

A woman in a black top is performing a massage on a person lying on a white sheet. The woman is leaning over the person, with her hands resting on their back. The background features a wooden wall and a green plant.

aspa

Massage therapist Julia Babicki works on Angela Nicola
at Carmen Delgado's Oasis Spa and Salon.



by **Christine Barbour** photography by **Tom Stio**

fantasy

Lived — Right Here in Bloomington

When I needed a shot of fantasy I used to go to the Book Nook at the corner of Walnut and Kirkwood and browse through the travel magazines. I was particularly fond of one called *Spa Finder*—a glossy, colorful tour of the world's most luxurious spots for rejuvenation and relaxation. Cascading waterfalls, brilliant desert sunsets, and thatched huts on exotic beaches were the settings for impossibly thin and well-made-up young women to lie in white tow-eled splendor, hot black river stones tracing the elegant lines of their spines or warm oil trickling into a pool in the small of their backs. They looked totally tranquil, totally pampered, and—given that they were actually being paid to travel the globe and write about these experiences—totally lucky.

Eastern music, with waves crashing in the background, is playing softly.



The entrance to the massage area at the Mira Salon & Spa.

Oh how I wanted that job to be mine. And now, years later, in one of those funny little quirks of fate, it is.

After a fashion.

You see, the founding editor of *Spa Finder* magazine has landed in Bloomington, started his own magazine (the one you are reading) and asked me to do a story on our local spas. There's no cascading waterfall here, no sand, no shore, and I, alas, am not impossibly thin. But—and this is the really important part of the fantasy anyway—I *am* being paid to travel the town and have treatments at five of Bloomington's leading spas (including one involving river stones and one with a whole array of trickling oils). For a short time I, too, am going to be tranquil, pampered, and lucky.

Join me on my journey to explore what Bloomington has to offer those in search of renewal and a little self-indulgence.

Mira Salon & Spa

My first stop is Mira Salon & Spa, for a 65-minute Custom Therapeutic Massage. Mira's industrial chic décor with its concrete floors, exposed bricks, and open piping is familiar territory for me as it is the home of Nicole and Sheila, on whom I depend for all my hair and nail-care needs. Its tiny massage room is also where, many years ago, I learned to love massages under the skillful and intuitive hands of Leyli Radjy.

Leyli has long since moved on to her own business, but Carol Cobine, radiating calmness and serenity, is waiting for me in the massage room. Eastern music, with waves crashing in the background, is playing softly. After some brief preliminary chat about how I am feeling, Carol tells me to undress to my comfort level and leaves me to it.

Comfort levels, of course, are relative things, and the first time I ever had a massage I was so self-conscious I wished I were wearing a turtleneck and sweat pants. A hundred spa experiences later I have never met a massage therapist, male or female, who wants to judge, or even notice, the myriad imperfections of my body, and they are all adept at using a sheet to keep covered what ought to stay covered. I shed my clothes without a thought and relax face down on the incredibly comfortable table. I am almost asleep when Carol taps quietly on the door and comes back into the room.

Custom Therapeutic Massage, according to the owners of Mira, is a blending of several massage techniques such as Swedish, reflexology, deep-muscle, and aromatherapy to meet a client's specific needs.



Creams and oils abound at Carmen Delgado's Oasis Spa & Salon.

My specific needs that day are to relax and get the crick worked out of my neck, conflicting goals that can present a dilemma for the therapist. A quiet, relaxing massage is not the same as one that addresses deep muscle issues. Carol starts with my back, her arms working like giant rolling pins to soothe through the kinks and knots. When she gets to my neck I can tell she is torn. I am there for a whole body massage, but my neck is clearly in need of extensive work. She compromises, trying to fit in some of both, and I wish I could stay for hours. As I leave she tells me to come back. "I would be honored to dig into your neck," she says. My neck would be honored to be dug into. I make a note to return.

Carmen Delgado's Oasis Spa & Salon

Within days I am scheduled at Carmen Delgado's for Raindrop Therapy Massage. I don't have a clue what this is, so I enter Carmen's

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The hands of Margarete Disque apply a deep tissue massage to Cara Huddleson at the Lés Champs Elysees Day Spa & Salon.

airy lobby with no expectations. But I can't stop humming a refrain from "Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head," a not-so-subliminal suggestion that has stuck in my brain. Any treatment that can relax me enough to halt the endless cycling of that song will be a success in my book.

I am not disappointed. Raindrop Therapy Massage may be the most relaxing experience I have ever had, although "massage" doesn't really seem the right word for what happens to me in the spacious treatment room. "Stroking" comes closer, or "soothing," or even "petting," in the soft, gentle way one pets an animal.

Raindrop Therapy Massage is a series of eight herbal oils (thyme, oregano, basil, wintergreen, thyme, etc.) dripped down my spine and rubbed in with light, feathery strokes. It's surprisingly comforting. After every two or three oils, the therapist does a general back rub—nothing very deep, just calming and relaxing. Then more drops, more strokes. I feel like a cat, and I smell like a salad. I drift off to

sleep during the last couple of drops and awake to hot, really HOT, compresses on my back while the therapist rubs my feet with some of the oils. Then more hot compresses. My muscles just melt.

I am such a puddle of contentment that I actually worry about being fit to drive home. I feel like I am under the influence of something, some kind of magic salad mix. My husband can smell my herby relaxed self as soon as I float into the house.

Lés Champs Elysees Day Spa & Salon

Two days later my dreamy mood is gone as I head to the new Champs Elysee Spa for some deep tissue massage. It could not be more different from my raindrop experience, equally satisfying but in an invigorating, get-your-blood-pumping kind of way.

Wrapped in the softest, fleeciest robe I have ever worn, I sit with my feet in a warm bath

Deep tissue massage is not for the faint of heart. While all good massage therapists are sensitive to their clients' pain thresholds and monitor the pressure so that it doesn't hurt, deep tissue massage has to hit some painful places if it is going to do any good.

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Gail Lewis administers an Inner Healing Massage in the courtyard at Mondo Salon & Spa.

while Margarete, my massage therapist and the owner of the salon, takes me on the Aveda fragrance journey. After I choose a scented oil (frankincense, which makes me feel vaguely Christmassy), she leads me into the small, light-filled massage room and leaves me to get settled, face down, into an amazingly comfortable face cradle. (A face cradle is the donut-shaped contraption that supports your head when you are lying on your stomach so that your neck stays relaxed and open for massage.) Usually the cradle puts pressure on my sinuses and leaves me stuffy, but this one is like lowering my face into a cloud.

Deep tissue massage is not for the faint of heart. While all good massage therapists are sensitive to their clients' pain thresholds and monitor the pressure so that it doesn't hurt, deep tissue massage has to hit some painful places if it is going to do any good. The whole goal of this kind of massage is to find the places in the body where tension resides and coax the tight muscles to release. Done right it is

energizing rather than comforting, revitalizing more than soothing. And you can really feel it.

Margarete does it right. For one thing, she is *strong*, and she does lots of real, deep work. I have a high pain threshold, and I can tolerate it as she finds the knots and kneads and pummels them out of existence. She concludes the massage by easing me into some good stretches. It's kind of like being on the rack as my legs, arms, neck are all pulled into alignment. I really need this kind of work. Afterward, I am sore. Good sore, but sore. Relaxed, too, but I feel more like I've had a heavy workout than a pampering treatment.

Mondo Salon & Spa

Keeping up my massage marathon, two days later I arrive at Mondo Salon & Spa for an Inner Healing Massage with Gail Lewis. Gail and her sister, salon owner Jo, say that Gail has a gift for sensing people's troubles and uses massage to help release them.



The sauna at Spaah!

That makes this massage a little different from the others because it relies on talking as well as muscle-working techniques. If, like me, you tend to be fairly untroubled and like to snooze off during massages, you may prefer a massage treatment where you can take a more passive, not to say vegetative, role.

The massage room has many special touches like flowered sheets, a single red rose, and cookies waiting for me on the pillow just like a luxury hotel. Water trickles in the background and music plays as Gail tells me to disrobe down to my underwear and leaves the room. I debate eating the cookies but don't want to feel full, so I just lie face down on the table.

There is no deep tissue component to this massage (which is good as I am still feeling the effects of the last one); rather it is about lighter muscle rubs with a real focus on helping you air and heal your inner difficulties. Gail asks questions about my life, my hidden sorrows and struggles. She senses that I have a sadness in me, but as neither she nor I know what it

might be, and she senses that I am a private person, we don't make many inroads. She also senses, she says, that more than anything I need to relax, so we decide to put the queries about my sadness aside and I drop off to sleep. When I wake up I am refreshed and peaceful and happy to eat my cookies.

Spaah!

My final stop is a building on North Walnut where I enter through the back and instantly feel, courtesy of the ocean-hued paint on the walls, that I am in the cool, blue green of the Caribbean. Like all the places I visit, Spaah! offers an entire menu of massages and spa treatments, but I am scheduled for the hot stone massage, just like the ones I used to see in the magazine.

Spaah! has a whole stable of therapists, but this morning I get Rose and her healing hands. Although we stick to our hot rocks plan, some incredible, satisfying deep tissue massage sneaks into the program as well. Since, despite my weeklong massage spree, I still have some unresolved knots and spasms that can use more work, Rose and I are a match made in spa heaven. As a bonus, she identifies part of the pain in my neck as originating in a tight arm muscle tracing up from my wrist, where long hours at the computer terminal continually cause it to retighten. A few simple exercises and some self-massage techniques will bring lasting relief, she says.

All this and hot rocks, too. Heated to just this side of discomfort, the stones bake the tension out of sore muscles, leaving them relaxed and supple and ready for skillful human fingers that can seek out the spots needing attention. The combination of heated stones and deep tissue massage on top of my week's worth of accumulated massage benefits lets me leave Spaah! able to turn my head fully for the first time in months.

Lots of fantasies, once lived, let you down; many pleasures are better left to the life of the imagination. Bingeing on spa treatments is definitely not one of these, even if you have to give up the mental image of yourself under a canopy on a sandy beach in Phuket.

After a week of being pummeled, pounded, and petted right here in Bloomington, I am mellow and content. Strong hands, hot river rocks, herbal oils, and healing energy have all worked their magic on me, leaving me truly tranquil, pampered, and very lucky indeed. ✨

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