

attract a female Vietnamese clientele than a foreign one because of the 'stigma' associated with spas and massage parlours in Asia.

'Traditionally, when Vietnamese people think of a spa, they see it as a place where men come to relax,' she said.

'Up until five years ago,' she explained, 'we allowed only female guests because we wanted to create a safe and relaxing place for women to improve their health and beauty.'

'The concept of the spa as a place for women to come for holistic therapy is still quite new here, she said, 'but that's changing'

The eleven year-old Thu Cuc Exotical Spa, located on Hanoi's idyllic Truc Bach Lake, is set in a tastefully done nine story converted house with Vietnamese décor and a tranquil atmosphere. With 60-minute facials at around \$25 and massages for \$30, its prices are cheaper than what you'd find at a higher end spa like Elite, where a 60 minute facial costs \$45 and a massage \$60.

Convenience

Thu Cuc Exotical Spa, where uniformed young women communicate with walkie talkies and whisk you via lift to your treatmentroom, has a very different feel from Lancy Spa, a small family-run salon located in Hanoi's West Lake.

Before opening Lancy Spa with her sister-in-law, Dang Bich Lam worked at one of Hanoi's best known spas, QT Anam, and the spa at Sedona Suites. Trained by her previous employers, Lam saw an opportunity to create a more cosy, convenient place where guests could come for the same services. So in 2002, she and her sister-in-law

bought a house on an up-and-coming street, To Ngoc Van, and converted it into a small salon.

Unlike Elite and Thu Cuc Exotical, Lancy Spa, while not the most polished place is town, retains a relaxed family-run feel. Ms. Lam, who personally greets most guests at the door, attracts a loyal following. Although she provides services like massage, facials and body scrubs in addition to waxing and manicures/pedicures, she is not trying to offer a 'spa experience' per se. Instead, her salon feels more like a typical Vietnamese salon except that her clientele is almost 100% foreign.

With 60-minute facials and massages at around \$15, her prices are 10-15% more than your average local salon, but she finds that most of her customers are happy to pay this because of the ease of going there and the value for money of her services.

You won't hear Lam talking about complementary therapies or holistic approaches but rather the relationships she has with her clients.

'I'm in this business because I enjoy making people feel more beautiful and relaxed,' she says. 'Sometimes my clients come in just to talk, which is also fun for me because I've learned so much about their countries and cultures.'

Therapies

Around the corner from Lancy Spa is the Yakushi Centre for Traditional and Holistic Health, founded and managed by Dr. Le Bich Thuy, who went to medical school in Hanoi and specialised in traditional medicine.

Unlike most other spas and salons, Yakushi focuses only on therapies and treatments that intend to balance one internally.

There's no waxing or manicuring done here. Yakushi offers therapeutic massage, acupuncture and other 'balancing techniques' like nutrition coaching and energy work. The focus is not beauty - at least not externally.

According to Dr. Thuy, 'Our underlying philosophy is traditional medicine - we work mainly on the internal balance of a person's constitution.'

'Of course that is one way to contribute to beauty,' she added.

Customers swear by Yakushi's shiatsu and aromatherapy massages, which combine Swedish massage with acupressure, delivering a deeper, more intense sensation than massages at other places in town.

Although you won't be sipping tea in a robe in a garden at Yakushi, you do get a thorough massage with some science behind it. And with a 60 minute massage for \$15, it seems a worthwhile investment.

Vietnam still has a way to go until it's truly considered a spa destination on a par with Thailand. But with many spas in Vietnam studying the industry and sending their therapists to be trained abroad, in Thailand and the West, the trend is sure to rise.

You may not have come to Hanoi looking for a spa experience. But from your family-run salon to traditional medicine centres to sports therapies, Hanoi caters to those on any budget looking for a bit of pampering. □

