

G R E A T  
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S P A N I S H S A M P L E R

by Ellen Sarbone

**T**he romance of a spa vacation is legendary, with famous lovers such as Napoleon and Josephine, Casanova and the Duke and Duchess of Windsor taking long, decadent sojourns to these glorious bastions of self-renewal. When it comes to destinations, Spain has long been a favorite for its 2,000 mineral springs and more than 100 spas.

Unlike the U.S., where treatments are mainly cosmetic and fitness-oriented, Spanish thermal centers are known for the particular medical problems their mineral waters claim to cure, and whole towns have grown around the springs. Visitors can choose their destination by geographic area, including quaint fishing villages, mountain hideaways and lush valleys, or by the ailment they want to improve.

Most spa programs require at least a week for the

whole course, which includes a full medical check-up by an MD who determines your personal treatment plan and daily schedule. Many resorts have added long weekend and four-day alternatives to their anti-stress, beauty and fitness programs. The rate usually includes breakfast and dinner, with a choice of delicious low-calorie cuisine. Services run the gamut from facial peels and mineral bath Jacuzzis to mud and seaweed wraps and facials.

One of Spain's most spectacular spa resorts is the Gran Hotel La Toja, sitting majestically on the Atlantic side of La Toja Island and linked by a causeway to the seafaring town of El Grove; it is surrounded by the Galician sea. This part of the Spanish coast is reminiscent of the fjords in Scandinavia.

The beautifully maintained five-star hotel was built

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at the turn of the century and is connected to the spa, making it easy to pad down for treatments in your fluffy terry robe and slippers. After a treatment, you can return to your room, open the large French doors to a private terrace, and relax overlooking the park-like grounds and sea.

La Toja's waters are known for aiding skin problems, physical aches, rheumatism and arthritis. The three main programs are anti-stress, beauty/hydrotherapy, and slimming. Treatments range from mineral baths to seaweed and mud packs. Other activities include golf on a nine-hole course, swimming in the Olympic-sized pool and tennis.

Another popular spa is the four-star **Gran Hotel Puente Viesgo**, on the northern coast of Spain by the Cantabrian Sea. Its waters are helpful for circulatory problems, stress and anxiety, arthritis and rheumatism. The facilities include a thermal swimming pool, hydrotherapy baths, steam rooms, high pressure showers and mud packs.

Though the hotel is relatively new, the town of Puente Viesgo has been a spa destination since the 1800s. It is located along the Pilgrim's route or "El Camino de Santiago" (The Route of St. John). For a thousand years, pilgrims from all over Europe have made the perilous journey

over the Pyrenees mountains and down to Santiago de Compostela (one hour from La Toja) to the site where the tomb of St. John was discovered in the ninth century. Along the way are monuments built by the faithful as shelters for the wayfarer. This part of Spain is so rich in history and so geographically and meteorologically different from the rest of the country that it merits a special trip.

In the coastal resort town of Lloret de Mar on the dramatic Costa Brava is **Institut Gem Health Clinic**, which pampers guests with a variety of treatments including Scottish showers, mud body peels, hydramassage, hydrotherapy and seaweed sessions. The spa's location in Cataluna allows visitors to bask in the temperate Mediterranean climate while exploring the Greco-Roman ruins and Romanesque monuments found in the nearby hills. The province of Girona features quirky port towns, the spectacular Dali Theater-Museum and the picturesque provincial capital city of Girona, graced by flowing rivers, footbridges, fortresses and a magnificent historic center.

For information on these and other spas, contact the Spanish Government Tourist Office in Los Angeles at (213) 658-7193.

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