

# Los Angeles Times Magazine

July 10, 2005



## THE FORTUNE HUNTERS

Recent Alaska wildfires are producing tons of prized morels this summer, so prospectors, pickers and wild mushroom traders have headed north—all looking to score. By Nancy Rommelmann

J.R. Moehringer on the Boston Red Sox's bloodiest day ~ Notes on the teenage wasteland ~ Dental spa pampering



# 'Open Wide'

At L.A.'s upscale dental spas, the command applies to both mouth and wallet

by Hillary Johnson

PHOTOGRAPHED BY ERIC STAUDENMAIER

I had my first encounter with cosmetic dentistry several months ago when I went to have my teeth bleached by Dr. John Ivey, who is widely regarded as the "cosmetic dentist to the stars." Ivey was one of the first dentists to offer porcelain veneers back in 1982, a full set of which can cost as much as \$30K, which is, I suppose, a write-off if you grin for a living, as many of Ivey's clients do. He's a talker, and will regale you with stories about Merv Griffin and, yes, ask you questions while your mouth is full of gear.

When I asked Ivey about dental spas—which seem to be everywhere, much the way cigar bars and their sequel, oxygen bars, were a few years ago—he snorted derisively. A fad. His waiting room was filled with the same ugly mauve chairs my Camarillo dentist's waiting room provides. Not that anyone coming to see Ivey actually waits—Sharon Stone was breezing in as I was walking out, and I doubt she saw anything but

a mauve blur as she was whisked into the inner sanctum. If Sharon Stone doesn't go to a dental spa, then who does, and what goes on there? Gum massage? Can you get braces to align your chakras?

The spa that really caught my attention—with a billboard—was Dr. Sâm David Saleh's Ora Dentistry Spa in Beverly Hills, so that's the one I decided to explore. A pretty, serene place that looks like a hair salon, it sits perched in a penthouse atop the Rodeo Collection. Scented candles burn in the hushed waiting room, which is swathed in the gentle ecru palette we've come to associate with upscale relaxation. Comfortable slipper chairs surround a coffee table upon which upscale magazines are buried beneath brochures for expensive cosmetic procedures. One promoting molar restorations said it all: "Teeth. The Ultimate Accessory."

I was just wondering if Dr. Saleh would be able to dye my incisors to match my handbag when he



Guests can calm their jitters in one of Ora Dentistry Spa's tranquil waiting areas or massage rooms.

breezed in, sat down next to me and shook my hand.

This is something my dentist in Camarillo has never done. I am one of those people who postpones cleanings for months just because I don't want to face the condescending grief I know I'm going to get. I guess one thing you get at a dental spa is a polite dentist who doesn't treat you like a simmer. So to heck with the ecru, I thought, I'll pay extra just to get a dentist who doesn't make me feel like a naughty third-grader. I also knew in a flash that there would be no questions here with my mouth full.

Dr. Saleh is soap opera handsome, his teeth so white that when he smiled it reminded me of the moment the spaceship door first opens in "Close Encounters of the Third Kind." He studied dentistry in London and at USC, and explained that the dental patient's usual antipathy toward treatment had always troubled him. "I had a passion for dentistry, and it hurt my feelings that people thought about it as unpleasant," he pouted handsomely.

So Saleh took to studying the matter, researching "all of the senses that are violated during the dentistry experience." Meanwhile, it wasn't lost on him that what people liked about going to a spa was that they were made to feel like "guests."

"It's not about adding a pedicure to your root canal," Saleh explained. "A lot of places will add a fountain in a corner and call it a spa."

Saleh didn't buy a fountain, but he did buy every piece of sci-fi dental equipment imaginable, from digital X-ray machines to ostrich leather-upholstered dental chairs, with the help of a group of investors.

In the treatment rooms, not a single scary implement is visible. The sleek modern décor conceals all, and even the drawers where tools and instruments are hidden away have been made to





The best thing about Dr. Saleh's tonic bar is you don't have to rinse and spit.

open and close without making so much as a *snick*. There are no paper files; each patient's records can be called up on an LCD screen. You can watch a movie of the inside of your mouth—or a slightly bigger-budget movie such as “Star Wars” if you are in for a long treatment.

Across the hall are the Prana and Bodhi massage rooms, for pre- and post-dental relaxation—something I had to grudgingly admit makes a certain amount of sense. There is even a separate alcove for private check-writing, and an atrium where “guests” can check out their dental work in natural light.

Saleh claims that his brand of upscale dentistry isn't out of line, in terms of what it costs. And I believe him, because cosmetic dentists don't make their money from exorbitant teeth cleaning, but by offering treatments that ordinary dentists don't offer, such as veneers and implants. (Saleh charges \$650 an hour for teeth whitening and from \$10,000 to \$80,000 for a full-mouth reconstruction.) Nor are most of these procedures covered by insurance. One of the brochures displayed prominently in Ora's waiting room was an application for credit.

At the end of the tour, Saleh charmed me by shrugging modestly, suggesting that, as splendid as all this was, it wasn't really any big deal. “Why shouldn't medicine be more hip?” he said. <

*Hillary Johnson blogs daily about beauty at [www.jackandhill.net](http://www.jackandhill.net).*