

# The bare essentials

Toscana Terme Bad Sulza's **Marion Schneider** reminds the wider European market that, in one basic respect, UK and US visitors need very careful handling



In my opinion, the English education system is still very conservative. Genders are often separated from an early age and this continues as girls and boys are in many cases taught in different schools. Even if they are taught in the same school, school uniforms and separate rituals for boys and girls during school time highlight the differences between them. Such caution is directly expressed in this variety of school uniforms and the many separate activities for boys and girls during school time. Accordingly one key issue emerges when English-speaking guests visit the spa: if your therapist's client is of the opposite gender, your therapist should take special care to respect the very high level of privacy expected by the guest.

## The naked truth

Nudity in general is a very delicate issue. When catering for clients from England, you should avoid any situation in which they feel exposed to your staff. Ideally they need a private area to undress and dress and some means of covering their nudity in between, such as a bathrobe or a large towel. During treatments, English clients expect that private parts – the genitals, the rear and for women the breasts – will always be covered. This is a must, at least for massages. For water treatments your clients may want to wear their bathing suit. Conducting treatments in a subdued atmosphere or with lights dimmed helps clients feel less exposed.

## Respect the difference

Guests from the United States share this sense of delicacy. A little background knowledge helps us to understand this attitude better: even from a young age little children are always dressed. Young girls already wear bikinis and children are not supposed to be naked in public. Furthermore, if the parents can afford it, children rarely share a bed or even a room overnight, regardless of gender. Most Americans therefore wear swimming clothes even in the sauna, regardless of the fact that the Scandinavian origins of sauna definitely prescribe nudity.

Accordingly it's very hard for Americans to change their habits and adapt to local rituals. If you wish to adopt a general approach to global spa guests, it's advisable to orientate your services around the greater needs of one client group so your staff can please all clients without even thinking about it. This helps secure a greater level of general customer satisfaction. Therapists should by definition have a natural gift of empathy, and this can help you improve your services. By initiating a process of ongoing communication within your circle of staff to share and exchange their experiences with clients, you can enhance the overall quality of your services.

*“By sharing knowledge, the spa industry is in a unique position to educate and to translate this sensitive knowledge to good business practice”*

## Warm welcome

If you have US clients, friendly, warm communications are essential to make them feel welcome. They also expect to receive the same standards of hospitality they know from their own country. If you intend to cater for American guests in large numbers, you should consider visiting the US to gain first-hand experience of the spa culture there. As the US and UK share many key cultural values, if you cater for the needs of visitors from the US, your guests from Britain will also feel more at ease. The core of the predominant values found in the US is rooted in English culture, after all.

## Skin treatment

This is a key distinction between German and English spa visitors, for example. Although they both represent Western cultures, they are in many ways quite different. Please bear in mind, here, that the characterisations I describe are necessarily generalisations. All cultures and even smaller social groups are to a greater or lesser degree heterogeneous and as such you will find both exceptions to the rule as well as differences in any group. That said, there are also identifiable similarities in every group.

Many Germans – just as in Scandinavian cultures – are well used to nakedness. In Germany, naturist beaches or lakeshore areas are quite widespread. Young and old go bathing completely naked and it's quite natural. While not prohibited, there are usually separate stretches of beaches or lakeshore for naturists. In the age of industrialisation and the working class movement, a naturist movement arose around outdoor activities such as hiking and biking which still exists today. Comradeship and friendship was expressed through the ability not to feel shameful in one another's presence. That doesn't mean that every German enjoys this to the same degree, but nudity is not regarded as disrespectful or shameless but rather an expression of trust and being at ease – communicated without words.

As Europeans exchange these experiences in today's market, the spa industry is in a unique position to educate and to translate this sensitive knowledge into good business practice.

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