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JUNE 2005

WHAT AILS YOU? Stressed out? Joints and muscles achy? Up for alternative therapies? From Old World stalwarts to high-tech newcomers, there's a Euro spa to soothe you. Often low-priced, they are among the last great bargains abroad. For details on more than a dozen, see page 158.



GREECE

Our cover subject, the **Blue Palace** hotel and spa, on a quiet stretch of sand in northeastern Crete, may as well be an island unto itself. Restaurants, a private beach, and a two-story spa all face the glittering Aegean Sea. The resort is filled with American, English, and German couples concerned with relaxation and pampering, not with cures. A typical day at the Blue Palace might include a facial, an algae-based hot bath, and time in front of the pulsating jets of the spa pool circuit. Deluxe hotel rooms have plunge pools (30-28410-65500; bluepalace.gr; doubles, \$490-\$675; treatments from \$47; open April-Oct.; ☒).



Europe | **Thomas Loof** ("The Cure Aquatic") grew up in Denmark observing his cinematographer father at work. From that time on, he knew he wanted to be a photographer. For this story, he went to four European countries to shoot some of the world's great spas, including the Blue Palace in Crete, pictured here. "I photograph a lot of hotels and spas, but I was particularly struck by the spa concept in Europe, which is entirely different from what you'll find in America. In places like Greece and Italy, there's a deep history to the spas, which are just stunning visually," he says. Loof also contributes to *New York*, *GQ*, and *Wolff*. Page 150.

FEEL-GOOD
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THE CURE AQUATIC

BEING THE EUROPEAN EDUCATION OF AN AMERICAN SPA LOVER, WATER—FROM THE SUBTERRANEAN TO THE MEDITERRANEAN.

IN WHICH **DANA DICKEY** SURRENDERS TO THE THERAPIES OF WHO SAYS OLD EUROPE HAS NOTHING TO TEACH US?

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
THOMAS LOOF

U.S.A. \$4.50
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GREECE EVERLASTING

MY DEVILS AND THE DEEP BLUE SEA
I left the cypresses and the undulating Italian hills to go further into history—to the largest of the Greek isles, Crete, the foundation of ancient mythology. No less than Zeus was born and hidden here until adulthood by his mother, Rhea. Characters such as the bull-headed Minotaur and the plotting Daedalus, as well as the twisting architecture called the labyrinth, all originated on this skinny 3,200-square-mile island. Later, the place

fer medical supervision. Among the claims made by thalassotherapy aficionados are that treatments reduce cellulite and soothe arthritis and muscle injuries. Everyone from sixties French cyclist Louison Bobet (healed from an auto accident by the waters) to the preternaturally youthful Catherine Deneuve is a convert.

Seawater and algae are rich in iodine, vitamins, and mineral salts—especially potassium and magnesium, which calms the nerves

which a jet pumped into action, with shocking impact: There was nothing to explain what was going to jet out of where, or how hard or fast it was going to do so. At the start, I went too quickly, first hopping on tingly foot pulses and next keeping my eyes shut tight against the water jetting down on my shoulders. Then I realized that I was nearly missing the experience altogether, so I slowed down and leaned into the final set of pulsating jets.

FOUR THOUSAND YEARS AGO, THIS PASTIME—A TUB SOAK

would give the world a paradigm of male chauvinism with the publication of Cretan-born Nikos Kazantzakis's *Zorba the Greek*.

It was nighttime when I arrived at Homer's "rich and lovely land." Upon awakening at the Blue Palace hotel, I promised myself that I would henceforth always meet stunning locales in darkness first, so that I could open sleepy eyes to such fully formed fantasies. From my balcony, I looked out onto the Aegean and thought back to the myths of the land. How fitting that I was here for a tub soak: Four thousand years ago, this pastime had been the undoing of Zeus' son King Minos—who had, after all, gotten his crown with the help of Poseidon—when he was murdered by enemies who poured boiling water over him as he took a bath.

The blue panorama of seawater that I took in wasn't just hypnotically beautiful; it was also my therapeutic tool. I'd come for thalassotherapy—a series of algae wraps, hoses, and ocean-water showers. Thalassotherapy is a creation of the French, who in their bureaucratic zeal

have created a *Fédération Mer et Santé* that lists the qualifications of such a spa: It must be situated by the ocean, use fresh-pumped seawater in its treatments and pools, and of-

and steadies heart and muscle functions. In the 1950s, a professor at Bordeaux University demonstrated that when seawater is heated to between eighty-nine and ninety-three degrees, the component nutrients penetrate the skin, helped along by the attraction between the negative ions in the water and algae and the positive charge of the skin.

All the scientific claims were no more than a buzz in the back of my head, however, by the time I found myself in a whitewashed room, lying back in a large tub of roiling hot saltwater into which the attendant had put a powdered mixture of mint, sage, eucalyptus, rose petals, chamomile, essential oils, algae, and mineral salts. I trained my eyes on a patch of cloudless blue out the window and nearly fell asleep. Afterward, I wandered the spa, lounging for a while by a long, shallow travertine pool on the ground floor, its chaises filled with a rarity on my trip: Americans. I strolled along the shoreline, listening to the sound of tinkling chimes that turned out to be small stones skipping across heavier rocks, pulled by the fierce waves.

Finally, I plunged into the spa's centerpiece, the thalassotherapy pools. Clients are instructed to don their swimsuits (unlike at the topless beach, bathing suits are required for the thalasso pool) and disposable clear plastic bathing caps. The regimen began with fifteen minutes in a small pool of ninety-five-degree water and the instruction to "let the water take you." I did, and it did. Then on to the bigger, waist-deep pool and a circuit of eight stations, at each of

Afterward, I asked Dora Koromila, the twentysomething spa manager, how Americans fare here.

"They like it a lot," she said. "There isn't much like this in America. They especially like the Elounda Glow package."

This series of procedures weds the pool circuit with body treatments that use local elements including olive oil, honey, and Cretan herbs. Do my countrymen choose the package because it affords the opportunity to have a distinctly Greek experience? "Sure," Dora said, "and the fact that it is the only package with no exercise."

After a few days of swimming in the ocean, lunching on feta, olives, and fruit, and then rising from sunbathing to brave the currents of the thalasso pool, I thought I was calm enough to go home.

—HAD BEEN THE UNDOING OF ZEUS' SON KING MINOS

CRETE
BLUE
PALACE
Guest rooms,
treatment
rooms, and the
spa all look out
on the Aegean.

