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**The Great Potential of the Thai Spa Industry
in the World Market**

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THE GREAT POTENTIAL OF THE THAI SPA INDUSTRY IN THE WORLD MARKET

Brief History and Development

The root of the Thai spa industry lies in a long tradition of healing and promoting wellness through Thai massage and herbal medicines. This can be traced back to as early as the 13th century Khmer Empire when the wisdom of ancient medicine was carved in stone. Geographically, Thailand, known as the Kingdom of Siam then, was the centre of the Southeast Asian region. It was quite inevitable that the wisdom of one culture blended into others, in this case that of local Thai with the Indian and Chinese cultures.

However, the first documented evidence was found in the Ayuthayan period around 1455 when the eminence of Thai massage doctors co-existed with the royal doctors having grand title and land ownership conferred by the ruler. The reign of King Narai the Great was marked by the arrivals of foreign influences having held their royal duties in the royal court. To determine the appropriate approach to treat the king's illness, His Majesty listened to the diagnoses of the court doctor, a traditional medicine man, an Indian doctor, a Chinese doctor, and a Western doctor. In 1756, the French ambassador also documented that massage was widely used in curing illnesses in the Siamese Kingdom.

Traditional Thai massage has travelled a long way since to become an alternative approach to medical practice today. While Thai massage is one of the key elements of Thai spa in curing aches and illnesses, it is also delicate enough to apply to infants and women whose aspects in life can be more complicated than those of their male counterparts.

Strategy

The Royal Thai Government has given extreme importance to the development of the spa industry and its competitiveness enhancement in the world market. The Ministry of Public Health has been entrusted with these tasks and, as a result, announced regulations that ensure the quality of Thai spas that goes hand in hand with the unique sense of "Thainess" in the wellness service.

Categorized as health and beauty service business, the spas in Thailand are scrutinized by way of three measures or considerations: standard of place, personnel, and products. Certified spas are given stickers that elaborate their spa type, namely, health spa, health massage, and beauty massage. These are governed by different regulations that suit the nature of their business. All certifications expire in one year and are up to annual inspection for renewal. The purpose is to encourage spa operators and their personnel to keep up with the quality standard. Since April 2004, three standard tests were already administered to 3,000 spa managers and two others administered to 5,000 spa therapists. Those awarded must be ready for standard check by the public health officers any time.

As there is a strong demand of Thai spa personnel in the world market, five star international standard massage and spa services are introduced. This leads to more collaboration between and among government agencies. While the Public Health Ministry is heavily involved in ensuring the standard of Thai spas and personnel, the Labour Ministry deals with standard skills tests for Thais seeking employment in spas around the world. The test includes health knowledge, skills in line with the health services standard, and a command of English as a foreign language. The Ministry of Education is also assisting in developing criteria in setting up the standard of educational program. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs looks into standards implemented by different organizations. Last but not least, the Thai Spa Association, though not a government agency, also lends support to the ministries mentioned above in the realm of spa education and standardization.

However, the aspect of Thai spa goes beyond education and standardization. The introduction of Thai spa to the world relies heavily on the delicacy of Thai culture that places great emphasis on

the willingness to serve, ambiance, treatments for different purposes, such as the wellbeing of the body, and the finding of true inner peace of mind. All is included under the term "Thainess."

It is therefore the duty as well as responsibility of all involved in the development of Thai spa industry to the world to ensure that all Thai spa personnel is equipped with sufficient skills needed in securing employment and progressing in their career in the international market.

Challenges

The challenges in exporting Thai spa services to the world have to do with regulations of particular countries, contract of employment, and employer's policy and regulations. These must be tackled. Special attention has to be paid to the following:

- screening of employer's standard;
- professional experience in securing an entry visa;
- security of employees while under contract;
- contract and conditions of contract corresponding to law and regulations of a particular country;
- working visa granted to certified personnel on contract;
- categorizing Thai spa as a health relaxing service organization;
- registration of Thai spa personnel under contract as professional personnel in health relaxing service or its equivalent; and
- easy access to government office and information for personnel experiencing difficulty in working situation.

Opportunity

The wisdom of Thai culture that has long treated and nourished Thai people is now being implanted into the mind of Thai spa personnel ready to serve the people of the world with their world-renowned, certified skills and their genuine sense of "Thainess".

Hospitality and service that Thai upbringing and further training reflect are also ready to pamper the world population with a long-rooted tradition of Thai spa treatments that balance the four natural elements through the use of herbs and a holistic approach; to let them enjoy the Thai spa atmosphere that goes beyond serenity and comfort to achieve a level of calmness and true inner peace of body and mind; and to provide a service that comes straight from the heart with grace, gentleness, enthusiasm, and a willingness to serve.