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BALINESE MASSAGE: Tapestry of traditions

BY: DENISE REYNOLDS

So you'd like to spend a week in paradise. But you just can't find the time to jet off to the South Pacific. Here's what you do: Experience some of Bali's best by booking yourself a Balinese Massage. If you can't go to Bali, let Bali come to you.

Soothing, calming and completely indulgent, Balinese Massage transports your mind and body to a deeply relaxed state, leaving you feeling refreshed and renewed. And because its techniques specifically target the muscles' connective tissue—the myofascia and the tendons—it's a particularly effective treatment for sports injuries. Flowing and graceful Balinese massage strokes relieve tension, improve blood flow, and reduce stress for everyone, not just the athletes among us.

Passed down from mother to daughter for generations, Balinese massage has been a vital part of everyday life on the island for centuries. Women mix natural herbs and plants, incorporating them into massages in order to maintain the health of their families. Even babies receive daily massage after their baths to aid in muscle and bone formation, keep skin supple, and induce sleep.

A blend of Indian, Chinese, and European techniques picked up via the trade routes that passed through the Spice Islands in the 1500s, this massage has been used on Balinese royalty and peasants alike. Deep compression techniques are designed to gently squeeze the body's muscles and organs, stimulating them to expel air or wind that the Balinese believe becomes trapped in the body, producing a sluggish, tired feeling. Compressions restore vitality, improve energy, and rebalance the body's systems.

Symbolism permeates the various components of Balinese Massage. Long, flowing strokes represent the circle of life, and the massage ends exactly where it began. Downward strokes are used to strip tension from the body; upward strokes move circulation toward the heart. Toxins are tackled with the wringing technique, representing a wringing out of the body's impurities. A movement known as skin rolling is used to bring deeply stored pockets of tension up to the surface. Acupressure and reflexology moves are interwoven as well.

Touches of Bali are evident throughout the Mandara Spa at Westin's Rio Mar Beach Resort in Puerto Rico, the site of my Balinese Massage. Intricately carved wooden artwork lines the hallways, silken pillows adorn the spa's banquettes, and rattan baskets hold fluffy white towels in place of rice. In the treatment rooms, earth-toned sarongs are draped over the massage tables. Sultry, rhythmic Balinese music and flickering candles set the mood. Gently rocking my feet, the therapist begins her massage with a thumb-walking technique; her hands work atop the sheet covering my body. She moves next to my head, matching my breathing with her own, and concludes the dry portion of the massage along my spine.

Heating the fragrant massage oil in her hands, she returns to my feet where she stimulates reflexology points using thumb pressure. Palm presses gently warm my leg muscles, followed by long strokes up my hamstrings. As she compresses my back muscles with her palms, I can feel her gracefully climbing onto the table above me in order to achieve the necessary angle. Now face up, my arms are treated to more palm presses and my palms receive acupressure. Even my stomach is massaged softly. The final sequence of movements focuses on my neck, scalp, and face. By the time she's done I feel as if I've snuggled my body into the sandy shores of Bali and watched my worries wash out to sea.

The Balinese believe their island home is paradise. As the sun sinks into the horizon, the chorus of chirping cicadas tells the farmers it's time to return home and rest. When you feel the harmony and grace that is conveyed through their massage, and experience the unhurried pace of their lifestyle, you'll join them in the Balinese blessing, "Om suasti astu," which means, "Peace in your heart and in the world."

Spa specialist Denise Reynolds, whose column "Spa Pleasures" brings you reports on spa treatments from around the world, invites you to visit www.spapleasures.com for more information on the pleasures that await you at today's spas. Copyright © 2005