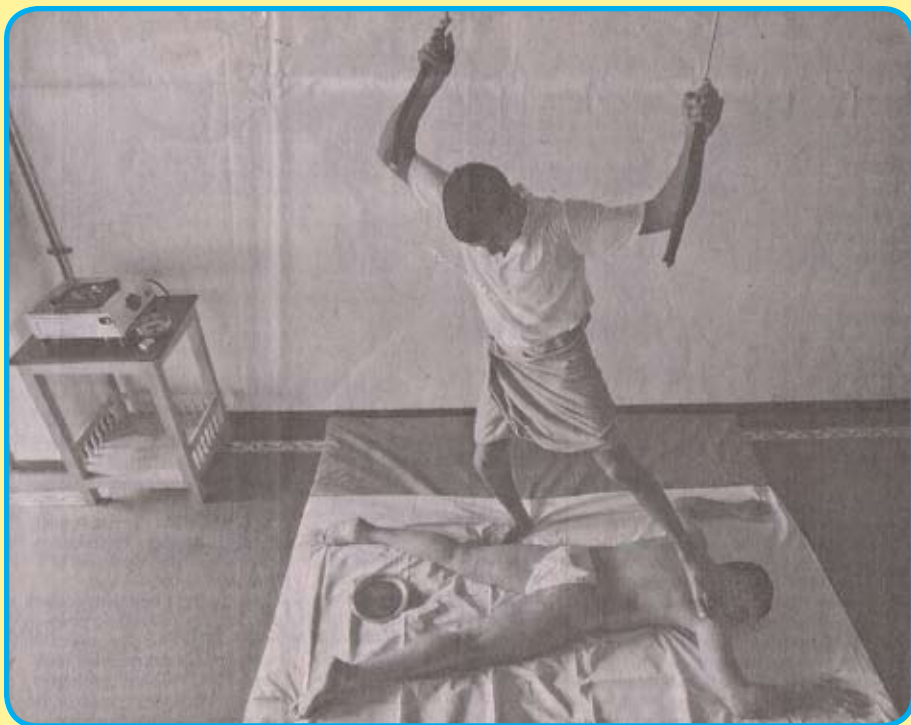
Know what to expect

That probably never would have happened in the United States, but it turns out that Morocco has a strong French heritage, and I found in later travels throughout France that massaging the breasts is typical in full-body massage.

It helps to know what to expect in different countries.

“Every state is different in the United States and has different laws regarding breast massage,” said Irene Diamond, owner of San Francisco’s Diamond Massage & Wellness Center and a representative of the American Massage Therapy Association. “It’s generally understood that you will work on the breast only for legitimately professional reasons, such as implants. But there are countries where women routinely walk around without tops on.”

Regardless of local customs, we all have our own personal boundaries. Although one person may think a certain technique is great, it may not be what you are after with your massage. First-timers might want to try a 15-minute chair massage, often available at a crafts show or a health food store. You sit in a custom-made



Ayurvedic therapists demonstrate a foot-massage treatment called the Padha Abhyangam in the ayurvedic center at Kalari Kovilakom, the more-than 150-year-old palace now known as the Palace for Ayurveda in Kerala, India.

chair and lean forward into a face cradle while the therapist works your neck and shoulders.

Modesty concerns make some people reluctant to have a full-body massage. Not to worry, there are options. Take it all off, knowing you’ll always be covered with a sheet or towel, or leave your underwear on, although it’s a little cumbersome for the therapist.

Some thoughtful spas offer disposable underwear, thongs or briefs in various sizes and unisex boxers that fit both men and women. They also come in handy for conquering shyness in the Jacuzzi, sauna, steam or swimming pool areas. Although, let’s face it, you hope no one you know ever sees you wearing these things.

Communication is key to a good massage. Think about your intention and why you want a massage. Is it to ease pain or to release tension and relax? Convey your feelings to your therapist. Strong, trained hands reach where all the hot towels and cold packs, yoga and stretching exercises cannot touch, for the deepest relief.

Use gestures

If you find yourself in a foreign country where you don’t speak the language, how do you tell your therapist what you want? Animated gestures are good. Or just let the massage begin and offer feedback with an occasional “Good!” or “No!” A trained massage therapist can read your body language and will adjust the pressure in the event of reactions like flinching or clenching, legs stiffening or accelerated breathing.

Despite the language barrier, I felt safe wandering the streets of Singapore and dropping into one of the many small salons that offer foot reflexology. It doesn’t involve taking your clothes off, instructions are obvious and it feels terrific.



A visitor at La Voile Rouge beach club, known for hedonism, gets a massage in Saint-Tropez France

If you're more comfortable with some distance between you and your therapist, pick one who hangs from the ceiling. That would be an Ashiatsu practitioner. Ashiatsu is a barefoot-massage technique widely practiced in Asia and India and just beginning to appear on spa menus in the West. The therapist holds onto bars on the ceiling and delivers a deep tissue massage using foot pressure. Once I relaxed into it, I found the massage remarkably effective.

On a recent return trip from Asia, I found myself with five days to spend in Honolulu and settled into my all-time favorite hotel, Hilton Hawaiian Village. Bay Area mogul Henry J. Kaiser (yes, that Kaiser) built the Village in the 1950's. It's a glamorous resort on the widest stretch of Waikiki Beach, at the north (quiet) end of the strip, where you can romp in the waves with the surfer dudes or learn to paddle board in the tranquil lagoon.

Lomi Lomi massage

I'm a sucker for the beach, and I always watch for the green flash when the sun goes down, but this time I had another agenda: I wanted to experience authentic Lomi Lomi massage, in the land where it was born. The Village's Mandara Spa is one of the largest spas in Waikiki, with a very good reputation, and I suspected they would have lots of experienced Lomi Lomi therapists. I wasn't disappointed.

Lomi Lomi has been described as "waves breaking on your back," probably because it's typically performed with the forearms, in long strokes that simulate a rolling motion. It's deeply relaxing and therapeutic, yet not aggressive.

My Lomi Lomi therapist, Dawn, grew up on Oahu, although her family is from the Big Island. Dawn calls Lomi Lomi "a whole-being approach," rather than a full-body massage, although it is certainly that. Practiced in families and handed down from generation to generation, it's interwoven into

the culture of the islands as a holistic healing tradition. In my experience, Lomi Lomi is best when it's done in Hawaii by someone who grew up with it.

Families develop their own special strokes. The beloved Auntie Margaret has taught Lomi Lomi for decades from her home, a humble wooden house on stilts across from the beach, in a remote part of the Kona Coast. Her training is prized. Everyone knows that "poi pounding" is an Auntie Margaret specialty. The therapist pounds on the soles of the feet to stimulate nerve endings. It's unexpectedly energizing.

Lomi Lomi practitioners believe that emotions are held in the stomach, so typically they massage the abdomen to release emotional tension. However, sometimes clients are surprised and can even be uncomfortable with it. In the United States, massage therapists rarely include the stomach in their anatomical game plans – and that's mostly, Diamond said, a time consideration.

"Most clients want their arms and legs and back worked on," she said. "At our center, we don't include face or belly. Most people are hesitant to have the belly worked on."

Diamond also does not include breast massage, unless there's some health reason to do so.

"Let's face it, it's not like there are a ton of nerve endings there," she said. "The pecs are another matter: that is one area most of us, especially those working on computers all day, could use some attention on. But in our society we get very nervous about what we can touch or should not touch, and so we err on the side of discretion."

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Mandara Spa is one of the largest spas in Waikiki, Hawaii, with a good reputation, and lots of Lomi Lomi therapists.

When hands do the talking

Here are some common massage terms you may see on a spa menu.

WATSU: Performed in a warm pool with the therapist providing stretches and massage strokes to achieve relaxation. Shown at right, at the Kibbutz Lotan in Israel.

SWEDISH MASSAGE: Meant for relaxation, using gentle strokes and light oils, considered the classical European massage technique.

HOT-STONE THERAPY: Dark, smooth stones are heated, then placed on such areas of the body as the back, in the palms and between the toes while the therapist delivers the massage.

THAI MASSAGE: A full-body treatment using yoga-like stretching positions, usually done on the floor with the client dressed in loose clothing.

DUO MASSAGE: Treatment performed simultaneously by two therapists; also called four-hand.

REFLEXOLOGY: Ancient Chinese technique usually on the feet or hands using pressure-point massage, with the intent of restoring the flow of energy.

AROMATHERAPY: The application of fragrant essential oils for therapeutic benefits.

ESSENTIAL OILS: Liquids extracted from flowers, grasses, fruits or trees that reflect the odor or essence of the plant.

