

Secrets from the Water Castle

The lure of a unique cultural experience invites you to Whistler.

By Kirsten Rodenhizer



THE WATER CASTLE was the Sultan's retreat to recuperate and restore his energy. Inside the Taman Sari, the Sultan could rest and relax with the whole family. It is with this philosophy that The Taman Sari Royal Heritage Spa was built. The spa is designed to help bring out beauty from within, and promote health and happiness to radiate outwards.



I await my treatment at Taman Sari Royal Heritage Spa in its elegant front lobby, nibbling on fruit salad and sipping a cup of Javanese tea with jasmine flowers. The lobby, with its dark tile floors, teak furniture, stone carvings and batik wall hangings, has been carefully designed to make you feel like you're stepping into a Javanese luxury retreat the moment you cross the spa's threshold. The scent of the flowers mingles with the aroma of lemongrass and peppermint suffusing the air.

The experience is as rare as it is authentic. There are just seven of these unique spas in the world and only one in North America, located in Whistler's Summit Lodge. Taman Sari's signature treatments are based on jamu, a form of traditional herbal medicine practiced in Java, Indonesia.

"This is something we grew up with and that our parents taught us, and we want to introduce it to the public," says Spa Director Julie Wahono. "We are very proud to be part of this authentic tradition."

The Taman Sari company, concept and spa product line were created by Wahono's mother, Mooryati Soedibyo, who grew up in the royal court of Java as a descendent of an early 20th-century sultan.

Spa therapist Anis, a young woman in a brown-and-gold batik uniform, arrives, greeting me with a nod and a smile, and escorts me down a hall lit with floor candles. She walks behind me and directs me in a soft voice to the massage room. The room is small and sparsely decorated with earth-toned silk batik. Lilted music emanates from the corner — the sounds of the angklung, Indonesian bamboo pan pipes.

To begin, my scalp is massaged and my hair anointed with a coconut cream hair treatment and wrapped in a towel. Then comes the hour-long full-body massage. Traditional Javanese massage involves medium to heavy palm and thumb pressure, stroking the length of the muscles and occasional rolling of the skin between the thumb and forefinger — techniques intended to increase



blood flow, release the body's energy and promote healing. The deep pressure gets right into my muscles. By the time she reaches my toes, I feel like I've melted into the massage table.

Each product used in the treatments, from the hair cream to the massage oil, is beautifully fragranced with herbs and spice blends. Taman Sari spas use their own exclusive line of body care, facial care and ratus, or Javanese aromatherapy incense, manu-

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factured in a special production facility in Indonesia. All Taman Sari spa therapists are trained in massage and jamu at an exclusive training facility in Jakarta.


Next up is the lulur exfoliating scrub, wherein a wet-sandy concoction of fenugreek, rice powder, turmeric, temu giring root and pandan wangi leaves is applied all over my body and then rubbed vigorously until it dries and falls off. Lulur is most often associated with the pre-wedding ritual of Indonesian women. The scratchy sensation is worth it – I emerge soft and pink as a peach. I rinse off in the in-suite shower, and then Anis, who is waiting quietly outside, leads me back to the lobby for more tea.

Wahono returns to give me a tour of the entire spa. There are five treatment rooms in total, including a massage room, a Vichy shower room, a foot spa, a sauna room and a couples' treatment room with an in-suite hydrotherapy tub. The teak wood and batik decor continues throughout, with bright silks, statues and furniture imported directly from Indonesia. A tea and jamu bar in the front lobby offers an opportunity to sample a variety of teas and jamu herbal cocktails designed to enhance health.

"Javanese people believe that what you eat will heal you – that your food is your medicine," says Wahono. "In Java, people keep a medicine box in the kitchen full of dried spices."

She is clearly proud of the facility's many authentic touches, and hopes the lure of a cultural experience will help bring visitors to Whistler.

"We would like people to see us as part of a whole Whistler experience of culture, health and wellness, as opposed to just a spa treatment," she says.

Taman Sari's signature Javanese treatments include the Javanese massage and Lulur body exfoliation, as well as a Merapi volcano body wrap. The spa menu also offers more familiar services, such as Swedish massage, facials and other aesthetic treatments. Spa packages are available, and the spa is open year-round. Whatever the timing or purpose of your visit, it's definitely worth paying a visit to Indonesia the next time you're in Whistler. 

For more information about Taman Sari Royal Heritage Spa, call 604.938.5982 or visit www.tamansarispa.com.

