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## Escapes

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### A New View Of Atlantic City

*A handful of luxury spas have helped polish up the gambling resort and, in the process, created another reason to visit.*

By SHIVANI VORA

IT'S a lively Tuesday evening at the Harrah's casino in Atlantic City. Gamblers fill the blackjack and poker tables while drinking beer and cocktails, slot machines clang in a steady rhythm, and the air holds on to traces of cigarette smoke.

Just a few hundred feet away, however, an entirely different world exists. Guests at the Red Door Spa are soaking in a waterfall-framed Jacuzzi and sipping pomegranate herbal tea on soft chaise longues around a fireplace. Soothing Zen music plays in the background, and the scent of

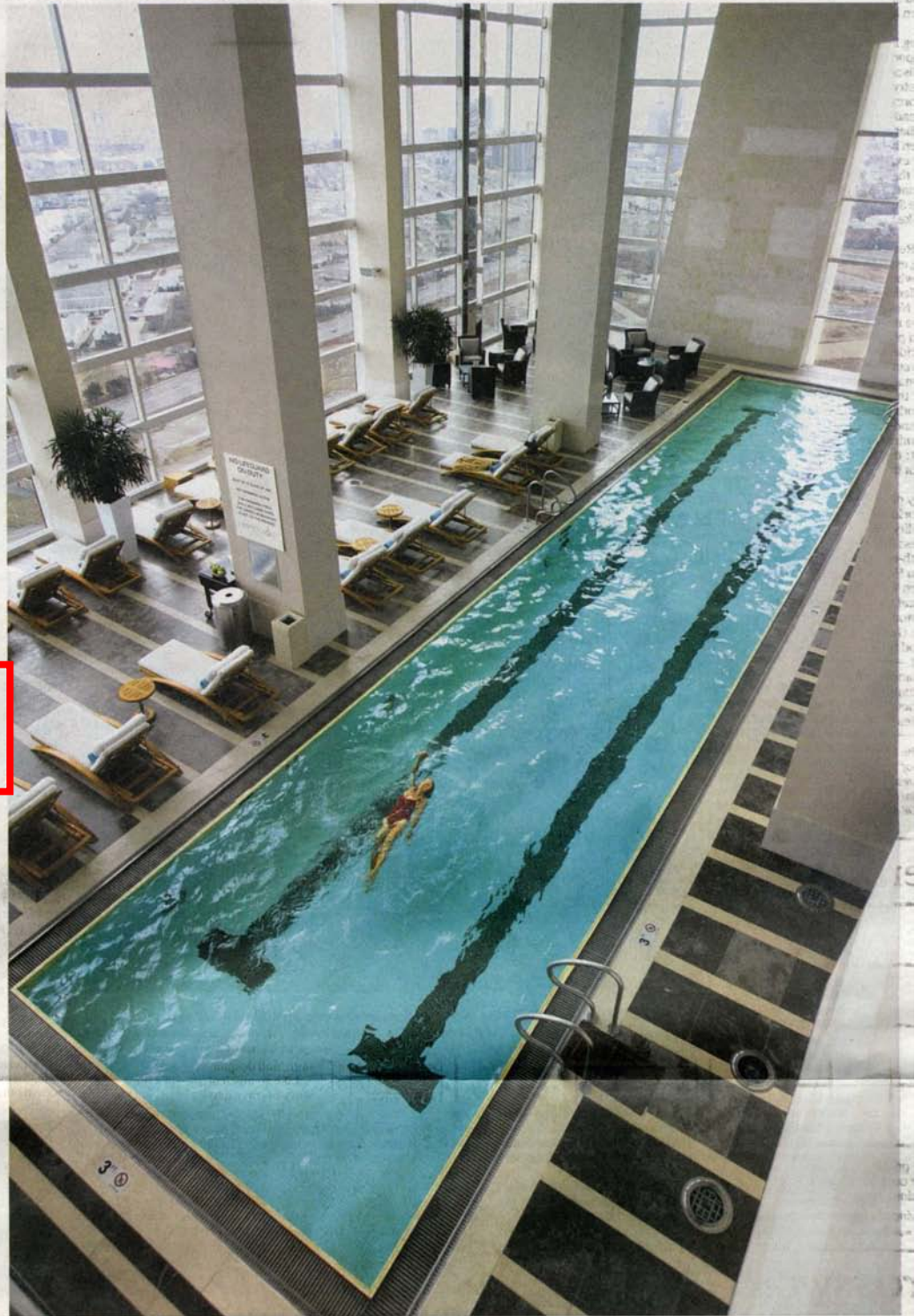
Once, this quieter, calmer side of Atlantic City would have been hard to imagine. But the city, which has spent the last several years trying to spruce up with shinier casinos, upscale hotels and dining options beyond mile-long buffets, is turning to several new splashy spas to draw visitors.

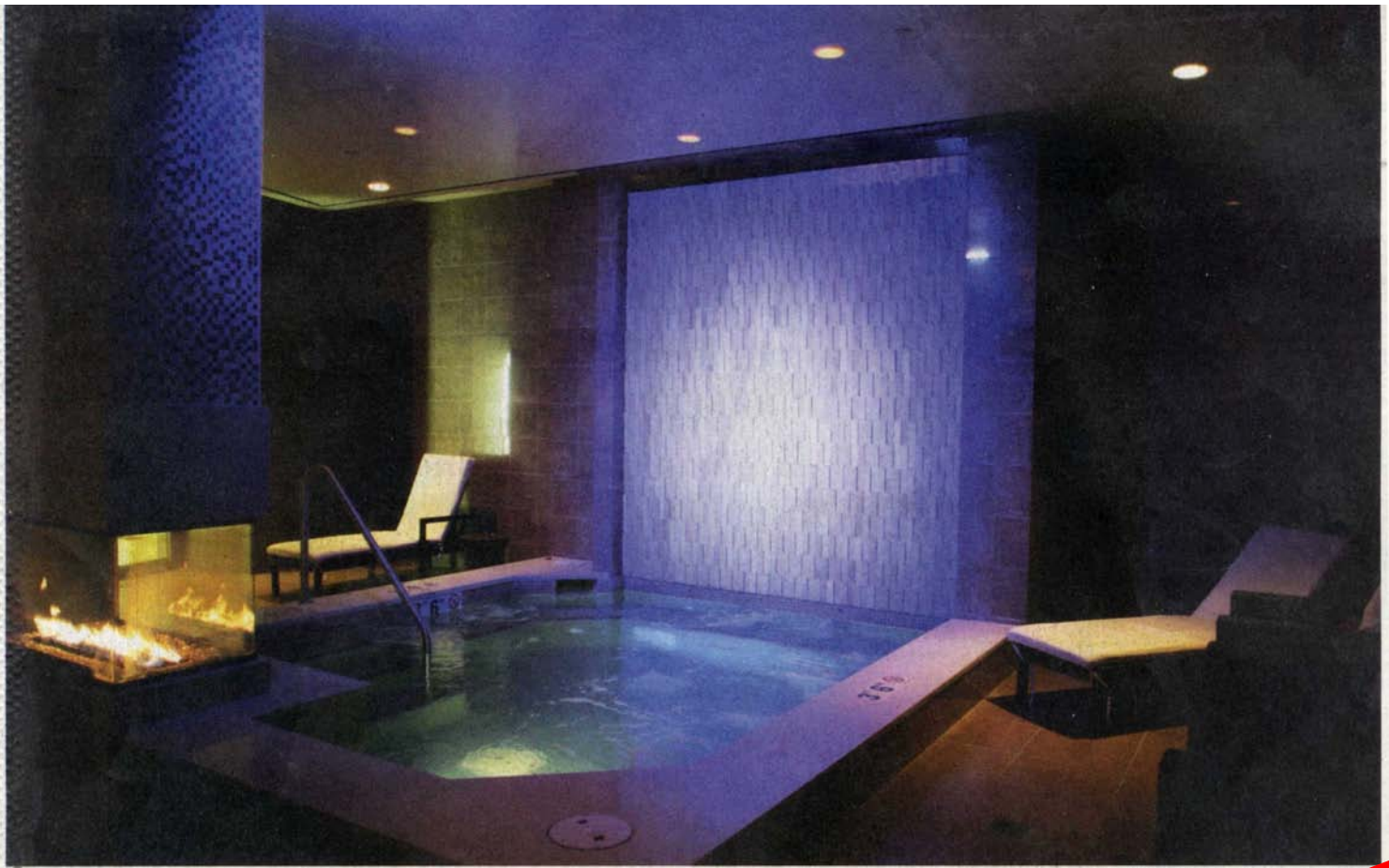
There have been at least a half-dozen spa openings in the last two years, and a handful more are in the works. So now, if they can tear themselves away from the slots and tables, visitors are lured with hundreds of treatments with names like Lemon Zest, Dancing Waters and Immersion Rainforest.

Six years ago, the spa culture was almost nonexistent. Save for a few small designated spaces set aside in some casinos where on-call therapists worked a handful of treatment rooms, there were virtually no spas, said Jeffrey S. Vasser, president of the Atlantic City Convention and Visitors Authority. Now, places like Immersion at the Water Club, Spa Toccare at the Borgata, Vive Day Spa at the Showboat, Qua Baths & Spa at Caesars and the Elizabeth Arden Red Door Spa at Harrah's are luxurious, meticulously planned amen-

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**OVER THE BOARDWALK** At Immersion, atop the Water Club, spa patrons can swim with Atlantic City as a backdrop.





**FIRE AND WATER** A waterfall and a hearth accent a Jacuzzi at the Elizabeth Arden Red Door Spa at Harrah's. It opened in 2007, accelerating expansion of the spa business in Atlantic City. PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROBERT MECIA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

# A New View of Atlantic City

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ities that are major selling points of the hotels.

While they vary in size and services they are all striving to be serious destinations for spagoers, aiming for customers who want to pass away an entire day getting treatments and lounging around saunas, steam rooms and swimming pools.

Barbara Kirk, 66, has stayed at the Showboat twice a month for the past decade to play the \$1 and \$5 slot machines, but she now includes visiting the hotel's Vive Day Spa as part of her itinerary. The 4,000-square-foot space, which opened in November, is lined with sand-colored Italian tile and has treatment rooms with cork floors to reduce outside noise. The men's and women's locker areas each have eucalyptus-scented steam rooms.

A spa novice, Ms. Kirk booked an appointment for her first facial after taking a tour of Vive and enjoyed it so much that she has been back twice.

"The only time I have to get beauty stuff done is when I come to Atlantic City," said Ms. Kirk, who lives in Bayonne, N.J., and works in the insurance business. "Before, there wasn't really any place nice where you would want to spend a lot of time in, but Vive is a beautiful space."

The spa trend started in 2003, when Spa Toccare opened at the Borgata with 15 treatment rooms and quickly became booked two months in advance. The demand for treatments was so great, said Brennan Evans, the director of spa operations, that Spa Toccare expanded to 54,000 square feet just two years later.

manicures.

While a basic massage is the service most often booked at spas, according to the International Spa Association in Lexington, Ky., some services at the new Atlantic City spas go beyond the basics, and even the basics have twists.

Vive recently introduced a massage, facial and pedicure with seashells treatment that the spa says helps release calcium into the body. At Red Door, the manicure and pedicure stations have their own flat-screen televisions. Toccare has a dry-float soft pack, a tub with a wrap that simulates floating in water and is used as a part of several services. Immersion has a treatment room where jade stone is part of the walls, and the locker rooms at Qua are modeled after traditional Roman baths with hot and cold plunge pools.

While Atlantic City may be easier and cheaper to get to for many customers like Ms. Caliri, that doesn't mean the treatments themselves are a bargain. A 50-minute massage costs in the low three figures at most spas, and some extravagant treatments reach well into four figures. Qua, for example, offers a three-hour \$5,000 treatment called Dieci Mani; five attendants administer an exfoliation; a hot stone massage; an ayur-

vedic shirodhara treatment, in which warm oil is poured on the forehead; a chakra balancing that uses different colored stones to balance the body's energy; and a facial. Customers go home with \$1,500 in spa-care products and a \$1,000 bag with one of the Pier Shops, like Louis Vuitton or Gucci.

The couples' treatments at Immersion start at \$550, and the least expensive manicure at Red Door is \$27. Most places add an additional 20 percent gratuity, which guests usually have the option of adjusting.

But even in the slowed economy, and even at those prices, most spas say that bookings are up or holding steady. Jackie Moyers, the assistant general manager of Red Door, said that business was up 5 to 10 percent in February from the same month last year, and that weekends were still booked to capacity.

Spas tend to stay strong in slow economic times, said Lynne McNees, president of the International Spa Association. "After 9/11, people flocked to spas in record numbers, and we're finding that they're still going now," she said. "They may cut down on the length of treatment they get, but they have a psychological need of wanting to be nurtured during stressful periods."

The busy bookings, however, did not come at a cost for some spas. Those that noticed a slowdown recently introduced discounts, spa directors said. Spa Toccare, for example, sells out on the

weekends, but it introduced a 50-minute \$99 massage Sunday through Thursday — a 20 percent discount from the usual price — to bolster weekday bookings. And Qua is offering a different sale every month, like one for April that offers a 50-minute massage, body exfoliation or facial for \$99. That's 40 to 65 percent off the usual price.

While Immersion did not lower costs, it introduced the option of 50-minute treatments in November, shorter than the previous 80-minute minimum, to offer less-expensive choices. Both the Water Club, where Immersion is located, and Borgata, home of Spa Toccare, are jointly owned by MGM Mirage and Boyd Gaming.

Nonetheless, Immersion is perhaps the most deluxe of the spas. The 36,000-square-foot space is on the top two levels of the Water Club and has a glass-enclosed pool with views of the city and ocean. Items from a menu created by the chef Geoffrey Zakarian can be served at a poolside chaise longue or table.

Santosh Sekar, a 30-year-old hedge fund analyst from New York, booked two 50-minute Swedish massages at Immersion when he took a trip to the Water Club over Presidents' Day weekend with his wife, Jyoti. He said the shorter service did the trick. "For me, going to the spa isn't only about the treatment — it's also about enjoying the space and relaxing," he said. "I can get that in 50 minutes and not have to spend as much money."

Still, other customers say that the prices don't deter them. Ms. Caliri, now a regular at Immersion, said that her average bill came to \$250 but that it was still far cheaper than booking a flight and going away for an extended period.



Some discounts are offered, but pampering is largely recession proof.

There was a handful of spa openings in the next few years, but the growth really took off in 2007 when the Elizabeth Arden Red Door opened at Harrah's. In 2008, Immersion, Qua and Vive joined the lineup.

planned. Sea Spa at the Chelsea boutique hotel is scheduled to open in mid-April. The 10,000-square-foot space will have exposed brick walls and rugs with animal prints, a relaxation room with heated benches and floors and a 94-degree saltwater pool. Also, at the end of next year, the Revel Entertainment Group is scheduled to open a casino hotel on the boardwalk where the spa will be a major component, a spokeswoman for the company said.

Cheryl Caliri, a 56-year-old retiree from Philadelphia, tried a massage at Spa Toccare when it first opened. She said that even though the city is just an hour from her home, she had gone there infrequently because she didn't think it offered the type of spas she loves to visit when she travels.

"After going to Toccare, my perception of the city completely changed," she said. "It was on par with the spas I've visited in more exotic places like Hawaii and New Zealand."

Now, Ms. Caliri takes monthly excursions to Atlantic City with her husband or her friends for massages, facials and



**SANCTUARY** A lounge at Spa Toccare at the Borgata, top, and a treatment room at Qua at Caesars. The new spas offer a break from the hustle of Atlantic City's gambling tables and the bustle of its night life.

#### IF YOU GO

The **bluemercury spa** (609-347-7778; [www.tropicana.net/Atlantic-City-spa](http://www.tropicana.net/Atlantic-City-spa)) is in the Quarter, a shopping and dining area in the Tropicana Casino & Resort. Bluemercury has 25 spas nationwide, but the Atlantic City spa, open since 2004, is its largest at 10,000 square feet.

**Immersion** (609-317-7790; [www.thewaterclubhotel.com/spa](http://www.thewaterclubhotel.com/spa)) opened last year in 36,000 square feet on the top two floors of the Water Club hotel. Its menu was created by Geoffrey Zakarian, who owns the Manhattan restaurants Town and Country.

The 1,400-square-foot **Larimar Aveda Salon & Spa** (609-441-1600; [www.larimarsalonspa.com](http://www.larimarsalonspa.com)) at the Pier Shops at Caesars offers hair, nail and body treatments. **Qua Baths & Spa** (609-343-2400; [www.caesarsac.com](http://www.caesarsac.com)) opened last May at Caesars Atlantic City. The 20,000-square-foot spa has treatments like a chakra stone balancing.

and going away for an extended period.

Ms. Kirk said the \$130 she spends each visit at Vive was a worthwhile indulgence. "I work hard, and I think I deserve to treat myself every once in a while," she said.

Not all of Atlantic City's new spa customers are from out of town. Charles Haney, 31, who owns a restaurant in town and lives in nearby Egg Harbor Township, gets a massage every few months, a luxury he used to book only when he traveled. When he recently tried the 90-minute massage at Vive, however, he no longer felt the need to leave town for such an indulgence. "I was surprised to discover such a nice spa experience right here," he said. "I used to have the mentality that I had to travel to get that, but now I realize that I can have it right at home."

**Sea Spa** (800-548-3030; [www.thechelsea-ac.com](http://www.thechelsea-ac.com)) is set to open in April at the Chelsea hotel. It will have a 94-degree saltwater pool and two relaxation areas: one with heated stone benches and floors and another where guests may order lunch from a spa menu.

**Spa Toccare** (866-692-6742; [www.theborgata.com](http://www.theborgata.com)) at the Borgata, the first of Atlantic City's new spas, is

At Harrah's Resort, the 23,000-square-foot **Elizabeth Arden Red Door Spa** (609-441-5333; [www.harrahresort.com](http://www.harrahresort.com)) opened in May 2007 and has flat-screen TVs at the manicure and pedicure stations and waterfall-framed Jacuzzis in the locker rooms.

**Vive Day Spa** (609-343-4118; [www.vivedayspa.com](http://www.vivedayspa.com)), about six months old, is a 4,000-square-foot space that has eucalyptus steam in the locker rooms.