

Years ago if you were in search of a spa for pampering or alternative health treatments, you'd usually have to travel out of London to find one. But recently a new wave of urban day spas have sprung up in the inner city – giving people “too busy” for spas the chance to test the water. **SARAH HARVEY** reports.

TO A certain generation, spas can conjure up images of being manhandled by a sturdy Germanic woman and being restricted to a diet of celery sticks.

However, increasingly people are beginning to associate spas with getting a relaxing massage or facial treatments. There is also a growing awareness of the health, rather than purely relaxational, benefits of massage – as well as other complementary health procedures than modern spas offer.

But in this modern world, not everyone has the time to pootle off to Champsney's for the weekend, which is where urban day spas come in.

Chinalife, Islington, an urban spa called Chinalife is doing a roaring trade.

It has opened three and a half years ago by former actress and Miss World London winner Stephanie Kingley Oprea.

Kingley is a devotee of “Chinalife” massage, a form of deep tissue massage evolved from Acupuncture. Her massage and the massage Kingley said: “The concept was to create a little oasis within the urban city – somewhere where people can stop to recharge their energy and have massage and beauty treatments. We're offering a spa service, but on a relaxed basis, so people can make appointments and drop in.”

The popularity of Kingley's treatments led to her moving, stepping in age from their early 30s to their 40s. These include facial treatments such as facial lift, skin toning, and more cosmetic skin care.

Kingley said: “Beauty is predominantly a focus,

particularly evening, but massage is definitely up there too. I can give a massage by hand along the call for massage to. I think it's the result of various things. People want to receive things from days on holiday and they want for the first time, so massage has a higher profile now and it's not just an something “only” my own. There's no guilt attached to it and there are a lot more practitioners around. People are also exploring different ways of looking after themselves these days, rather than just looking for a traditional beauty.”

“We can offer an alternative to prescription drugs. It's a choice to come down the more rather than go other routes to deal with your problems. Generally people are not very good at dealing with stress and confrontation, so they look to escape stress like drugs, drink and food addiction. It's our way of coping. Going for treatments like massage allows you to get to know with yourself – it's the oldest medicine in the world. By the end of the session I feel confident you and you have a deep sense of relaxation.”

“The spa treatments continue to have a demand there before they have managed to increase circulation and they use a special blend of essential oils. Other treatments include hot stone massage, and even a research diet, which aims to improve digestion and balance the stomach.”

Kingley added: “We're a one stop shop that helps people get through their emotional and physical needs. The biggest thing we help with is stress.”

Meanwhile, Chinalife in Camden High Street, Camden Town, arrived on the scene last year. Opened by professor Man Fong Mei as an offshoot of the adjacent 30-year-old AcuMedic Chinese medicine clinic, there is obviously a strong emphasis

on the health benefits spa treatments can bring.

Professor Mei's son, Don, who is the company's creative director, said: “The trend really is moving more towards trying to fit spa treatments into your daily life rather than pampering yourself and taking off the whole weekend.”

“Our opinion is it's wonderful if you can pamper yourself as much as

possible but in reality we are all busy people, and so much of the modern conditions like stress are things that need to be managed on a day to day level, rather than once or twice a year.

Therapeutic

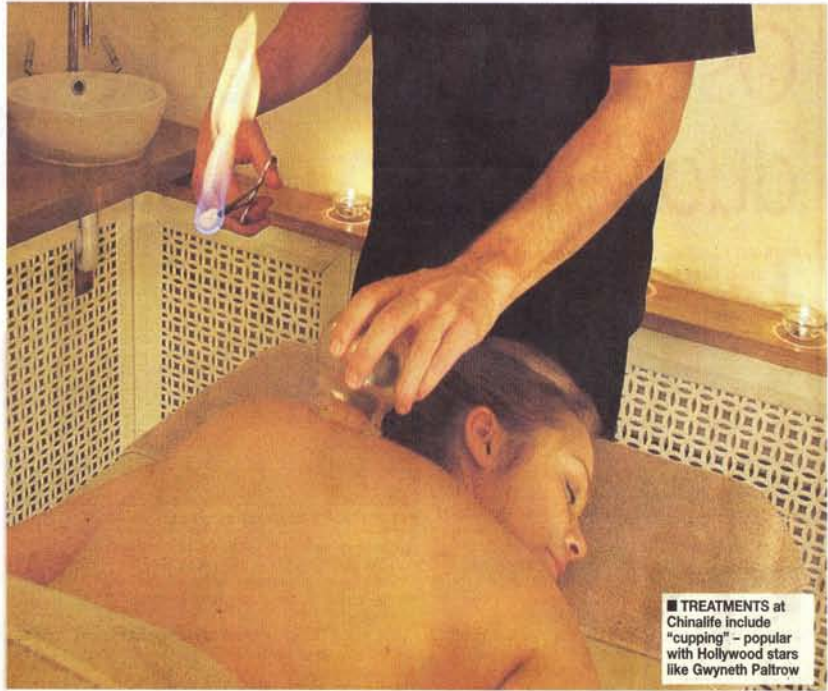
“So, we try to offer as an effective treatment as possible in as short a time as our customers can manage to fit into their lives. It's more about the therapeutic process rather than just simple pampering.”

Treatments at Chinalife include herbal facials, acupuncture, tonics and cupping – fans of the latter of which include movie star Gwyneth Paltrow.

Don said: “Cupping has been practised for thousands of years as part of Chinese medicine and is usually combined with Chinese tuina massage and acupuncture. Chinese medicine believes that illness, stress and pain can be caused by a blockage or stagnation of blood, lymph fluids and vital energy, known as Qi.

“So, for example, back pain may be caused by bad posture which means that your Qi energy and fluids can't flow properly through that area and begin to stagnate. Cupping is used to stimulate movement of these fluids and Qi, to get your body back on track.

“It is used to treat all kinds of muscle pain, stress, and to help clear congestion after a cold or flu. The therapy involves creating a vacuum in several cups and applying them to the skin. This causes a suction sensation which stimulates energy and fluid flow and can draw out toxins. You



TREATMENTS at Chinalife include “cupping” – popular with Hollywood stars like Gwyneth Paltrow

Bliss is now just around the corner!

are usually left with some painless marks but they disappear within a week. The results are an immediate relief of pain and stress.”

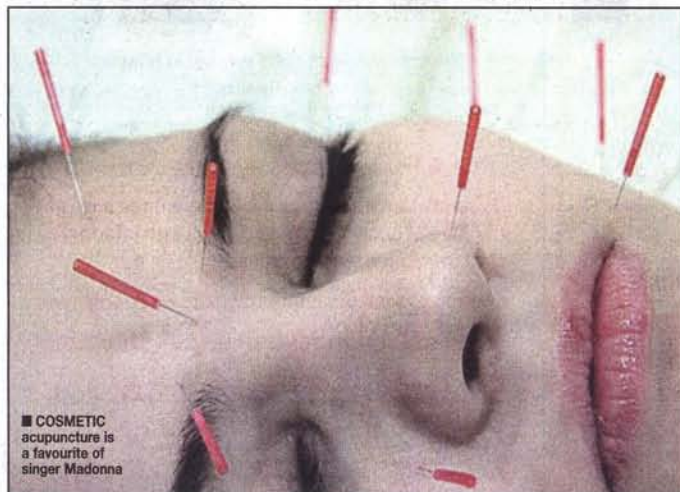
Unlike at most spas, the treatments are carried out by doctors trained in both Chinese and Western medicine. These include some of the highest qualified doctors in the field of acupuncture.

Don said: “We try to integrate a lot of the theory of Chinese medicine into our treatments, so, for example, the massage therapists can talk to you about things to help identify things that may be unknown to you. We'll discuss how you're sleeping, what your diet is and massage all over your body to find the tender points to reveal aspects of your internal body. Of course, some people like to come just for a massage but we try to have that expert knowledge on hand just in case!

“The cause of bad skin can be from internal health, excess of heat in the body or damp can be caused by stress or anxiety.”

Cosmetic acupuncture – a favourite of “Queen of Pop” Madonna – is one of the most popular treatment at Chinalife. Don said: “All it takes is one celebrity to say they like something for the interest to get blown up. Cosmetic acupuncture is becoming a popular alternative to more invasive anti-aging techniques. It's about balancing the internal organs, while making sure there is a good blood supply to the face, which stimulates collagen.

“Because of the medical clinic next door we get a very broad base of customers, and being based in Camden means we get a whole host of people coming here.”



COSMETIC acupuncture is a favourite of singer Madonna