



Man up and be pampered

Travel editor **Brian Crisp** had a date with Three Sisters, three spa treatments and three days in the Blue Mountains

IT'S the trifecta. I'm sitting in a Japanese Zen garden, totally relaxed, and looking out over rolling hills and a beautiful lake.

It is about 3.30 on a Friday afternoon. The rain is gently falling, at times trickling through the thatched roof above me and dripping on to my face, cooling my body. The air is thick with mist.

Only minutes earlier I was sitting in a 38C pool taking in the energies from the mineral hot spring bath, hopefully protecting me from arthritis in my even older age.

What a fantastic way to start the weekend. And also unexpected.

The location is what makes this so surprising. I'm nowhere near Japan. I am somewhere between the Blue Mountains and Lithgow.

I've left Katoomba on the Great Western Highway, turned down Magpie Holland Road and eventually into Sir Thomas Mitchell Drive. I am in South Bowenfels.

Spaparadise, a Japanese bathhouse, is not what you would expect to find out here. Until a few years ago, this was the private playground of some select Japanese businessmen who would come to this converted Tudor-style house to relax and forget about business life for a while. It is now open to the public from Friday to Sunday.

It is not at all glitzy. It is a normal everyday Australian home, except it looks like the Japanese equivalent of Jamie Durie has arrived and given it a weekend makeover.

I am met at the front door by Angela, a tall Asian woman who instructs me to remove my shoes, gives me a pair of disposable thongs and motions for me to wait at the counter.

After a formal welcome, I am given a tour, and importantly, a set of spa etiquette instructions.

This is the quiet room, she whispers, as we pass through what once would have been a family's lounge room. Next stop the change rooms, bathing area, 38C pool, 20C pool, herbal steam bath, and finally the Zen garden.

The process is explained in exact detail. Please wash after using the pools or steam rooms.

I am then allocated a locker, given a hand towel to dry myself, and sent on my way to discover an organised form of peace and serenity.

There are about a dozen other people with me doing the shuffle from heated pool to shower, to cold pool, to shower, to steam room, to shower and then outside to the garden.

I'm then summoned to the massage room and told in a very matter-of-fact way to remove my wet swimmers and lie on the table face down. Massages around the world tend to follow similar paths. Not here. I was surprised when my therapist climbed on my back and started by digging her knees in.

She works her way around, pushing me this way and that. Eventually I am on my back, legs splayed, towel covering my dignity as the inside of my thighs are being stroked. Long strokes. I can't talk for all men, but this is a delicate area for me. I really have to concentrate – think George Costanza in the spa episode of *Seinfeld*.

I mention this to a female friend (she was on the table in the room next to me) and she says that this was the first time anyone has ever massaged her inside leg. Poor girl.

We finish our treatments with some soothing tea grown on the hills surrounding the bathhouse. I'm told the tea will help balance my mind and being, especially if I am overtired.

The thing is, I'm so relaxed after three hours here, I'm ready to curl up

in a ball and have a nanna nap.

We drive back to Leura, our base for the next two nights.

Varenda, built around 1906, is a beautifully restored three-bedroom home, just a couple of hundred metres from Leura's main street.

It is one of three holiday properties in the area owned and brought back to life by Lorraine Allanson.

You can see the renovation was a labour of love.

The bedrooms are dramatically themed and named Scarlett, Bluebell and Mon Rouge. The front garden, with water fountain, is manicured to perfection. Everything has a place, and everything is in its place.

The Blue Mountains region is about 110km along the M4 and Great Western Highway from Sydney.

If you prefer train travel, allow two hours to get up the mountain from Central Railway Station.

The Three Sisters are without doubt its most famous tourist attraction, although none are as high as the region's highest peak, Mt Piddington, which is 1094m.

While most people come to walk the spectacular trails, I've been lured here to sample some of the delights of the region's spas. So on my first morning I head off to Spa Sublime, right in the heart of Katoomba.

Before the global financial crisis, the popularity of spa treatments for men had been increasing by between 6 and 10 per cent each year.

Kieren Withers, editor of *Spa Australasia Magazine*, says the male treatment side of the industry is once again building momentum.

An increase in male grooming studios (think haute barber shops) and more masculine design features incorporated into existing spas, such



as Spa Sublime, make for a more male friendly spa experience.

In the past, the facilities to attract men in the first place didn't exist – barbers didn't do it and beauty therapy clinics were traditionally seen as secret women's business.

Men were often introduced to the spa concept during couple treatments offered at boutique resorts.

Spa Sublime, in a converted house, can treat eight clients at a time. And they have designed a special program just for men.

My treatment today includes a facial. The spa uses Mr. products, derived from Australian indigenous plants, which claim to put back what life takes out. My face feels so good afterwards that I buy some of the Mr. facial cleanser. The treatment also includes a traditional indigenous smoking ceremony.

After some pampering, I head off to the New Ivanhoe Hotel in Blackheath for a country pub counter lunch.

No boutique beers here, just burnt orange carpet with a red swirl on the floor and two old men swapping war stories at the bar while a friendly big-haired blonde bar lady hands out useful information. "Buy your wine from the bottle shop. It's cheaper and we don't charge corkage," she tells a customer.

We dine on local Megalong beef, garlic-and-mushroom sausages and vegies. I bet the menu hasn't changed much since the 1980s, when Graeme Danaher was captain-coach of the local premiership-winning Blackcats. The food was good then, and it's still pretty damn good today.

My third spa treatment turned out

to be of epic proportions.

The Carrington Hotel is one of the Blue Mountains' landmarks. It is also home to the Yindi Day Spa, run by the charming Amanda Hersey.

Today I'm booked in for the VIP treatment – 3½ hours of rubbing and scrubbing. The treatment costs \$395 and starts with a 30-minute soak in the hydrotherapy spa.

From there it is on to the table for a ginger scrub and sandalwood mud wrap. Then comes the 55-minute ginger aroma-massage, followed by the foot bath and, finally, the hot oil deep-scalp treatment.

Now that's an awful lot of spa. So to top it off Amanda throws in a well-earned beer at the bar downstairs. Nice touch.

The spa philosophy is based on using natural products such as Dr Hauschka and Waterlily. It's more than just a philosophy for Amanda – chat with her for anything more than a few minutes and you will discover she is passionate about these products.

For me, three spa treatments in three days was more than enough.

So as I downed my beer I turned my attention to the television to watch the races and see if I could find a trifecta as good as the one I'd just had.

**Wish you
were here**

Spas

Blue Mountains Sparadise
Sir Thomas Mitchell Drive,

South Bowenfels. Ph: 6352 3122.
bluemountainssparadise.com

Spa Sublime

9 Penault Ave, Katoomba.
Ph: 4782 3113.
www.spasublime.com.au

Yindi Day Spa

15-47 Katoomba St, Katoomba.
Ph: 4782 0970.
www.yindi.com.au

Eat

Seven Restaurant

Station St, Wentworth Falls.
A cosy establishment that features modern Australian cuisine with a hint of Mediterranean influences.

Silks Brasserie

Leura Mall, Leura.
This restaurant has a great feel to it. The front of house welcome is friendly, the advice on meals and wine excellent and the food just tops it off.

Josophans

Leura Mall, Leura.
On a cold day this is the perfect place to warm up with a hot chocolate and fall in love with the bread-and-butter pudding. It was worth having to undo the top button of my pants for.

Stay

Varenna,

Railway Parade, Leura.
Ph: 0430 496 755 varenna.net.au



COOL POOL: Easing into the 20C pool at Japanese bathhouse Sparadise.



VERY ZEN: Relax and soak up some scenery in the outdoor pool at Sparadise