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STONE MASSAGE: Make mine on the rocks

BY: DENISE REYNOLDS

Multitasking is a fact of modern life. We eat at our desks, reading e-mail while listening to voice mail, and call this progress. It's no wonder we feel overstimulated and overworked. For more and more people, the antidote of choice for this dizzying pace of life is a wonderful twist on the old notion of 'getting stoned.'

Dim lights, mood music, and exotic scents fill the air. But this is a far cry from the days of Woodstock and flower children. Today's Baby Boomers are discovering the wholesome potency of Stone Massage.

Since the beginning of time, many cultures have been fascinated by stones and have used them in their medical traditions. In the American Southwest, where it reaches 120 degrees in the summer, Native Americans used hot rocks in sweat lodges for purification and healing, as well as to relieve specific physical complaints including menstrual discomfort and the pain of childbirth.

But it wasn't until a hot August day about ten years ago that stones were formally introduced to the spa world by Mary Nelson-Hannigan, the creator of LaStone Therapy®. Experiencing arm fatigue due to a heavy massage schedule, Mary was taking a sauna when she noticed the rocks and decided to use them for her next massage. Since then, her massage system has grown to include 54 hot stones, 18 frozen stones, and one room-temperature stone.

Although credited with benefits ranging from improved circulation, stimulated metabolism and even cellulite reduction, people suffering from obesity, heart disease, osteoporosis, varicose veins or skin conditions should not undergo stone therapy.

For my Stone Massage I traveled to Tucson, Arizona, birthplace of the present day technique. The desert touch was evident throughout the Sonoran Spa at Westward Look Resort where treatments are inspired by ancient desert traditions. Named for its lush Sonoran Desert setting, this nurturing environment boasts a sun-dappled terrace that serves as a pre-massage relaxation area, overlooking breathtaking views of the Santa Catalina Mountains.

Once I was comfortably situated

on the massage table, my therapist retrieved black basalt lava stones from a nearby water bath and assisted me in sitting up while she placed ten smooth stones—heated to a temperature of 125-135 degrees for optimal heat retention—on the table beneath me to align the muscles of my spine. Slowly she lowered me onto the stones, which fit perfectly into the curvature of my spine. Next, she placed four stones atop the towel covering my torso, each corresponding to a specific chakra point. Then, small flat stones were inserted between my toes, large rounded stones were placed beneath each palm, and one stone was positioned on my forehead. Immediately, I began to feel the penetrating heat dissolve all my stress.

While the stones began to work their magic, she applied clary sage and juniper oil to my body (sage is grown outside in the resort's Wellness Garden). Cradling a single stone in each of her hands, she glided them over the oil and began to massage my muscles with long, fluid strokes—working her way around my body beginning with the legs, then the arms, followed by the neck and chest area—lingering just long enough to melt the tension from every muscle she encountered.

Removing the stones that had become my friends, she turned me over and placed two large stones on the sacral region of my lower back and a large rounded stone in each upturned palm as she continued her work on the reverse side of my body, again using the stones as an extension of her own hands.

By the time she finished this deeply sedative and reenergizing massage I was completely relaxed and carefree. My body and mind had regained their balance. As I walked out into the still desert air, I felt grounded and grateful for the restorative power of the stones.

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 © 2004