

Spa safari

A women-only week of blissful indulgence and good food in Vietnam

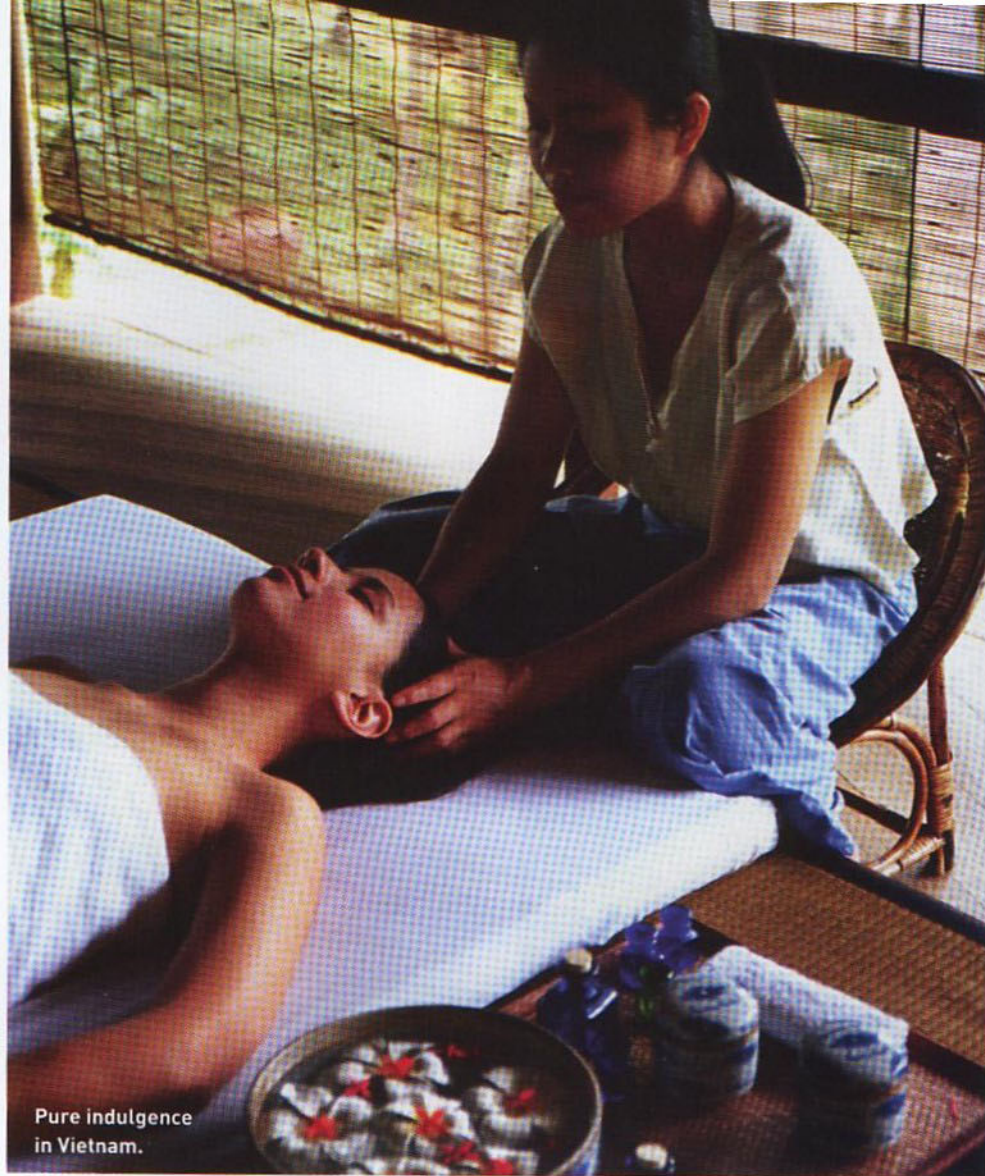
Imagine an indulgent weekend with girlfriends, featuring day spa treatments, fantastic food and, of course, time to shop. Now extend the fantasy to a longer stay in another country and you have the Gorgeous Safaris seven-day tour to Vietnam.

Television host and foodie Maeve O'Meara and her team have devised an indulgent escape for women wanting time out to relax and be pampered. Numbers are limited to around 15 women per tour — just the right size for travellers to develop new friendships and receive personalised service. The trip costs about \$3500, which includes airfares, accommodation, insurance, most meals and daily spa treatments (contact www.gourmetsafaris.com.au). In seven days we indulged in two facials, five massages and one body treatment.

The week begins in historic Hoi An. The town's mix of Chinese, Vietnamese and Japanese architecture and its modern reputation for silk, porcelain and expert tailors are legacies of its past as an international port for the exchange of commodities between East and West. For the three days we spent in Hoi An we stayed in the five-star Hoi An Life Resort and were treated to daily massages and facials using Dermalogica products.

Hoi An is also a place to eat well. The local market provides a snapshot of Vietnamese life, as women buy their daily cooking requirements, but it was at two local restaurants that we enjoyed Vietnamese food at its best: fresh, light and full of flavour. The culinary experience was rounded out with a cooking class at the Cargo Club with Miss Vy, who provided a commentary on Vietnamese culture as she taught us how to prepare simple, delicious dishes.

After the hustle and bustle of Hoi An, we spent three nights at Life Resort Qui Nhon, which nestles alongside a sleepy fishing



Pure indulgence in Vietnam.

village. It was a welcome contrast. Set among tropical gardens with its own private beach, it's the closest thing to paradise I've come across — every room has ocean views.

The resort's large day spa complex comprises a series of open-air pavilions overlooking the ocean, so treatments are administered to the sound of lapping waves and the rustling of trees stirred by the breeze. We tried morning tai chi and yoga on the beach, escaped for our daily spa treatments, then spent the rest of the time at the horizon pool or in a deckchair on the beach.

Treatments at the resort's spa complex use natural ingredients grown in the grounds and surrounding areas. A coconut scrub followed by an aloe vera body wrap leaves your skin glowing. Another must-try is the dry salt and sand sauna — if only because it's unlikely you'll come across it anywhere else. The "sauna" is a small glassed-in room in the tropical gardens, where they cover you neck-deep in warm sand and leave you to sweat it out for 15 minutes before the

therapist comes back to dig you out.

The four-handed massage was incredible, although the Life Wellness Menu offered an upgrade to a six-handed treatment if you really needed the "combined energies of three therapists flowing through your body". I wasn't sure I could take it.

Under lantern light with the beach as our setting, the final night's dinner was a chance to get glammed up before kicking off our shoes and walking barefoot in the sand. Aply described by our tour guide as "a Shirley Valentine moment", it was the perfect conclusion to a week-long retreat with the girls.

So was the trip a one-off or is it worth doing again? Perhaps that can be answered by the murmurs of fellow travellers during the flight home as they began planning their next visit — if not to relive the experience of revitalised skin and spirit, at least to return to the local tailors for the clothes they forgot to have made.

— LINDA RICHARDS