

Stressed out with city living? Muscles tense and aching? You need our guide to

The best massage in London

MASSAGE is booming in the capital with every hotel and spa competing to offer the latest and most therapeutic treatments.

For many cultures, massage is a vital part of wellbeing and healing. Now more and more Londoners are realising they could do their stiff shoulders, dodgy backs and stressed minds a power of good if they could just get their bodies into the right professional hands.

BY ALICE HART-DAVIS

But how to find a good masseur? One problem is that spa therapists tend not to specialise in massage and they also tend to move on frequently. Really, you want a recommendation from someone you trust, for a practitioner who has made a particular type of massage their speciality, so that you benefit from their years of expertise.

You can tell a great masseur as soon as

they start work; you don't need to tell them which muscles are stiff or which joints are out of kilter; to them, your problems will be immediately obvious.

What a good massage should do for you is pretty straightforward: it should make you feel a lot better than you did before; it should ease the body and soothe the mind; it should be enjoyable; it might be uncomfortable to have over-tight muscles worked on and loosened but it shouldn't be painful.

Don't put up with anything that causes

you pain, or makes you feel threatened, or anyone who doesn't listen to what you ask for.

The cost varies. If you live out of the centre, you may find a good practitioner who charges £40 or £50 an hour, but in central London, the rate for the top masseurs is anything up to £100 an hour — and if you want them to come to you, you can double that, since you'll be paying for their travelling time.

So who gives the best massage? Here are our testers' verdicts...

KINGSLEY OGEDENGBE

Ki Mantra yogic massage

Ki Mantra Urban Life Spa, 5 Camden Passage, N1 (020 7226 8860); www.kimantra.co.uk; starts from £65 for an hour up to £190 for two hours.

TESTER: CHARLOTTE ROSS

What it promises: To eliminate stress and deal with problem areas.

What is it like? I began in gym garments lying on cushioned mats on the floor, with Kingsley bending and stretching my limbs into various contortions. As well as loosening my very tight hamstrings (a consequence of cycling) he used this time to "get to know" my body. Some of the stretches were quite intense, but he sensed when he had gone far enough and when my body could take more. For the next part I undressed completely, was draped with towels and treated to a wonderfully thorough massage, with strong sweeping strokes — some expertly administered by his size 12 feet — using a herbal balm that soothed my aching muscles. Without prompting, Kingsley knew my neck was my main



Not for the prudish: Kingsley Ogedengbe

problem area. He unravelled the tightest spots with ease, leaving me gloriously relaxed. That evening my legs were markedly less stiff and my neck free of pain and more mobile. At night I slept like a child.

Downside: Not for the fainthearted or the prudish.

Verdict: An in-depth workout that tackles real physical problem areas but still leaves you blissed out.

Expert view: Kingsley's specialities range from Thai-influenced Indian rope massage to yoga massage, all carried out with skill and precision and a knack for tackling problem areas firmly and effectively. Brilliant for wiping out the stress of London living in one session.

★★★★☆

NARI SADHURAM

Deep-tissue massage

Human Nature, 13 Malvern Road, NW6 (020 7328 5452); from £80 per hour (includes 15-minute consultation on first visit).

TESTER: SIMON DAVIS

What it promises: Look better and feel fitter with a stress-beating massage

What was it like? There is a feeling among aficionados that the true massage, the one that actually resolves stress and muscle tension, has been hijacked by the spa industry and turned into a wishy-washy stroking session with hot pebbles, sickly candles and eerie music. Mr Sadhuram does not do wishy-washy. In the basement beneath his tatty health-food shop in Maida Vale there is a strip light and a table upon which he performs his increasingly celebrated deep-tissue massages. "Pain is not fun," he says, during a 15-minute consultation, "but the edge of pain is rewarding." Mr Sadhuram is a champion of body brushing. The brush, not unlike one used to groom horses, is swept quite firmly over the whole body which

leaves the skin tingling and then taut. It is said to stimulate the lymph system as well as remove dead skin. He then proceeds to massage "as deep as you can bear" and he really does delve. He gets right under my shoulder blades, weeding out knots that felt as if they'd been rooted there for a decade. Sadhuram then performs a sort of body ironing technique, putting his forearm on the small of my back and, with full body weight, gliding up to the shoulders. It's a magnificent feeling, as if all the niggling bubbles of a London day are being popped. The oil was jojoba with lemon grass which was neither sticky nor stifling so I could put my suit back on. An invigorating 10-minute Indian head massage ended the session and made me feel usefully perky before returning to the office.

Downside: For some, the insalubrious surroundings will be off-putting

★★★★☆



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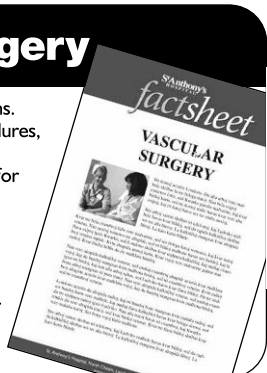
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AMY KU REDLER

Thai yoga massage

Kailash Centre, 7 Newcourt Street, NW8 (020 7722 3939); £85 for 90 minutes; £75 an hour for home visits. Amy also trains teachers (07956 911 159; yogamassage.co.uk)

TESTER: CHRISTINA MADDEN

What it promises: Good for sports injuries, back, neck or shoulder pain, and poor posture.

What is it like? Thai yoga massage is an ancient therapeutic massage that involves assisted yoga postures and acupressure. It should really be called yoga for the lazy because the therapist does all the work — manipulating you into a series of poses. The Kailash Centre is a zone of airy tranquillity in St John's Wood. You're fully clothed throughout, and start with a gentle warm-up on the padded mat for the massage of the feet and legs, freeing up energy channels with pressure to various meridian points. Then the serious stretching begins. You lie there while she uses hands, feet and elbows to manipulate and unknot muscles you may have forgotten owning. The drill includes walking up and down your back, though this is surprisingly painless. By the end of the session, any remaining muscle tension has



melted into submission. It leaves you feeling decidedly unkinked and about an inch taller.

Downside: Brief but quite vivid discomfort. There is an ouch factor.

Verdict: Great for locating muscles you didn't know you had. De-stressing and revitalising.

Expert view: Amy is co-founder of the London

School of Thai Yoga Massage, a gentle technique combining acupressure massage with assisted yoga stretches. These take the body to its limits, but safely and gently. Brilliant for increasing flexibility and improving sleep.

★★★★☆

Yoga for the lazy: Amy Ku Redler eases her clients into a series of yoga postures