



The Vigilius resort, in the Dolomites, offers adventure outside and, right, style inside. Below, a rub-down at Les Fermes de Marie, France

Design Hotels

For serious you time, book a treatment with the best. Susan d'Arcy lists 20 essential spa hotels in Britain, Ireland and Europe

YEOTOWN Devon

Yeotown's founder, Mercedes Ngho, is trained in vinyasa flow, one of the most energetic forms of yoga, so the daily sessions are hard. Other activities include yomps through the Valley of the Rocks and demanding circuit training. Excellent guides, instructors, chefs and therapists, combined with intelligent scheduling, mean you can be stretched to your physical limit without snapping. Most guests lose weight, but much more useful, in the long term, are the sensible lifestyle tips to take home. 01271 343803, yeotown.com; three days start at £1,250pp, all-inclusive

BABINGTON HOUSE Somerset

The Cowshed spa is split into Active, with a fabulous pool, and Relax, which looks like a village general store given a makeover by Stella McCartney. The relaxation lounge is decorated with colourful gourds and a wood-burning stove. Treatments are indulgent: the manicure and pedicure stations, kitted out with mini TVs, are straight out of Sex and the City. 01373 812266, babingtonhouse.co.uk; doubles from £250, room-only; facials from £68, massages from £70

BARNSELY HOUSE Cotswolds

The Garden Spa is small, so, while its alfresco hydrotherapy pool is pretty, it's so tiny that if more than two guests are using it, they'll be on first-name terms within minutes. The therapists are excellent and the relaxation area is so soothing, it would be rather rude not to nod off there. If you can't afford Barnsley House's prices, stay across the road in its offshoot, the Village Pub, where doubles start at a much more agreeable £125, B&B. 01285 740000, www.barnsleyhouse.com; doubles from £275, B&B; facials from £75, massages from £75

LIME WOOD New Forest

The Herb House spa is very zen — all cocooning cream colour schemes and sensuously curved corners. The hydrotherapy pool and sauna overlook a dappled canopy of ancient oaks, while the spa offers British and Irish ranges such as the seaweedy Voya and the ayurvedic Tri-Dosha, as well as organic Bamford products. Food at the Raw & Cured cafe includes delicious goodies foraged from the forest; if the weather is kind, yoga in the rooftop herb garden or a dip in the alfresco hot pool are unforgettable. 023 8028 7177, limewoodhotel.co.uk; doubles from £245, room-only; facials from £65, massages from £85

COWORTH PARK Berkshire

This superglamorous spa balances cutting-edge art and exacting green standards to spectacular effect. The 60ft indoor pool is a great place to linger, with mood lighting and underwater music, and the Carol Joy facials are the equivalent of sending your face to the steam cleaners. The relaxation room is almost too smart to be relaxing, but its Spatisserie is the

perfect spot for ladies who lunch. The hotel in general is a joy, mainly because the staff understand how to provide attentive service without becoming stalkerish. 01344 876600, coworthpark.com; doubles from £215, room-only; facials from £60, massages from £75

LIFEHOUSE Essex

Admittedly, it can be a touch Towie, but the architects have done a sensitive job of blending what remained of 19th-century Thorpe Hall with an impressive contemporary building. The resident naturopath, Sue Davis, who spent many years treating A-listers at Chiva Som, one of the world's leading spas, is admirably realistic — she doesn't rule chocolate out of a healthy lifestyle. That's my kind of detox. 01255 860050, lifehouse.co.uk; doubles from £89, B&B; facials from £65, massages from £65

ROCKLIFFE HALL Co Durham

Set in pretty parklands next to the River Tees, the spa has generous public space around the light-filled pools and thermal suite. Treatment-wise, it offers trendy Dr Murad, organic Sacred Nature, Mama Mio for pregnancy pampering, and a series of bespoke male treatments, including eyebrow waxing. The real plus, though, is the focus on wellbeing. The enthusiastic team, which includes a sports therapist and a physiotherapist, offer practical

advice on everything from fitness to nutrition and meditation. 01325 729999, rockcliffehall.com; doubles from £250, B&B; facials from £70, massages from £80

ARCHERFIELD HOUSE East Lothian

Sian Parry Jones, of Urban Retreat at Harrods, has headed north to unveil Fletcher's Cottage, a £3m eco-spa at Archerfield House, a 40-minute drive east of Edinburgh. Treatments feature organic products and the steam room offers salt inhalation, evoking the surrounding shores. The relaxation area has sink-in sofas, tables made of reclaimed oak, sheepskin rugs and a toasty wood-burning stove centre stage. 01620 897050, archerfieldgolfclub.com; doubles from £225, B&B; facials from £80, massages from £50

VIGILIUS Dolomites, Italy

The spa nestles amid the limestone turrets and towers of the pink-hued Dolomites. The emphasis here is on stress-busting outdoor activities, from climbing to paragliding, as well as skiing and hiking, depending on the season. Inside, it's all soothing wood finishes and tactile velvets in warming tangerines and reds. Treatments are great, except for the scratchy hay bath. It's more relaxing to snuggle under a cashmere blanket on your balcony. 00 39 0473 556600, www.vigilius.it; doubles from £255, B&B; facials from £55, massages from £40

CASTEL MONASTERO Tuscany, Italy

A hilltop medieval village near Siena has been transformed into a fabulously atmospheric five-star retreat. You can follow a strict detox with Dr Ali, physician to Prince Charles, with health-conscious dishes devised by Gordon Ramsay — but it takes willpower to resist the "normal" food. My advice is, don't even try: go for pure pampering instead. The treatments and therapists are excellent, the infinity pool has views of rooftops and cypress-studded hills, and the yoga lessons are fabulous. 00 39 0577 570570, castelmonastero.com; doubles from £320, B&B; facials and massages from £115



PAMPER YOURSELF PROPERLY

THE DOLDER GRAND Zurich

Therapists are forensically focused here, and treatments are delivered with total precision. You can opt for tough fitness classes, gentle walks in the surrounding woods or lounging around the pool, approached through a towering textured limestone "canyon". Memorable touches include an ice cave with falling snowflakes and a heat experience adapted from the Japanese tradition of burying yourself in sand. Here, you sink into scented pebbles instead.

00 41 44 456 6000, thedoldergrand.com;
doubles from £396, room-only; facials from
£125, massages from £125

PORTO ELOUNDA Crete

The thalassotherapy pool's sea-water jets provide a brilliant DIY-massage, while the alfresco bubble loungers come with views over Mirabello Bay. The spa has scented hammams, saunas and steam rooms, an ice cave and a pool over which dozens of crystals are suspended. The spa is attached to three hotels: the six-star Elounda Peninsula All Suite Hotel, glitzy enough to satisfy Hollywood's hierarchy; the five-star Elounda Mare Hotel, a more restrained number where the Camerons have stayed; and the four-star Porto Elounda De Luxe Resort, which is perfect for families.

00 30 284 106 8012, portoelounda.com;
doubles from £185, B&B; facials from £45,
massages from £90

PARK HOTEL KENMARE Co Kerry

This hotel pioneered pampering in Ireland, and its Samas spa remains one of the country's best. The owners, brothers Francis and John Brennan (who present Ireland's version of The Hotel Inspector), keep a traditional hotel, but the spa couldn't be more contemporary, with candlelit treatment rooms and a glass box in a mossy glade for a relaxation room. Treatments use Sisley, one of the most exclusive and effective ranges around, and are always executed with style.

00 353 64 664 1200, parkkenmare.com;
doubles from £300, B&B; facials and
massages from £115

LES FERMES DE MARIE Megève, France

Jocelyne Sibuet is the French Martha Stewart (minus the prison record). She owns a small but chic chain of hotels, and the Megève location of this one ensures its spa is a favourite with skiers. Treatment cabins display plenty of *je ne sais quoi*, with walls dramatically covered in tree bark. Sibuet's own Pure Altitude products, based on alpine plants, are fabulously effective.

00 33 4 57 74 74 74, fermesdemarie.com;
doubles from £140, room-only; facials
from £45, massages from £50

LES ETANGS DE COROT Versailles

The original wine-inspired Caudalie spa, in Bordeaux, is extremely good, harnessing the plumping polyphenols in grapes to redress the detrimental effects of imbibing the stuff, but it's not cheap. Les Etangs de Corot is its more affordable sister property. It offers the same spa menu (with, sadly, the same prices), but with a more informal ambience. Rooms have beautiful beds, dainty dressers and quirky antiques.

00 33 1 41 15 37 00, www.etangs-corot.com;
doubles from £166, B&B; facials and
massages from £85

GRAND HOTEL DE BORDEAUX & SPA Bordeaux

Sashaying over the hotel's top three floors, this spa has a wonderful rooftop relaxation area. Inside, the designer Jacques Garcia has drawn inspiration from the ancient Roman baths, creating a darkly decadent temple to beauty, with a black-slate hydrotherapy pool and a large twinkling hammam.

The cult French skincare range Nuxe (its Huile Prodigieuse oil is in every make-up artist's bag) ensures the guests are as beautiful as their surroundings.

00 33 5 57 30 44 44, ghbordeaux.com;
doubles from £145, B&B; facials and
massages from £77

ASIA GARDENS Spain

This hotel in a pine forest outside Alicante brings a little bit of the East to the West. All the therapists have been trained at Wat Po, a traditional Thai massage school in Bangkok, the resort's design is Balinese and the cuisine is a delicious fusion of eastern and Mediterranean styles. Best of all, the Costa Blanca's microclimate means it basks in therapeutically warm temperatures all year round.

00 34 966 818400, asiagardens.es;
doubles from £195, B&B; facials from £77,
massages from £85

MARQUES DE RISCAL Spain

Frank Gehry's trademark titanium ribbons turn his Rioja landmark into a sightseeing stop in its own right, although the Michelin-starred cuisine is also worth a visit. The sexy little spa's red and black decor feels more oriental than continental, but the treatments remind you where you are, with barrel baths, merlot wraps and cabernet scrubs.

00 34 945 180880, hotel-marquesderiscal.com;
doubles from £260, B&B; facials from £80,
massages from £89

CONSERVATORIUM Amsterdam

Take time out from Amsterdam's temptations for the Akasha Holistic Wellbeing Center. The spa is accessed via a floating pathway over the pool. Guests can indulge in limb-loosening watsu — yoga and shiatsu in the water, with underwater speakers to aid guided meditation — treatments in the hammam and massages using seashells filled with a mineral-rich warm lava gel.

00 31 20 670 1811, conservatoriumhotel.com;
doubles from £390, room-only; facials from
£97, massages from £72

THE OITAVOS Portugal

Every window in the resort has views over the wild Atlantic, and the spa plays on the therapeutic benefits of the ocean by offering Voya, the Irish range that uses mineral-rich, hand-harvested seaweed as a key ingredient. Lotions will leave your skin supersoft and probably clear your nasal passages — some of the potions pong like the wrong end of the beach. Beyond the bathrobe, the resort has an award-winning golf course and one of the largest equestrian centres on the Iberian peninsula.

00 351 21 486 0020, theoitavos.com;
doubles from £131, B&B; facials from £65,
massages from £45

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luxurious Coworth Park:
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