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**Spa man**  
Neil Howard reveals the  
latest trends in wellness



## Accor ascension

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Deep in the heart of the UK's Ribble Valley, the Stanley House Spa opened in 2012.



# New model spa

As the man responsible for a string of high-profile concepts at the Dorchester, Lanesborough and Armani hotels, **Neil Howard** has carved out a reputation as a pioneer in the field of spa consultancy. He talks to Ross Davies about current trends, changing demographics and the future of an indispensable amenity.

**“R**ather than try and pack a lot of things into a small space, it's better to do less, but do it bloody well,” says Neil Howard.

It's an interesting glimpse into the personal philosophy of arguably the most

in-demand spa consultant working today: direct, concise and expedient.

To provide some context, Howard is discussing his latest project, the Dormy House Hotel, a boutique property in the UK's Cotswolds, currently undergoing a £10 million renovation. Scheduled to

open in 2014, he has been drafted in by Andrew Grahame, CEO of Dormy's umbrella company, Famcombe Estate.

“Grahame approached me at the end of last year,” Howard says. “We've really focused on changing the concept of membership, so I've made it more about



1. The Lanesborough.  
2. The Stanley House Steam Room.  
3. The Coral Reef Club.

lifestyle assessment and personal training, as opposed to just creating a self-service gym. The space might be smaller, but that works in the context of personal training.”

### Changing perceptions

By his own admission, Howard “relates far better to quality establishments and professionals at the top of their game – those who are likely to focus more on service and less on saving money”. Yet, despite having his own portfolio of successful projects, he still encounters the odd case of obstinacy among operators not yet attuned to the spa model.

“Some get it; some don’t,” he says. “Generally speaking, most owners are

foodies – they come from a food and beverage background. So, obviously it helps when the client has a personal understanding or familiarity with spas. This tends to be general managers and those with experience of working in resorts.”

Since Howard Spa Consulting opened its doors in 1995, the transformation in the perception of the spa within the hotel industry has shifted considerably. Once something of a postscript for hoteliers, centred around a basic gym and swimming pool, the spa is now an essential five-star feature for brands looking to differentiate themselves in a competitive marketplace.

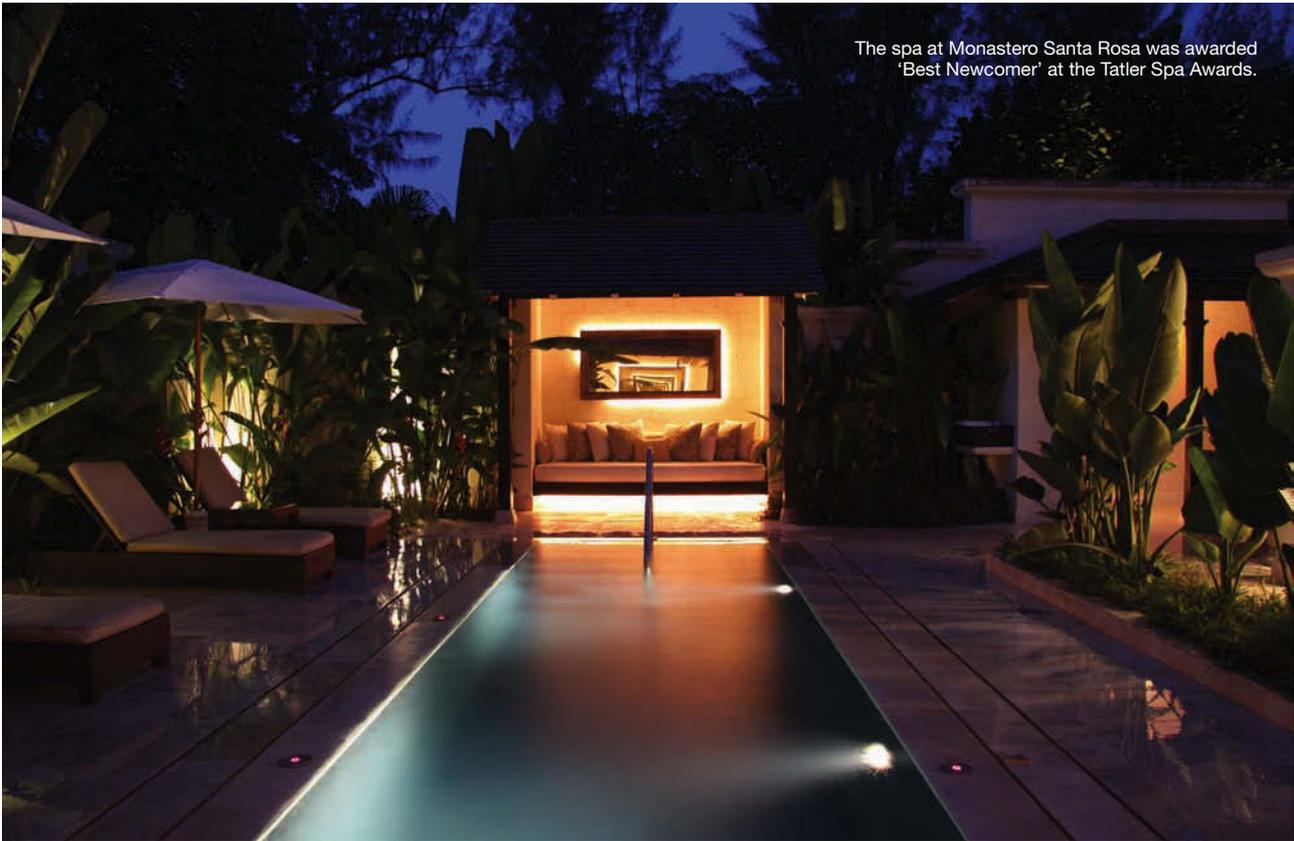
“It has certainly become more sophisticated over the last 20 years or

so,” says Howard. “Back then, fitness was king, but with very little else on top of it. Treatment rooms were added on as a kind of afterthought. These days, it is the other way round, with treatment facilities at the core.

“The range of lifestyle services has become broader, too, whether it is a thermal suite and hydro-pool, or manicure and pedicure; not to mention the rise of physiotherapy and Chinese medicine. I hate using the word, and it might sound predictable, but it needs to be looked at in a more holistic way.”

### Wealth of experience

Trite or not, Howard is clearly a man worth listening to, having spent the lion’s share of his career in the luxury



The spa at Monastero Santa Rosa was awarded 'Best Newcomer' at the Tatler Spa Awards.

hospitality sector. He initially worked in an operational domain, focused predominantly on spa and fitness, before sensing a niche and moving into the realm of consultancy.

"I felt I had gone as far as I could in terms of operations," he explains. "The role I've had for the last 18 years has enabled me to maximise my experience, because each project is so different from the last. Creating a spa is such an intricate thing; it satisfies my appreciation of design and service, and provides the opportunity to create something better."

**“ When you create something and refine it with teams of professionals, each project is special – it becomes part of you. ”**

His enthusiasm for his job is self-evident, and not surprising given the plaudits he continues to garner. Most recently, the spa at Monastero Santa Rosa hotel, a converted 17th-century convent perched high on Italy's Amalfi Coast, was awarded 'Best Newcomer' at the Tatler Spa Awards.

Other fêted projects include the Stanley House Hotel in Cheshire, and the Coral Reef Club in Barbados, which incorporates an 'outside-in' walled-garden motif, allowing guests to be constantly in touch with the outside elements of the Caribbean.

"When you create something and refine it with teams of professionals, each project is special – it becomes part of you," says Howard. "The Monastero Santa Rosa, for example, is perhaps not the most prestigious name I have worked with, but it is a real gem with a fantastic spa experience."

Howard's vein of consultancy spans the entire lifecycle of a project, from initial feasibility and research, through concept formation, space planning and design guidance to pre-opening and operational assistance. And that goes for individual properties as well as

collections. For the latter, his client portfolio includes the Dorchester and Lanesborough in London, not to mention all three Armani hotel properties – Ginza, Dubai and Milan, recognised by the Architectural Digest as one of the 11 best-designed spas in the world.

How much is the creation of a spa dictated by its brand, especially one so illustrious?

"It's everything for us," he says. "With Armani, the name is obviously very strong and known across the world, so there was little point in introducing another one – Giorgio Armani wouldn't allow that anyway. We spent a lot of time creating a spa that took Armani's values and interpreted them. Culture is a massive differentiator when it comes to creating a strong product."

### City move

Resorts have traditionally been fertile ground for spas due to their expansive premises, as well as the sense of escapism and exoticism that they tend to perpetuate. However, as more people seek wellness closer to home, urban properties, once deemed unsuitable due

to space constraints, are increasingly being turned on to the concept.

"The resort is still the traditional setting, but it has also been in city hotels for a few years now," says Howard. "It requires a different model, of course, and is really dependent on maximising your space with amenities that make the most money, aside from the rooms themselves. This is always the case, irrespective of whether or not I am working with a new or existing hotel.

"Spas are becoming more multilayered, based on what we call the 'spa within a spa' idea. This goes back to respecting space."

The latest SpaFinder Wellness report appears to bear witness that hoteliers, with the means to do so, would be foolish not to update their properties. The study, conducted by approximately 100 researchers across 87,000 spas worldwide, confirmed that guests are on the lookout for advanced and novel

health and lifestyle options that can't be obtained in the local gym.

### Personal touch

Howard's ability to interpret trends and move with them has arguably been the most important contributing tenor to his own achievements. His itinerary is chock-a-block for the foreseeable future with Dormy House's completion pencilled in for January 2014, while other projects, presently under a veil of confidentiality, will take him to Dubai, Qatar and the Far East.

Howard believes the secret behind every successful spa is a highly personalised, bespoke service.

"I think the goal is to make it as personal an experience as possible," he says. "When you go to the gym, often you will get your initial assessment and then that's it in terms of assistance – and they won't even remember your name. A great spa will offer a service tailored to your personal needs; for example, you have the option of having an instructor with you at all times.

**“Spas are becoming more multilayered, based on what we call the 'spa within a spa' idea. This goes back to respecting space.”**

Wellness might be the buzzword of the moment but its definition is ultimately contingent on the individual guest. Consequently,

"It can be a private experience, too; a spa within a spa caters to that. It's more than just two couches in a room – that's already been done to death." ■



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