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Massage Spas, New Oases for the Harried Flier



Kevin P. Casey for The New York Times

The Massage Bar at Seattle-Tacoma Airport.

By JOHN HANG
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ABOUT five years ago, Richard Laermer, a public relations executive, found himself with time to kill during a layover at Logan Airport in Boston.

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Kevin P. Casey for The New York Times

Shane King, a massage therapist, gives a chair massage at the Massage Bar.

"I was milling around the terminal, and I noticed a place that had massage," recalled Mr. Laermer, whose firm has offices in New York and Los Angeles. "I thought, hmm, I can go to the food court, or I can get a massage."

He opted for the massage. A young woman kneaded his back and then worked her fingers deep into the soles of his feet. "It was really expensive, but it felt really good," Mr. Laermer recalled of his 30-minute massage, which cost \$50. "Definitely a better choice than going to Burger King."

Mr. Laermer, who travels about 175,000 miles a year on business, now gets massages regularly at airports. He swears by them. "After it's been contorted for hours in those airplane seats, my body is so tight it sort of creaks." Once he's had a massage, he said, "I'm creak-free."

Once considered something fringe and New Age, massage has gained respect. In 44 states and the District of Columbia, therapists must be licensed to practice; and there is a growing body of research showing its value.

"There's definitely good evidence that massage reduces anxiety, depression and certain kinds of pain," said Dr. Christopher Moyer, a research psychologist at the University of

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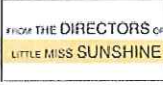
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Wisconsin in Stout, who has been studying the benefits of massage for almost a decade. "There is also some evidence that it might reduce intensity and frequency of headaches."

Considering that regular air travel might be summed up as one huge headache, Dr. Moyer says he's not surprised at the growing availability of massage in airports. According to a 2010 survey by the American Massage Therapy Association, 18 percent of American adults said they received a massage in the previous year.

Although it is not known how many of those were massaged in airports, Massage Bar Inc. estimates that it gives 300 massages a day at its 18 airport locations throughout the United States. (The company, based in Seattle, is widely credited as being the first to offer airport massage. It started with a small location in Seattle-Tacoma International Airport in 1994.)

"Sometimes just taking a walk or going into a quiet place in an airport where you can relax will have a similar calming effect to massage," said Dr. Lynn Millar, professor of physical therapy at Winston-Salem State University in North Carolina. "But I think it's worth a try. There's plenty of research showing its benefits."

What kind of massage should business travelers consider? Alongside manicures and facials, the menu boards on the airport spas offering massage feature an almost Starbucks-like choice of options: Swedish, therapeutic, sport, deep tissue. While there are differences in the techniques, the basics of the treatment are the same: using the hands, fingers and sometimes the leverage of his or her body weight, the massage therapist manipulates the soft tissue of the body to reduce tension and free up movement.

For the harried traveler looking to try massage as an antidote to long hours standing in line or cramped into business-class seats, Ruth Werner, president of the Massage Therapy Foundation, recommends what some call the "entry level" form of hands-on treatment: chair massage.

Here a specially designed chair allows you to lean forward and supports the front of the body, allowing the therapist to work on the shoulders, back and neck, typically places where most of us feel tension. Chair massage clients remain clothed and no oil or lotion is used. It is done from 10 to 20 minutes.

"It's a good way to start," Ms. Werner said. "Because you're clothed it's a little easier and faster, and the intimacy issue is much less."

Massages requiring the partial removal of clothing typically take place behind a curtain or in a private room.

Given massage's long but often undeserved reputation as part of the sex trade, massage professionals for years have been trying to separate sex-for-hire from legitimate massage therapy. The new Lifetime TV show "The Client List," which stars Jennifer Love Hewitt as a sort of call girl-massage therapist, may help to reinforce an old stereotype.

"I wish we could say we're over it, but massage is still being used as a front for human trafficking," Ms. Werner conceded. But "legitimate massage therapists have absolutely no expectation or tolerance for the suggestion of sexual activity." As for airports, she said: "It is highly unlikely that this would ever be an issue in such a public setting. You're six inches away from other people."

Of course, anyone can give you a shoulder rub. To make sure you're getting a professional-quality massage, Ms. Werner said, "look for someone who is pushing off with the back leg as they work, using all their body weight, and making firm contact. If their shoulders hike up, if they seem to be holding their breath, if they don't look comfortable as they're working, that might be someone to avoid."

She adds that these days, massage at an airport can be as effective as the most exclusive spa. "The best massage I ever had was in the Portland airport," said Ms. Werner, who is a licensed massage therapist and author of a widely used textbook.

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