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LOUIS VUITTON

# Martha Soffer Offers Five-day 'Panchakarma' Home Cleanse

The sought-after Ayurvedic doctor, chef and herbalist relocated her spa to the Santa Monica Proper Hotel, growing her team and offering more treatments. BY RYMA CHIKHOUNE

At Surya Spa, Martha Soffer first sits clients down to take their pulse and check their tongue. It's quiet as you hold still in silence, awaiting her word. She'll take notes and ask questions, decoding your bodily needs to guide your path. And then the magic happens.

The magic here is immersing yourself in Ayurveda to better listen and care for your mind and body. A holistic approach to mental and physical well-being, the practice is an ancient Indian medical system to treat diseases. Soffer has been offering Ayurveda for decades in Los Angeles, where she's made a name for herself in the wellness community – and in Hollywood, attracting Gwyneth Paltrow, Kate Hudson, Julia Roberts and Kourtney Kardashian.

"Surya gets me to a place of profound equilibrium and deep renewal," Paltrow has said.

Meaning "knowledge of life" in Sanskrit, the language of Hinduism, Ayurveda embraces the interconnectedness between the body and life's environments. It encompasses nutrition, massage, meditation and yoga, using a combination of herbs, oils and other elements for a purification process, rejuvenation and, ultimately, long-term wellness.

Its principles are at the root of many alternative therapies used in the West. But what Soffer has done is make it accessible in its entirety, teaching the fundamentals while modernizing the experience. Her spa – which first opened in the Pacific Palisades – relocated to the Santa Monica Proper Hotel this year. Luxurious yet homey, the 3,000-square-foot space was designed by Kelly Wearstler, who filled it with warm hues, woods and stones.

"I try as much as I can to keep the knowledge pure," Soffer, an ayurvedic doctor, chef and herbalist, says of her approach at Surya Spa. "Ayurveda is so accessible, if you take a book and try to understand, or even if you take my course online." (It's 40 lessons for \$125.)

Soffer's story starts in Colombia, where she was born and raised. Her introduction into wellness was through transcendental meditation in her 20s, while studying computer science in Iowa.

"It was winter, and I could not believe how cold it was," she laughs. "The minute that I started meditating, my life totally switched from computers to spiritual things."

There, she met someone that had just received an Ayurveda treatment.

"She had oil in her hair," she went on. "I asked, 'Why do you have so much oil in your hair?' She said, 'You should try one.' So, I went and scheduled myself for a treatment. And then after that treatment, I was so guided to just do it.... Coming from Colombia, the exchange of the money and everything was so expensive. But I was like, 'I have to do it.'"

She arrived in the Pacific Palisades after accepting a job at an Ayurveda clinic, which ended up closing. It was during that time that she met her husband, Roger, and the two opened Surya Spa. She attributes initial success to a piece in the L.A. Times.

"That article really took my whole business to a different level," she says.

With Roger, chief executive officer of Surya Spa, Soffer's team grew to include 16 therapists when she was at her former location. Now at The Proper, there are about 45 employees in total. She notes that employees must meet with an astrologer who specializes in Jyotish, Vedic astrology, as part of the hiring process.

"If that aligns with Surya, then they can work at Surya," Soffer says.

Treatments vary at Surya Spa, with all kinds of therapies, scrubs, massages, as well as classes. There's a prenatal option, menopause relief – and a custom \$695 glow treatment, which is popular with celebrities for award shows and brides before their weddings.

For visitors, the journey begins in a waiting room, cozy and relaxing, where they're offered tea. "Ayurveda: The Science of Self Healing: A Practical Guide," by Dr. Vasant Lad lies on a table, giving a glimpse into the practice. Soon, they're brought to Soffer for a consultation. Personalized, no two experiences are the same unless needed. With hour sessions at \$345, Soffer provides lifestyle recommendations and diet modifications.

"Food is medicine," she continues.

The kitchen is the hub of the spa – open, with a communal table and rotation of chefs (and ayurvedic cooking classes). During the morning hours, clients are served breakfast before their treatment, followed by lunch.

"Everybody has a different way of metabolizing food and taking things through the body," Soffer explains, of individual needs.

The right seasonal foods provide the most important nutrients and create for better digestion, minimizing inflammation (known to contribute to diseases and health conditions). For some, a dietary change – shared during the consultation – is the preparation needed to begin the Surya Spa experience and allow for the most valuable visit.

Treatments at the spa include the signature three- to 28-day "panchakarma" retreat, a detox that helps balance the mind and body while promoting weight loss. It starts at \$6,530 for three days, including accommodations, 3.5- to four-hour daily treatments, time with Soffer, private sound healing, "qigong" (involving body posture, movement, breathing and meditation) and a "dosha" yoga class (a mind-body practice). The three "doshas" – governing principles of the body in Ayurveda – are "vata" (space and air), "pitta" (fire and water) and "kapha" (earth and water). We are one of these "doshas," or a combination of them.

"The experience is so much about love and making the person feel like they're in the womb again," she says of



Martha Soffer began offering Ayurveda in Los Angeles' Pacific Palisades in 2004.

treatments.

Soffer also offers a guided at-home option, a five-day "panchakarma" cleanse kit, for \$125.

"The idea is that it covers the cost for us to make everything," she explains. It includes an instructional PDF, as well as how-to videos on massaging your own body. It's part of her mission to make Ayurveda more accessible.

"I want to get to everyone," she says. "That's why I decided to do the home prep."

The five-day cleanse includes beginning the day with ghee (clarified butter) and, on the last day, drinking castor oil (a stimulant laxative).

The massage, following the cleanse, helps create better flow in your body. In the end, impurities in your body are flowed into your digestive tract and eliminated.

"We are exposed to so many toxins, especially today, not only through food, but also to environmental toxins," she says.

"When your body moves, the cells start to work so much better, so that's why it's important to do this every change of the season," she says of "panchakarma," recommended four times a year. "It rejuvenates your body."

Those who are able to visit the spa can experience its signature four-handed massage with warm oils, known as Abhyanga. It's \$325 for 60 minutes, with two therapists mirroring each other as they repeat movements head-to-toe, from the scalp to the soles of the feet.

Or, for a taste of "panchakarma," one can book a four-hour, one-day experience – with treatments and oils personalized based on diagnosis from a photograph of your tongue and any health concerns you raise – for \$885.

The products used are her own; Surya Spa is also a brand, creating beauty goods sold direct-to-consumer at [suryawellness.com](http://suryawellness.com) and Neiman Marcus. (The face oil, collagen cream, bath soak and custom oils used during treatments are available to take home as part of the three-day retreat, as well.) They're among the highest quality on the market, with Soffer involved in every step of the process working with a lab in Florida.

"The product has been one of the things that I've been putting a lot of attention on and keeping it pure," she says. Prices range from \$23 for a "Lip Therapy" to \$195 for the "Collagen Cream." "I think I can get to more people that way, through the product."

She also creates spices and gluten-free breads, available at Erewhon.

"I want people to know about Ayurveda – applying Ayurveda to your life and see how much it can change your consciousness, your body, your lifestyle," Soffer says. "Because once you apply that lifestyle to your life, then everything just starts working so much better in every way."



The communal table in the kitchen at Surya Spa.