

SPAS IN THEIR EYES

THE SECRET OF BLISS'S SUCCESS

Beauty boffins among you will be well aware (and very happy) that Bliss Spa has arrived in London. *Time Out's* shopping editor in New York, Zoë Wolff, checks out the phenomenon that started there, while Rachael Phillips discovers why it's set to be just as massive over here...

BLISS IN NEW YORK When Bliss joined forces with French conglomerate LVMH in 1999, it was a sign of how far the spa had come. Since its New York debut in 1996, the Soho oasis for well-heeled Manhattanites had doubled in size, opened a second branch on East 57th Street and, many would argue, spawned the luxury spa boom that continues today.

New York may now be littered with places to get pampered, but Bliss still packs 'em in for its signature Ginger Rubs and Hot Milk and Almond Pedicures. 'A lot of people open a spa because they think it's fashionable,' says Bliss founder Marcia Kilgore. 'It's like with restaurants. It's easy to be good for a minute, but it's the ones that have good chefs that people keep going back to.'

Quality, in Bliss's case, doesn't come cheap. The Triple Oxygen Facial, for example, costs a prohibitive \$140. But having done quite a bit of spa-hopping, I can attest that the Bliss experience is worth emptying your pockets for. What sets the spa apart is its curious blend of decadence and lack of fuss. Being here is like riding on a cushy conveyor belt. Even the potentially cloying gimmicks – one 'checks in' at the front desk, changes in the 'locker room' and hangs pre-treatment in the snack-stocked 'robe zone' – serve this over-arching efficiency.

Considering the spa does an astounding 9,100-plus Triple Oxygen Facials a year, it's not surprising that expansion continues apace. The West Coast, Dallas and other key US cities are being eyed up both for spas and for Quickbliss nail bars – in-and-out mani/pedi outposts that will debut in NYC sometime in 2002.

BLISS IN LONDON Bliss has been open here for a mere two weeks and it's already going down a treat. The spa business is booming in London, and Bliss Spa has launched in ladies-that-lunch central: Brompton Cross. So is this New York import a winning formula?

Well, first impressions count, and the retail space upstairs is a glowing white cube full of horribly tempting goodies and whizzy nail terminals. Get your mitts or feet sorted out here and you get a set of headphones so you can watch TV on the plasma screen above your therapist's head – so no need for idle 'Going out this evening?'-type chat. And, like the sushi at Itsu round the corner, all the equipment to do your nails arrives on a mini conveyor belt, sterilised and ready for action.

Downstairs is where the treatments happen. The locker room is really pleasant, with deep, long lockers to put all your rubbish in (no squidging up your 'dry clean only' trousers), and showers and sauna. While you wait for your treatment, chocolate brownies, cheese and biscuits, grapes, even a glass of wine await – the key here is that Bliss is low on guilt and high on fun. No sanctimonious therapists force-feeding you liquorice tea and telling you how unhealthy you are.

Just like my NY counterpart, I'm known for my spa addict tendencies and I too balked at the £190 price tag of my treatment, The High Herbie. But when I got out of the spa two hours or so later, after a body wrap, foot massage, upper body massage and full-on facial, I did feel it was worth the money – and that I'd come back.

The facial includes a serious extraction session (ie zit-squeezing), and the woman even got to blackheads in my ears, God bless her. Another plus is they play real music, like Al Green, instead of the usual Enya bollocks. My skin glowed afterwards and didn't turn zitty, which it has after most other facials I've tried. I even sat happily on the tube home and smiled at people – the name High Herbie is obviously more accurate than I thought.

Bliss is a much-needed addition to spa culture in the UK – its humour, a strong service ethic and treatments that deliver results should make this another part of the New York experience we don't want to give up.

Bliss Spa, 60 Sloane Avenue, SW3 (020 7584 3888) South Kensington tube. Open Mon 12.30-9pm, Tue-Fri 9.30am-9pm, Sat 9.30am-6.30pm. Bliss basic facial £90, triple oxygen facial £125, hot cream manicure £23, hot salt body scrub £85.

