When it comes to healing the human body and spirit, modern medicine can only take us so far. For total wellness, it is often necessary to go back to ancient traditions, where healing practices went beyond a cream, pill or machine. Ayurveda is one such tradition, where ancient healing processes that started in India have continued to evolve while staying rooted in their holistic approaches. This healing practice relies on ancient writings that take a natural approach to physical and mental health. Shankara Spa at the Art of Living Retreat embodies ayurveda from the food and tea options to the treatments included in its spa menu. While visiting the retreat, Skin Inc. met with Shankara Spa director Kim Rossi to discuss her future plans of blending ayurvedic healing with western medicine.
Skin Inc. (SI): How did you get started in the industry?
Kimberly Rossi (KR): In 1988, I sold memberships and taught aerobics for a great fitness management company. I sincerely believed everyone should exercise, particularly for living a longer, healthier life, but I also knew the effects it had on my body, mind and self-esteem. In 1993, I started working for Christina Newburgh’s Spa Deus in Tuscany, Italy, which encompassed fitness, bodywork, beauty, nutritious food and education. This concept and location was heaven on earth for me.

SI: How did you get started in Ayurveda?
KR: I had been studying, practicing and teaching yoga since 1998. This was my authentic connection to achieving balance in my life and the concept of self-mastery. In 2003, the school I studied yoga at launched an ayurveda school, and Dr. Vasant Lad was on the promotional piece. This school allowed me to work full time, do realistic on-site and remote-learning and study with Dr. Vasant Lad and all the visionaries and master teachers who helped bring ayurveda to the West.

SI: What are your most popular treatments?
KR: Abhyanga would have to be our most popular treatment. Shirodhara is another popular treatment, which is warm oil poured over the forehead in a specific pattern to balance right and left hemispheres of the brain and deeply decompress the central nervous system. Marma, which balances the elements in the body, opens the flow of energy and deeply relaxes the body to ignite its natural healing mechanisms. We also offer ayurveda health consultations for people seeking the knowledge to be happier, healthier and more whole. This science is sustainable for reaching our best self by merging our daily cycle with nature.

SI: How do you train your staff?
KR: We start with a full week of orientation starting with an introduction to ayurveda, abhyanga and shirodhara. We spend approximately one year to train and mentor our staff to learn our entire menu.

SI: How do you hire your staff?
KR: We look for people interested in the science with previous experience in a spa who have a personal commitment to health and well-being. We also do an initial phone screening followed by a three-hour, in-person interview that includes receiving a massage, references and a background check to ensure we offer the best service to our customers.

SI: How did you craft your spa menu?
KR: We have an Ayurveda College and Hospital in Bangalore, India. We have aligned all of our programs, treatments and herbal remedies to what we teach and practice there. We have committed to keeping things authentic and genuine.
SI: With being in the mountains, how do you reach new clientele?

KR: We are where our customers are. We have strategic marketing efforts focused on search and social. While we could be out of the way for some, when people search stressed out, need rejuvenation, cleanse or retreat, we pop up. The being out of the way part actually turns out to be an extraordinary transformational experience.

SI: How do you market your spa?

KR: Our guests spread the word, and we have a talented team of marketing professionals that constantly analyze and refine our efforts.

SI: How do you promote spiritual healing and ayurveda in your spa?

KR: Consciously. We practice what we promote. We have been acutely aware that our efforts engage people in a way to turn them on, not off to meet people where they are at and speak a language that they resonate with.

SI: How did you choose a product line for your spa?

KR: We have our own ayurveda face and body line, Shankara. It is made with our recipes from India in a sacred place by people that have a deep spiritual

Shirodhara (top) and abhyanga treatments at the Shankara Spa
SPA SNAPSHOT

SKIN INC. EXPERIENCES HOLISTIC HEALING ON HEAVENLY MOUNTAIN

When I arrived to the spa, I was brought upstairs to wait in the lounge area while filling out my intake form. While I waited, I was able to choose between drinking a kapha, pitta or vata tea based on what my body needed the most. I sipped on my kapha tea while snuggled in my warm robe and staring at the scenic views on heavenly mountain. When my therapist Helena came to get me, it was a bittersweet moment, and I hadn’t even had any treatments yet.

Once we arrived in the room, Helena started the treatment with me sitting on the end of the massage bed in my robe. We started with a meditative prayer to “help me love my imperfect perfect self.” After Helena said these words to me, I repeated them back to her; she then moved on to lightly dip her finger in oil before rubbing it on the center of the top of my head, middle of my forehead, top of my chest and middle of my chest. Helena then asked that I place my palms to the ceiling before she applied oil to them and squeezed gently, repeating the same motions with my feet.

After this, Helena left the room so that I could undress to my comfort level and we could start my abhyanga treatment. I started by lying face up on the bed, and Helena began pouring oil over the different sections of my body that she would be working on. Helena used her heavenly fingers to bring balance to my body by working on my right arm, crossing over my abdomen and working on my left leg. She then repeated this with the opposite side, and my dry skin drank up the copious amounts of oil she continued to apply to it.

Once she had finished restoring balance to my front, Helena had me switch over to my back where she again worked on my arms, legs and abdomen, but she took extra care to work around my spine and on the knots in my back. Once the balance had been brought back to my body, Helena requested that I flip back over. She had me deeply inhale the kapha aromatherapy before using her expert touch to give me a divine neck, scalp and shoulder massage that my body was in desperate need of. After Helena worked her way through the stack of knots that had built up on the sides of my neck and in my shoulders, we started on the shirodhara treatment.

During this treatment, a warm oil was poured over my third eye to bring me into a meditative state, and boy did it work. I felt as if I was in the perfect balance between being asleep and awake while the oil poured on my forehead. I remember that Helena continued to massage my feet during this treatment, and she would also move the oil up and down and side to side on my forehead before placing it back on the center of my third eye.

Once this treatment was concluded, Helena gave me another gentle scalp massage before wrapping my hair in a turban to allow all of the oil to soak into it over night. I left the spa feeling like I was almost floating and in a state of pure relaxation and bliss that carried over through the rest of my day.
practice, using natural ingredients, structured water and vedic chanting. Our line is also in the best spas and cruise ships in the world.

**SI:** How do you set the ambiance for your spa?

**KR:** First, we create an atmosphere of health, healing and service amongst ourselves. If we are able to cultivate this internally, we are able to extend this to our guests. This is the ambiance, an environment that supports deep transformation physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually.

**SI:** Where do you see the spa and wellness industry heading?

**KR:** When I started in the 90s, there were only a handful of destination spas in the U.S. In 2000, everyone became a spa—every hotel, fitness center, hair salon, medical/dental office and pet groomer. Guests would come in with a bunch of money hoping to feel better. Now, things are coming around full circle. Wellness incorporates an aspect of an engaged experiential activity. This teaches the guest how to be happy, healthy and whole, while engaging them in an experience or activity that they can take home and utilize, so the experience can be practiced and the benefits are sustainable.

**SI:** What made you decide to incorporate the prayer at the beginning of your treatments?

**KR:** This is centering for the guest and for the therapist. Our natural state is to be healthy and happy, and it is our choices that pull us away from that. This centering aligns us with our natural state, to be happy, healthy and whole.

**SI:** What made you decide to blend western medicine in with ayurveda?

**KR:** We are seeing more and more people with severe imbalances (i.e. digestive issues, diabetes, arthritis, anxiety and depression). Combining our medical doctor with our vaidya (ayurvedic doctor) we are able to facilitate profound healing. When we are on the path of disease, we need both.

**SI:** How do you plan to blend these different practices together?

**KR:** Western medicine has no concept of prana, but a great sense of chemicals. It treats disease and not the person. The vedic view has a broader orientation and unifying principles at a broader level. It sees disease dysfunction of the living person, and it understands health, disease and well-being. By merging both we can have the right, balanced and happy living.

REFERENCES: