



check-IN to the perfect places to stay

Greg Hackett enjoys an aromatic treat at the Brisbane Sofitel

IT IS like Turkish dip but without the pita bread. Three bowls of different aromatic unguents for you to smear over your — or your partner's — body. This is called *Romance for Two* in the traditional Opal Rasul Temple, the hour-long signature treatment at Stephanie's Spa Retreat in the Brisbane Sofitel.

It is an ancient cleansing ritual that seems to fit so well in the modern opulence of a five-star Sofitel hotel, part of the French Accor hospitality group.

The door shuts on the stressful world and we are enclosed in a small steam room that resembles a private temple. Light flickers gently from tea light candles adorning arabesque-shaped recesses in the walls, the ceiling is a circular array of tiny lights that twinkle different colours like the night sky in a desert and a turquoise mosaic sitting bench adds to the sense of having escaped to a land far away and a long time ago.

Firstly, take an exfoliating brush and gently "dust" your partner's body.

Next, spread the paste from the first bowl on yourself (or your partner) from feet to groin with a soft bristled brush. Then dip into the second bowl and cover up to the top of the chest. Finally, apply a small amount from the third bowl to the neck and shoulder region.

Ten minutes is allowed for the

preparation process, before steam begins to stream from under the bench. The room is soon blanketed in steam, which reaches up to 40 degrees.

Sit back and relax or close your eyes and let your imagination gently glide like a flying carpet on a hot Arabian night.

After about 35 minutes, the steam stops and a mist of water descends from small overhead jets for several minutes, clearing the air and returning you gently back to reality.

We retrieve our impossibly-soft robes and Sensei thongs from outside the steam room and float down

the hallway for the second part of this therapy, a one-hour full body massage in a twin room.

A brief discussion with your therapist about problem areas "to work on", then choose one of three fragrant oils to be warmed and rubbed into your skin. Struggle to stay awake as back, legs, arms, shoulders, chest, toes and fingers are relieved of tension.

My companion is quiet in her blissful dream world next to me.

The experience concludes with some quiet time in the day spa's lounge, sipping herbal tea.

We return to our Sofitel Club room on the 27th floor refreshed and rejuvenated.

The hotel underwent a \$10 million remake during the past two years and the new-look lobby is welcoming with plush sofas and carpet.

The gymnasium has been moved and offers excellent views over Brisbane's CBD.

Like most Sofitels, the hotel's design takes advantage of views. Rooms look out on to Brisbane's hills or towards the CBD. The level and room numbers are yet to be rebadged from the star sign to Sofitel's new worldwide logo of two chain links but the rooms have been refurbished with LCD TV screens, broadband internet access and the signature Sofitel Mybed.

The new Cuvee Lounge Bar is the place to meet friends, or for a digestif following dinner in Thyme2 restaurant. The open plan allows diners to watch the kitchen staff at work on their tandoori ovens, wood fired ovens and hot woks. Here, it is all about "diner interaction".

A meal in Thyme2 should be more than a feed; it is an experience.

We had the smorgasbord in the 1970s, replaced by the buffet in the

80s and 90s, but now the help-yourself food bar is called interactive dining. The Saturday evening seafood spread looks good value for money. A la carte is also an option. After much anguish I decide on that and a glass or two of sauvignon blanc from Victoria's Yarra Valley.

I choose half a dozen oysters kilpatrick (\$24 for six) followed by the chef's signature dish, Dolce Vita beef tenderloin served with potato, asparagus, garlic prawns, foie gras and shiraz jus (\$46).

My companion has the Treasure Box of local garden baby vegetables, spring wild mushrooms and cream sauce in a puff pastry box (\$29), which is big enough to be a main course.

She then struggles to find the room for a delicious rack of Mediterranean style lamb dusted with ras el hanout spices and served with vine leave cous cous, lemon preserved and minted cucumber salad, sheep yoghurt, harrisa and natural jus (\$43).

They are accompanied by a bottle of 2003 Pegasus Bay Maesto Merlot/Malbec from Waipara in New Zealand (\$129).

The Sofitel is located next to Central Station (direct trains to the airport) and a 10-minute walk to the CBD shopping such as the Myer Centre.

The lush City Botanic Gardens are a pleasant 15-minute walk from the hotel, entry via Alice St. It is Brisbane's oldest park, planted by convicts in 1825 as food crops to feed the prison colony. The gardens include ancient trees and rainforest glades and are bordered by Parliament House on one side and the Brisbane River's northern banks on the other.



Central location: The Sofitel offers excellent views over Brisbane's CBD.



check-out



where: Brisbane Sofitel, 249 Turbot St, five star

getting there: Virgin Blue flies direct daily from Melbourne to Brisbane, from \$155 per person one way www.virginblue.com.au

room rate: 100 Reasons Why package, from \$245 a night, includes overnight accommodation, \$100 credit each day to spend within the hotel, plus the chance to win a week's holiday at four Sofitel Hotels in Australia — a total of four weeks holiday. Available until February 12.

mini bar: Crown Lager costs \$7

Internet: In-room broadband \$29 for 24 hours

more: www.sofitelbrisbane.com.au, (07) 3835 4444



An assault on the senses: Sofitel's Opal Rasul Temple adds to the treat of a stay in Brisbane.