

Slime and sublime

Spa regimen mixes work with pleasure

BY MICHELE MEYER
Houston Chronicle

IXTAPAN DE LA SAL, Mexico — I dreamed of becoming actress Julia Roberts.

You know: tall, slender yet curvaceous, sensuous with beautiful, doe eyes ...

This was my chance.

Three days of pampering at Ixtapan Resort Hotel and Spa in Mexico.

Hey, I didn't have far to go. I may be 5 foot

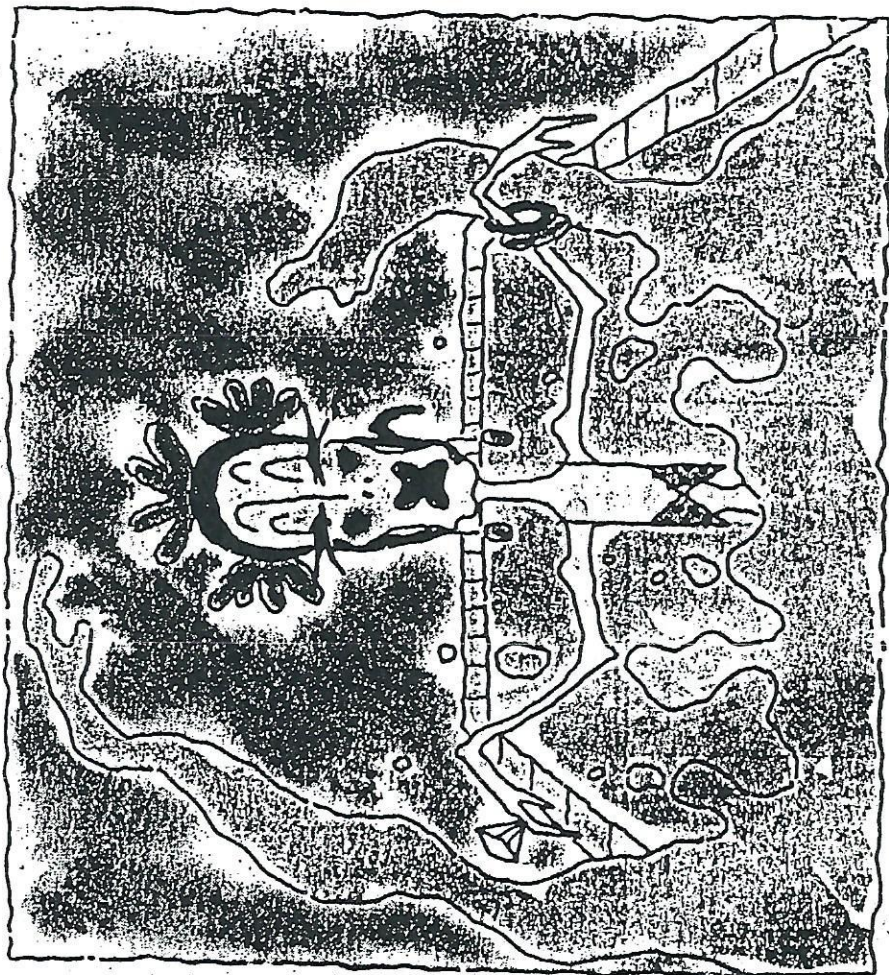
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3, but I already have curly, dark hair and dark eyebrows like the *Steel Magnolia* ... With a few facials, manicures and massages, I would be drop-dead beautiful.

Or so I thought. After three days of part boot camp and part R&R, I experienced a 1-pound weight loss and an earthquake. After three hours of exercise each day, if I was drop-dead anything, it was drop-dead sore. All that effort, and I'm still more likely to get the lead for *Bountiful Woman* than *Pretty Woman*.

I was not the only bountiful scenery when I arrived a few Sundays ago at the spa, which at less than \$420 for a three-day package is among the less expensive programs around.

After a winding, harrowing drive through the hills south of Mexico City, Ixtapan de la Sal seemed an oasis among the dry brush



Kris Poli Illustration / Chronicle

and poverty. Mosaic-adorned fountains, ponds and 42 acres of rosebushes and bougainvillea-entwined trellises surround the hotel, a five-story barrackslike concrete structure.

Working women from all over the United States and families from throughout Mexico come here for respite. In the winter, 90 percent of the guests are American women. The rest of the year they are mostly Mexican families, hoping to be honed into shape with

exercise classes and 900-calorie-a-day menus, and to be pampered with facials, massages, manicures and mud wraps. Paraffin wax treatments, reflexology and acupuncture all are available for those who want something more exotic.

I knew something was amiss, however, when I arrived at the hotel nestled in lush hills, 70 miles southwest of grimy Mexico

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Spa

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City.

The first thing they handed me was not a dietetic margarita, but an unadorned slip of paper.

It said: "7 a.m. *caminata* (walk), 8 a.m. *desayuno* (breakfast), 9 a.m. *ginnastica* (aerobics) and 10 a.m. *acuatica* (aquatic exercise)."

Hey wait a minute? Didn't I come here to be pampered? This sounds like the army. Who gets up at 7 to walk and then to exercise another two hours?

We did.

Picture this: A dozen women and a couple of men, half American and half Mexican, in shorts and T-shirts, hats and sunglasses headed toward the hills at sunrise.

We immediately separated into two groups, nicknamed by the staff *Las Gorditas* (the fat ones) and *Las Altas* (the tall ones).

Las Gorditas, far the majority, were women in oversized T-shirts, and mostly aged 40 and above. Many came with their sisters or daughters.

Las Altas were Eve Reid, an accessories designer from New York and her pal, Laura Anderson, an owner of a commercial land title company in Austin. Both were about 30 — tall, slender, sleek. They wore sleek blazers and tights that revealed muscles but no blemishes.

Las Altas always led our hikes, stretched the farthest during our aerobics class and skipped breakfast to do hundreds of sit-ups. *Las Gorditas* fantasized about chiles rellenos and ice cream sundaes — and most of all, looking like *Las Altas*. As Reid and Anderson brushed past, we gasped for breath and stopped to rub sore muscles or chatter.

"*Vamonos. Andale. No se pare.*

Cierra tu boca. No hables. No fumes," barked George, the wiry 42-year-old marathon runner who led our daily hikes. "Let's go. Hurry up. Don't slow down. Shut up. Don't talk. Don't smoke." George, ranked fourth in Mexico in his sport, was friendly yet had little patience for his charges. He darted past us and scampered up mountainsides to kill boredom as we chugged behind.

"Every morning I don't think I can do it, and then I would think it was so beautiful," said Ruth Miller, a retired retailer from Dallas. She was here with her sister, Naomi Williams, also of Dallas.

Next was breakfast, when we stared at our plates as if we thought eggs and bacon would appear if we looked long enough.

No, breakfast *really* was just a mound of cottage cheese the diameter of a quarter with a small piece of toast.

The lone poached egg on our plate the second morning was greeted with rapture by regulars.

"Don't you feel like, 'Is it all for me?'" gushed Miller, as she beamed at her plate.

Mealtime was the most educational time of day. Spa veterans educated newcomers to spa tricks:

■ Peel your fruit to avoid catching a bug.

■ Ask the waiter for pineapple instead of Jell-O for dessert.

■ Ask for the best masseuse (Lupe, who uses the heat of her hands rather than lotion).

■ Spread Nivea lotion on your feet to prevent blisters during the hikes.

■ Head to the Hotel Kiss across the street if you're going to cheat on the diet.

Veterans also compared the many spas they had frequented: the Greenhouse in Dallas; Rancho la Puerta in Tecate, Mexico; Safety Harbor Spa in Tampa, Fla.; Olympia in Oconomoc, Wis.; The Wooden Door in

Lake Geneva, Wis.; and many more — spas which for the most part were more expensive, more rustic and demanded more exercise.

"As far as spas go, this one is great for the money," concluded Robin Molinaro of Waterloo, Iowa, and at 23 a veteran of more than four other spas.

Lessons from spa veterans were the only education at the spa. If you didn't know Spanish, you were not likely to be able to communicate with the staff that coated you with paste of various colors.

On to exercise class, where Chela pushed us through an hour of low-impact aerobics. "*Uno, dos, tres...*"

Once we collapsed, she sent us to change for what was the easiest — yet most dreaded — exercise: aquatics in what we came to call the Slime Pool.

Murky, thick and the color of overcooked asparagus, the pool was purported to be rich in minerals. We attempted aquatic exercises, buffeted by the slime. I wondered if the pool would bubble and engulf me at any moment.

The slime pool was all but forgotten an hour later as we entered the beauty institute with its lilac chairs and walls, lush plants and mirrors. The institute exuded femininity.

We traded tights and T-shirts for strapless, purple-striped wraps that could make anyone look like a sage roll. (By the way, if you're a size 6 or under, the one-size-fits-all wrap will keep sliding down.)

Ali was forgiven as I looked at my pink schedule for the remainder of the day: hair treatment and nails at 11:30, massage at noon, lunch at 1 p.m., facial at 3 p.m. and mud pack or loofa at 4 p.m.

Aaaaah, the life.

From then on, my major concerns were do I want clear nail polish or

magenta, an avocado hair treatment or a French twist? Somehow nothing could match the decadence of having Chela, the aerobics instructor, massaging oil into my scalp as Tona, the aquatics dictator, buffed my nails, soaked my feet and pared my callouses. These exercise taskmasters had shed their leotards for pink uniforms. I closed my eyes as Chela massaged my neck and dreamed of eating the avocado she was rubbing into my scalp.

I awoke as I was being sprinkled with rose water.

Every day was a thriller. What would they put in my hair and on my face? Monday, it was a hot oil hair treatment and papaya facial. Tuesday, it was tomato on the scalp and banana on the face. Wednesday, it was herbal cream and steam in hair and apple, oatmeal and honey and Vitamin E on the face.

Julia Roberts never had it so good.

By the time I padded down to lunch on the terrace, there had been more food on my hair than on my plate. Monday we ate a salad of grapefruit, oranges, carrots and lettuce and Tuesday a chicken tostada.

Every day, the drink in my glass looked like cherry Kool-Aid, but it tasted like... hmmm... tree roots? It was *jamaica*, an herbal drink that is an acquired taste, one that grows quickly on someone who is starving. It was the only thing on which there were no limits of how much we consumed. In a world of clear con-summe, red Jell-O and minuscule meals, *jamaica* soon was devoured.

After a day of beauty, I headed back to my "master suite," spacious yet shabby, to daydream. The room had a terrace, two rooms, two baths and vanity area, but the sofa, chairs and other furniture were well-worn and dated from soon after the hotel was built in 1939.

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D T CTH

Resort

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Ants, spiders and other bugs kept me alert. The room had Cinemax, CNN and HBO, but no air conditioning or toiletries beyond soap. Despite the 15 roses delivered to our rooms Monday, this was not Inn on the Park.

I settled into bed as birds chirped and horses clomped past. If dreams had calories, I would be in trouble. I envisioned packaged Oreos, which I don't even like. The next day it was saltines. I don't like saltines. (Perhaps, it was a premonition of my main diet for the following weeks: crackers to compensate for *turista*.) Not once did I dream of lettuce, carrots or tomatoes.

I woke up and walked a mile into town, telling myself I needed a bottle of water. Why then did I ask each

store vendor if they had chocolate bars?

I returned home with neither. Others at the spa were sunbathing poolside or exploring options at the neighboring public baths. There, a glorified whirlpool cost 16,000 pesos (about \$8) for one person and a massage about the same. Parafin wax treatment for the body costs double that.

By the time we emerged for our 7 p.m. dinner, which on some days was carrot or zucchini soup, followed by trout, baked chicken or beef, and then a sliver of pineapple, a baked apple or excessively virtuous Jell-O. Portions were small, but adorned with parsley and cut attractively.

We, too, were attractive, having metamorphosed into tanned and glossy women with silver jewelry and makeup. A day of beauty, as we called it, had knocked a decade off the looks of some guests.

We were not only younger looking, but by the end of the trip, we were all

room. The price includes: exercise classes, daily massage and facial and weekly mud wrap, scalp treatment, manicure, and pedicure. Additional charges include transfers from Mexico City's airport to Ixtapan de la Sal, at \$45 to \$52, and 15 percent tax.

No credit cards are accepted at the hotel. For reservations or more information, call or write the spa's U.S. representative, E & M Associates, 211 E. St., New York, N.Y. 10017; (800) 223-9832.

■ The spa is located 70 miles southwest of Mexico City in Ixtapan de la Sal, on Route 55.

■ Bring leggings, shorts, hat, glasses, sun block, tennis shoes, passport and swimsuit. There's no need for dress-up clothes, makeup or shampoo if you have the hair treatment each day. The hotel provides no amenities beyond tissue and soap.

■ Don't bring jewelry, and if you do, put it in the hotel safety box.

■ Although the staff speaks little English, you can get by with a few words. "Mas suave" means softer. "Mas fuerte" means harder. "Dema-

camp buddies. We giggled and talked about everything (in other words, food).

None of us fit the vision I had of spagoers: wealthy, lithe women of leisure, who go to spas to maintain their size-4 figures. Many of us are a good 25 pounds overweight, and most of us are entrepreneurs. Mary Ellen Molinaro of Waterloo, Iowa, owns a gift shop; Eve Reid designs accessories; and Irma Uscanga de Amandi of Mexico is a chemistry teacher.

The week became increasingly adventurous.

On Tuesday, we submitted to a mud wrap. Some adored it; others of us were repulsed at being painted all over in mud and then left for a half hour to bake in clear plastic.

Wednesday, we were rubbed with Johnson's baby lotion and salt to remove dead skin. We left downy soft.

Thursday's experience was not on our pink schedules. An earthquake, 6.1 on the Richter scale, shook us

from a deep sleep at 1:35 a.m. A few fluorescent light covers were ajar, but otherwise only people were rattled.

Robin Molinaro had been dreaming a man was adorning her with silver jewelry from Taxco when she awoke with a jolt. "She thought it was a man under her bed shaking her bed," recalled her mother, Mary Ellen. "She thought he had come to get the silver she had bought."

Earthquakes, like brief power outages, were common at the spa, Chela said.

So was weight loss. After three days, I had lost a pound, and the others between two and four pounds.

Even Reid, who had nothing to lose, left satisfied with her dewy skin, sleeker muscles and relaxed nerves.

"I thought a Mexican spa was an oxymoron," she said. "But this is green and pretty. The weather is dreamy."

Remember these tips when planning retreat

■ Don't expect miracles or even a transformation in a week. In three days, I lost 1 1/4 pounds and an inch from my hips and a half-inch each from my bust, waist, stomach and thighs.

— MICHELE MEYER