

DAY SPA

GOING GLOBAL

Lisa Starr and Jane Kitchen give the lowdown on World Spa, the urban bathhouse that's getting New York all steamed up



There are heat experiences from across Europe, the Middle East and Asia

This type of facility is new in the US, but it's still attracting several hundred people a day



With ROI expected in just a year, it's hardly surprising they plan to take the model to more cities

As often seems to happen, World Spa is the result of an unexpected change in plans. A group of developers, hoping to purchase an existing 10,000sq ft spa in the bustling New York borough of Brooklyn, spent a few years travelling and researching spas around the world. When the opportunity for the sale didn't materialise, the group decided to create their own facility on a nearby piece of land for which they already owned the leasehold – it just so happened to be a disused car park.



Day passes are dynamically priced and start at US\$89

Nearly a decade on and World Spa, a 50,000sq ft, three-storey urban bathhouse, is providing much-needed relaxation in the city that never sleeps.

Lisa Starr talks to the MD about how business is going since opening in December and teams up with fellow *Spa Business* editor Jane Kitchen to try out the facility.

Thermal fantasy land

At the heart of World Spa is one of the largest co-ed hydrothermal bathing facilities in the area, offering experiences from across Europe, the Middle East and Asia.

Managing director Lenny Vays says the vision was to create a "fantasy land", an escape from the commercial craziness of the local environment. "We weren't totally sure what we wanted until we saw it," he explains, adding that Design for Leisure worked with the team on the original conceptual and planning designs.

The wide range of thermotherapy experiences, accessed via dynamically-priced passes ranging from US\$89-188 (€81-170, £71-151), include a Moroccan hammam, a Turkish hammam, two Russian banyas, an event sauna, a clay and hay sauna, an infrared sauna and an aroma sauna. Guests can also cool off in a snow room and visit a Himalayan salt room, private cabanas, or hydrotherapy, vitality and onsen pools.

The big difference from other spas, says Vays, is that "our approach allows people to socialise with each other". Treatment areas are intended for quiet, but public areas allow for conversation and togetherness.

This type of facility is quite new in the US, but Vays says the response has been excellent – thanks in part to a lot of press coverage, but also much

created via word-of-mouth. Up to several hundred people visit daily and 55 per cent of the clientele is 25-35 years old and 75 per cent are women.

ROI within a year

Vays heads up a staff of 200 and a management team overseen by spa veteran Sandra Sadowski. The seven treatment rooms, for therapies by Hydropeptide, HydraFacial and Charme d'Orient, are manned by 45 employees and are already booked solid, so Sadowski has resourcefully turned some of the pool-level cabanas into additional treatment areas.

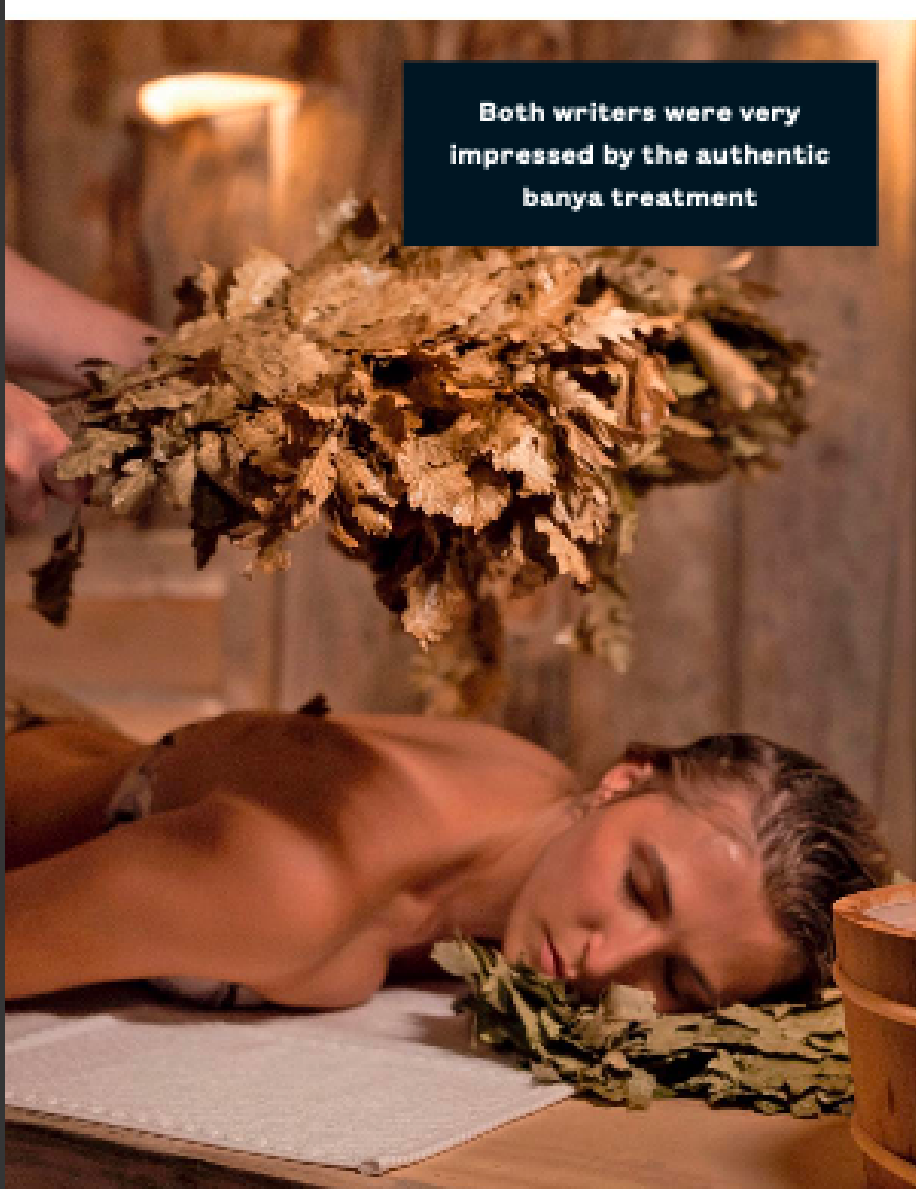
Aside from treatments and day passes, revenue is also generated by a private membership costing US\$1,700 (€1,540, £1,364), US\$3,000 (€2,718, £2,406) or US\$5,000 (€4,732, £4,071) for three, six or 12 months respectively.

Another differentiator of World Spa, says Vays, is its food offering. The site features three restaurants seating more than 330 people, including Ren, which is helmed by Michelin-starred chef Shaun Hergatt. "Our menu is a very intentional amenity, offering guests good food, selections that they probably don't eat every day, from different corners of the world," he says.

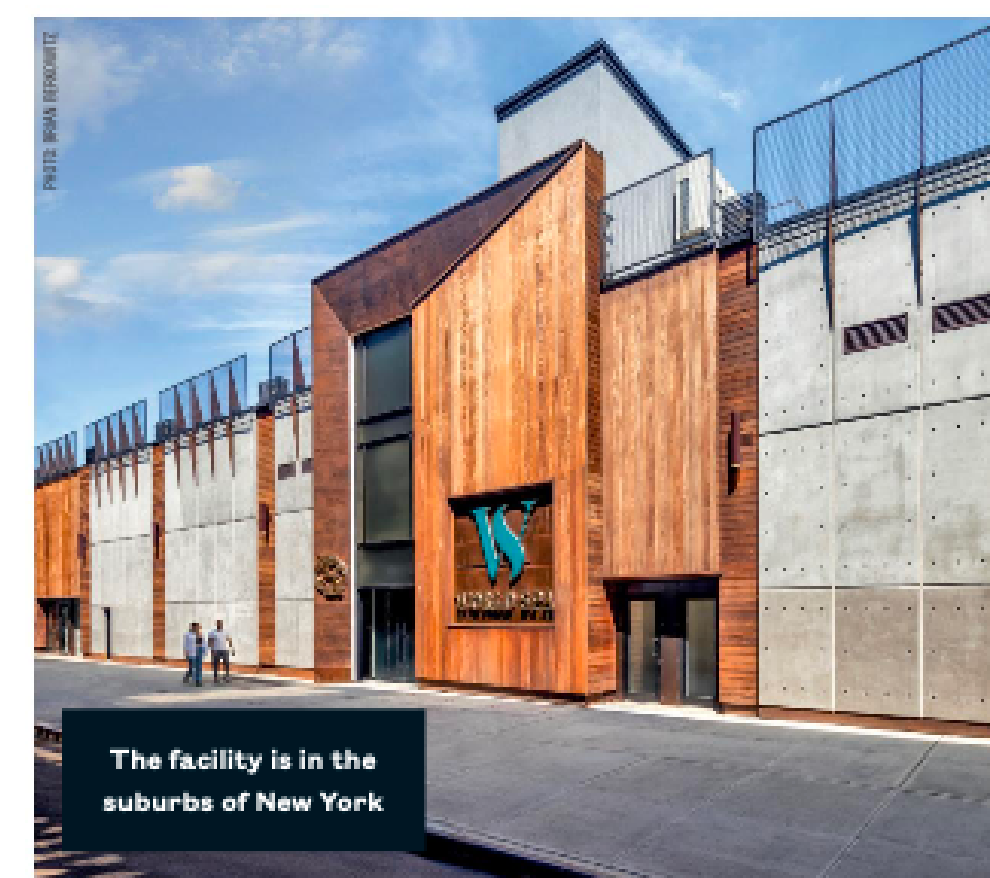
Once the tweaking and training is complete, and they're able to fully evaluate what is working well, Vays expects that World Spa will start to see ROI as soon as this year. With such a positive start, it's hardly surprising to hear that the ownership group has plans to take the model to more cities across America.



The intricate Moroccan tiles in the hammam are gorgeous, says Jane Kitchen



Both writers were very impressed by the authentic banya treatment



The facility is in the suburbs of New York



FIRST PERSON

The gentle heat of the Himalayan salt room offers respite after the banya

Jane Kitchen

Editor at large, *Spa Business*

“The food is an important detail that will keep guests coming back

Approaching World Spa on a Monday in January, I'm struck by its out-of-town location – this is the New York where people actually live – and surprised to see a snaking queue of people waiting to take advantage of the cheaper weekday admission: US\$89 (€81, £71) vs US\$120 (€109, £96).

I've booked a 45-minute hammam ritual for 2pm with my friend Joselin, which costs US\$165 (€150, £132) on weekdays. On arrival, we're also offered a 30-minute, US\$120 (€109, £96) Venik Platza banya session, which is available immediately. Nice upsell.

Authentic banya experience

In the sauna, two men in bell-shaped felt hats – one Russian, one from Uzbekistan – deliver an invigorating ritual and their attentiveness was a true highlight. Having experienced traditional banyas I could tell the temperature had been dialled down for an American audience – a necessary and welcome adjustment.

Perfect for socialising

Joselin and I spend the afternoon moving between thermal pools and heat experiences and it's the perfect setting to relax, reflect and catch up with an old friend.

At one point, a woman in the salt room reminds us we're in a quiet zone, even though no signs indicate that. But perhaps there's a need for such an area?

This is clearly a social spa and most people are there in groups or couples, laughing and talking. The clientele is mostly young and much more reflective of the diversity in New York City – a striking contrast to hotel spas that are usually full of older, white women.

Still in our bathrobes (very European!), we enjoy a delicious avocado salad and salmon tartare with fresh juices in the World Spa Lounge in the middle of the thermal floor. This is an important detail that completes the social spa experience and will keep guests coming back.

Room for improvement

We end our day in the hammam, which feels less authentic. While my therapist is very sweet she's unsure of the process and the mud feels diluted and slippery. However, the Turkish and Moroccan tiled facilities are gorgeous and more training will undoubtedly lead to another fantastic ritual.



This is clearly a social spa with a mostly young clientele, says Kitchen

► FIRST PERSON

Lisa Starr

Contributing editor, *Spa Business*



Venturing on a 45-minute train ride from mid-town Manhattan takes you to the nether regions of Brooklyn. It's 10am on a weekday, but there's a line of people waiting to try World Spa's wide range of global spa bathing and heat experiences.

Efficient check-in

Using a QR code while waiting leads to an online intake form and speeds up entry. Directly behind the check-in desk – staffed by four people on my visit – are the changing rooms with 400 lockers between them. An RFID bracelet conveniently opens the locker – storing a robe and slippers – and also handles billing for food and drink. It's an efficient process geared for high numbers of guests.

Impressive guest engagement

A large open stairway winds around the elevator up to the second floor, with the thermal amenity options which are the heart of the spa. These were being enjoyed by a diverse array of guests on my visit: couples, groups of friends (even men). I was surprised to see visitors enjoying all thermal options, even cold plunge pools which are not so common in America, in spite of the fact there was no apparent guidance on sequencing or recommended usage. New Yorkers are an intrepid audience for sure, but the overall engagement I witnessed bodes well for these types of facilities across the US.

My treatment was the signature 30-minute Venik Platza – an affordable US120 (€109, £96) banya ritual,



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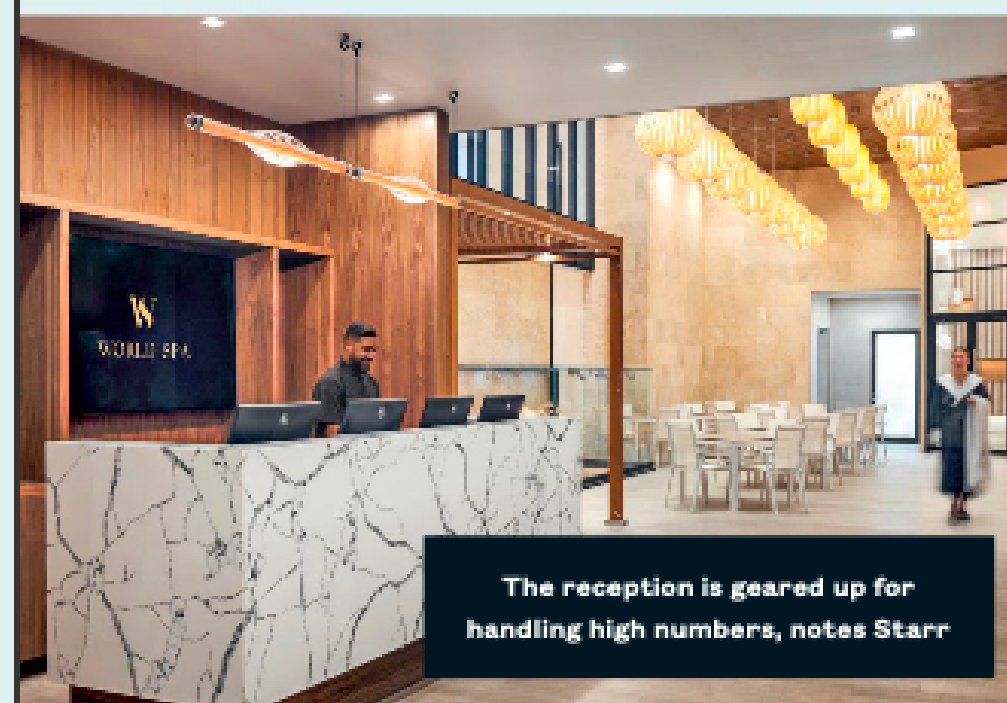
It's 10am on a weekday, but there's a line of people waiting to get in

that includes two hours of facility use. Being doused in extremely hot water and thwacked with oak and birch leaves might not sound appealing, but it's authentic, doesn't hurt and lounging in the Himalayan salt room afterwards helps to regulate body temperature.

Extensive food menu

After visiting a number of saunas and hammams, I found a table for lunch. The restaurant, Ren, offers a surprisingly extensive menu of small plates and meals, accessed through a QR code once more. The choice of alcohol, including cocktails and shots, are contraindications for heat treatments, but I'm told servers are trained to discourage over-ordering these.

When you're ready to depart, you can use one of several kiosks to check out and settle the bill. Bundling up to brace for the cold New York winter, it's easy to see why the warmth and relaxation at World Spa have been so appealing. ●



The reception is geared up for handling high numbers, notes Starr