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Heated differences

How geography and culture impact thermal traditions and why it matters for your spa

WORDS NORA ELIAS

Cultural differences exist in every area of life and while they usually don't present insurmountable obstacles, they're always something to be aware of. One of the main places in which they can manifest themselves in spas is the thermal zone. Spa-goers in different parts of the world have diverging preferences when it comes to what the space should include, how the facilities should be used and what their key attraction and benefits are.

Every spa should have a certain cultural sensitivity but it's especially relevant if your location means you have a diverse global clientele or if you're about to embark on a project in a market that is new to you. "There are important differences between regions when it comes to spa concepts, which means some heat experiences are more important in one region than in another, and it's essential to respect the cultural characteristics in order to create a successful concept," says Frank Strobel, director of international sales at thermal provider Klafs.

Certain thermal features are a staple of almost any spa, regardless of location – most notably the sauna and steam room. However, that doesn't mean that features in the thermal suite don't vary in prevalence and popularity as a result of a range of factors, including geography. →

Faena Hotel Miami Beach, a Klafs project

THERMAL AREAS
Cultural differences

The vitality pool at the Genting Hotel at Resorts World Birmingham, a Spa Creators project

Pine Cliffs Resort, one of MSWG's clients

The Finnish sauna at the Palazzo Gnudi Spa, a Wellness & Spa Solutions client

"Without being too stereotypical, areas like the Middle East and Turkey tend to favour steam-based options whereas the Scandinavians and Russians favour the intense heat of the sauna," says Erin Lee, project director at thermal specialists Dröm UK, which has worked on a number of projects in and with clients from the Middle East.

Blowing hot and cold

Roberto Cemin, president of Italy-based Wellness & Spa Solutions, which provides thermal facilities including pools, saunas and steam rooms to the industry, says regional traditions are integral to what clients expect from the thermal area. "The use of and preference for some equipment depends on the history and culture of a nation," he says. "For example, the best [thermal] treatment you can have in Africa is the Moroccan hammam, in Russia you find the banya and in the Mediterranean thalassotherapy is very popular."

> "We always talk to clients about cultural differences within the spaces before we go through the design process"

The markets in which Klafs is active range from the UK, continental Europe and Russia to the Middle East and Asia, and Strobel agrees that the past is a heavy influencer on the thermal habits of today. "In continental Europe the sauna has a long tradition so a variety of different sauna experiences will always be a plus. In the Middle East the hammam and wet treatments play a key role and should be the focus of a winning spa concept, and in Asia people primarily think about water and treatments when they think of spas," he explains.

However, clients don't just favour facilities that are in line with their own surroundings and traditions. In fact they often have a preference for something contrasting. "People look for the opposite of what the country offers," says Chris Keen, chief executive of Austrian planning and design company Medical Spa & Wellness Group (MSWG), whose key international markets include the UK and the Balkan countries.

"In hot countries people prefer soft steam baths and ice and snow cabins but the colder the region the hotter the experience should be, such as the Russian banya where the temperature goes up to 105°C." The Russians are not alone in this, with Lee pointing out that both "the Russians and the Scandinavians bathe in extreme heat and use extreme cold to cool down – very intense".

Thermal knowledge

Industry experts agree that the level of knowledge spa-goers have about thermal experiences and the facilities they're most familiar with is often influenced by where they're from. "I think some countries and cultures have more of an affinity with the benefits of spa [and thermal areas]; it's more akin to their way of life," says Christine Hartigan who works on spa and wellness projects for UK-based architect Space and Place.

Lee elaborates on the topic, explaining that "The Scandinavians and Russians are brought up with thermal bathing as part of their daily routine, as are people in Turkey and the Middle East. The UK and other European countries are starting to realise the benefits but are [often] still unsure how to use the various rooms and rituals."

Adding to this, Keen says: "In countries with a long spa tradition, like Austria, Germany or the Scandinavian countries, people have more experience.

"However, the rest of the world is catching up. It's not enough to build a standard steam bath or sauna now; you need to explain the story, the procedures and the health benefits of different cabins and treatments." Strobel similarly says that in his and Klafs' experience, clients' growing focus on what spas, including the thermal space, can do for them is a global trend. "People are more and more interested in clear benefits, in wellbeing and rejuvenation," he says. "We're seeing that even in regions without much of a spa tradition there is a strong rise in knowledge about the spa journey."

Cemin comments that while regional differences are still a factor, there is now more individuals can do to educate

Verulamium Spa at Westminster Lodge

The sauna at the Jaz Amsterdam hotel, on which Klafs worked

Sommerhuber/Dröm UK

Verulamium Spa at Westminster Lodge, a Space and Place project

themselves. "You can definitely link to the culture and history of every nation. In Italy, for example, the benefits of steam baths and laconiums are better known, while in northern Europe, the benefits of different types of saunas are well known," he says.

> "In countries with a long spa tradition, like Austria, Germany and Scandinavia, people have more experience. However, the rest of the world is catching up"

"But nowadays people have the chance to deepen their knowledge through the internet and specialised magazines."

Local connection

Alistair Johnson, director of UK-based design and consultancy business Spa Creators, whose international projects span locations such as Russia, Croatia, Saudi Arabia, France and Monaco, says the company always factors in the geographic aspect. "We always talk to clients about cultural differences within the spaces before we go through the design process," he says. He adds that these differences include that "In Europe there is more of a focus on the health benefits of the thermal area whereas in the UK and US markets, we're looking at it more from a relaxation point of view."

If you're an operator breaking into a market that is new and unknown to you, it's worth partnering with someone with a deeper local knowledge. "From our perspective, it's of high importance to collaborate with internationally experienced partners," says Heinz Schletterer, chairman of MSWG. "It's very risky to set up a project in a country where your partners are not familiar with the market characteristics." Lee says that's exactly what Dröm UK originally did in the Middle East.

"When we started working in the Middle East it was important for us to partner with a company that was either based in the relevant country or had worked there successfully in the past," she says. "That way we were able to understand when we could and couldn't work, the cultural expectations, how the government in the country worked, what red tape we might encounter, et cetera."

Dressing it down

One of the key cultural differences in the thermal area is the "to wear or not to wear a swimsuit" issue. In some countries it's the practice not to use swimsuits or trunks in saunas and steam rooms, in others it would be unthinkable not to. "In Germany and northern Europe people normally don't use a bathing suit while the British or Italian, for example, are much more modest," says Cemin. In places where the two practices meet, this can be an issue. However, as Jonson explains, there are ways around it.

The Spa & Bath House at the Royal Crescent Hotel, a Spa Creators client

The Turkish Bath at Palazzo Gnudi Spa

"We're working on a project in Croatia at the moment and the hotel has a large conference market with guests from all over the world. I went into the sauna when I was there and there was a man who was completely naked but also women in their swimsuits," he says. To address this, Spa Creators suggested putting in additional thermal facilities as part of a refurbishment. "We're going to create separate saunas and steam rooms in the changing rooms, in addition to the ones in the thermal area, and that's due to this issue of people being naked in the main thermal space," Johnson explains.

This is not the only time Spa Creators has made design adjustments on a cultural basis. "We're working on another project, the Frensham Pond Hotel in Sussex in the UK, which is owned by an Asian family and we're going to put a sauna and steam room into the women's changing room. That's in addition to a sauna and steam room in the main pool hall," Johnson says. "The family comes to stay at the hotel and they want to have a separate thermal area that the women can go into."

The answer to overcoming any cultural issues the thermal area might present seems to be to do your research, work with the right people and come up with creative solutions to any challenges. **PSW**