

# BlissBody

BY *Andrea Ferretti* PHOTOGRAPHY BY *Debra McClinton*

I HAD JUST JETTED BACK AND FORTH across the country, spending half of a three-day trip riding shotgun in my boss's rental car and wrangling with reservations agents over botched travel plans. I was frazzled and exhausted, the embodiment of imbalance. My body clock was off, my brain had shut down, and my mood was just plain grumpy. After a sunrise flight, I crawled into bed at 10 a.m., didn't move until evening, and still didn't feel like myself.

Ah, but fortune was smiling on me: I'd planned a trip to an Ayurvedic spa for the very next day. I was pretty certain that if anything could bring me back into balance it would be warm oil streaming over my scalp and body, a four-handed massage, and the wisdom of Ayurveda, a 5,000-year-old holistic approach to healing.

Not long ago you could experience Ayurvedic treatments only by checking in to one of a handful of residential clinics around the country. (Or by going to India.) There, a practitioner would inquire into everything from how well you digested food to how easily you perspired before he or she prescribed customized therapies. Between treatments, you would learn about the foods, herbs, and asanas to incorporate into your everyday life.

But these days you can forgo this ancient approach and wander into almost any spa to order Ayurvedic services à la carte. Luxury hotels like the Ritz-Carlton in Pasadena, California, now offer *shirodhara*—the calm-producing stream of oil onto the forehead. The Sonoran Spa at Tucson's Westward Look Resort does dry brushing (to exfoliate the skin) and *abhyanga* (a gentle warm oil massage)—both traditionally part of a daily Ayurvedic self-care routine. And spas across the

**Don't let the winter blues get you down. Indulge in some heavenly Ayurvedic treatments and feel warmer, more relaxed, and healthier than ever.**

## *Liquid Velvet*



I had been dreaming of *shirodhara* (SHEE-ro DAR-ah) since the first time I'd heard of it. This tradition of pouring a fine stream of oil onto the ajna chakra, or third-eye region in the middle of the forehead, is Ayurveda's signature technique for creating a sense of calm. *Shirodhara* is known to quiet the mind, lessen anxiety, and aid sleep. Plus, it feels like warm velvet washing over you.

Or it should. But on my big spa day the oil felt too hot and my third eye felt scorched. After enduring it for a short time, I spoke up and the therapist adjusted the temperature. Then it felt too cool, as if I weren't quite getting the full effect. I thought the sensation would be like a physically prompted meditation—eliciting a quiet, steady mind. Instead, my mind was busy reacting to the temperature and I didn't get the benefits I'd hoped for.

I learned afterward that there's no set temperature for the oil—traditionally, it should be heated to about two degrees above “blood temperature.” But this is a tricky thing to master since each person's body temperature is slightly different. In all likelihood, I was running a bit hot that day and the hot oil aggravated that sensation. If you find yourself in a similar situation, ask the therapist to move the oil around your forehead rather than pouring it on one spot. That may make it easier to sink into the blissfully relaxing effects of *shirodhara*.



land are offering Ayurveda-inspired treatments: dosha-balancing facials, “Bindi Body Wraps,” and custom packages often marketed under the name Nirvana.

Ayurveda is on so many menus these days either because it’s the hip new thing in the West—or because the treatments actually *can* create “a deep sense of relaxation balanced by steady energy and clarity of mind.” That’s the benefit that Melanie Sachs, the author of *Ayurvedic Beauty Care*, attributes to properly administered Ayurvedic treatments: “It’s different from that ‘spa slug’ feeling people get when they slither off the table and can barely get their clothes on.”

The goal of any Ayurvedic treatment is to bring your mind, body, and spirit back into balance. Of course, rebalancing in the face of serious ailments is no small feat; Ayurvedic practitioners generally work with clients for months, encouraging time-consuming daily self-care rituals and a variety of changes in diet and routine, and sometimes prescribing more radical therapies, like the week- or monthlong detoxification program called *panchakarma*. But Sachs, who trained with respected Ayurvedic doctor Vasant Lad and who is now based in San Luis Obispo, California, as an Ayurvedic educator for the spa industry, says the medical model isn’t the only approach—especially for people who are basically healthy but feeling off-kilter. “People can absolutely benefit from a one-time treatment,” she says. I was game to give it a try.

#### MY OWN PRIVATE IMBALANCE

I was a bit more prepared than many spa visitors; about six months earlier I’d met with Reenita Malhotra, an Ayurvedic doctor and the founder of Ayoma LifeSpa in San Jose, California, to determine my *prakriti* (basic constitution). According to Ayurvedic tradition, we’re each born with a *prakriti*, a unique combination of the three *doshas*: *vata* (associated with wind; cool and filled with movement), *pitta* (associated with fire; hot and intense), and

*kapha* (associated with mucus; damp and motionless). While a single dosha may be dominant, most people have *prakriti*s made up of two dominant doshas (I’m a *vata-pitta*), or even all three.

As you go through life, many things can upset your *prakriti*—the weather, your sleep cycles, your emotions, etc. At any given time you might develop an excess of one, two, or even all three of the doshas, putting your *vikriti*, or current state, into a doshic imbalance. If left untreated, Ayurvedic practitioners say, your imbalance

**“Ayurvedic treatments don’t give you that ‘spa slug’ feeling when you slither off the table and can barely get your clothes on.”**

will manifest as specific symptoms and can ultimately lead to serious diseases. The treatments address these imbalances so your system functions optimally.

It’s crucial, then, that your therapist determine your *vikriti* on the day of treatment. At a spa, you can expect a brief interview or questionnaire before you start any Ayurvedic services. “An Ayurvedic treatment is not general,” Malhotra says. “It must be tailored to what you’re going through.” Once the practitioner knows what your imbalance is, he or she can then select an appropriate approach.

At this time of year, with the cold wind blowing and the holiday frenzy beginning, it’s common for your *vata* dosha—the force that governs movement in your body, including circulation and digestion—to slip out of balance. When that happens, you may feel anxious, overwhelmed, and prone to distraction, as well as more susceptible to insomnia and constipation.

Ayurvedic warm oil treatments make an ideal remedy for *vata* imbalance. They warm the body, calm the mind, and give the senses a time out. The combination of *abhyanga* and *shirodhara*, in particular, is traditionally employed to balance *vata*; *abhyanga* releases tension in the body, while *shirodhara* is known for ameliorating mental and emotional aggravation.

#### HEAVENLY DETOX

The day I went to the Ayoma LifeSpa I woke up feeling off. I was still exhausted and cranky, and my skin was breaking out. But slipping into a robe and being in the soothing spa environment took the edge off. My fatigue receded as I anticipated my treatments—and then I just relaxed into them: For five hours I luxuriated in streams of warm oil and the pampering hands of massage therapists.

In all, I indulged in four treatments that day. At first it was heaven, but about midway through, I realized I might have signed up for too much. I started feeling antsy and hot, as if I’d had quite enough oil poured over me, thank you. That evening, instead of enjoying a post-spa calm, I stomped around the house feeling irritable and overheated.

“The treatments can be detoxifying and powerful,” Malhotra told me later. “People will respond differently depending on what their imbalance was before the treatment.” Apparently it’s not unheard of (though not common) for people to feel their symptoms intensify for a short period after getting treatments. It’s as if a mild detoxification occurs, and the toxins must be released before you get back into balance. It was like getting a facial: You may not look your best immediately afterward, but give it a day or two and the results can be dramatic.

And yes, two days after my treatments, I felt fantastic. My skin was softer—no more rashy flare-ups—and the whites of my eyes were clear. My muscles felt loose and relaxed, my mind was at ease, and best of all, I felt calm and vibrant, as if a steady fountain of energy was bubbling up from within. I sailed smoothly through the next week with barely a worry.

Well, being a *vata-pitta* I did, of course, worry just a little—but my main concern was when I could schedule my next Ayurvedic spa day.

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## Double Your Pleasure

 Who could resist a four-handed *abhyanga*, the Cadillac of massages—two therapists working in tandem? One therapist began working on the left side of my body while the other mirrored her strokes on the right. The precision of their movements was remarkable, like a well-choreographed dance. I learned afterward that one therapist in fact leads the massage, cueing from one technique to the next. They moved from long sweeping strokes up and down the length of my body to kneading with their knuckles to—my favorite—swiping deep crisscrosses across my abdomen.

At times *abhyanga* felt like gentle *shiatsu*, using similar pressure points; at other times it felt like Swedish massage. Sometimes, says Sachs, the therapists may also work in the opposite direction from the way your body hair grows to drive the oil deeper into your pores. That's why an *abhyanga* may get vigorous—the friction against the skin generates more heat and helps the oil to penetrate. “The *abhyanga* is the cardinal treatment for balancing *vata* because the oil and the heat relax the mind and calm the nervous system,” she says.

### know before you go

A trip to an Ayurvedic spa is a little different from the usual soak, scrub, and rub. Here are some tips to guide you:

**TELL ALL** Upon arrival, you'll probably be interviewed or asked to fill out a short questionnaire about your diet, sleep, and, er, elimination patterns. This information helps a therapist determine your *vikriti*, or current imbalance, which is vital for an effective treatment. Your *vikriti* will influence the therapist's choice of oil (one infused with herbs that pacify the specific *dosha* that's out of balance), pressure (light for *vata*, medium for *pitta*, strong and vigorous for *kapha*), body region on which to focus, even the duration of your treatment. For example, if you're in the midst of a *vata* imbalance, a hot steam bath will be healing. But if you're *pitta* is up, too much time in the heat could leave you feeling stifled.

**BE SPOILED BY THE OIL** In the Ayurvedic system, oil is considered crucial to the healing process. It heals dryness and is thought to nourish the body, calm the nervous system, and seal in the subtle energies of the body, replenishing your vital essence, known as *ojas*. When the oil is infused with herbs—turmeric, licorice, and ginger are commonly used—it acts as a carrying agent to introduce the plants' medicinal properties into the body.

**FIND THE RIGHT BALANCE** Unless you're following the advice of a reputable practitioner, plan for no more than two treatments in a day, and be sure they complement each another. Pairing a vigorous, energizing treatment with a soothing one could leave you more out of balance than when you started. In winter, blend any of the treatments described on these pages; they all work well together and are ideal during *vata* season. But play it safe and check with the spa director to ensure you've got a good combo going.

**GO EASY** “These treatments are designed to change the energy of the body,” says Sachs. “So allow yourself time to gently experience that change.” That means not making lunch or dinner plans for just after your treatment ends. If possible, spend a few hours in the spa's napping room, terrace, or other quiet spot, letting yourself fully integrate the subtle shifts in your energy.



# Crowning Glory



Sitting in a massage chair with my face buried in a cushioned headrest, I was ready for *shiro abhyanga* (SHEE-ro ab-hee-AN-ga), a scalp and spine massage that the therapist, Darla Boyett, told me would release toxic energy through the *sahasrara* (crown) chakra, the center for intuitive knowing. The treatment began with Boyett's hands resting lightly on the crown of my head.

I must admit that scalp massages are not a favorite of mine. In fact, I usually ask the therapist *not* to touch my scalp. There's something about someone squirreling around in my messy, curly hair that I just don't like. But I'm glad I succumbed this time, because I was completely won over—and I think the oil had a lot to do with it.

The therapist first massaged my scalp gently, gradually working more vigorously. Next she oiled it, stroking in circles and working around my head in sections—Ahhhhhh. You know when you scratch a dog in that perfect spot and the dog looks at you like he never wants you to stop? I felt like that dog. Then the therapist pulled the hair lightly from the root and worked the oil into my hair, all the way to the ends. My typically tangled locks felt long and luxurious. As she softly rocked my head back and forth, I dropped into bliss and thought about asking her to continue that gentle movement all day—until the spinal massage began.

With even pressure, her fingers pulsed down my neck and shoulders, not going too deep but inviting the blood to flow up and down my spine. Moving down my back, she paused at the sacrum and circled again and again. Then she used long, sweeping strokes up and down the length of my spine, eventually drifting up toward my neck and head. Once again, she placed her hands lightly on my crown chakra to finish the massage. I emerged feeling relaxed, energized, and looking slick and oily, like a wet seal.

**well seasoned** Whether or not you manage a trip to the spa, you'll feel better if you nurture yourself this vata season. Mas Vidal, an Ayurvedic practitioner and the director of Dancing Shiva Yoga & Ayurveda in Los Angeles, suggests these vata-balancing practices for fall and winter.

**STAY STEADY** It's easy to let the change in seasons and the holidays lure you into an erratic schedule. But a structured day will keep you steadier. Aim for being in bed by 10 p.m. and getting eight hours of sleep. Then notice how you feel.

**BE STRONG** When you're doing yoga, hold the postures longer than you normally do, and breathe slowly and deeply. "Most vatas like to be entertained with

lots of movement," says Vidal. "But I notice in my students that what you need the most you tend to resist the most." He suggests holding poses for 10 breaths and then resting in Savasana (Corpse Pose) or Tadasana (Mountain Pose) for an equal length of time before moving to the next pose.

**KEEP IN TOUCH** At least a few times a week, perform abhyanga to nourish

your joints, nervous system, and skin. Using warm oil (see "Bottled Goodness," page 26, for a vata-specific version), massage from the center of the body outward, using circular strokes on the scalp and moving clockwise on the abdomen.

**GET WARM** It may seem obvious, but it's essential to bundle up, wear a scarf, and do whatever else you can to keep your system from being taxed by the cold. Warmth is a simple but often overlooked solution for pacifying vata.

**COOK YOUR VEGGIES** Limit your intake of dry and raw foods such as nuts, chips, and uncooked vegetables in winter. Eating too many of these foods can aggravate a vata imbalance. Prepare warm, moist foods like soup, cooked whole grains, and root veggies, and stick to regular mealtimes.

**BE QUIET** "I try to get my students to start doing one thing at a time," Vidal says. That means becoming aware of habits that may be second nature, such as making dinner while talking on the phone or eating while watching TV. Try to set aside time for silence throughout the day, either by meditating or simply curbing the tendency to talk unnecessarily.

**TAKE LESS** "I ask my students to pay attention to all the sensory impressions they take in," Vidal says. "What kinds of movies are they watching? Are they in a bar or surrounded by people every night?" Vidal counsels that reducing mental impressions will reduce vata. He likens it to going on vacation and sitting at the beach watching the water all day. When your mind takes in fewer impressions, your nervous system slows down and relaxes too. He suggests getting out into nature as much as possible to encourage a slower pace.

**LISTEN UP** Finally, try not to resist natural urges. In other words, don't suppress your sneezes, ignore your hunger, or scoff at your urge to sleep—and always go to the bathroom at your body's first signal. Acting on the body's cues is especially important for people who tend toward vata imbalance; ignoring them contributes to anxiety.

## AYURVEDIC SPAS AROUND THE COUNTRY



### EAST

#### **Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health**

Lenox, Massachusetts  
(800) 741-7353  
[www.kripalu.org](http://www.kripalu.org)

#### **BodiScience**

Peabody, Massachusetts  
(978) 977-9966  
[www.bodiscience.com](http://www.bodiscience.com)

#### **Sivam Yoga & Nine Stone Body Therapys**

Cherry Hill, New Jersey  
(856) 482-5183  
[www.sivamyoga.com](http://www.sivamyoga.com)

#### **Center for Health & Harmony**

Springfield, Virginia  
(703) 912-2901  
[www.centerforhealthandharmony.com](http://www.centerforhealthandharmony.com)

### MIDWEST

#### **Jon Alan Atelier**

Indianapolis, Indiana  
(317) 202-0063  
[www.jonalanatelier.com](http://www.jonalanatelier.com)

#### **The Raj**

Fairfield, Iowa  
(800) 248-9050  
[www.theraj.com](http://www.theraj.com)

#### **Tranquility Spa**

Green Bay, Wisconsin  
(920) 438-8399  
[www.tranquilityspasanctuary.com](http://www.tranquilityspasanctuary.com)

### SOUTH

#### **Ayurvedic Day Spa & Center for Well Being**

Sarasota, Florida  
(941) 929-0999  
[www.ayurvedichealers.com](http://www.ayurvedichealers.com)

#### **The Spa at Mandarin Oriental**

Miami, Florida  
(305) 913-8332  
[www.mandarinoriental.com](http://www.mandarinoriental.com)

#### **Rasayana Cove Ayurvedic Retreat**

Ona, Florida  
(863) 494-7565  
[www.ayurvedicretreat.com](http://www.ayurvedicretreat.com)

### WEST

#### **Akash Healing Center**

Kailua-Kona, Hawaii  
(808) 331-2276  
[www.livinglightministry.com](http://www.livinglightministry.com)

#### **Ayoma LifeSpa**

San Jose, California  
(408) 423-5424  
[www.ayoma.com](http://www.ayoma.com)

#### **The Ayurveda Center of Hawaii (on Kauai)**

(808) 826-6621  
[www.panchakarma.net](http://www.panchakarma.net)

#### **Ayurveda Plus Rejuvenation Center**

Portland, Oregon  
(800) 588-4108  
[www.ayurvedaplus.com](http://www.ayurvedaplus.com)

#### **The Ayurvedic Institute**

Albuquerque, New Mexico  
(505) 291-9698  
[www.ayurveda.com](http://www.ayurveda.com)

#### **Blue Sage Sanctuary**

Nevada City, California  
(888) 878-5222  
[www.bluesage-sanctuary.com](http://www.bluesage-sanctuary.com)

#### **The Chopra Center Spa at La Costa Resort & Spa**

Carlsbad, California  
(888) 424-6772  
[www.chopra.com](http://www.chopra.com)

#### **Dancing Shiva**

Los Angeles, California  
(323) 934-8332  
[www.dancingshiva.com](http://www.dancingshiva.com)

#### **Diamond Way Ayurveda**

San Luis Obispo, California  
(866) 303-3321  
[www.diamondwayayurveda.com](http://www.diamondwayayurveda.com)

#### **Kaya Kalpa Wellness Center**

Watsonville, California  
(408) 847-3276  
[www.mountmadonna.org](http://www.mountmadonna.org)

#### **LifeSpa**

Boulder, Colorado  
(303) 516-4848  
[www.lifespaspa.com](http://www.lifespaspa.com)

#### **Maharani Ayurveda**

Santa Barbara, California  
(805) 452-2526  
[www.maharani.us](http://www.maharani.us)

#### **Mirabella Mansori**

San Diego, California  
(858) 720-1832  
[www.mirabellamansori.com](http://www.mirabellamansori.com)

#### **The Shirodhara Day Spa**

Salt Lake City, Utah  
(801) 943-3840  
[www.shirodharadayspa.com](http://www.shirodharadayspa.com)

#### **Surya Spa**

Pacific Palisades, California  
(310) 459-7715  
[www.suryaspa.com](http://www.suryaspa.com)

## Drizzled & Drenched

 Of the four treatments I had, the *taila seka* (TAY-la-sayk), sometimes called *pizichil*, felt the most decadent. Perhaps it was just the power of suggestion—the therapists described it to me as a hot oil bath, and just the word “bath” jump-starts relaxation for me. One therapist held a funnel-shaped copper pot about a foot and a half above me as she slowly and methodically drizzled warm oil, and another therapist followed the oil trail with fast, circular strokes. I was in heaven.

The distance the oil traveled before reaching my back was not random. According to ancient Indian texts from the first century BCE, the oil should be poured 14 finger widths above the body to allow for maximum penetration of the seven layers of tissue, which are lymph, blood, musculature, fat, bone, marrow, and the reproductive organs.

The bath was soothing more because of the sensations and the strong-smelling oil that cleared my lungs and sinuses than because of any specific massage techniques. Unlike the *abhyanga*, where the emphasis is on the full-body massage, the purpose of the *taila seka* is “to drench the tissues of the body,” Malhotra says. So there was a lot of focus on rubbing the oil into my skin. As the oil poured over me, I felt enveloped in a warm, protective coat.

I didn’t think heaven could get any better until the oiling therapist alternately squeezed and wrung my shoulders, then my elbows, then my wrists (where many of us 9-to-5ers have inflamed tendons). She worked the oil in and gently milked each finger, then did the same with my knees, ankles, and toes. The oil bath ended with both therapists sweeping their fingers from my toes up my legs and torso, around my shoulders, and down my arms. Sufficiently “drenched” from head to toe, I headed for the steam bath—a chance to soak in even more moisture. Who says oil and water don’t mix? ■

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