



A religious experience

WOW. IF there is a day spa in the country that is better than this, please, somebody, tell me where it is.

From the moment I pass through the 200-year-old carved wooden doors, I am entranced by the opulent surroundings, attentive service and little touches that make Stephanies Spa in the Sofitel Brisbane a true day spa experience.

I am greeted by owner Stephanie Shepherd, who has an aura that is a good advertisement for her business, and ushered through to a change room to change into the softest robe I have ever felt.

There is time to rest in a “tranquillity lounge” with a cup of herbal tea, then one of the impeccably groomed staff comes to collect me for my treatment.

I am booked in for the signature opal rasul steam temple treatment and am not sure what to expect, but soon realise it is going to be something beyond the norm.

The room is lavishly decorated with bronze and turquoise mosaic tiles and the domed roof contains a fibre-optic “night sky”, providing the only light apart from a collection of tea-light candles.

I am instructed in the ritual of the steam temple, then the therapist pushes a button to start the hour-long process and leaves.

As instructed, I discard my robe and begin by dry-brushing my skin before coating myself with three richly coloured muds: a green tea detoxifying blend for the legs, a nourishing rose and sandalwood combination for the torso and a pale, cleansing mud for the face.

As I apply the last of the mud with the large, soft brush, steam begins pumping into the room and I retire to the curved bench to relax and stare at the stars.

The room fills with so much steam that only the “stars” and candle lights are visible; it is deeply relaxing and sensual. Just as I am starting to drift off, a warm, misting rain begins to fall from the ceiling, beginning the process of washing off the mud and bringing me back to a more conscious state.



BEYOND THE NORM: Twilight by the pool at the Brisbane Sofitel.

A soft light comes on in the shower, signalling that it's time to finish rinsing off, and I slather myself in delicious-smelling moisturiser before convincing my legs they need to take me back to the lounge.

Another therapist appears to collect me for my hour-long massage, which is strong and fluid, like a choreographed ballet.

Incorporating elements of kahuna and other massage styles, it is without doubt the best I have had anywhere in the world.

Once again, it is the little touches, such as the warm heat pack on my back while the therapist works on my legs and the hot towels interspersed with the flowing massage, that lift the treatment to another level.

When I emerge from underneath my warm, lavender-scented eye pillow, I am so reluctant to leave this oasis of calm in the heart of the city.

Thankfully, I only have to take the lift back up to my hotel room, where there is a plush bed waiting to catch me.

The Sofitel Brisbane is making the most of its new spa by offering a series of spa and accommodation packages that are five-star all the way – perfect for a romantic interlude or a luxury break with friends.

The spa, Shepherd's second in Brisbane, has been well designed to cater for couples and small groups, with partitions that allow various areas to be opened up or sectioned off as needed, and many treatments are designed to be shared.

Jane E. Fraser finds a slice of heaven in Brisbane - and men are welcome too.



I would certainly recommend the rasul steam temple treatment for couples, perhaps followed by a massage in the couples' room.

The spa menu includes several different types of massage, body polishes, skin care and beauty treatments – including a range of treatments for men – and there are packages ranging from two hours to an indulgent six hours.

I am intrigued by the Tibetan sacred massage, which incorporates “balancing rituals” and Ayurvedic practices, but I know that when I visit again, I'll be heading straight back to the temple.

The writer was a guest of Stephanies Spa Retreat and Sofitel Brisbane.

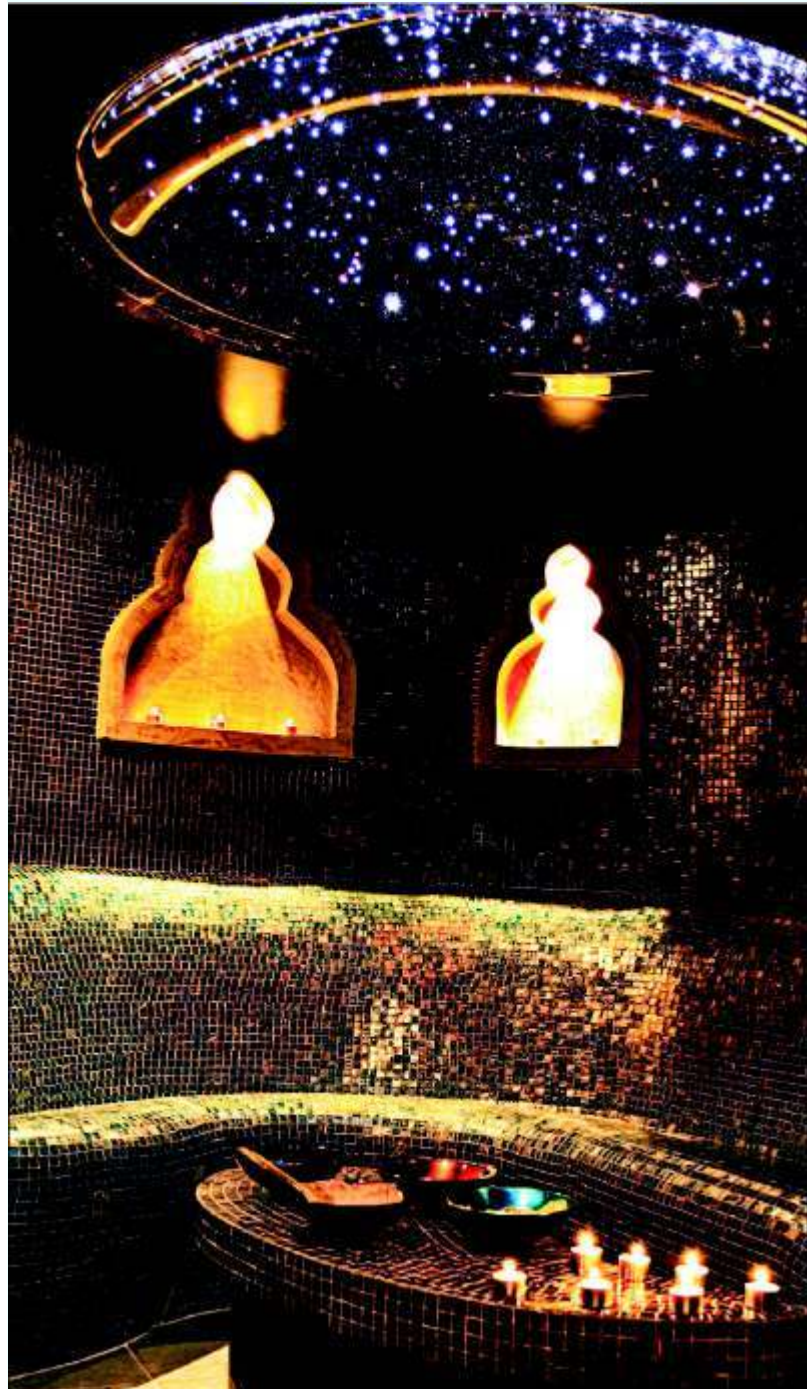


> TRIP NOTES

■ **Stephanies Spa Retreat, Sofitel Brisbane.** Spa prices range from \$99 for a single treatment to \$749 for a six-hour package including spa cuisine lunch. The opal rasul temple treatment costs \$139 per person for two people sharing, while a signature Tibetan sacred massage is \$229 for 90 minutes. Phone (07) 3221 8800 or see www.stephaniesspa retreat.com.au.

■ A "Sofitel Spa Revival" package, from \$344, includes

accommodation and buffet breakfast for two, a bottle of sparkling wine and one 90-minute hot stone massage. For the ultimate escape, book the Sofitel Signature Spa package, with corner suite accommodation, a bottle of wine and chocolate-dipped strawberries on arrival, an opal rasul temple treatment for two, room service breakfast, valet parking and a late checkout, for \$790 per night. Phone (07) 3835 4444 or see www.sofitelbrisbane.com.au.



HEDONISTIC DELIGHT: The mosaic-lined 'steam temple' for the spa rasul experience.