



BACK TO BASICS

A DATE IN DAYLIGHT

forced actress and writer

HOLLY WHITE to

approach her beauty regime very differently to how she had before: she needed to literally turn it inside out, swapping make-up (her carefully-applied outer skin) for bare skin and an inner glow. She starts her new regime here, with massage

“Let me put my cards on the table. I don’t think being fashionable means a wardrobe full of new season designer goodies, nor do I equate being beautiful with having an entourage of stylists and make-up artists alongside a dressing table heaving with products. Regardless of what the current climate dictates, the above would rarely be possible, even for a woman with deep, deep pockets. I associate true beauty and style with that wonderful French expression, “*être bien dans ma peau*”; to feel good in my skin. Women who have attained this liberated state of being stand starkly apart from those at the mercy of an over-prescribed litany of dos and don’ts, all for the sake of fashion. The emancipated woman buys what she is naturally drawn to, what she genuinely has found to be effective, and takes care of her body and mind out of sheer pride, a desire to feel happy, healthy and well.

I confess, this only truly occurred to me after a brief and, unusual in Dublin, sober, love affair. The relationship was initiated with a brunch invitation. The subsequent dates - a walk in the park, a trip to the cinema, a visit to an art gallery - all required looking casually beautiful. The usual transformative effect of my going-out regalia - heels, legs, alcohol-fuelled effervescence - could no longer charm. I needed my basics, in the stark light of day, to work much harder for me. Skin needed to be clear, make-up natural and healthy, scent became much more important than I had previously believed and all my basic day clothes had to look as special as the going-out glam rags. With no pumping music and dim lighting to hide behind and lacking the heady buoyancy of a few glasses of wine to boost my confidence, I was left with just jeans, a T-shirt, flat shoes and myself, to work with.

And so I resolved to turn over a new leaf: my new regime would have nothing to do with spending my entire paycheck in an effort to be instantly fashionable. My demands outstrip wanting to look superficially pretty, I want the inner as well as the outer aspect nourished. I want therapists who dispense tips galore, mop up tears if they come. I’m not just looking for a quick fix, I want the works and I’ll challenge them all on every level, including value for money. I want comfortable surroundings and an excellent treatment that is the right mix of beneficial, therapeutic and enjoyable and also, if I’m not being too demanding, realistically priced. I’m not frugal but I think that the enjoyment can quickly disappear from a treatment if you feel short changed.

In Thailand, at 20, while my companions were glued to the *Lonely Planet* guide, planning our itinerary, I took full advantage of the incredibly cheap, readily available massages. In Thailand, everyone gets about two massages a week - it’s viewed as more of a necessity than a luxury. *The Thai Well Centre*

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in Ranelagh in Dublin 6 is as authentic as it gets. Tiger Balm pervades the air. Thai Maneewan, who runs the centre with her Irish husband Brian, gets stuck into my back with her elbows and then her knees, showing no mercy. Every inch of me is stretched and pummelled. At the end, she places a hot towel over my face and instructs me to breathe deeply through my nose and then mouth. A waft of Thai herbs mingled with mint and lemongrass hits me like a slap in the face, it's so strong. Within minutes my sinuses are cleared. A natural healer, she eyes a bruise on my knee, and quickly anoints it. My whole body is tingling with newfound energy and I feel as if I could take on the world. I walk home, eyes bright, reeking of Tiger Balm, and promptly fall asleep on the couch. This is such a unique find, I would recommend it to anyone who is not a fan of lying down and blissing out – you will be totally entertained and challenged for an hour.

Nuala Woulfe's Serenity Day Spa in Glashule in Co Dublin is sophisticated and enormous, the atmosphere reverential. There is a separate dressing room with dressing gown and slippers to change into and lockers to stow your clothes and handbag. I have a California Massage with Judit, from Barcelona, who has a lovely manner that doesn't make you feel as if you need to apologise for being so vain as to spend a few hours at a day spa. She washes my feet, encourages me to breathe deeply and notices my spine is deeply tilted so a cushion under my stomach will make me more comfortable. I never knew this before and it makes a huge difference. She uses deep strokes with lavender and ylang ylang oil, custom-blended for me. The treatment room is a pink cocoon. Judit suggests some daily exercises to relax my back. I leave buoyed with an otherworldly sense of calm. I meet my mum for lunch, I've no idea what we talk about as my mind has long since drifted off onto another plane. I had spotted a friend's sister in the reception as I left. I ring her after lunch and she is equally pleased with her treatment (so it's not a one-off). I sleep deeply that night.

It's one of those days where even the prospect of a treatment

(a Hot Stone Massage with Jennifer at *The Tethra Spa at the Merrion*) is stressing me out. I bought a blender and couldn't work it out and my breakfast smoothie flung itself everywhere in my kitchen, except my glass. I am hungry and cross. In the hotel gym and pool area, cosmopolitan types lounge around in robes, drinking fresh orange juice and leafing through the newspapers. The provision of dressing gowns and slippers is something I am getting used to; and a locker to safely stow everything away in. The Tethra spa employs four full-time staff and one part-time, all Irish (unusual these days). A back scrub is followed by massage with oil and then the basalt stones, heated to 55°, are applied. Initially, there is a deep sensation of heat followed by a sort of melting feeling as the stones are moved around. Having my face massaged with the stones feels absolutely amazing. The only thing that irritates me is a loud man making all aware of his arrival and subsequently pounding away on a treadmill just outside the treatment room. The gym is apparently quieter in the afternoon. For just €15, you can use the gym, steam room and pool before a treatment. Definitely worth mentioning are its fabulous opening hours, 9am till 9pm, seven days a week (free parking on Merrion Square on a Sunday).

The Harvest Moon Centre on Baggot Street, an urban mecca for massage and flotation, has been a poultice for my wounds many a time. With ten therapists from far and wide, it tends to be a multi-cultural experience. The atmosphere is hippy-ish but massage is taken very seriously and is of the 'no pain, no gain' ethos. Ask for Sunita, and if you get the front room you're lucky, it's enormous!

After a massage a week for four weeks, I feel that old worries and anxieties have been brought to the surface and worked out of me. I had a bout of tears and a crop of spots, followed by elation and clear skin. I don't feel like I've the weight of the world on my shoulders. A massage a week would be impossible for me to sustain but given the choice between a night on the tiles or a massage of equal value, I would take the latter, so I guess my priorities have changed. Do I look better? I certainly feel better and that's half the battle. ■

ADDRESS BOOK

SERENITY DAY SPA, 55B Glashule Road, Sandycove, Co Dublin, 01 230 0255;

www.serenityspa.ie. **California Massage**, €135.

TETHRA SPA AT THE MERRION HOTEL, Upper Merrion Street, Dublin 2, 01 603 0600;

www.merrionhotel.com. **Hot Stone Therapy**, €125.

THAI WELL CENTRE, 53 Ranelagh Village, Dublin 6, 01 497 0888; www.thaiwell.ie. **Thai Full Body Hot Oil Massage**, €65.

THE HARVEST MOON CENTRE, 24 Lower Baggot Street, Dublin 2, 01 662 7556; www.harvestmoon.ie.