A woman in a white robe is sitting on a wooden bench in a circular spa. The spa has a large circular opening in the ceiling, through which a bright light is shining. The walls are made of wood and the floor is a reddish-brown color. The overall atmosphere is serene and relaxing.

2001: a spa odyssey

An out-of-this-world experience for the serious
sybarite in the desert Southwest.

By Jeff Book Photographs by Roy Zipstein

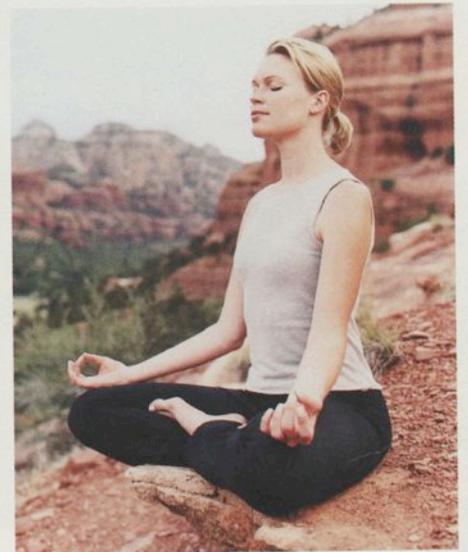
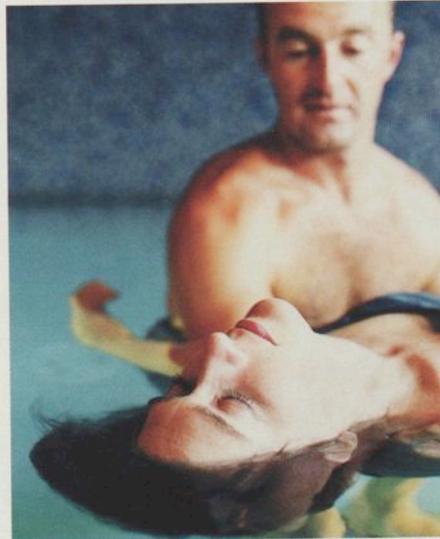
Mii Amo is set in Arizona's spectacular Boynton Canyon, an area often championed for its healing energies. Opposite: The spa's Crystal Grotto meditation chamber echoes the warm colors of the canyon.



Exposed to the mysterious force fields of Sedona, some people experience fantastic visions of tripping through time or soaring, eaglelike, above the canyons. Mine was more prosaic: I was a gravy boat in a deluxe dishwasher. At least that's how it seemed under the Vichy shower, as the long spray arm rinsed away the mash of ground blue corn, coarse salt, and fragrant oil with which I'd been coated and scrubbed. Inspired by a Hopi rite of passage in which maidens are covered in blue corn powder, the blue corn body polish was my initiation into the restorative rites at Mii Amo spa.

I'd arrived in Sedona with a stubborn knot in my neck and a distinctly jaundiced view of New Age nebulosity. Driving past signs touting psychics and crystals, the Vortex Deli and Earth Mother Father Healing Plaza, I tried to summon scorn but could only muster a bemused chuckle. For by then it was too late—I'd been visually bushwhacked by the area's gorgeous, otherworldly red-rock formations, glowing like congealed fire in the Arizona sun. In such a stunning landscape, outlandish notions can suddenly seem entirely plausible—and that's just as well, since Mii Amo's motto could well be "For best results, keep an open mind."

High-end spas routinely invoke the healing nature of their settings, but few have as much to conjure with as Mii Amo (pronounced mee-AH-moe). It is in beautiful Boynton Canyon, adjacent to Enchantment Resort but set off behind a tall curtain of cottonwoods, at a quiet remove from the parent property's bustle of sports and family-



Mii Amo delivers both invigoration and relaxation, be it from a Native Rain massage, a float in the Watsu pool, or meditation in the mesmerizing canyon.

oriented activities. The canyon was inhabited centuries ago by the Sinagua people, and later by Apaches, who still hold it sacred as their Garden of Eden, where their earliest ancestors came into being. And it's also the site of a vortex. According to spa director Toni Nurnberg, Sedona has seven of these fabled power spots, said to radiate electromagnetic and psychoactive energy. "Other spas have to make up a story about their location," she says. "We don't. This is one of those rare places, like Stonehenge or Lhasa, where the earth's energy is concentrated and coincides with heightened spiritual awareness."

Rather than try to compete with this resonant landscape, Gluckman Mayner Architects wisely deferred to it and harnessed its power. Interspersed with courtyards planted in native flora are low-slung buildings of terra-cotta-hued stucco, which seem like organic extensions of the colorful, skyscraping canyon walls. It's modernist architecture that echoes the Southwest's protomodernists, the Anasazi, who derived form from function a thousand years ago in adobe dwellings rooted to cliffs and mesas. Mii Amo might be termed a museum-quality spa, since the New York firm also designed the Andy Warhol and Georgia O'Keeffe museums, among other high-profile galleries. It's a telling precedent: Museums have been called the cathedrals of our age, and, like them, spas are contemplative spaces, zones of spiritual renewal, and refuges from the cacophony of daily life. Mii Amo's bold, simple forms, uncluttered surfaces, and harmonious

Glass doors separate a waterfall-fed indoor pool and fireside lounges from a more traditional swimming pool just outside.



proportions are a perfect foil for sensuous spa treatments and the cinematic backdrop.

The spine of the two-story main building is a high, skylit corridor with floor-to-ceiling windows. At one end is the 80-seat dining area and a spotless "open kitchen," at the other a well-equipped gym and a library. Downstairs are men's and women's changing rooms, each with a whirlpool spa, sauna, and steam room; upstairs are treatment rooms and an exercise studio. Glass doors separate a waterfall-fed indoor pool and fireside lounge from an inviting outdoor pool and whirlpool set in a walled courtyard. Leading to the main entrance is a watercourse lined with smooth stones—an example of the design's subtle Asian influence. (The blueprints were approved by a feng shui master.)

Mii Amo means "journey" or "passage" in the Yuman Indian language (it also sounds like "me llamo," Spanish for "my name is," suggesting a parallel identity quest). Before guests arrive, they talk to spa counselors, who help them tailor their journey to their goals, from exercise and weight loss to stress reduction and spiritual growth. The spiritual emphasis is embodied in the Crystal Grotto, a circular meditation room at the heart of the design. Modeled on the kiva (a Native American ceremonial chamber), the room is a New Age chapel, complete with red earthen floor. In the center stands an altarlike petrified-

log fountain containing crystals, which are spotlighted by the sun at summer solstice

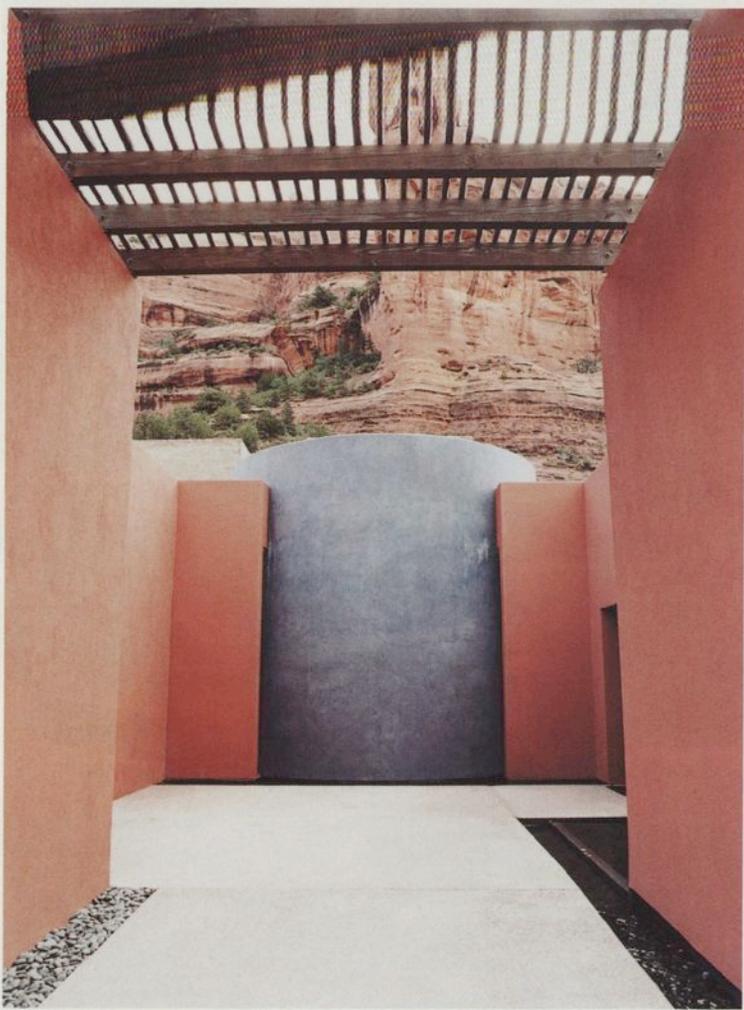
through a well-placed oculus. (This design recalls the sky-viewing rooms of artist James Turrell, who is transforming an Arizona meteor crater into a celestial observatory.) Each morning therapists and visitors gather in the grotto to "set their intentions" for the day. Bottles of massage oil are left there to be recharged overnight by the central crystals and four others placed at the cardinal compass points. I can't attest to the crystals' power, but the room is a captivating space for meditation.

The grotto could use a sound-insulating door like the ones that muffle treatment rooms and reflect the care given to pampering the senses. Like other posh spas, Mii Amo deploys an array of tactile sensations, potent fragrances, and tranquilizing music (which extends even underwater, via pool speakers). What's more, it is extraordinarily eye-pleasing. Some spas' treatment rooms are clinically austere and dimmer than a monk's cell; Mii Amo's are all illuminated by natural light. Facial rooms have windows set at an angle to frame views from your chair, while the hydrotherapy tub has a glass wall revealing a full panorama of the canyon. Massages are also given in outdoor wickiups covered in shade cloth that gauzily

filters sunshine, breezes, and canyon scenery. Poolside lounging alcoves are sheltered by latticed sunscreens that cast dramatic shadows. Polished terrazzo floors segue into foot-friendly outdoor aggregate. Tabletop bonsai plants delicately echo old trees nourished by canyon springs. In these and other ways, the design thoughtfully mediates between—and intertwines—the intimacy and refinement of spa treatments and the raw grandeur of the setting.

As for the New Age flourishes, they're more than window dressing, says Nurnberg: "We want to empower staff as well as guests to 'walk the talk.'" Mii Amo hit its stride almost immediately after its January opening, which is largely to the credit of two pros most responsible for the spa experience. Spa designer Sylvia Sepielli, a Sedona resident who

(continued on page 262)



Mii Amo's entrance seems to emerge space-age modern from its primeval environs.



Mii Amo's design thoughtfully mediates between, and intertwines, the intimacy and refinement of spa treatments and the raw grandeur of the setting.

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Mii Amo

(continued from page 210)

helped create highly regarded spas at California's Ojai Valley Inn and Maui's Grand Wailea Resort, among others, wrote the architectural brief for Mii Amo. "When I talked to some architects about sacred space or using light as part of the design, their eyes glazed over," she recalls. "Gluckman Mayner got it." Nurnberg, who has owned two massage schools and was the spa director at Franz Klammer Lodge in Telluride, had no trouble lining up a talented staff. "Sedona's a magnet for healers," she says. "They are here because they want to be in this environment, for their own growth."

Mii Amo is available for day use, but it's best experienced by staying in one of the 16 guestrooms that qualify it as a destination resort. Located in one- and two-story casitas, all rooms have a fireplace and private courtyard or balcony. Like the main building, the guest quarters have a clean-lined serenity, with sleekly modern door and bath hardware, a mix of wool carpeting and bamboo flooring, sandstone counters, and sumptuous bedding on simple platform beds. Rooms 504 through 507 have especially good canyon views. The most spacious quarters are a spa suite (502) and the luxurious Mii Amo Suite—at 1,500 square feet, it is more like an apartment, with a large living/dining room, a separate treatment room, and a secluded outdoor shower, whirlpool, and fireplace. (This, I thought, would have been the perfect spa hideaway for Howard Hughes—that is, if he hadn't been phobic about sun, fresh air, and physical contact with other humans.)

Treatments at Mii Amo can be luxuriantly long—some last 90 minutes—and therapists are encouraged to adapt them to the client's needs and make suggestions (one told me to check out a book called *Feldenkrais for Runners*—and no, it is not Philip Roth's latest). The spa offers three-, four-, and seven-day packages, which include lodging, three meals a day, a choice of treatments, and signature goodies like a robe and tote bag. Oh yes, plus there's a private training session and/or "mind/body consultation."

As part of my three-day, five-treatment package, I received an Ayurvedic analysis from Toni Nurnberg. I'd encountered this ancient Hindu "science of life" at another spa, in the form of a confusing questionnaire and a Shirodhara treatment—a warm-

oil forehead drip that was supposed to awaken my third eye but resulted only in a bad-hair day. The easy-to-answer Mii Amo questionnaire confirmed Nurnberg's initial diagnosis that my *dosha*, or constitution, is ruled by *pitta* (fire) rather than *kapha* (water and earth) or *vata* (air).

I wasn't convinced that *pitta* explained my personality, but the civilization that gave us yoga and Tantric sex is not without wisdom. Passing on Mii Amo's version of Shirodhara, I opted instead for a Dosha Balancing Wrap. After a light exfoliation and a massage with aromatic oils formulated for my *dosha*, I was cocooned in an herb-infused sheet that made me think of funeral pyres by the Ganges—until the therapist began massaging Ayurvedic pressure points on my head, neck, and scalp. Near the end, as I was dreamily drifting, both my shoulders jerked reflexively and I felt the knot in my neck unravel.

If anyone loses weight here, it's not for lack of temptation. The menus, which vary from day to day, feature balanced, flavorful dishes (which the chefs in the gleaming open kitchen will cheerfully discuss), and there is a short but sufficient wine list. Balancing lighter breakfast fare is a hearty frittata soufflé with free-range turkey sausage and tomatillo salsa. At lunch you may find grilled Chilean sea bass with braised spinach and red lentils or risotto with smoked-duck prosciutto, as well as sandwiches and salads. At dinner, dishes like fennel-roasted salmon and molasses-seared elk medallions invite indulgence. Freshly made sorbets or the mixed-berry-and-yogurt "martini" are refreshing ways to finish. Despite its dietetic gestures—garnishes of tangy sprouts, a soy "tiramisu," high-octane vegetable juices, bland steamed edamame beans—the food is, thankfully, more sybaritic than Spartan.

Edible ingredients, from blue corn and herbs to milk and honey, are also found on the treatment menu. The Eminence Aha Facial uses lotions composed of organic produce grown in Hungary. (The acidic apple-grape-naseberry blend made me feel like one of Arcimboldo's fruit-faced portraits, then a paprika-spiked cream suffused my skin with a delicious, oxygenating warmth.) Of course, Mii Amo also has standard spa offerings like deep-tissue and shiatsu massages, pedicures, and activities such as t'ai chi, yoga, and aerobics. While there's noth-

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Top Treatments

Aside from the standard spa options (such as shiatsu, deep-tissue, and hot-stone massage), Mii Amo offers several more distinctive choices. Some of the best:

The **MII AMO** spirit treatment begins with quiet reflection and a purifying burning of sage. The therapist brushes the skin with sweet grass, massages it lightly with oils, and places crystals on chakras in a hands-on guided meditation that makes evocative use of scents and sounds.

The **BLUE CORN BODY POLISH** scrubs and purifies the skin with a blend of ground blue corn, coarse salt, and aromatic oil, which is then rinsed off. Finish with the optional hydrating massage under the Vichy shower, as refreshing as a desert cloudburst.

In the **SEDONA CLAY WRAP**, following a light exfoliation using native corn husks, a mineral-rich Sedona clay body mask nourishes and detoxifies the skin, followed by a moisturizing massage with herb-infused oil.

Like its name, **WATSU** combines water and shiatsu, in a mild, 96-degree whirlpool in an outdoor wickiup. Calmed by the caressing currents and a gentle, supportive massage, body and spirit surrender to a buoyant sense of well-being.

In the **MII AMO CRYSTAL BATH**, the body is anointed with essential oils, then immersed in a warm aromatic tub surrounded with crystals to intensify positive thoughts and energy.

The **EMINENCE AHA FACIAL** employs the natural properties of organically grown ingredients. A blend of fruits high in alpha hydroxy acids cleanses and exfoliates the skin, which is then oxygenated and toned by the suffusive warmth of a paprika-based mask.

The **NATIVE RAIN** treatment begins as a massage with a warm aromatic lather, which is washed away beneath the seven showerheads of the Vichy "rainbar." A moisturizer leaves your body relaxed and invigorated.

ing lacking in the gym, it would be a shame to come here and not explore the outdoors. Early one morning I hiked the Boynton Canyon trail, a surprisingly lush ramble that ends in a spectacular jumble of massive boulders and sculpted bluffs. (The canyon conceals 900-year-old Indian ruins, and there are more trails in the surrounding Red Rock

Secret Mountain Wilderness Area.) But I also lazed by the pool and browsed in the library (sample title: *The Coincidence File: Synchronicity, Morphic Resonance, or Pure Chance?*). And I spent time with Mii Amo's cross-cultural educator, Jonne-Marie Moseman. A bright-eyed Anglo woman with strong family ties to the Hopi and Blackfoot Seneca peoples, she discusses Native American beliefs and leads "native vision" sessions in the Crystal Grotto (it doesn't hurt that she is also a clinical hypnotherapist).

While I floated limply in the "amniotic" water of the Watsu pool, my therapist gently stretched and prodded my body, folding and unfolding it as she moved me through the relaxing currents in what she called a "water dance." It was profoundly calming—not so much a rebirthing as a return to the primal solace of the womb.

With my New Age resistance at an all-time low, I underwent a Mii Amo spirit treatment. My spirit guide first burned purifying sage, then placed crystals on my chakras and applied chakra-specific oils as I slipped into a deep reverie punctuated by surging brain waves—or were they pulses from the vortex? Finally she resonated a quartz "singing" bowl, which filled the room with palpable, bell-like tones until everything in it seemed to be vibrating at the same cosmic frequency.

It was as close to a harmonic convergence as I'm likely to experience, and perhaps it could have happened only in this sheltering canyon. "Sedona is one of those rare places that people are drawn to because they feel energized and balanced here," Sepielli observed. "I can't say what makes it that way." Nor can I, but I know that when I left the resort, I had lost the knot in my neck and a good deal of cynicism. Whether the vortex is a dynamo or a placebo, there is no denying the good vibrations at Mii Amo, a spa that excels at soothing body and soul. ■

During high season (March through May and September through October), a three-day package including meals and five treatments starts at \$2,340 for a spa suite and \$2,790 for the Mii Amo Suite. Mii Amo Destination Spa, 525 Boynton Canyon Road, Sedona, Arizona 86336; 888-749-2137 or 520-203-8500; www.miiamo.com.

JEFF BOOK WROTE ABOUT ENGLISH STYLE IN THE SEPTEMBER ISSUE OF *DEPARTURES* AND BUILDING YOUR OWN WINE CELLAR IN THE MARCH/APRIL ISSUE.