

ENTERTAINING

Day spa for the living room

- The rise in businesses that deliver deluxe treatments to you helps drive the trend of at-home pampering parties.

By Maryann Hammers, Special to The Times

The bride-to-be splurges on a pre-wedding party, taking nine guests to a spa so exclusive that it will exist for only five hours — in her Redondo Beach home. Another woman throws a "girls' night in" for her three best friends amid flickering candles and fluffy white robes in her Los Angeles den. Massages, pedicures and intense female bonding included.



Laid Back

(Anne Cusack / LAT)

As spa-going has become more mainstream, in-home spa parties have become one of the nation's newest entertaining trends. The development has been aided by the growth over the last two years of mobile spas — about a dozen have sprung up in the L.A. area — and the legacy of a television show that aired its last original episode a year ago.



Absolutely Glowing

(Anne Cusack / LAT)

"Since the popularity of Carrie and the girls from 'Sex and the City,' there's been a movement for women to spend more time with girlfriends. Home-spa parties offer a chance to feel like the gang from New York," says Anastacia Stathakis of Westin Rinehart, a Washington, D.C., public affairs and marketing firm. "Just as some people throw a bridal shower at a vineyard, a spa theme is a fun way to feel glamorous with your girlfriends."

Alexis Ufland, founder of a 2-year-old on-location spa service called Sparty, says the spa experience doesn't "have to be just about Zen and drinking green tea. They are a way to socialize and have fun. You can drink Cosmos and have a manicure with your friends while your favorite music is playing." Her New York City-based business has expanded to serve 11 cities, including Los Angeles.

Lisa Foster Maddox, the Redondo Beach bride, spent \$2,000 on her home-spa party in June, which included meditation sessions, yoga classes, facials and massages, plus take-home yoga mats and robes for her guests.

"I've never been to a spa that was as personal or fun as this was. I was really stressed arranging my wedding, but I felt completely relaxed at my party," says Maddox, an animation producer. Carrie Reinagel of Hermosa Beach-based Whole Life Consultants and owner of two hotel-based day spas staged the event.

"Carrie completely transformed my space with aromatherapy candles, fountains, pillows and plants. She even served tea and cucumber water," she says. "I didn't have to do anything except put out the CDs that I wanted them to play. I felt so spoiled."

That seems to be one of the allures of at-home spa parties. In the "all about me" era we live in, a spa set up in a host's home can reflect the giver's taste, instead of that of a prepackaged business. In addition, the parties reinforce another mantra of our times: There's no place like home.

"Women love to share things they adore, and people nowadays do much of their entertaining and partying at home. Being a homebody is the next frontier of hip," says Carolyn Brundage, founder of PrettyCity.com, a Chicago-based online company that explores beauty trends.

"Your home is a haven, a place to retreat, and when everyone has been properly primped and pampered, you can turn on 'Sex and the City' or 'Desperate Housewives' and relax with your friends," she says. "No need to get dressed, risk smudging your polish or put makeup on after a facial."

Spa parties typically cost about \$95 to \$150 per person, which includes the basic set-up — candles, music, massage tables, manicure stations — and one or two short treatments or massages for each guest. It may sound pricey, but frequent spa-goers might consider it cheap compared to going to a resort, destination or day spa, where a single manicure can cost \$65 and a massage is twice that.

Though seemingly hipper than its earlier at-home predecessor — the Tupperware party, which took off in the '40s — the spa party shares another trait besides food and female camaraderie with that direct-sales technique. Like the midcentury party-givers who could earn free products, the spa-party host sometimes receives a free treatment.

The events, which are staffed by massage therapists, manicurists and aestheticians, also can be upgraded to include additional services such as catered meals, photographers, personal chefs, gift bags, henna tattoos, or just about anything the host desires.

"If the host wants, I'll arrange for a psychic, a Pilates instructor or a nutritionist," says Aimee Gallagher, an event planner who recently started the Agoura Hills-based Experience the Spaah. "Or I can bring in a DJ, bartender, photographer or floral arrangements. It can be as simple or as grand as you like."

Five-star spa parties can come with a matching five-star budget. Sparty's Ufland recently arranged a catered birthday party for 50 guests that included yoga, massages and manicures for everyone, tarot card readings, full bar and a signature cocktail concocted for the event. The price: \$18,000.

"I've done on-location parties for up to 300," says Ufland. "Can you imagine 300 people walking around in terry robes and slippers?" But Michelle Coulter's much smaller Long Beach soiree for four — which cost \$400 — is far more typical.

QuietBeauty Mobile Spa of Long Beach "brought everything, including pedicure footstools, robes, cool little slippers, music, candles and Champagne," Coulter says. "I occasionally go to a nearby day spa, but I liked this better — and they sure don't serve Champagne at a real spa. It was lovely to open my home to my friends and enjoy each other's company in a relaxing atmosphere." Her next spa party will celebrate a friend's birthday in March.

At a home-spa party, "you can do whatever you like," says Maureen Santucci, a Sherman Oaks massage therapist for Sparty. "At a day spa, you get what's on the spa menu, and they want you to be quiet. In your own home ... if you want to be rowdy, it's fine."

Hosting an at-home party also offers a built-in spa-like benefit. It eliminates the stress of driving home afterward.